

Reach In and Touch Someone:
Communication Technology and Cultural Fears of Sexual Predation

By

Dorinda Hartmann

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral
Committee:

Michele Hilmes, Professor, Communication Arts

Eric Schatzberg, Professor, History of Technology

Robert Glenn Howard, Professor, Communication Arts

Greg Downey, Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication/Library and
Information Studies

Jeremy Morris, Assistant Professor, Communication Arts

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Introduction

To begin with a quiz: out of these four domestic electric communication technologies—telephone, radio, broadcast television, and the Internet—which one is it that “reaches into many family circles,” “comes into our very homes and captures our children before our very eyes,” is “the most accessible back door to the grown-up world,” and forces children whenever they use it to “walk someone into their home”?

Further hints: this technology profanes, weakens, hypnotizes, and abducts. It lets strangers into your bedroom and is itself already a stranger lurking there. You allow it an unprecedentedly intimate connection to and position in your most private and personal spaces, and it will inevitably turn on you by devouring your family. In fact, its primary interest is in the weakest member of the family, the innocent child, whom it constantly seeks to sexually contaminate. Nothing like it has ever happened before, and it has neither peer nor parent in the race to despoil and destroy.

The answer is “all of the above”—at least in terms of a certain set of roles and stories taking place around all of those technological systems from their inception to today. Each of the technologies is given center stage as catalyst and villain in a narrative of technologized sexual danger, a danger most specifically aimed at the child. This narrative begins from the artifact’s earliest days of introduction and

dissemination, but somehow never fades away no matter how familiar and even elderly the technology may become. Even while other stories both utopian and pragmatic are vigorously circulating around these technologies, this particular dystopian plotline remains on call, simultaneously ever frightening and ever useful.

This dissertation examines the cultural discourses surrounding the primary domestic electric communication technologies of the past century and a half—telephone, radio, television, and the Internet¹—in order to trace the construction of a particular discursive formation: the figure of technologized communication as a sexual threat to children. This fear discourse was woven into and around each of these technological systems early in its development and entrenched itself over time, providing an instrumentalist base for struggles over the technology's social and legal boundaries. Each technology in turn was claimed as inherently singular, the worst technological and sexual disruption to the sanctity of the home and the child; this project considers the historical links between these claims of singularity, examining the way in which this particular form of popular and tenacious technological dystopianism is articulated, reiterated, and put to work.

The discursive formation analyzed here has a tenacious, particular structure, constructing and relying on some potent symbols and figures that interlink into a narrative of perpetual threat, penetration, and despoliation. The central site for the reenactment of the narrative is the home—not a specific place, but a rich discursive

¹ The technological systems under examination in this project are specifically the ones connected to the domestic space of the home; more recent technological systems involving mobile electric communication are discussed in the conclusion.

site of meanings and relations that carry connotations both explicit and implicit. Each technology, in relation to the home and its concepts both associated and antagonistic (for instance, private vs. public, domestic vs. civic, family vs. stranger, feminine vs. masculine, child vs. adult), is portrayed and understood both as a breach allowing uncontrollable sexual threat into the home and as a masculinized/sexual technological predator itself employing this breach; the technology is therefore not just a neutral enabler of human evildoers, but at base is formed in and from a tangled nest of its own inextricable evils. The threat and catalyst is depicted as inherent to the technology itself, stemming from something of its very design, a mandatory dystopia shadowing each technology's utopian promise.

Grappling with a new communication technology in the home is a complicated process of constructing and defining the relationships between artifacts, people, and practices. The course of constructing and becoming accustomed to each technological system under examination here has prompted struggles over the meanings and roles of every node in the system: what is "home" (and who is in it, specified by roles of gender and age), what is "communication" (and who should and should not partake), let alone the context and position of the new devices themselves. Each technological system in turn was shaped and inflected by this process, constructed and elaborated by the very interactions and understandings that were supposedly simply describing it. But unlike the discourses of optimism and magical thinking that are familiar to any communications historian,

and that tend to fade as the new technology ages and becomes a familiar part of daily life, this particular dystopian discourse did not decline with the novelty of each technological system. It instead continued as an integral part of the older system, even as the next “unprecedented” domestic electric communication technology appeared and was itself molded and constructed around threads of this same discourse.

Examining the uses and shapes of this fear discourse, from the telephone to the radio, from radio to television, and from television to Internet, reveals a two-fold process in which the same basic discourse is repurposed, while the newer technology itself—and its version of the danger—nevertheless is described and constructed as entirely unprecedented, its risks unheard of. In the course of this repurposing, the earlier layers of discourse are given a fresh articulation, by serving as the core around which new layers are wrapped; the new layers bolster their claim to novelty by their derivation from the least-familiar object in the equation: the new technology itself. The new technology’s physical design and form is assumed to provide a mandatory orientation for the system’s development and use, and the latest layers of discourse take on this mantle both of inherence and newness (after all, how could they be repeated versions of an old story, if they derive straight from the design of a brand-new artifact?). Underneath a veneer of nature and newness, the presence of such tropes atop and around the core of previous iterations of the fear discourse helps inhibit linkages between the different technological systems; furthermore, this lack of linkage and historicity gives the

discourse a particular utility as a tool for shaping both the technology itself and the manifestations of power around it. Ahistoricity has been, and remains, a powerful feature of and tendency in technological discourse; in *The Shock of the Old:*

Technology and Global History Since 1900, David Edgerton writes:

Take the extraordinary litany of technologies which promised peace to the world... In order to be at all convincing these arguments had to deny their own history, and they did so to a remarkable extent. The obliteration of even recent history has been continuous and systematic... A history of how things were done in the past, and of the way futurology has worked, will undermine most contemporary claims to novelty.²

Undermining novelty is this project's ultimate goal, both by bringing out the discursive connections among the technological systems under examination, and by bringing out the discursive connections between time periods, seeking to highlight the deep structure in use beneath the surface narratives.

The tropes I am examining can be found across a multiplicity of discursive sites. For the purposes of this study, my textual evidence can be located in three basic types of texts. The first category includes law and policy documents, such as legal cases and statutes, governmental hearings, and reports. The second is comprised of sites in which experts both confer with each other and instruct the layperson, such as trade journals; advertising, medical, and educational studies; archival papers from broadcasters and advertisers; and sources of advice on home, family, and parenting. Finally there are popular media sites ranging from the

² David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xvi.

popular press and pop culture entertainment (movies, television shows, and plays; novels and short stories; comic strips and websites), to modern circulating folklore often called “urban legend”, which includes facets both of entertainment and peer-to-peer education. In all of these categories can be found instances and amplifications of the fear discourse under examination, as it is constructed, reshaped, explained, and deployed for various purposes both implicit and explicit.

The benefits of this model come from its breadth, tracing out and connecting some of the many sites and types of statements that work to iterate and reiterate the discursive trope under examination. It is in fact this very process of connection, historically and across technologies, that is perennially resisted and underdeveloped within the discourse itself, which keeps the fear narrative at its freshest and most useful in the exercise of power and influence. Thus the unearthing and articulation of these instances of the discursive construction, deployment, and evolution helps not just to unpack and anatomize the trope, but also to bring to light the potential linkages between its many uses.

While the chapters are presented in the chronological order in which the technological systems under examination were invented and disseminated, the evidence and examples being discussed are themselves not dependent on a straight chronological line. Instead, this work strives to highlight the connections between elements of the discourse not only across technologies, but across decades and even centuries, the same narrative being told and retold, used and reused, with similar roles, storylines, villains, and victims. This is particularly important because I do not

intend to rely on or reinforce a straight chronological argument from novelty, in which a technological system is only enmeshed in a fear narrative while it is still new and unfamiliar.³ Rather, I argue that these same discourses continue around an older technology even once a new worst-technology-ever has stolen the spotlight; they may be used for different purposes or with fewer headlines, but they remain a common touchstone in cultural understandings of the technological system in question, and technology in general.

A foundational theory of this study is Michel Foucault's complex but fruitful concept of "discourse". For Foucault, discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak...[D]iscourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things."⁴ Rather than a situation in which language names objects that exist *a priori* outside of language, here instead artifacts and actions are themselves a product of statements, of the process of thinking and speaking about them as well as participating in them, a process which rather than simply describing them is instead constitutive of them. Discourses shape and reconstruct how something is and is not/can and cannot be thought or spoken about, providing a fundamental basis for the allowable forms of material practice.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement,

³ As, for instance, in the "volatility" aspect of the "moral panic" literature, which will be discussed further below.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 54.

concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*....⁵

It is this tactic, an identification of regularities among and between statements, that inspires and underlies my study, in the interest of bringing forth and examining the existence, adaptation, progression, and use of the tropes that combine and reinforce one another to make up a particularly tenacious discursive formation. I describe the formation as a set of tropes and narratives, not to imply that they have an *a priori* teller or inventor, but instead to explore the way that each image and set of associations becomes linked to another in a sort of story that is reiterated and elaborated with the same types of characters, mapped onto the same categories of victims and villains, with the same engines of danger, despite the era or specific technology involved. The relations beneath the surface actors of the discourse remain linked (or tendentiously unlinked) along similar largely-unacknowledged lines of power and agency, a similarity which is the more culturally powerful the less it is examined and the less visible it is allowed to remain.

A work which applies Foucault's discourse model to technology in ways both useful and particularly relevant to my own project is Thomas Streeter's examination of policy discourse in the evolution of American cable television. He identifies and unpacks a utopian strain of discourse circulating around cable television in the early 1970s, especially in discussions of potential policy; this discourse served to unlink

⁵ Foucault, 41.

cable from its political and economic contexts and heighten the perception of the technology as both unique and autonomous, which affected its conceptualization and formation within policy and practice—discourse as itself a mechanism of creation, change, and power, rather than “a pale reflection of ‘real’ processes taking place elsewhere.”⁶ Streeter argues that this discourse “serves to shape an institution that it fails to describe,”⁷ and through the process of creating new ways of thinking and speaking about cable, formed and bolstered new ways of setting and enforcing relevant policy. This is an instance of discourse both creating and influencing a technological system, with narratives and images providing an arena within which power is then inscribed and enacted in particular ways. My dissertation includes some analysis of legal and policy discourse along similar lines, demonstrating ways in which the discursive formation I am examining was inscribed into practices of power and regulation, which practices in turn contributed to the larger discursive model and provided fertile ground for its further reiterations.

My analysis strives to examine the unacknowledged determinism latent in layers of a very powerful discursive formation woven around a particular group of technologies. Bringing the functionalist and anti-historical grounds of these discourses to light, and consciously noticing the links and continuities between them, helps to disrupt their claim to a kind of transparency, a common-sense naturalness that furthers their use as instruments of power and influence in many

⁶ Thomas Streeter, “The Cable Fable Revisited: Discourse, Policy, and the Making of Cable Television,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987), 175.

⁷ Streeter, 176.

different avenues of society and culture. Disarticulation from context and history is a time-honored method of claiming a position founded on concepts of unprecedentedness, inevitability, and danger, which boosts the influence and circulation of the discourse and keeps it from entirely falling prey to familiarity breeding contempt.

A specific concept from the history of technology field used in this dissertation is that of the technological system. In *A Social History of American Technology*, Ruth Schwarz Cowan defines this object/process as a hybrid of both people and artifacts (which are themselves a product of people and discourse even from their very design), as well as the connections that form and define it. Technological systems are “large, complex networks that are, at one and the same time, both physical and social,”⁸ and the process of meaning-making has a large part in their creation, maintenance, and evolution. All of the technologies in this dissertation are parts of technological systems, existing within human contexts and practices that form and reform, despite the narrative pressures of the fear discourse under analysis to codify each technology as a separate defined object coming from outside of human society, with set and stable meanings and uses.

There are two studies of specific communication technology systems that have strongly influenced my own. One of these is Carolyn Marvin’s book *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late*

⁸ Ruth Schwarz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 149.

Nineteenth Century, in which she examines the ways in which two new inventions, the electric light and the telephone, were envisioned, constructed, and considered in relation to existing social structures and norms. In her study, Marvin decries the concept of a technology as an artifact invented outside of culture and having a singular and unidirectional impact on it. Instead, she argues, “Media [a category in which she includes communication technology] are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication.”⁹

Marvin reveals and elaborates linkages between the telephonic and electric systems, showing the ways in which their initial construction, use, and understanding took place in a web of relations covering both; this pan-technological approach productively moves beyond considering each artifact as an island, to bring into focus meaning-making on a larger scale. Although this dissertation puts each of the technological systems being examined into its own chapter, in chronological order of their invention, it is not for the purposes of drawing a strict timeline or considering the technologies as fundamentally separate. Instead, the broader point of the analysis relies on the existence of Marvin’s larger web, to see continuities in the ways the discursive formation appears and is reiterated with each technology, and how all of the technologies are connected in their roles within the repeated narrative even while these roles are largely assumed to be ahistorically separate.

⁹ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

My work is also indebted to Susan Douglas' *Inventing American Broadcasting*, a study of the earliest days of radio and the crucial role that culture played in shaping radio as artifact, system, and practice. In contrast to earlier historical approaches that posited American radio broadcasting as suddenly appearing fully-fledged in the early 1920s, Douglas instead traces the original emergence and construction of the technology, examining what it meant and could mean, as well as how it was shaped over time, arguing that "technology is as much a process as a thing."¹⁰ Her focus on the ways in which radio was "embedded in and shaped by a rich web of cultural practices and ideas"¹¹ provides both important context for my own examination of radio both early and late, and a fruitful model for looking at ways in which this same matrix and process apply to the associated technologies under analysis here.

Douglas also argues that radio was "portrayed as a technology without a history,"¹² pinpointing a discourse which has great ramifications for my study. This same strategy can be seen operating in the process and practices of the discursive formation I am tracing out around this set of technologies, through which a particular avenue of power is provided and reified, and one of the strengths of which is its very success at positioning itself and the technological systems it helps to construct (while, as Foucault's discourse model indicates, purporting merely to

¹⁰ Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), xxviii.

¹¹ Douglas, xv.

¹² Douglas, xv.

describe said system) as ahistorically as possible. Douglas' insistence on contradicting the pre-existing depiction of radio as an autonomous force has therefore been particularly useful and influential to me, demonstrating a productive method of disrupting the assumptions of invisibility and stasis that these types of discourse often strategically adopt.

Both Marvin's and Douglas' books focus on the point at which the technologies under examination were new, during the initial process of invention and dissemination throughout society. My study is influenced by this focus on the early historical moment, but does not itself concentrate solely on that moment. In tracing the developments, reconstructions, and uses of the fear discourse, the early days of each technology are certainly crucial, providing a hothouse period in which the discourse is first applied under its new guise to the emerging and unfamiliar system. But my analysis also follows iterations of the discourse much later into each technology's development, finding that even as novelty recedes, this particular narrative of sexual danger does not, but instead remains woven throughout each technological system, its place in society, and the struggles over its meaning, role, and use.

Finally, Alice Marwick's discussion of the "technopanic" is a touchstone for my work, bearing both influences and a few important differences. Marwick's technopanic draws from theoretical framework of the "moral panic," as developed by Stanley Cohen and elaborated by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda; according to Marwick, "The technopanic is an attempt to contextualize the moral

panic as a response to fear of modernity as represented by new technologies.”¹³ She argues that technopanics “focus on new media forms,” “pathologize young people’s use of this media,” and result in “an attempt to modify or regulate young people’s behavior”. By definition, the moral panic—and thus the technopanic—has five characteristics: concern and hostility (a heightened level of the former directed at a demonized group of the latter), consensus (belief that the threat is real and caused by the demonized group), disproportionality (panic out of proportion to empirical harm), and volatility (rises quickly and eventually fades away).¹⁴

The technopanic concept is certainly a fruitful way to consider the discourses under examination here: the combination of communication technology and anxiety, the public telling and retelling of the fear narrative, and the uses to which these retellings are put, can all be mapped upon moral panic theory to useful effect. In a sense, I am focusing on the primary mechanism beneath the panic, drawing out and showing the connections between the language, metaphors, and constructs that cast these technologies as the predator to which the entire panic is a reaction. In addition, Marwick (drawing from previous works such as John Springhall’s book on moral panics around youth culture and Kirsten Drotner’s analysis of the relationship between “media panics” and modernity) emphasizes the importance of not allowing these panics to exist in the ahistorical vacuum of a perennial present, but instead to

¹³ Alice E. Marwick, “To Catch a Predator? The MySpace Moral Panic,” *First Monday* 13:6 (2008).

¹⁴ As discussed in Marwick, drawing on Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: the Social Construction of Deviance* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

interrogate their long history and their uses as sociopolitical tools. As Springhall writes in *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics*, “These concerns stretch in an almost unbroken line through successive ‘moral panics’ in both Britain and America... Each new panic develops as if it were the first time such issues have been debated in public and yet the debates are strikingly similar.”¹⁵ My project seeks to anatomize and link the mechanisms of this particular strain of the debate, where the discursive figures of domestic communication technology, sexuality, and children meet.

However, in the course of working to thwart the discourse’s claim to singularity, my analysis has a different relationship to the concept of novelty. While I agree with authors such as Marwick and Springhall that the fear discourse relies for much of its power and shock on a spurious claim to newness and unprecedentedness, I do not place as much weight on the actual newness of the technology at the center of the anxiety. Marwick’s technopanic by definition “focus[es] on new media forms,” and Springhall writes:

Whenever the introduction of a new mass medium is defined as a threat to the young, we can expect a campaign by adults to regulate, ban or censor, followed by a lessening of interest until the appearance of a new medium reopens public debate.”¹⁶

This approach emphasizes, not only the newness of the medium, but also the moral panic concept of “volatility,” one of the building blocks of a moral panic as defined in

¹⁵ John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 2, 7.

¹⁶ Springhall, 7.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda¹⁷, in which a panic rises rapidly but disappears just as rapidly, being “relatively short-lived”¹⁸. My project does not share this emphasis on the rise and fall of a particular, discrete panic (in the way that Marwick, for instance, distinguishes between a panic about “online pornography” and a panic about predators trolling for young victims via the social networking site MySpace); nor a series of discrete but related panics, as in Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s model:

...one or another moral panic which seems to have been sustained over a long period of time is almost certainly a conceptual grouping of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics.¹⁹

Instead, my analysis attempts to draw out the structure and contents of the story behind the technopanic, the discursive elements that are assembled in the same narrative around each domestic electric communication technology being examined (and, as discussed in the conclusion, continue the familiar pattern around newer mobile technologies); this deep structure and its constituent parts connect to one another and map onto societal power relations in telling and significant ways, and once a technology has been embedded in and constructed by the sexual-predation discourse, this discourse remains a part of the technological system and is commonly invoked even once the technology itself has become far from novel.

¹⁷ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 38-41.

¹⁸ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 39.

¹⁹ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 39. Springhall seems to find this sort of construction inadequate, arguing that moral panic theory “is urgently in need of updating to take into account the almost daily construction of panics in the 1990s and a new plurality of ‘folk-devil’ reactions” (Springhall 8).

In Chapter One, “‘The Devil’s Wires’: The Threatening Telephone,” I examine a dystopian discourse built over time around the original wired telephonic technological system, in which the telephone is a tool that ruptures and contaminates domestic space, bringing the powerful and sexually-threatening male inside to prey on vulnerable women and children. There are several building blocks of this discourse that can be usefully unearthed: first, a narrative of proximity and presence, in which telephonic technology becomes a conduit for virtual and physical presence and connection, especially connection with the body. Second, the telephone’s role in demonstrating the permeability and fragility of the boundaries around domestic space, with the technology becoming a disruptive and uncontrollable portal both in and out of the semantically-loaded concept of the home. And third, the particular notions of gender and sexuality that underlie and amplify the telephonic threat, in which the technological predator is the external/sexual adult male, and the technological victims are the internal/innocent female and child. The final section is a case study of 1980s legislative struggle around the concept and regulation of “dial-a-porn”, which rely heavily on all of these axes that contribute to the discourse of the telephone as a predatory sexual threat to women and children in the home.

The second chapter, “‘A Latchkey to Every Home’: Intrusive Radio” applies this analysis to the next domestic communication technology to appear in American homes. The three axes from the telephonic discourse already discussed serve as the core of the discourse around radio, with technologically-determinist concepts

derived from the form of the new invention layered on top. To the first three axes of proximity and presence, the disruption of domestic space, and the gendering in which the external male menaces the internal female and child, is added the idea of complete disconnection from the wire. This etheric freedom is perceived as providing radio with heightened powers, most definitely including the power to harm. Wirelessness (itself more of a deterministic discursive construct than a technological “fact”) grants radio an unprecedented omnipresence and omnipotence within the trope, from which is extrapolated an extreme form of invasiveness: radio is imagined as an all-seeing and all-showing eye, radio waves having the power to pass through any wall, suffuse any body, and disrupt any societal norm. This discourse of penetration and disruption is at its most elaborate surrounding the figure of the child, and in fact the construct of the aggressive, inherently-invasive radio menacing the child serves as one of the crucial bases for the terminology of broadcast policy.

Chapter Three, “‘To Ensnare the Growing Urchin’: Predatory Television,” moves on to examine broadcast television and the layers appended to the radio discourses already discussed (which, as mentioned in Chapter Two, were themselves added to the existing discourses already circulating around the telephone). As before, the public perception of the new technology’s design as inherently determining not just its use, but also its more ineffable powers, crucially affected this latest iteration of the story and served to set the newer technological system apart as its own singular threat, the worst danger to children known. In this

case, with the use of television technology came the involvement of sight, and from the concept of sight and its processes and connotations was generated a host of determinist discursive threads that elaborated the path of the invasive signal. This construct made the television itself a physical and conceptual window through which enters the external threat, disembodied and sexually-bodied at one and the same time. Once inside the boundaries of the home, the signal penetrates the eye, beginning a process of invasion and infection: from the eye into the brain, from the brain throughout the rest of the body. This process turns the viewer into a passive colony for the invader, with the child viewer in particular possessed and abducted both mentally and physically.

Chapter Four, “‘The Monsters are Already in Our Homes’: the Sinister Internet,” examines the way in which the discourse under examination is expanded and elaborated within and around the complex technological system called the Internet. The computer, which serves both as the core of and the human access point to the Internet, already brings with it its own dystopian discourses of malevolent intelligence and masculine, predatory nature. Combining a network of computers into a multipoint-to-multipoint web, the Internet reintroduces the disruptive persona of the amateur, a figure whose presence in the technological system was forcibly suppressed through much of the history of commercial radio and television. But now that the amateur reappears in the equation, the masculine role, unruly behavior, and sexual threat he represents maps neatly on to the technologized predator posited in the discourses surrounding the previous three

technologies studied here. In particular, the figure of the skilled and disruptive male “hacker”—a biological outgrowth and intimate of the computer system—brings with him discursive constructs blending technology, sexuality, biological contamination, and danger. Additional technologies involved in the Internet system, such as the webcam and synchronous messaging (or “chat”), combine with the computers, connections, and amateur users, into re-enactments of the predatory-technology story, with each previous domestic electric communication technology constitutive of the newer discourse even while that history is largely disregarded in the shadow of the newest and seemingly worst device on the block.

Overall, these chapters work to trace developments of the discourse of domestic electric communication technology as a sexual predator of children, as iterated within and around the technological systems of the telephone, radio, broadcast television, and Internet. The effort of identifying and deconstructing the many statements making up this discursive formation reveals several stages or aspects, working in concert: each version of the fear narrative begins with pre-existing layers of discourse, relying on long-lived and well-tested patterns, thus providing the new iteration with a core of familiarity and similarity. This core, however, is then wrapped in a fresh take on the same narrative, derived from technologically-determinist understandings of the design of the latest target technology. The aura of instrumentalist newness this provides helps give weight to the claims of singularity and novelty used to strengthen and most effectively deploy

each iteration of the discourse in efforts to shape the technology, its place in the culture, and a variety of practices of official and unofficial power alike.

Chapter 1

“THE DEVIL’S WIRES”: the Threatening Telephone

“In the tangled networks of a great city, the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives...It is the servant of our common needs—the confidante of our inmost secrets...life and happiness wait upon its ring...and horror...and loneliness...and...*death!!!*”

This is the title screen introducing the 1948 film *Sorry, Wrong Number*, based on the enormously successful radio play first broadcast in 1943 (and re-broadcast every year for ten years thereafter). Against a backdrop of female telephone operators busily plugging and unplugging telephone connections, this ominous warning prepared the audience for the real villain of the piece: the telephone, lurking by the bed of the helpless female invalid.

From its earliest days, the telephone had this kind of troublesome symbolic status, bringing with it notions of community and assistance as well as intrusion and danger. The utopian discourse of the telephone was of course the mainstay of its early appearances in advertising²⁰, lauding the telephone’s utility as a business tool, as a means of summoning medical or other help, as a new way of facilitating communication and interaction with friends and family, and so forth. But the very features that were embraced as harbingers of utopia were the same ones that were suspected as carriers of something darker and less beneficent. According to Carolyn Marvin, “[t]he telephone was the first electric medium to enter the home and

²⁰ For example, see Claude Fischer, *America Calling: a Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 157-165.

unsettle customary ways of dividing the private person and family from the more public setting of the community,"²¹ and this disturbance was expanded and grappled with over time as the telephone became more pervasive and a larger part of everyday life.

This chapter examines a particular dystopian discourse that circulates around the telephone system, as it has with each domestic electric communication technology installed in American homes: the telephone's symbolic construction as a tool with which threatening sexual discourses or sexually-threatening segments of society can poke through the boundaries of the domestic sphere to get at the vulnerable figures inside. For the sake of analysis, the discourse of sexualized threat circulating around the telephone can be separated into three major (but interrelated and simultaneously-constructed) axes: first, proximity and presence; second, the vulnerable domestic sphere; and third, gender and sexuality intersecting with age. These axes have been rearticulated and recombined over time to provide foundations for naturalized exercises of power, such as enactments of policy, relying on technological determinism to alter the way in which various factions within society do, should, and may interact with the technological system, and through the system with one another. The first theme, proximity and presence, concerns the depiction of the telephone system as a conduit disrupting boundaries between the virtual and the actual, building upon earlier models of virtual space and

²¹ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

metaphysical electricity. The second theme, that of the vulnerable domestic sphere, focuses this disruption at the charged boundary of the family home, which itself carries connotations of what should and should not be inside. And the third theme examines the construction of the victim inside the domestic sphere, with certain combinations of age, gender, and sexuality assigned to the telephone's rightful prey, most particularly women (especially young women) and children.

In the telephonic targeting of these particular victims, boundary-disruption takes on organic connotations—disruption of the home, body, and norms of gender and sexuality—in which technologized-impurities penetrate and despoil the pure. The chapter examines this via a longstanding trope that brings all three axes into play, a narrative pattern generally named in folklore studies “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs.” This story, as reiterated in everyday retellings or professional entertainment narratives, fleshes out the telephonic threat to young women and children in the home, with the articulations of space, danger, and technology serving to reinforce all of the themes discussed. The chapter then concludes with a case study of one way in which fears of the sexually-predatory telephone played out in the legislative arena, in this case focusing on the 1980s hearings in the United States Congress on the topic of “Dial-a-Porn”. In the course of defining and delimiting this particular industry, individuals involved in the hearings reconstructed and reinforced the specter of the dystopian telephonic system, often disregarding the stated facts in the case in order to better shape the narrative being built according to the pre-existing anxiety discourse.

“Let your fingers do the walking”

The first axis separated out here for consideration is the concept of proximity and presence. This is a discourse in which the technology is imagined and symbolized as a pathway or a conduit, turning the presence and proximity of its users from “virtual” into “actual.” “Virtual reality” may sound like nothing more than a catchphrase of the computer age, but as a discourse it has a much longer history. The discourse of proximity and presence in fact depends at its base on the symbolism of “virtual space,” called in early discussions of technologies like the telephone and radio “the ether.” “The ether” stems from the historical discursive construction of electricity as an animate, vital force – as John Carey and John Quirk phrased it, drawing from Leo Marx, the “electrical sublime.”²² In the rhetoric of the “electrical sublime,” electricity and electric technology take on an otherworldly power to impact and transform society, to lift it to utopian future heights or to destroy it utterly. The ether was often imagined as a magical and spiritual realm, in which humans, through their technology and its harnessing of electricity, were somehow touching God. Benjamin Franklin Taylor wrote in an 1886 poem:

Your little song the telephone can float
 As free of fetters as a bluebird’s note,
 Quick as a prayer ascending into Heaven,
 Quick as the answer, “all thy sins forgiven”. . .
 The Lightning writes it, God’s electric clerk; The engine bears it,
 buckling to the work

²² James Carey and John J. Quirk, “The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution,” *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 121.

Till miles are minutes and the minutes breaths. . .²³

The ether was an unseen inner space through which human messages were pulled in the blink of an eye, disappearing on one end and reappearing on the other, following the discourse of communication as transmission or transportation. As

John Carey notes:

...[T]he transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture – perhaps in all industrial cultures...It is defined by such terms as “imparting,” “sending,” “transmitting,” or “giving information to others.” It is formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation...a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people.²⁴

Information was imagined in physical terms as a packet that was carried from one place to another. Much was and has been made of the idea that the telephone, and the telegraph before it, were the first advances in technology for thousands of years that in their very design *separated* communication from transportation (since the methods of heliograph, semaphore, or signal drumming, ensconced in some cultures since before written history). However, the ways in which people came to understand and talk about the new technologies were not mandated by the artifacts’ design; instead, they were influenced to a large degree by the ways in which certain highlighted points of the design could be adapted to pre-existing discourses within which people already talked and thought about communication.

In the early years of the diffusion of the telephone, the concept of the phone

²³ Cited in John Brooks, *Telephone: the First Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 95.

²⁴ John Carey, “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 15.

wire as a new version of the existing pneumatic tube message-transportation system appeared within various discourses right away. For instance, a film called *The Telephone*, produced by Edison's studio in 1898, was described by the Edison catalog:

A practical illustration of the value of this modern invention. Posted up on the wall is the startling sign, DON'T TRAVEL. USE TELEPHONE. YOU CAN GET ANYTHING YOU WANT. Man comes in, rings up, takes telephone, talks, then waits a moment; opens little door at the bottom of the receiver, and takes out a glass of beer! Blows off the foam, takes a deep draught, and telephones for a cigar. Waits a moment; gets impatient and calls again, when out comes a blast of flour, plastering his face and clothes so that he looks like a miller. Sure to create barrels of fun.²⁵

Of course, the Edison film used the metaphor for fun. It has also appeared in other discourses of play surrounding the telephone, such as jokes and pranks, relying on the widespread and often-unexamined tendency to picture the telephone lines as a hidden labyrinth of hollow tubes through which messages, and thus other, less savory things, travel. For instance, in 1965 Marshall McLuhan described a trick common to "the small town in the early days of the telephone":

The joke in question took the form of calling several people, and, in an assumed voice, saying that the engineering department was going to clean out the telephone lines: "We recommend that you cover your telephone with a sheet or pillow case to prevent your room from being filled with dirt and grease." The jokester would then make the rounds of his friends in question to enjoy their preparations and their momentary expectation of a hiss and roar that was sure to come when the lines were blown out.²⁶

²⁵ *Supplement No. 4, War Extra: Edison Films* (Edison Manufacturing Co., 1898), 5.

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995), 268.

This prank was not limited to the telephone's past, however, nor to small towns (despite McLuhan's claim). Jan Harold Brunvand, a folklorist at the University of Utah, remarked on the long-lived nature of the belief in hollow telephone lines in his examination of the modern legend about "cord lice" or "cable lice," insects that live and breed inside the lines and sometimes cause trouble for people or equipment. He wrote:

Would anybody really believe in such things as "cord lice"? Sure they would. I can report that I once saw the secretary/receptionist of a high university executive sitting with her telephone mouthpiece inside a paper bag on her desk because some prankster had called her, impersonated a telephone company official, and warned her that they were going to blow the lice and dust out of the line that afternoon at such and such a time and she should prepare herself for a bit of a mess.²⁷

As Brunvand argues, belief in things like cord lice or hollow wires does not require stupidity or some kind of mythical "small town" naivete. As with other deep-rooted discourses, the concept of the telephone system as a transportation system made up of hidden webs of hollow wires is one of the primary ways in which people have translated and symbolized their understanding of the technology. They bring it into their frame of reference by consciously or unconsciously making analogies, often basing those analogies on certain aspects of the artifact's design and thus weaving technological determinism into the very metaphors and symbols that underlie the basic ways in which we talk about and understand the technological system as a whole.

²⁷ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 202-203.

Whether or not people introduced to the telephone at the time of its invention actually believed that the messages were written down and physically transported over a miles'-long hollow conduit of wire, there were certainly people at the time who were quoted as believing that *other* (read: ignorant, lower class, and/or female) people believed so. The concept of the wire carrying a physical object from one space into another became one of the structuring metaphors circulating around telephones in daily life, especially the social meanings of who was technologically capable and telephonically literate and who was not. Dominant groups within the population symbolically separated themselves from those they considered outsiders by making jokes and telling stories about ignorant misuse of the telephone as nothing more than a new pneumatic tube. Claude Fischer writes that “[m]any of the jokes industry men told in the early years depicted the initial encounter of a country bumpkin with a telephone,”²⁸ and Carolyn Marvin cites an instance of a ‘bumpkin-meets-phone’ tale that was originally written as if it were a news item. After eyeing the telephone with some trepidation, a “raw California granger” wrote something on several pieces of paper and crammed them forcibly into the transmitter. To his surprise, no answer came back. Finally:

The puzzled granger departed after another half-hour wait, and a secretary entered the room. He discovered the telephone “stuffed full of manuscript and ruined.” When the instrument was dismantled and all messages had been removed, they were all found to read: “Bakker and Hammeltonn—Send me to the Pavillion a six inch long munkey rench. Yurs Trully J.E.”²⁹

²⁸ Fischer, 92.

²⁹ Marvin, 20.

In the 1956 Warner Bros. cartoon *Barbary-Coast Bunny*, set in the old west contemporary with the first appearance of the telephone, Bugs Bunny purposely plays this kind of phone-bumpkin in order to fool his gambler adversary. Bugs, clad in “city slicker” garb, approaches a wall-mounted slot machine and asks the gambler if this is one of those new-fangled “telee-o-phones.” Amused, the gambler tells him it is. So Bugs tries to call his mother by putting a coin in the slot, pulling the lever arm, and shouting into the jackpot tray as the wheels spin: “Hello? I want to speak to my mom, please. Hello, mom? I can’t hardly hear ya a’tall!” The gambler watches with a patronizing smirk as Bugs talks to the slot machine, asking his mother for some money (not a munkey rench, but close enough). However, Bugs being Bugs, the conclusion of his supposed mistake is closer to that of the Edison film: he hits a jackpot and gold coins come flooding out into the jackpot tray, to which he chuckles, “Gee, thanks, mom!”³⁰

In addition to the concept of the ether, and the metaphor of communication as physical transportation, the discourse of proximity and presence circulating around the telephone has one more component: an inextricable combination with the human body. When the human body enters the equation, bodily presence

³⁰ Bugs’ cinematic ancestor Harpo Marx acts out a similar bumpkin/communication/transportation gag in the 1932 film *Horse Feathers*, but here the telephone really is the financial conduit: he is prevented from putting a coin into a speakeasy slot machine, so he moves to a pay phone next to the machine. Grinning, he inserts a coin, dials one number, and holds his empty hat upside-down in front of the coin return as if expecting a jackpot. Nothing happens, so he tries it again. This time, the phone rings, and as he lifts the receiver, a stream of coins shoots from the coin return into his hat.

becomes the physical packet of information that travels down the wire, through the ether, to land in a different space. In David Leavitt's novel *Equal Affections*, a character wonders:

What are we, after all...but voices, synapses, electrical impulses? When one person's body touches another person's body, chemicals under the skin break down and recombine, setting off an electric spark that leaps, neuron to neuron, to the brain. Was that really all that different from what happened when fingers pushed down buttons on a keyboard that sent signals across a telephone wire to another keyboard, another set of fingers? Wasn't there, in all that, something of a touch?³¹

The discourse of virtuality and actuality, of the body's presence transported by electricity and technology, circulated around the telephone well before its more recent articulations around the technology of the Internet. Jeffrey Sconce wrote that telecommunications technologies are discursively and metaphorically understood as having the capacity to:

...enable an uncanny form of disembodiment, allowing the communicating subject the ability, real or imagined, to leave the body and transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination. In more extreme versions of this technological fantasy, the entire body can be electronically dissolved and teleported through telecommunications technology, a convention at least as old as the imaginative adventures of Baron Munchausen in the mid-nineteenth century.³²

"This technological fantasy," in Sconce's words, takes on its most embodied form in the concept/activity of phone sex. In *Vox*, a novel consisting entirely of a phone-sex conversation on a paid chat line, one of the characters directly articulates this

³¹ David Leavitt, *Equal Affections* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 139-140.

³² Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 8-9.

telephonic dissolution/reconstitution: "Sometimes I think with the telephone that if I concentrate enough I could pour myself into it and I'd be turned into a mist and I would rematerialize in the room of the person I'm talking to."³³ The wire becomes not just a conduit for sound, or for mystical travels of thought and spirit, but for the entire corporeal package to enter the wire and emerge unscathed on the other side. Disembodiment is only temporary, just a necessary step to allow entry into the ether-passageway.

In some forms of the fantasy the dissolution step might not even be required, as in the 1954 Warner Bros. cartoon *Bugs and Thugs*. Bugs Bunny has been kidnapped by bank robbers; when they stop the car at a gas station, Bugs calls the police from a pay telephone booth. One of the robbers catches him in the middle of his call for help, grabbing Bugs and dragging him back to the car. Bugs holds on to the receiver, however, and as the robbers bundle him into the car and drive away, the wire between Bugs' receiver and the phone booth gets longer and longer, extending like fishing line. At last, out of the booth is yanked a disheveled policeman, still gripping his own telephone receiver, who has apparently been pulled bodily into his own telephone, through the conduits of the telephone lines, and out the speaker at the other end by the force of Bugs (and the speeding getaway car) pulling on the wire.

This sense of electricity and technology carrying something of each person across the wires has certainly been imbricated thoroughly into the utopian

³³ Nicholson Baker, *Vox* (New York: Random House, 1992), 95.

discourse around the telephone (from the turn of the 20th century when Edward Bellamy predicted that people in the future would “stay at home and send your eyes and ears abroad to see and hear for you,”³⁴ to the turn of the 21st century when a mid-century Yellow Pages ad slogan still urged people to “Let your fingers do the walking”³⁵), but, as is not surprising, it also seems to bring with it a strong undercurrent of anxiety. The union of body and technology necessary to use these ether-communications is a discursively uneasy relationship, and one which has been referred to in interestingly sexualized and racialized terms as “the miscegenation of nature and culture,”³⁶ bringing with it fears of contamination, of disruption of the dominant status quo. According to Carolyn Marvin:

No[t] surprisingly, the prospect of media that made senders and receivers proximate and seemed to eliminate many of the barriers that kept them safely separated excited profound xenophobic anxiety. [In the late 1800s,] Professor Alonzo Jackman mulled over the risks of physical connection by wire to those who were diseased, or who might in some other way be dangerous.³⁷

Michèle Martin wrote of an event roughly contemporary to Professor Jackman in which people apparently believed these risks had been realized:

...[S]ome citizens thought that telephone wires were hollow and carried bacteria which were responsible for the 1885 smallpox epidemic. Some people were so angry about the telephone as an agent of disease that they marched to the telephone exchange “with torches,

³⁴ Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (D. Appleton & Co., 1897), 348.

³⁵ Chris John Amoroso, “Let Your Fingers Do The Walking Campaign,” *Encyclopedia of Major Marketing Campaigns*, ed. Thomas Riggs (Farmington, MI: Gale Group, 2000): 107-110.

³⁶ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 21.

³⁷ Marvin, 200-201.

pick-axes and clubs...”³⁸

The sociological and clinical discourse about telephones and the body continued to touch on this concept of dangerous proximity, a form of bodily transportation in which the (outside) caller has the power to travel through the technology, appear at the other end, and subjugate the (inside) answerer. Academic discourse around the sociology of telephone conversations posits an inherent power differential, a relationship of domination and submission, in the very act of participating in a telephone call, a “systematic power imbalance between telephone callers and answerers” termed caller hegemony.”³⁹ In this instrumentalist model, the caller both initiates and controls the interaction, dominating the answerer—who has little or no agency with which to resist—simply by virtue of the design and use of this particular technology: “[t]he answerer’s role includes the obligation to speak first, which entails vulnerability to be recognized by a still-unrecognized caller and to assent to whatever the caller asks.”⁴⁰ The entire interaction is shot through with this same inequity, with the caller empowered to terminate the call as well as initiate it.⁴¹ Other factors—such as the content of the conversation or the possible previous relationships between the speakers—are ultimately seen as largely irrelevant, subjugated to the structure of the technology. The role of caller is

³⁸ Michèle Martin, *“Hello, Central?”: Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 135.

³⁹ Robert Hopper, *Telephone Conversation* (Bloomington, IN, 1992), 33.

⁴⁰ Hopper, 34.

⁴¹ Donald W. Ball, “Toward a Sociology of Telephones and Telephoners,” *Sociology and Everyday Life*, ed. Marcello Truzzi (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 64.

the role of doer, the role of answerer is the role of done-to. As we shall see in later chapters, caller hegemony's assumption of technological mandates and the mapping thereof onto social interaction appears and reappears in discourses surrounding and creating communication systems, beyond the telephone system itself as well as far beyond the term's original context.

"To throw wide the doors"

The narrative of the threatening telephone is permeated with fears of the disruption of the boundaries between the virtual and the actual—conceptual pathways becoming conduits, disembodiment becoming embodiment, verbal power becoming physical power. In the second axis under analysis, this fear of disruption is further localized: if the telephone wire is a conduit, and it is hooked up to your house (unlike the more public and centralized technology of the telegraph), then the wire becomes an unsuspected and poorly-guarded entryway from the outside world into the home. It is not just the blurring of the line between virtual presence and actual presence that is to be feared, but the fact that the technology allowing this blurring is installed in the heart of the home; inappropriate and dangerous things from public spaces can get down that conduit into vulnerable domestic spaces. As Stephen Kern wrote of the wired telephone system, "Telephones penetrate and thus profane all places; hence there are none in churches."⁴²

⁴² Kern, 316. The cell phone has of course extended the possibilities of penetration/profanation, as can be seen in today's charged arguments around cell

As telephonic technology spread through society, its uses and meanings pushed at the existing borders of the home and the family and made them seem more permeable. Unexpected phone calls could now break through the walls of the home as through a new doorway; this discourse appears, for instance, in an 1898 article titled “The Telephone Tangle, and the Way to Untie It,” which claimed that “[telephone subscribers] complain that when they are busy they are continually being rung up about trivial matters. A man might as well complain that he has to open his front door to see unwelcome visitors and his back door to admit the sweep.”⁴³ The combination of “unwelcome visitors” at the front (that is, the legitimate) door, and “the sweep” at the back door (that is, the lower-class tradesman’s entrance) seems particularly telling. To those who could earliest afford home telephone service, the “safe space” of the white, middle-class domestic sphere was under siege by the wire conduits coming in through the walls, rupturing the sense of safe social distance embedded in the discourse of domestic space. In the literature of etiquette, traditional repositories for the rules and concerns of the higher classes (and those who wished to emulate them), the prescribed method of answering the phone, given the caller-hegemony based custom that it was important to respond to the telephone’s ring quickly and obediently (“The first thing

phone use in certain spaces: cinemas, for instance, although the “profane” aspects are much more intense regarding live theater performance spaces and especially concert halls. Mobile technologies, while not within the scope of my analysis here, will be discussed in the conclusion.

⁴³ A.H. Hastie, “The Telephone Tangle, and the Way to Untie It,” *Fortnightly Review* 70:64 (Dec. 1898), 894.

is to answer the telephone *promptly*. You wouldn't keep friends waiting impatiently at the front door; don't keep them waiting at the other end of your telephone"⁴⁴) was often phrased in terms of an invasion of the home, especially the potential of intrusion by strangers. For instance:

The correct way to answer a house telephone is still "Hello." This is because it is like looking out through the shutters, as it were, to see who is there. To answer, "This is Mrs. Jones' house" leaves the door standing open wide, and to answer, "Mrs. Jones speaking" leaves her without chance of retreat.⁴⁵

In a private home, "Hello" is still the most convenient and practical way for members of the family to answer the telephone. Servants are generally instructed to say "Mrs. Blank's residence." But many families prefer not to throw wide the doors, so to speak, and announce whose household it is until they know who is calling.⁴⁶

And Marvin cites an 1886 article in which "the *Leavenworth (Kansas) Times* reported that 'disreputable' persons were nightly phoning 'respectable' people and 'using indecent, vile and vulgar language, and when asked where they are reply, "at the *Times* office.'"⁴⁷ Even before the spread of automatic switching technology allowed calls to be made without the intervention of an operator or the all-knowing Central office, the telephone was used and perceived as an instrument of risk for the "respectable" home and family.

The telephone's specific relationship to the infrastructure of the house made

⁴⁴ Lillian Eichler Watson, *The Standard Book of Etiquette* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., 1948), 362.

⁴⁵ Emily Post, *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1945), 439.

⁴⁶ Watson, 364.

⁴⁷ Marvin, 88.

it a particularly potent discursive figure: not only was the telephone itself considered a potentially dangerous artifact, but in the domestic installation of the tentacles of the telephone system (telephone, wires, number, directory, etc.) it was woven inextricably into the very fabric of the house, which in turn made the house itself a source of (rather than an inherent shelter from) danger. Diane Zimmerman Umble's examination of the relationship between the Old Order Amish and Mennonite communities and the telephone indicates that the symbolic baggage of the domestic physical connection of the telephone wires was actually the primary driving force behind the particularities of the Amish restrictions on adoption of telephone technology. The Amish are allowed to use telephones, but, crucially, not to have them installed in their homes, which spurred the creation of small, freestanding "telephone shanties"⁴⁸ that house a telephone on or near Amish property without providing that last, deeply symbolic physical connection between the wires and the house (and thus the "sacred space"⁴⁹ of the home)⁵⁰. One of Umble's Amish-Mennonite sources told her of an old farmer whose son had a telephone installed: "And he used to sit on the porch of his house, and he'd say,

⁴⁸ Diane Zimmerman Umble, *Holding the Line: the Telephone in Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 117.

⁴⁹ Umble, 154.

⁵⁰ The wire is crucial in this discourse, as is shown by the relationship between the Amish and cell phones. The Amish are allowed to own and use cell phones, because the phone uses a battery rather than being wired into the home; Old Order cell phone users therefore leave the cell to charge (on its electric wire) in their telephone shanty, or with an "English" neighbor for whom these restrictions don't apply. (Howard Rheingold, "Look Who's Talking," *Wired* 7:1 (Jan. 1999), 128-131, 160-163. < http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.01/amish_pr.html>

“There goes the devil’s wires into my son’s place. There goes the devil’s wires.”⁵¹

The 1988 horror film *Pulse* is all about this fear of “the devil’s wires,” and specifically the danger they potentially bring when they are allowed to twine themselves in and around the walls of the family home. A young boy comes to visit his father and stepmother in their pleasant suburban neighborhood, only to find that one of the neighbors has died under mysterious circumstances (found, in fact, with his hand reaching for the smoking wires of the kitchen telephone). The boy discovers that the neighbor was killed by the electric appliances in his house, apparently under the influence of a malevolent pulse of electricity that crept into the walls and burst through the outlets. His worried stepmother seeks advice from an old repairman she sees at the neighbor’s abandoned house, and he tells her what she must do:

Pull the plug, lady. Pull all the plugs! Disconnect yourself. And not just up there at the top of the pole. That don’t mean nothin’. It don’t just crawl in on your wires. It ain’t a thing—it’s a signal. A pulse. Kinda like a voice. So what you’ve got to do is to get rid of anything in your house that might have ears to hear it.

The monster here is the disembodied “pulse,” at first creeping in through the wire conduits, but then living and breeding within the walls of the house like some kind of deadly insect, biding its time until it can slither out through the wall sockets and command the hitherto helpful and dormant electric appliances to do its evil work. The whole system, from the wires “at the top of the pole” to the appliances in the house “that might have ears to hear it,” is dangerous to the sanctity of the home, and

⁵¹ Umble, 112-113.

the only way to protect yourself is to disconnect.

A similar piece of advice is used to heighten the threat (and thus the horror) in advertisements for the 1965 film *I Saw What You Did*. One trailer for this film begins with a shot of a ringing bedside telephone; as a woman's hand reaches for the phone, the image freezes and a male voiceover says urgently, "Don't answer it!" The same process repeats twice more, from a shot of a (different) ringing phone to an answering hand to a freeze-frame with the voiceover command, "Don't answer it!" Then it cuts to a shot of a telephone directory, the pages quickly riffling past, and a man's voice ominously warns: "*Your name is in this book. It could happen to you!*" Here the telephone and the directory give outside threats the tools to find and victimize you, and the final step comes when you unwittingly answer the phone and usher them in. The repeated cry of "Don't answer it!" serves as a dire warning not to open the physical conduit and thus the metaphorical doorway—"pull the plug, lady."

With the telephone wired into the walls, the traditional boundaries around the safety of the domestic sphere are rendered useless – and, in an interesting spin on the discourse, sometimes even harmful. In a number of stories in which the enemy gets into the house through the wires, it is as if he (and it is generally "he," as we will see) has burrowed in to threaten the vulnerable figures inside the domestic sphere through a *one-way* tunnel; the women and children inside somehow can't use the same technological conduit to escape (to call for help, for instance), and their escape from the physical boundaries of the formerly-safe domestic space is hampered by the very locks and bars that they took such pains to fasten in the first

place against the contamination of the outside world.

In the film *Sorry, Wrong Number*, for example, as the bedridden Leona is on the telephone with the hospital trying to hire a nurse to attend her for the night, a man enters the house through an unlocked downstairs window (the audience can see him, but Leona cannot). The intruder, sneaking through the kitchen, lifts the receiver of the wall-phone off the hook. Leona, hearing the telltale sound through her own receiver, is frightened: "What was that? That click just now, on my telephone, as though someone had lifted the receiver off the hook of the extension downstairs?...There's someone in the kitchen downstairs, and they're listening to me now—!" she says to the nurse on the other end of the line—and then, rather than use the telephone's much-lauded power to summon help (whether via the nurse or via a call to the police), Leona hurriedly hangs up and cringes away from the phone, as if the intruder could crawl into the downstairs extension and emerge through her handset right into her bed. Directly thereafter, her husband Henry calls, and she tells him of her increasing uneasiness as she sits alone in her bed in the empty apartment, saying "I've been a prey to every kind of horrible call!" "Now, honey," he patronizingly reassures her (even though he is aware that her fears are fully justified), "you know you're perfectly safe in that house, it's all locked up...and the telephone's right beside your bed." In other words, even if a threat could penetrate the locked doors of the safe domestic space and get up to the bedroom, traditionally the most protected spot in the nest, Leona supposedly should still be able to escape via the emergency exit, the telephone.

However, Leona's complaint about being prey to the phone turns out to more correctly describe the role of the telephone in her bedroom and the power imbalance it has brought. It has allowed predators in through the wire, and her status as the answerer/victim will not give her the agency she needs to get out through the wire in her turn. This is demonstrated with finality at the climax of the film: Henry, who knows very well that the intruder downstairs is a man he himself paid to murder Leona, at the last moment discovers that her murder is not only unnecessary, but will definitely be traced to him. He urges her to get help—but not through the telephone. "I want you to try and get out of bed!" he says. "...I want you to get out of that bed and walk to the window! I want you to scream out in the street, Leona!" But Leona is not even able to escape the house in that rudimentary way, sending her voice out through that simplest of channels, the open window: "I can't move, Henry! I'm too frightened!" she sobs. All she can manage, as the killer approaches, is to fumble the receiver back onto the phone and hang up, belatedly and futilely trying to close the danger-conduit at last.

The films *Black Christmas* (1974) and *When a Stranger Calls* (1979) use practically identical sequences to illustrate this point. In each film, the main character, a teenaged female, feels nervous and vulnerable because of mysterious telephone threats she has been receiving that night. Each character is shown carefully fastening up the house in an extended and slow series of shots: drawing the curtains, locking the door, performing those ritual actions that protect the hallowed domestic space against intrusions from the world outside. Shortly

thereafter, when it is revealed that the mysterious calls are coming from inside the house, and a strange man bursts forth from upstairs to murder her, the main character flees to the front door. But she cannot open it, because she herself has locked it and/or fastened the security chain; now these cozy domestic measures are turned against her, trapping her inside the contaminated domestic space that had once seemed so pure.

A similar sequence is repeated with even more emphasis in *Pulse*, but with a young boy as the victim. The boy, David, who also feels increasingly nervous and vulnerable—not because of mysterious phone calls, this time, but because of mysterious electrical surges coming in through the wall sockets—is repeatedly reassured by his parents that he shouldn't worry, nothing can hurt him here, because of the locks on the doors and (especially) the bars on the windows, shown in lingering closeups. But again, the very protectiveness of the hallowed family circle becomes a trap. He discovers that the threat “comes in through the wires,” and tells his father, “I just don't want to stay here anymore! I just want to get out of this house right now!” His father soothes him and sends him upstairs to his room, but instead David flees the house—only to be caught on the front sidewalk by his father and literally dragged kicking and screaming back inside, sobbing and shouting, “No, Dad! I don't want to stay in the house! Don't make me go in there!” At the climax of the film, when the deadly electricity has at last seeped in through every socket and into every appliance and bursts forth to wreak final havoc (much as the killers do in *Sorry Wrong Number*, *Black Christmas*, and *When a Stranger Calls*), David tries to flee

from the house and is reduced to yanking helplessly on the locked front door and shouting ineffectually for help through the barred window. In all of these manifestations of the discourse, the telephonic conduit, like a rupture in the skin, brings in a contagious organism that attacks the body of the family from the inside, and they are only safe if they can flee the space that once was their protection.

“Reaches into many family circles”

This second axis of the fear discourse focuses on fears of intrusion, disruption of the boundaries between public and private, outside and inside, “Them” and “Us”. Of course, the coded concept of “Us,” and the “safe” space of the white, middle/upper-class domestic sphere, is not complete without the third axis under discussion, issues of gender, age, and sexuality, as this conceptual space is largely formed around the root figures of the vulnerable woman and child. The dystopian discourse of electric invasion is at its richest and most persistent when the figures of the woman and the child are involved, for the vulnerable domesticity they have largely represented in the discourse of private versus public space serves as an intense focus for the sexualized threat of the male technologized invader from the outside.

Given the essence of actor/acted-upon framing the concept of caller hegemony previously discussed, it is not so surprising that the caller/called relationship has been mapped so thoroughly onto our society’s gender roles, with their own naturalized model of male-masculine-actor/female-feminine-acted-upon. The “role

imbalance"⁵² constructed at the heart of telephonic caller hegemony is a perfect fit with the role imbalance constructed at the heart of the discourse of the gender and sexuality of human bodies. Biological essentialism and technological determinism go hand in hand to define our society's particular sets of power relations as somehow inherent, an inescapable function of the original design and the "natural" methods of use.

This gendering of telephonically-mediated interaction (with the attendant discourses of proximity and presence) produces a heightened concern about sexuality, especially regarding the ways in which the telephone permits its users to break the bounds of sexual propriety. The potential for phone sex was circulating in the public imagination well before the modern days of "dial-a-porn"; as with many of the other discourses about virtual presence and the body, this one also has a longer history than one might expect. Henry M. Boettinger claims, for instance, that "The imagination of early moralists was so fevered by prurient thoughts that one suggested laws prohibiting telephone installations in bedrooms."⁵³ One Jazz Age article remarked:

The telephone gives the flapper courage—and more it permits a girl to lie in her bed and to talk with a man lying in his bed; it permits her half-clothed, to talk with him a moment after its ring had made him hop nude out of his bathtub.⁵⁴

Jean Cocteau alluded to this type of lascivious sexual/technological scenario in his

⁵² Hopper, 9.

⁵³ Henry M. Boettinger, "Our Sixth-and-a-Half Sense," in *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, ed. Ithiel de Sola Pool (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977), 203.

⁵⁴ Cited in Martin, 164.

1930 play, *The Human Voice*. The entire work is a monologue delivered by a woman on the telephone with her unseen ex-lover, who has recently left her. She tells him:

You know, dear, sometimes when we were in bed and I had my head in its little place with my ear against your chest and you were talking, I heard your voice exactly the same as this evening in the telephone...The night before last? I went to sleep. I took the telephone with me...No, in bed with me. Yes, I know. I'm very silly, but I took the telephone to bed with me because, after all, we are connected by the telephone.⁵⁵

One of the earliest manifestations of the gendered and sexualized discourse of telephonic threat came from regulatory sites targeting and punishing the use of vulgar or obscene language over the phone. Telegraph companies had already faced some of the same issues, as in cases like *Nye v. Western Union Telegraph Co.*, handled by the Circuit Court of Minnesota in 1900. This case was judged according to the traditional bodily-transportation-based “common carrier” metaphor, which was applied to telegraph companies and in their turn to telephone companies. A primary focus of the concept of the common carrier was to require that similar service be offered to everyone in similar situations. However, it also served to weave the idea of wire-as-conduit thoroughly into the legislative discourse, so that this case provided a very early precedent regarding obscenity and electronic communication:

...as a common carrier of persons, though bound to carry every one who pays the fare, might exclude from his vehicles a person having a loathsome contagious disease, so, equally, it would be the right and duty of a telegraph company to refuse to transmit a message which upon its face is obscene, profane, or clearly libelous, and manifestly

⁵⁵ Jean Cocteau, *The Human Voice*, trans. Carl Wildman (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1951), 38-39.

intended only for the purpose of defamation.⁵⁶

Unlike the telegraphic system, though, in which the message itself was given to and filtered through the mediating hands of telegraph operators, the telephone did not have as strong a system of gatekeepers in place—or, following the common carrier metaphor, there were fewer ways of preventing diseased passengers from climbing aboard and travelling to their destination. Telephone operators were employed to make and supervise the connections, but the actual messages were spoken back and forth by the end users themselves. This took message content and the appropriateness thereof at least partly out of the hands of the technology's overseers, which left gaps for unruly behavior by those having the conversations. If and when this unruly behavior occurred and "vulgar" language was used, it was often conceptualized as a slippage of "men's language" into the protected circles of women, which created a crisis not just of etiquette, but of gendered invasion.

In the 1913 case of *R. H. Darnell v. The State of Texas*, this gendered facet of the telephone prompted the Court of Appeals to uphold the appellant's original conviction. The decision reads:

The uncontradicted proof introduced by both sides shows that on April 30, 1913, appellant, who was a subscriber of the telephone company, called up, on a party line, Mr. Dinsmore and discussed with him over and through the phone the insufficient service the phone company was giving to its subscribers, and said: "I think I know what the trouble is but I don't know where it is from. Like the fellow that went into the saloon and shot it up and shouted I am a son-of-a-bitch from Texas and the saloon man replied I knew you were but did not

⁵⁶ *Nye v Western Union Telegraph Co.* (Circuit Court, D. Minnesota, Fourth Division, 1900) 104 F 628.

know where you were from.” At least two others on this party line heard this conversation at the time. One of the witnesses, at least, says appellant used the word “son-of-a-bitch” twice.⁵⁷

Mr. Darnell’s vulgarity (related, interestingly enough, to a complaint about the phone company itself) was intended for the ears of his male friend. But the court felt honor bound not only to protect the sensibilities of those uninvited witnesses who were “listening in” on the party line, but also to protect the female gender in general from Mr. Darnell’s inappropriate language flowing through the wires. The decision continues:

It is well known that the telephone exchanges in this State are in charge of, and operated by young ladies, almost exclusively. It was evidently the intention of the Legislature to protect these young ladies, as well as the patrons of the telephone companies...⁵⁸

According to Carolyn Marvin:

A related problem was whether long-standing rules of propriety that made it unthinkable for a gentleman to swear in the immediate presence of ladies entitled him to speak more freely in personal telephone conversation with male friends. According to polite opinion, the implied or actual presence of women, both the all-monitoring feminine “Central” and the equally strong feminine presence at the center of the family community increasingly served by the telephone, set the tone for every conversation. An Ohio telephone company enforced its rules against “improper or vulgar” language in phone communications by removing the instruments of subscribers who did not observe this rule of social presence. When a subscriber took the company to court on this issue, the judge ruled: “The telephone reaches into many family circles...All communications should be in proper language. Moreover, in many cases, the operators in the exchanges are refined ladies, and, even beyond this, all

⁵⁷ *R.H. Darnell v The State of Texas* (Court of Criminal Appeals of Texas, 1913) 72 Tex. Crim. 271.

⁵⁸ *Darnell v State*.

operators should be protected from insult.”⁵⁹

It was not merely a matter of a man using language deemed vulgar, then, that caused the disruption, but this vulgarity combined with the telephone’s discursive status as a penetrator of the sanctified domestic space, where the vulnerable presence of women needed to be protected—even if the women in those family circles were not the recipients of the vulgar conversation. Simply having these packets of vulgar information traveling across the wires was enough to bring sexualized contamination in their wake.

Beyond propriety and custom, there were also precedents that bolstered these types of legal decisions. Various states had profanity statutes on the books that relied heavily on the double-barreled concepts of proximity and gender, such as the Alabama state code of 1876. This law prohibited “the use of abusive, vulgar, or insulting language in the dwelling-house of another, or upon the curtilage [yard, garden, or field] thereof, or upon the public highway near such premises, ‘and in the presence of the family of the owner or possessor thereof, or of any member of his family, or of any female.’”⁶⁰ The two-pronged test therefore relied on proof of the use of vulgar language in or near the house, and the presence of “the owner’s” (the male head of household’s) family, or any women (related or unrelated to the head of household) whatsoever. According to the decision in the 1878 case of *Ivey v. The State of Alabama*, “The legislature has sought, by carefully guarded language, to

⁵⁹ Marvin, 89.

⁶⁰ Cited in *Ivey v The State of Alabama* (Supreme Court of Alabama, 1878) 61 Ala. 58.

protect families or females from impropriety of language...The statute was intended to protect the home, or the members of the household while in its sacred precincts..."⁶¹

This particular kind of protectiveness owed a great deal of its impetus to metaphors of space and presence; the bad language was legally conceptualized as a physical intruder much the same as any burglar. When certain types of language were constructed as intrusive and dangerous to “families or females” inside the home’s “sacred precincts,” said language was understood to have power beyond the ordinary linguistic act of decoding its meaning. In other words, it was not important if the “families or females” actually heard and understood the vulgarities—it was the fact of proximity that made the language dangerous. The decision in the 1879 case of *Yancy v. The State of Alabama*, specifically noted that “It was not necessary...that it should be shown that [the abusive, insulting or vulgar language] was heard by the female averred to have been present when it was spoken. It is the fact of presence, subject to insult if the language is heard, which is of the essence of the offense.”⁶² The 1893 case of *McVay v. The State of Alabama* drew upon *Yancy* (which had, in its turn, drawn upon *Ivey*) to emphasize the importance not only of proximity, but of proximity to the (vulnerable, feminine) home. *McVay* was said to have “used abusive language near the dwelling of said Whitman where the latter’s wife and daughter were at the time,” and the court instructed the jury, “if you believe from the

⁶¹ *Ivey v State*.

⁶² *Yancy v The State of Alabama* (Supreme Court of Alabama, 1879) 63 Ala. 141.

evidence in this cause that Mrs. Whitman was near enough to hear the abusive, insulting or obscene language used, it is not necessary to show that she did actually hear it.”⁶³ The vulgarity of the language did not need to be decoded in order to be harmful; as with “a loathsome contagious disease,” physical proximity was what mattered. In telephone-based cases like *Darnell v. Texas*, we can see that the language-in-the-wires is slotted into this pre-existing legal definition of “nearness” to the home and “presence” of females, thus inscribing into the discourse of law the model of telephonic communication as a home-penetrating form of physical transportation.

The fear in this third discursive axis is at its core a sexual fear, an anxiety about the disruption of boundaries between “impure” and “pure,” with each side given a gender-coding: male-impure-aggressive, female/child-pure-vulnerable. All three axes, combining proximity, the home, and gender/sex—and each concomitant set of anxieties about the disruption of boundaries—are potently combined with sexualized violence in the discursive construct of the “obscene phone call.” Here the telephone, and the automatic power imbalance perceived in the dynamics thereof, creates a conduit through which the aggressive male body may enter into the vulnerable domain of the female victim. The technological determinism underlying this construct posits caller hegemony as an automatic invitation for general mayhem:

The telephone creates an evolutionary niche in semiotic ecology, a

⁶³ *McVay v The State of Alabama* (Supreme Court of Alabama, 1893) 100 Ala. 110.

space for dialogue that privileges a caller's projects. Such projects then develop, as nature abhors a vacuum. In the wilderness, if erosion forms a crack in a rock, some plant will grow there. If a pond forms in the desert, predators will hunt there.⁶⁴

In the discourse of the obscene phone call, the predators are sexual predators, and the telephone connection becomes another weapon in the arsenal of men's violence against women, falling along a continuum that includes domestic violence and rape.⁶⁵ Obscene phone calls have in fact been described as "verbal rape,"⁶⁶ and some of the same sets of beliefs can be seen to circulate around both discourses. For instance, in his sociological analysis of the telephone call, Hopper describes the power dynamics of caller hegemony: "The telephone caller's purpose penetrates... Surprise operates in the caller's favor. The answerer already says 'yes' by answering..."⁶⁷ The (female) answerer is thus seen as a participant in her own victimization who opens the door to the penetrating (male) caller and "says yes" through her insufficiently-guarded behavior. One victim of an obscene call similarly conceptualized her role: "I didn't hang up at the first obscene word. I didn't hang up until I could stand no more. I questioned and begged the caller, as though he were a physical presence and I were being attacked..."⁶⁸ As in some of the discourses still extant around rape, the extent of her suffering largely seemed to result from her

⁶⁴ Hopper, 210.

⁶⁵ For instance, see Carole J. Sheffield, "The Invisible Intruder: Women's Experiences of Obscene Phone Calls," *Gender & Society* 3:4 (Dec. 1989), 483-488; Frederic Storaska, *How to Say No to a Rapist and Survive* (New York: Warner Books, 1976).

⁶⁶ Margery Plummer, "Verbal Rape: the Obscene Phone Call," *Victimology* 9:1 (Winter 1984), 15.

⁶⁷ Hopper, 33.

⁶⁸ Plummer, 15.

role as the (female) answerer, the one in the dyad who is constructed as inherently powerless, who (perhaps unwittingly) “said yes” (or “was asking for it”).

In psychoanalytic discourse, obscene telephone calling is also categorized as a form of sexual violence, but here it has been historically conceptualized not as rape, but as exhibitionism, linking virtual proximity to a behavior specifically defined by visual proximity. One of the earliest published psychoanalytic studies of an obscene caller, in 1932, described a man who repeatedly called women on the telephone, exposed his genitals, and achieved sexual release by imagining that the woman on the other end of the line could see him.⁶⁹ (Coincidentally, the very next year saw the appearance of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which included this passage: “Unspeakable messages he telephoned mentally to Miss Dunn at an address in d’Olier Street while he presented himself indecently to the instrument in the callbox.”⁷⁰). The nexus of telephone technology, gender, sexuality, and virtual proximity was codified and diagnosed in that study as a subset or “rare form of exhibitionism.” Later studies relied on that definition in their own discussions of obscene telephone callers⁷¹, identifying the behavior as a “paraphilia” both

⁶⁹ Gerhard Bloch, “Über Eine Seltene Form Von Exhibitionismus,” *Zentralblatt für Psychotherapie und ihre Grenzgebiete einschliesslich der medizinischen Psychologie und psychischen Hygiene* 5 (1932), 605.

⁷⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

⁷¹ For instance, see: Richard D. Lyons, “Obscene Phone Calls Stir Concern,” *NYT* Feb. 26, 1967, 55:1; Geary S. Alford, Jeffrey S. Webster, & Steven H. Sanders, “Covert Aversion of Two Interrelated Deviant Sexual Practices: Obscene Phone Calling and Exhibitionism,” *Behavior Therapy* 11 (1980), 23; J. Thomas Dalby, “Is Telephone Scatalogia A Variant of Exhibitionism?,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy*

“conceptually similar and, in fact, functionally interrelated”⁷² to exhibitionism, and thus treatable with many of the same methods. Again, just as the discourse of exhibitionism gives the power to the male as the one who forces the sight of his body upon the female, in the paraphilia of obscene phone calling the power relationship is once more defined according to the gendered tenets of caller hegemony, in which “the content of the phone call is less important than the fact that someone is in the demeaned and humiliated position (the listener) and someone else is in the powerful, dominating position (the speaker).”⁷³

It is this gendered and sexualized power that is constructed as constant and inherent, no matter the specific interactions within any given phone call. Just as dystopian discourse constructs the telephone system as a one-way conduit, from powerful male caller to powerless female answerer, telephonic sexual violence is largely understood to only and inevitably go in one direction. For instance, in the larger paradigm of exhibitionism, the female is the one seeing while the male is the one being seen, and yet the power dynamics there are still constructed with the male paramount—being seen becomes a violent act of “forcing the sight of his penis on the eyes of an unwilling woman.”⁷⁴ In much the same way, the visual proximity discursively achievable over the telephone can just as easily be turned into a model based on voyeurism, dominating the (female) answerer by seeing her rather than by

and Comparative Criminology 32:1 (April 1988),45; Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: the Temptations of Emma Bovary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 29.

⁷² Alford et. al., 24.

⁷³ Kaplan, 29.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

forcing her to see him. In this discursive construct, therefore, whichever type of proximity the (male) caller desires, to see or to be seen, the dynamics of gender, sexuality, and power circulating around telephonic technology ensure that he will not be endangered—unlike the careless female callers of the cautionary tales which will be discussed in more detail below, whose foray at playing the role of the empowered and sexualized caller only invites disaster in the form of a rightfully-empowered male caller who puts them back into their proper role of victimized answerers.

In popular film, the discourse of obscene phone calls as voyeurism is often constructed to go hand in hand with the voyeurism of the camera. One basic example appears in the 1980 film *Murder by Phone*, in which people are mysteriously being found dead near their telephones. In one scene, a young woman arrives home to the sound of a ringing phone. She answers it with a hasty “Hang on just a second, hang on,” and lays down the receiver before the caller can speak. She hurries to close and lock her front door (as in the locking scenes from other films discussed previously), then undresses down to her lace underwear in a narratively-unmotivated display purely for the camera (and thus the audience as unseen voyeur), as well as a visual symbol of her status as the sexualized “bad girl” who seldom survives to the end of a horror movie. Only then does she pick up the phone, and shortly thereafter the unseen killer on the line triggers his device, physically reaching through the telephone to murder her.

A more complex instance, and one which further unpacks the metaphor of

the telephone as a dangerous, sexualized instrument both of sight and of death, appears in the 1964 film *Black Sabbath*. This film has three different short narratives, one of which is called "The Telephone." In this story, a woman comes home at night and her phone begins to ring. At first, when she answers it, no one is there. It rings again, and again no one is there; she is becoming frightened. She undresses in the camera's view and leaves the frame to take a shower. But the phone rings again, and playing by the rules both of caller hegemony and of gender primacy, she returns to the camera's view, wrapped in a towel, and answers the phone again despite her obvious fear and reluctance. "Hello, Rosy," says a menacing male voice. He begins to describe her as if he can see her: "How nice you look with that towel around you. You always did have a beautiful body." And as he does so, the camera slowly pans down Rosy's bare side and leg, making the audience complicit in the telephone-based sexual invasion of her body. She moves to draw her towel closed, but Frank interrupts her: "No, don't cover yourself. I like seeing you this way." During this sequence the audience is given access to the male pursuer's visual point of view, just as in the more traditional sort of horror movie, even though (or, perhaps more accurately, *because*) he is only present in the scene through the telephone. The male caller's virtual presence has become actual presence, the phone a tool that gives him an uncanny and sexualized form of power, and the passive, frightened, female answerer cannot see him in return. She is helpless to close the telephone-wire door against him.

The telephonic threat to the woman and child within the domestic space reaches

an apex of pervasiveness and anxiety in a particularly longstanding trope which many modern folklorists study under the rubric, “the Babysitter and the Man Upstairs.”⁷⁵ This is the commonly-told story in which a young female babysitter is terrorized by mysterious phone calls from a man—he laughs, or utters obscenities, or threatens her, or simply asks, “Have you checked the children?” After being increasingly terrorized by these calls, the girl finally calls the police or the phone company, who tell her that the next time he calls, she must keep him on the line as long as possible so they can trace the call. He calls again, she struggles to keep him on the line long enough; once she finally hangs up, the police or the operator calls her back to deliver the chilling news, “The calls are coming from inside the house!” In most versions of the story, the babysitter manages to escape, but the murderer lurking upstairs has already killed the children in their beds.

We can see all of the axes under discussion coming into play here. In the supposedly-safe domestic space, the young woman and the children are suddenly under attack from a male voice over the telephone—and it turns out that not only is his voice in the house, but his body is as well. Folklorist Sue Samuelson, who studied hundreds of versions of this story collected by sources in both the United States and Europe, points out that it is the telephone that is the crux of the tale, “the most important and emotionally-loaded item in the plot.”⁷⁶ The male threat has been there in the house all along, and conceivably could have killed the babysitter directly

⁷⁵ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 53-57.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, 55-56.

upon dispatching the children, but he doesn't; he insists on repeatedly reaching out and touching her through the wires, and it is this contact that creates the worst of the terror (and the most pointed exercise of the male stalker's power). The horror is amplified, not just from his presence inside the house, but from his specific use of the telephone as his means of entry, exploiting the social and gendered norms of caller hegemony to make her let him in past the traditional domestic defenses of locked doors and drawn shades.

Samuelson also observes that in many versions of the story, the babysitter is particularly open to a threatening call because she has been expecting a call from her boyfriend; thus, the stereotypical overuse of telephone technology by girls and young women is fittingly punished. The story serves as a cautionary tale, the equivalent of the old saw, "If you don't stop doing that, you'll go blind!" In addition, this detail clearly fits with the widespread discursive pattern of punishing the sexual woman: "bad girls" die at the end of countless stories, plays, and films, up to and including the traditional slasher movie, with young women killed while having sex but the "good girl" surviving to scream another day. The babysitter here has not been attending properly to her domestic duties; instead, she is planning to use the dangerous and sexualized telephone in order to pursue her own frivolous ends, and she pays for it.

This is clearly the structuring narrative trope in the film *I Saw What You Did*. As soon as the supervising parents have left the two teenage girls, Libby and Kit, to babysit Libby's little sister Tess alone overnight, the girls turn to the telephone as a

source of titillating entertainment. “We do it all the time, call people for fun,” Tess says to Kit. Libby demonstrates by calling a man’s phone number chosen at random from the phone book, and when his wife answers, Libby asks breathily, “Is Bill there? This is Alice. I’ve been waiting for him...at the Green Garter Club...” Eventually the random calls reach a man who begins to talk back to “Suzette,” the breathy sexualized female persona Libby has created. He chats with her, flirts with her, and urges her to meet with him. Libby later tells Kat, “His voice was so deep, so exciting! It’s like he was running his hand down my back, real slowly...” This indicates the beginning of the incorporation of his voice via the medium of the telephone, which ultimately leads to him physically running his hands, not down her back, but around her neck when he finds her and tries to strangle her at the climax of the film. “We’re not going to be using the phone for a long, long time,” Libby says weepily to Tess at the very end. She has learned her lesson the hard way: it was the risky telephonic behavior of the girls themselves—the way they opened the phone-wire-door in the home, and the way they reveled in both the sexualized dimension of the instrument and in the sense of actual bodily presence from the voice on the line—that allowed the intruder to find them and physically manifest himself inside the formerly safe domestic space.

A more grim and unforgiving version of the same story is told in the 1974 film *Black Christmas*. The setting here is a sorority house, full of young women who are practically unsupervised except for the ineffectual guidance of an alcoholic house-mother. It is revealed early in the film that the sorority receives obscene

phone calls on a regular basis from a man they have nicknamed “The Moaner.” The phone rings during a Christmas party, and the girl who answers it calls out, “Hey, quiet! It’s him again! The Moaner!”, which brings her sorority sisters running. As the man on the phone proceeds through a series of grunts, squeals, sexual propositions, and profanity, the young women stand in a row, listening, avidly transfixed, the camera slowly moving from face to face in a long tracking closeup. Despite their professed repugnance at The Moaner’s language and behavior, they still seem unwilling and/or unable to hang up the phone and thus close the metaphorical door on him, trapped by the unseen restrictions of caller hegemony as well as by their own sexual curiosity. One of the girls finally grabs the phone and begins to curse back at The Moaner, for which she is later remonstrated by her friends. “Come on,” she snorts in reply, “this is a sorority house, not a convent.” But her sexual and linguistic bravado brings one final response from The Moaner before he hangs up on them: “I’m going to kill you.” And eventually he does, murdering and thereby punishing all of the listening women by the film’s end—except for one who is left catatonic, sedated and alone, vulnerable to The Moaner, who (unbeknownst to anyone but the audience) still lurks in the attic with the extra phone extension. As the camera pulls back from the house and the final credits roll, we hear the phone begin to ring, emphasizing that just as in the most basic form of the Babysitter and the Man Upstairs, the male murderer’s presence in the house is not necessarily the primary source of terror—it is his use of the telephone as a tool, one to which the victim is seen as uniquely susceptible.

“The nine-year-old daughter and the man at the end of the phone”

All of these articulations of the dystopian discourse circulating around the telephone system, and the accompanying anxieties of ruptured boundaries, were spun into a series of legislative and judicial decisions in the 1980s during public national arguments around “dial-a-porn” (generally defined as a commercial transaction involving a live or recorded sexual message listened to through the telephone), both as an object and an industry. This series of occasions for the creation of policy serves as an interesting case study, following the iteration and transformation of the instrumentalist discursive constructs discussed earlier into legislative policies and judicial decisions, organizing particular facets of power and bringing them to bear on certain practices and uses of the telephone system, attempting to shape the discourse and the artifact at one and the same time.

The particular branch of telephone use that gave rise to the commercial dial-a-porn industry is the “toll-call” system, which has its roots in the early days of telephone development and diffusion. Originally, all calls were connected by central operators, who were thus available to every subscriber at every call. This contact led to the operator becoming a kind of centralized information service, providing upon request such facts as the time and the latest weather report. It took up the operator’s time, however, which reduced her productiveness and thus her cost-effectiveness as far as the larger goals of the telephone company were concerned. To

avoid these kinds of losses, by the 1920s various telephone companies were beginning to install automated message systems, such as the time-of-day recording provided by New York Telephone in 1928, eventually followed by an automated weather report in 1937.⁷⁷

By the 1970s, telephonic information services provided a wider range of content, including dial-a-joke, dial-a-prayer, children's stories, messages from Santa Claus, sports scores, and horse race tips, among others.⁷⁸ As from the earliest days of the technology, these services were controlled in their entirety by the telephone company, from production of the content to the mechanics of distribution and the means of advertising. In 1980 AT&T developed its "Dial-It" service, setting up long distance lines with 900-prefixes; in addition to long-distance charges, callers paid on a per-minute basis in order to participate in activities such as automated polls.⁷⁹ At first AT&T kept all of the toll charges (charged to each user's monthly telephone bill), but shortly thereafter the FCC ruled that the Dial-It service exceeded the boundaries of the telephone companies' authority, and AT&T was ordered to "divest

⁷⁷ Martin, 102-103; William Dunkle, General Manager for the Information Services Business Unit of Pacific Bell, cited in United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Final Report Vol. II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1986): 1428.

⁷⁸ Barbara Rudolph, "Who Ever Said Talk Was Cheap?", *Time* (19 September 1988): 44; Edmund L. Andrews, "Expanding the Uses of '900' Services," *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1991: 34; Dunkle, cited in *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Vol. II*, 1428.

⁷⁹ Alain L. Sanders, "Dial-a-Porn, Find-a-Lawyer," *Time* (3 July 1989): 56; Robert LaRose and David Atkin, "Audiotext and the Re-Invention of the Telephone as a Mass Medium," *Journalism Quarterly* 69:2 (Summer 1992), 414.

itself of its 'enhanced services.'"⁸⁰ The company now needed to contract with separate providers, who would control the content and manage the advertising, while AT&T would provide the telephone lines and the use of its billing department, and they would split the profits.⁸¹

The arrangement sparked a proliferation of long-distance call-in lines, and with the breakup of the Bell system, the Regional Bell Holding Companies (the so-called Baby Bells) began to partner with hundreds of small firms to establish local dial-up services with prefixes like 976, 540, and 410.⁸² The telephonic information industry in general became very profitable, and enthusiastic purveyors of toll-call services projected that the industry would continue to grow at its current rate into an economic juggernaut. "It's the beginning of a multibillion-dollar wave of information-providing services, all funneled through your personal phone," said W. Brooks McCarty, founder of the National Telephone Information Network.⁸³

Dial-a-porn was not a latecomer to the new industry, nor a straggler grafted on to soak up extra profits; toll-calls providing sexual content emerged at the very beginning, not long after AT&T first started its original "Dial-It" service. The timeline of dial-a-porn history that has thus far been inscribed into sites of legislative and scholarly discourse has located the origin of the industry itself specifically in March

⁸⁰ Elizabeth J. Mann, "Telephones, Sex, and the First Amendment," *UCLA Law Review* (April 1986): 1221; Dunkle, cited in *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Vol. II*, 1428.

⁸¹ Dunkle, cited in *Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Vol. II*, 1428-1429.

⁸² Rudolph, 44.

⁸³ Rudolph, 44.

of 1983, with one company operating nationally from its headquarters in New York.⁸⁴ However, despite the repetition of this date in government hearings through the years, further research indicates that it is not entirely correct; this makes it more likely that regulatory discourse has settled on the date when dial-a-porn was “discovered” by legislators as a marker for its beginnings. Evidence of commercial dial-a-porn service can actually be found from as early as 1981, from sites in both New York and California; the *New York Times* ran a column remarking on the phenomenon, grappling with just how to conceptualize this new combination of telephone technology and sexuality:

I was startled to discover recently that it is now possible to dial an obscene phone call...No, I am not making this up. There really are people so eager to get obscene phone calls that they'll pay for it. The few people I know who have had free obscene phone calls have felt assaulted by them...Maybe it's ordering up the assault for yourself that makes the difference.⁸⁵

By 1982, some phone companies were holding lotteries in order to decide with whom they would contract to provide pay-per-call information services; one company that won a line in the New York State lottery leased two additional lines from other lottery winners and began providing large-scale dial-a-porn services by early 1983, and it was this company that first caught the attention of legislators.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ See, for example: United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33359; Cindy L. Petersen, “The Congressional Reponse to the Supreme Court’s Treatment of Dial-a-Porn,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 78 (August 1990), 2026.

⁸⁵ Patrick McDonnell, “Heavy Breathing,” *New York Times* (27 December 1981), section 6, 12:3.

⁸⁶ Brent D. Ward, United States Attorney (Utah), cited in United States Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, *Attorney General’s Commission on*

Dial-a-porn eventually dominated the race for profits in the telephonic information service industry;⁸⁷ an article from 1988 summed up that “[s]o far, sex has been the best-seller, generating more than a third of the industry’s revenue.”⁸⁸ As might have been expected, other purveyors of telephonic information were not pleased by this financial success and further expansion. It was not necessarily because of a perception that the dial-a-porn companies were cutting into their market share, however—the larger problem was the increasing use of the dial-a-porn provider as a symbol for all telephonic information services.⁸⁹ More and more, toll-call technology as a whole was conflated in public discourse with the negative connotations of unregulated pornography, which other participants in the larger industry felt tarred them with too wide a brush. In an analysis of the conflicted industry in *Advertising Age*, caution seemed to be overtaking the previous enthusiasm as the scope of the industry’s image problems became more and more apparent. A lawyer representing businesses involved in telemarketing admitted that he was “pessimistic” about the future of 900-numbers “[u]nless the industry cleans

Pornography Final Report Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1986): 1429.

⁸⁷ Dunkle, cited in *Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography Vol. II*, 1432; Petersen, 2026; Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, “Desexualization of the Telephone,” *New York Law Journal* (19 Jan 1990), 1.

⁸⁸ Rudolph, 44.

⁸⁹ John P. Gillard, “Pay-Per-Call Legal Advice, Professional Integrity, and Legal Licenses: Why 1-900-Lawyers is a Call to the Wrong Number,” *Marquette Law Review* (Winter 1996): 575-576.

itself up... It has a bad reputation, and deservedly so.”⁹⁰ In April of 1988, several information services using the 976 prefix filed suit against various dial-a-porn providers sharing the same prefix, for “interference with economic opportunity and unlawful business practices.” The non-pornographic information providers claimed that “[d]ial-a-porn is running legitimate services out of business and tainting the 976 industry,” and some companies folded altogether, claiming that they had had to spend more money on dissociating themselves from pornography providers than they could spend on promoting and financing their own operations.⁹¹ Even AT&T eventually acted, seemingly against its own economic interests, in order to try and stem the negative effects the “sleazy” image of 900 numbers was having on its reputation. Since the company could not selectively refuse service to certain customers, including dial-a-porn providers, AT&T decided to stop paying all companies for calls placed to their 900 numbers. “We’re especially troubled by reports that children can reach these messages,” announced AT&T vice-chairman Charles Marshall. “Eliminating the economic incentive for adult-message sponsors should help solve the problem.”⁹²

As this last quotation indicates, one of the most damaging blows to the toll-call industry’s collective reputation, and thus one of the most pressing motivations to change, even at a potential financial loss, came from an implied threat to children.

⁹⁰ Scott Hume, “Telemedia Working Out the Kinks,” *Advertising Age* (18 February 1991), S1.

⁹¹ Nancy Blodgett, “Guilt By Association?,” *ABA Journal* (1 April 1988): 31.

⁹² David Disch, “AT&T Acts to End Phone-sex Services,” *Christianity Today* (19 February 1988), 47.

The discursive axes combining telephone technology with proximity, invasion of the home, and danger to the woman and child, were the primary weapons in the struggle to control, regulate, legislate, or ban the dial-a-porn industry, attempting to contain this potent combination of telephonic technology and sexuality.

As was previously mentioned, national legislative discourse locates the “discovery” of dial-a-porn in early 1983, when Carlin Communications was running a national dial-a-porn service for *High Society* magazine from headquarters in New York. Peter F. Cohalan, County Executive of Suffolk County NY, and Congressman Thomas J. Bliley (R-VA) filed a complaint with the FCC, asking that Carlin’s dial-a-porn service be shut down; they claimed that in contracting with Carlin to provide obscene content over the telephone lines, New York Telephone had violated federal law—specifically, section 223 of the Communications Act of 1934 (47 U.S.C.), which would become a well-trampled battleground in the struggle to control, regulate or ban dial-a-porn. Forty-six other congressmen signed a letter to the FCC chairman, also asking that he take action against the fledgling industry.⁹³

The FCC referred the matter to the U.S. Department of Justice, but the DOJ declined to prosecute, indicating that the matter would be better handled administratively, and thus they handed it back to the F.C.C. The F.C.C. in turn interpreted section 223 of the Communications Act of 1934 as unenforceable over

⁹³ Mann, n15; United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, “Cable-Porn and Dial-a-Porn Control Act: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Criminal Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-ninth Congress, first session, on S. 1090,” 31 July 1985, 88-89.

dial-a-porn as the language stood; section 223 only applied to calls “deliberately made to innocent, unconsenting individuals,” and no exception was originally intended “relating to calls initiated by children.”⁹⁴

Here we can see the FCC attempting to hew closely to the letter of the law regarding caller hegemony; that is, the initiator of the call is the perpetrator, not the victim, and is responsible for the call’s termination. This indicated the direction in which federal legislators were hereafter to pursue their attempts to legislate dial-a-porn: reinterpreting the caller hegemony construct, casting the person using the dial-a-porn line as the answerer (despite the fact that the practices of dial-a-porn actually required those seeking it to actively dial for it), trapped and vulnerable within the sacred precincts of the home. And what more ready-made figure for innocent victimhood than the generic figure of “the child”? Discursive precedent for the construction of childhood in this way dates back to the Victorian era and beyond, but modern American legislative precedent had a more recent model, one specifically tailored for issues of this kind. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, the United States Supreme Court overturned a number of proposed anti-pornography laws on First Amendment grounds. “However,” claimed a 1968 article in the *New York Times*:

...in a number of these opinions, the Justices have hinted that they would take a more generous view of laws aimed only at spicy fare sold to minors... Two law enforcement officers...told the Justices today that their legislators had taken the hint and passed laws barring children

⁹⁴ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 78.

from seeing “harmful” material that is not obscene and could not be kept from adults.⁹⁵

The figure of the vulnerable woman was still sometimes pressed into service, of course, as in Senator Jeremiah Denton’s (R-AL) assertion that pornography, including dial-a-porn, “changes the attitudes of husbands toward wives and of wives toward husbands in a negative way and undermines the marital relationship,”⁹⁶ Senator Jesse Helms’s (R-NC) portrait of “wives abandoned by over-sexed husbands,”⁹⁷ or Senator Arlen Specter’s (R-PA) well-worn story about his wife encountering a dial-a-porn number:

I recently received a telephone call from my wife...one day about a month ago she called me and said they are passing out leaflets in center city Philadelphia to call a number. And I said, well, what is heard when you dial the number? And she said, I do not know; I did not dial the number. And I said, well, why not? And she said, because I did not want to hear it...I said, tell me the number, and I dialed the number.⁹⁸

I received a call from my wife, Joan Specter, who is a councilwoman in Philadelphia, saying they were distributing leaflets about calling a long-distance number, which was a California number, and it looked like obscene materials. I said to Joan, “Well, what did the call sound like?” And she said, “I did not want to place the call.” I said, “How do you know what it is like, if you do not call?” She said, “I would rather you do that.” I did...and I could not believe what I heard.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Fred P. Graham, “Obscenity Laws for Children Argued,” *New York Times* (17 Jan. 1968), 36:1.

⁹⁶ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 22.

⁹⁷ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 3.

⁹⁸ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 70.

⁹⁹ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (16 Nov. 1989), 29331.

But by and large, it was the construction of the child-in-the-home that held sway as the most common weapon in this particular thread of legislative discourse, distilling images of innocence, vulnerability, and helplessness more effectively for a modern America in which women were less often considered an inherently protected class.

Congress's first definitive move in this policy arena was in late 1983, amending Section 223 of the Communications Act of 1934 with a new subsection (b). This subsection attempted to be more specific in targeting dial-a-porn in particular: it added language about "commercial purposes," and forbade obscene telephone conversations involving minors under 18 or nonconsenting adults, no matter who placed the call, trying to reorient the dial-a-porn process vis-à-vis the understood rules of caller hegemony. However, much to Congressman Bliley's later chagrin, this amendment, once passed, was understood and interpreted as effectively legalizing the transmission of technically obscene (as opposed to merely "indecent") material for consenting adults, when obscene materials had not actually been proven legal for transmission before, even for consenting adults.¹⁰⁰ This effect actually came directly from the insistence on including language so definitively targeted at children.

The rest of subsection (b) also caused problems: it stated that the FCC must issue regulations setting out methods by which companies could block underage callers, and adherence to these regulations would provide a defense to

¹⁰⁰ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 86.

prosecution.¹⁰¹ The FCC duly issued its *First Report and Order*, requiring dial-a-porn companies to operate only during late night hours or to take payment only through credit cards.¹⁰² However, the second circuit court struck down these regulations in the 1984 case *Carlin Communications, Inc. v. FCC*, 749 F.2d 113 (2nd Cir. 1984) (Carlin I), in which credit cards were found acceptable but time-channeling was deemed too restrictive as well as too difficult to manage across multiple time zones. The amended section 223 was thus for all intents and purposes shorn of its power.

The FCC then set out a Second Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, but before its second try at a workable set of regulations could be issued, Congress publicly tackled the issue at a July, 1985 hearing before the Subcommittee on Criminal Law of the Senate Committee of the Judiciary (99th Congress, 1st Session, July 31, 1985). In the course of this hearing, senators made statements and took statements from witnesses in order to create a discursive framework constructed entirely around the figure of the child-in-the-home, and by virtue of the child, the family-in-the-home as well. Acting chairman Senator Jeremiah Denton set out this goal right away with an introductory statement warning of “the invasion of the American home by pornographers”¹⁰³ through the wires, echoing the discursive axes already discussed here regarding the dystopian potential of the telephone system. Senator Denton also

¹⁰¹ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 90.

¹⁰² United States, Federal Communications Commission, *First Report and Order*, 49 Fed. Reg. 24,996 (1984).

¹⁰³ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 5.

underscored the repeated theme of the one-way conduit, attempting to reframe the dial-a-porn user as the ‘answerer’ in the caller hegemony dynamic; for instance, he reported:

In my own state of Alabama, a news article appearing in the *Montgomery Advertiser and Journal*, on June 5, 1983, listed story after story of how children as young as 6 years old have been indiscriminately exposed to pornographic messages and images through dial-a-porn services against the will of and without the consent of their parents.¹⁰⁴

The passive phrasing of language such as “have been exposed to” is repeated throughout the hearing (and, as we shall see, in future Senate statements of this kind), creating the picture of the child in the home as the victim of an exhibitionist, a more familiar model of crime against children (and similarly, as we have seen, of women).

The FCC sent a written statement by its General Counsel, Jack D. Smith, and Smith also appeared at the hearing to give further testimony. The FCC’s legal stance did not gibe well with Congress’s aim, especially because the FCC still believed that current law did not support a shift from the dial-a-porn user as caller (and thus initiator and terminator of a consensual interaction) from the dial-a-porn user as victim. Smith’s written statement warned against passing another law that would be

¹⁰⁴ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 9.

negated by the courts as quickly as the last one had,¹⁰⁵ and he reiterated this warning in his oral testimony, which led to this exchange with Senator Denton:

Smith: While the extent to which Congress may regulate offensive telephone communications has yet to be resolved, it seems clear that the courts will require any regulation in this area to be as unintrusive as possible. ...

Denton: If you will permit a comment, “unintrusive” in what way? Isn’t pornography “intrusive”?¹⁰⁶

Smith answered this comment with an observation about the recent acts of the second circuit court, stating that it seemed to want to protect children without abrogating the rights of adults to have access to the same material. Denton’s response was again focused on the discursive goal of the hearing-as-performance, rather than the potential legislative pitfalls set out in Smith’s testimony: “So the court seemed to indicate that what we need to do is protect children against pornographic materials?”¹⁰⁷

Other committee members and invited witnesses at the hearing participated in the construction of dial-a-porn as the initiator and an aggressive intruder that targets children, as in Senator Strom Thurmond’s (R-SC) statement that “With increasing frequency, some type of obscene material or smut is thrust into our lives...I do not see how any parent of a child would approve of material such as that

¹⁰⁵ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 16-17.

¹⁰⁶ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 21.

¹⁰⁷ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 21.

being distributed in our society,”¹⁰⁸ and Bruce A. Taylor’s (Vice President and General Counsel of an organization called “Citizens for Decency Through Law”) statement that Congress must “prevent what has now become a million calls a day reaching the American public, and most of those calls [sic] are probably between the ages of 13- and 16-year-old adolescents.”¹⁰⁹ One witness, a professor of psychiatry, most clearly hinted at the correct way to decode the repeated use of the word “home” with his statement, “This material can now and does enter the private dwellings of individuals and most alarmingly, the home”¹¹⁰—“the home” within this thread of policy discourse was not a “private dwelling of individuals,” but the richer construct including figures of children, women (and more particularly the family-focused subset of women called mothers and wives), domesticity, vulnerability, and so forth.

Perhaps the most intense focus on this type of discourse came when two of Congressman Bliley’s constituents testified about their children’s experiences with dial-a-porn. The two men (presented as heads of households and fathers of boys) had sons who were friends, and one boy passed along a dial-a-porn number to the other. One man testified:

For a brief period, the boys enjoyed the mischievous thrill of the explicit recordings. My first reaction was, oh, well, boys will be boys.

¹⁰⁸ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 68-69.

¹⁰⁹ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 74.

¹¹⁰ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 137.

However, it was only after confrontation, discussion, discipline and punishment of my son that I realized the consequence of our experience.¹¹¹

Within the phrasing of his testimony to the committee lay an example of the switch from the traditional caller-hegemony construct (the boys made the call, and they were in little danger because of their masculine right to the “caller” position: “boys will be boys”) to the altered construct focusing on the child as the victim-answerer, invaded by the dial-a-porn-as-caller. The other man testifying about this particular event told much the same story, with the additional detail that a nine-year-old girl at the boys’ school received the number and “heard the same things that our boys had heard.”¹¹²

The specter of a child of that age, and more specifically a girl, intruded upon by dial-a-porn came back as a discursive weapon slightly later in the hearing, in the charged struggle between Senator Denton and Barry W. Lynn, Legislative Counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union. Lynn had already gotten on the committee’s bad side by beginning his statement with a warning against the “disturbing rebirth of censorship in the United States,”¹¹³ and his testimony was largely resistant to participation in the discursive construction of the dial-a-porn-intruder victimizing the helpless child-in-the-home. In his written statement, and briefly in his oral

¹¹¹ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 95.

¹¹² United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 96.

¹¹³ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 97.

testimony, he emphasized the position of First Amendment law regarding the “unwilling listener”:

Where this conflict in fact exists, “the right to be left alone must be placed in the scales with the right of others to communicate.” *Rowan v. Post Office Department* 397 U.S. 728,736 (1970). However, voluntary use of “Dial-It” services intrudes upon no privacy rights of others. There are absolutely no unwilling listeners...The service can be accessed only by the affirmative act of a voluntary listener who has clear knowledge of what he or she is about to hear.¹¹⁴

His focus on this area of the law, however, was challenged by the committee, and Senator Denton in particular, with a charged and telling reiteration of the story of the little girl mentioned by Congressman Bliley’s testifying constituents:

LYNN: In other words, it has a commercial purpose, but it cannot in any reasonable way be labeled public. The communication in dial-a-porn is between parties facilitated by a totally automated electronic switching system which does not involve even a third party to the extent of a letter carrier.

DENTON: Such as the 9-year-old daughter and the man at the end of the phone in New York?¹¹⁵

One of the most interesting and discursively potent things about this exchange is Denton’s instant use of the idea of “the man at the end of the phone” (practically “the man upstairs”), when the number called by the older boys and passed along to the girl was apparently a number targeted at heterosexual males and voiced by a female (and, even further, not a live speaker, but a recording of a woman’s voice). The little girl must be used as the ultimate figure of the victim, and in the framework being

¹¹⁴ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 113.

¹¹⁵ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 100.

constructed here, she becomes the most effective sort of victim when cast in the traditional role of the female/child at home sexually threatened by a male, the role we have already seen spun out within our culture for a century around the technology of the telephone system. Lynn, faced with the committee casting him in the role of an anti-family/anti-children/pro-invasive-pornography menace, was eventually reduced to insisting toward the end of his testimony: "You know, I do not just look at this thing theoretically, Senator. I have two kids, a dog and station wagon. I am a very straight-laced person in many, many ways."¹¹⁶

Shortly thereafter, the FCC, still attempting to promulgate appropriate regulations according to section 223(b), issued its *Second Report and Order*; here, time-channeling was replaced with a requirement for access codes, meaning that those who wished to use dial-a-porn services would have to contact the company in writing and contract for an access code to allow them to hear the material.¹¹⁷ Carlin Communications, the same company that succeeded in having the first set of regulations struck down, challenged again, and in *Carlin Communications, Inc. v. FCC*, 787 F.2d 846 (2nd Cir. 1986) (Carlin II), the second circuit court again declared the FCC's regulations invalid, stating that an access code requirement was too restrictive.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ United States Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Criminal Law, 105.

¹¹⁷ United States, Federal Communications Commission, *Second Report and Order*, 50 Fed. Reg. 42,699: 1985.

¹¹⁸ Petersen, 2035.

The Senate responded after Carlin II by bringing an amendment to the floor as part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, intending to alter the wording of section 223(b) in order to forbid entirely any dial-a-porn operations of any kind by striking out the provision about minors under 18 or non-consenting adults, and removing the FCC from the process altogether by striking out the section on the defense to prosecution. The Senate passed it, but when it reached the House, the Representatives struck the amendment from the bill.¹¹⁹ Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) therefore proposed the same amendment in the Senate in 1987, despite the stated misgivings of some of his colleagues regarding its potential for being struck down afterward by the courts.¹²⁰ In his explanations of the amendment on the Senate floor, Senator Helms and accompanying written testimony and opinions relied even more strongly on the figure of the victimized child, to the exclusion of almost all else (such as opinions from the FCC or other relevant regulatory or legal experts about the legal soundness of the amendment), which ended up constructing a discursive framework that it seemed no Senator dared to break by voting nay (and in fact, Helms placed additional pressure against potential naysayers by asking for the yeas and nays on the amendment to be listed in a roll-call vote: “I think I want to put Senators on record over this: win, lose, or draw.”¹²¹).

Helms began:

¹¹⁹ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33357.

¹²⁰ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33359.

¹²¹ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33358.

I urge Senators to listen carefully. I am reading from the Dallas Voice, the official newspaper, I suppose, of the sodomists in Dallas, the homosexuals, the gay community. Incidentally, I resent the corruption of a very fine word, "gay." It says, "Call and talk to other hot sexy men live," and then it gives a telephone number, and so forth...Oh, it says, "Well, it is for consenting adults." But who believes that, in the context of what American parents are experiencing with this foul process?¹²²

The bulk of Helms's uncontested presentation continued in a like vein, arguing that "dial-a-porn has caused irreversible damage in American communities and American families,"¹²³ and quoting letters from three parents whose children called dial-a-porn lines, the stories repeatedly disturbing him so much that he refused to finish reading them aloud: "And I will not give the rest of it...I do not care to read it aloud. But suffice it to say that it is a disgusting set of circumstances...I am not going to read the rest of these facts."¹²⁴ And in a bodily image neatly dovetailing with the phone line as a one-way conduit, Helms concludes, "...I am trying to hack the umbilical cord that is feeding garbage to the minds of our young people."¹²⁵

The only other Senator who proffered an opinion during the debate was Claiborne Pell (D-RI), who appeared dubious that the amendment would pass constitutional muster, but wanted to make it clear that his objections were judicial rather than discursive: "If we vote on it, my present thinking is that I would want to vote in the negative although I agree with the objective. The only reason to vote in

¹²² United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33356-33357.

¹²³ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33357.

¹²⁴ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33357-58

¹²⁵ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33358.

the negative is because of the constitutional issues.”¹²⁶ Senator Helms reassured him by inserting into the record a letter from Citizens for Decency Through Law, who again, as in the 1985 hearing, argued in favor of a change in the law and claimed that the amendment would stand as constitutional. And also as in the 1985 hearing, the CDL testimony relied to an enormous extent on the discourse of widespread and aggressive dial-a-porn attacking helpless children (“...any child in America can hear hardcore sexually explicit messages on the country’s telephone system...the telephone system has a public trust. The trust is breached when the telephone system enters the pornography business by exposing ‘indecent’ dial-a-porn to virtually every child in America,” etc.).¹²⁷ The letter argued directly and at some length in favor of the multivalent image Congress had thus far been attempting to make the focus of the entire dial-a-porn argument:

It is of the utmost importance to be cognizant that dial-a-porn is presently in the home whether the homeowner wants it or not. Today one cannot have telephone service in the privacy of one’s family environment without being required to have dial-a-porn with it. Families with children must give up telephone service to be “left alone” from exposure of their children to this “intruder.” Is there really a medium more “pervasive” than the telephone? We know that children (especially teens) spend countless hours on the telephone. At present, no family can be left alone in their own homes without the harmful nuisance of indecent or obscene dial-a-porn.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33359

¹²⁷ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33359, 33362.

¹²⁸ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33362.

In the end, when the vote was taken and the roll was called, the only senators who did not vote in favor of the amendment were the two who were absent.¹²⁹

The amended 223(b) was passed and enacted into law in 1988, but while the discourse may have been powerful, the amendment itself was definitely weak. Certain senators had already been dubious about its status under constitutional law, and they were shortly to be proven correct: Sable Communications of California, an affiliate of Carlin Communications, challenged the new wording of section 223(b) on the grounds that it violated the first and fourteenth amendments. The U.S. district court in California granted a preliminary injunction against enforcing the ban on indecent telephone messages, but upheld 223(b) against obscene telephone messages; Sable, unhappy with this decision, appealed it to the Supreme Court. In the 1989 decision in *Sable Communications, Inc., v. FCC*, 109 S. Ct. 2829, 2832 (1989), the Supreme Court upheld Congress's ban on obscene telephone messages but struck down the ban on indecent messages, stating that the latter were protected by the First Amendment. And further, the Court disapproved of Congress's choice to control dial-a-porn by banning it outright, as it was not the least-restrictive means they could have chosen. The Court stated that the FCC's latest attempt at regulation on the issue (here involving three choices: requiring users to pay by credit card, requiring an access code, or requiring use of a descrambling device) should have been tried before 223(b) was amended yet again, as there was no evidence in the record thus far as to the ineffectiveness of these regulations. The decision also

¹²⁹ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (1 Dec. 1987), 33363.

“found the legislative history of the 1988 amendment to be of little probative value as to the need for further regulation, because it consisted primarily of ‘conclusory statements’ made by individual members of Congress during floor debate,”¹³⁰ underscoring the extent to which this particular piece of policy discourse had heretofore been largely created within and controlled by the framing discourse in these “conclusory statements”—in this case, the discourse of vulnerable children at home pursued by sexually-threatening telephone technology.

Congress took one more pass at amending 223(b) to the judicial system’s satisfaction, introducing a new amendment less than four months after the Sable decision. This time, the ban was tailored more closely to the precedents of First Amendment law in this area; however, floor debate in the Senate barely referred to the mechanics of the revision or its position vis-à-vis the First Amendment, preferring as before to rely on a network of statements about the danger in the wires and the persecution of children. In this debate, Senator Daniel Coats (R-IN) introduced a new turn of phrase, the language of “addiction,” to further emphasize the vulnerability of the endangered child (and perhaps to further remove any hint of culpability from the child’s role as the caller within the caller hegemony dynamic), warning his colleagues of “the damage that occurs when young people become hooked on dial-a-porn messages...young people either singly or in groups literally become addicted to the messages that are delivered over these phone lines...”¹³¹ As

¹³⁰ Petersen, 2040-2041.

¹³¹ United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record* (16 Nov. 1989), 29330.

before, it passed both houses and was signed into law in November of 1989, but this time it was able to withstand a spate of various challenges,¹³² seemingly because this version of the amendment had increased its focus on using language that would better fit legal precedent, and thus it no longer needed to rely as strongly on the dramatic framing metaphors and conclusory statements alone. The fears and beliefs of that discourse had finally been translated more effectively into a policy-based exercise of power.

The 1980s dial-a-porn hearings and other arenas like them demonstrate some of the circulation of and struggles around this particular dystopian understanding of the telephone, both as an artifact and as a system. Telephony has been a rich source for this kind of fear—as the first domestic electric communication technology, it provided a different angle on old anxieties of breached boundaries and ruptured defenses, as people worked (and continue to work) to come to terms with the omnipresent device. In much of this struggle, the design of the telephone artifact and its interconnections is claimed, explicitly or tacitly, as a determinant for particular positions and decisions. But in fact, though the technology itself is often regarded as a fixed object requiring fixed responses, it is actually these moments of intensive cultural work around the meanings and uses

¹³² Juliet Dee, “‘To Avoid Charges of Indecency, Please Hang Up Now’: An Analysis of Legislation and Litigation Involving Dial-a-Porn,” *Communications and the Law* (March 1994), 16.

of telephony that create and maintain crucial parts of “the telephone system” in a larger sense, contributing to the webs of artifacts, people and power that shape what the telephone is and can become. As we will see, similar struggles and concerns reoccur in the cultural construction of radio, but the perception of the infinite reach of the “wireless” via the the pervasive and invasive radio wave serves to intensify the discourses both of utopian potential and of danger.

Chapter 2

“A LATCHKEY TO EVERY HOME”: Intrusive Radio

“In Nome or sweet Lafcadio,
There’s no escape from radio!
Then, since you cannot dodge the atmosphere...”¹³³

Poet Arthur Guiterman complained thusly about the “zealous radiolaters/Who wreck the peace of erstwhile happy homes” with a radio signal both disruptive and hypnotic, and as all-encompassing as the very air we breathe. The development of this type of discourse around radio technology did not begin so very long after its initial development around the telephone system, and yet the narrative constructed around radio grants radio a uniqueness, a greater power and danger, due to particular aspects of its design and use: the radio system, whether in its earliest days as the domain of the earphoned-amateur, or in its later commercial form as controlled by government and corporations, is seen as going places the telephone cannot and doing things the telephone could never attempt, providing pathways for a much more insidious and all-encompassing attack.

This chapter examines the dystopian discourse of predatory radio. As with the sexually-predatory telephone, this discourse as it employs the radio is powerfully instrumentalist at its core, positing the technological system’s threat as inherent to its design. Radio in particular is granted a technologically-mandated omnipresence and omnipotence: first and foremost, from the idea of radio as utterly

¹³³ Arthur Guiterman, “Radiolatry,” *The Light Guitar* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), 241.

wireless (despite the actual existence of wires in the system), giving this evil version of the electrical sublime an unprecedented and untethered path beyond that initially reached by the telephone wire. Next I examine the radio as a central figure in the imaginary positing of the “radio eye”, a sort of fictional proto-television in which the untethered signal can carry visuals as well as sound from anyplace in the world; while the radio eye certainly carries obvious utopian freight, it also brings a shadow side in its wake, complete surveillance and pervasiveness with no spot on earth left unradiated. This leads to an exploration of ways in which the utter pervasiveness ascribed to radio technology is sharpened to a dangerous *invasiveness*, with radio able to penetrate and disrupt multiple targets at once: the human body, the social body (societal strata and norms), the home and family (meaning the woman and child), and structures of gender and sexuality.

Within this discourse, during its daily operation within domestic space radio becomes an “ether bogeyman,” the predator and despoiler of children whether mentally, psychologically, physically, emotionally, or sexually. A short-hand version of this despoliation appears in a folkloric narrative historically told and retold around radio (much as “The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs” was around the telephone), involving the male host of a children’s radio program (generally understood as a “kiddie-show host”, indicating programs for the very youngest listeners) whose foul language and scornful attitude toward his innocent little charges slips out onto the air. The chapter concludes with an examination of the way in which the basic narrative building blocks of this type of story served as a

foundational discourse and referent for the legislative concept of broadcast “indecent,” a crucial term for conceptualizing, structuring, and bringing to bear content regulation in American broadcasting.

“There’s no escape from radio!”

From its earliest beginnings radio technology was labeled “wireless”—from the “wireless telegraphy” of dots and dashes to the “wireless telephony” that carried human voices and music—and this perception of utter wirelessness provided a source of endless fascination and unease. The telephone had already been thoroughly linked to travel through virtual space via concepts of the ether and the “electrical sublime,” but the radio took this discourse a step further. At least with the telephone, the life-force of electricity had visible, material paths to follow, scurrying along the wires—if you remove the wires yet still keep the living electric force carrying something from place to place, all unseen, the wonders and terrors of the technology are both heightened tenfold in their unlinking from standard metaphors of communication as visible transportation. The concept of wirelessness lacked any identifiable place, and yet penetrated every place.

There were some who tried at first to complicate the image of complete wirelessness: for instance, in the winter of 1898, *The Living Age* ran an article entitled “Ethereal Telegraphy” which referred to the developing invention as “What

is commonly, though inaccurately, spoken of as ‘wireless telegraphy’.¹³⁴ One year later, an article titled “Aetheric Telegraphy” in the same magazine expanded on that theme:

“Wireless Telegraphy” is so complete a misnomer that it is marvelous it should still continue to be used as a heading in the newspapers...its name, or rather the misnomer which has been applied to it, has led to the popular illusion that the poles and wires which disfigure our housetops will disappear....Dr. Sylvanus Thompson, who has expounded the subject in the clearest possible way, ...[says]: ‘Firstly, we must frankly recognize that there is no such thing as telegraphing without wires—that the base-line, or the base-area, surrounded by wires, is a fundamental necessity...The odd thing is that an immature invention like this should have taken such a hold of the public imagination....’¹³⁵

But despite the pleas of the experts who pointed out the important role of the wire in this so-called “wireless” invention, and who attempted to highlight that portion of the technology’s design to support their preferred naming and discursive treatment of the device; and despite the continuing importance of the wire throughout radio’s history, up to and including the rise and dominance of the wired national networks, it was the freedom and pervasiveness of wirelessness that continued to “tak[e] such a hold of the public imagination” and provide the primary basis for the discursive construction of what “radio” meant in both the utopian and dystopian senses.

In a rhapsody to wirelessness that would surely have distressed Dr. Sylvanus Thompson, Don Marquis’ 1906 poem “Wireless Telegraph” contrasted the physical

¹³⁴ A. M. Clerke, “Ethereal Telegraphy,” *The Living Age* 219 (3 Dec. 1898): 623

¹³⁵ “Aetheric Telegraphy,” *The Living Age* 223 (16 Dec. 1899): 698.

limits and vulnerabilities of wire with the complete freedom and power of the wireless with stanzas like these:

All battered and lamed and shattered and maimed
 the mail-ship crawls into port,
 And the belted tire and the volted wire
 are the toys of the whirlwind's sport;
 And the gray sea's teeth in the depths beneath
 where the coiled, green serpents play
 Are crumbling, crunching, mumbling, munching,
 at the cable lengths alway—
 But now they may howl, the storms, and growl,
 at the work of the lineman's hands,
 But gone is their pride with the boast of the tide
 that bit at the deep-sea strands.

For a sentience thrills through the bastioned hills
 that has neither voice nor form,
 Nor recks of the might of the Chaos-sprite
 that lashes the earth with his storm;
 Bitted and bridled and shackled and girdled
 and bound with a linkless chain,
 The brute powers cower at the god-like power
 that dwells in a human brain;
 Man has stolen the wings of the deathless Things
 that range where the spirit is lord,
 He is leagued anew with the Silence
 through the strands of a strandless cord.¹³⁶

And early the next year appeared a poem by Harry H. Kemp, "The Song of the Wireless Telegraph," with the same contrast between the discourses of wire and wireless:

You have bounden my sister's limbs,
 you have flung her along a wire;
 But I am as free as a cloud could be
 and my sinews never tire.

and

¹³⁶ Don Marquis, "Wireless Telegraph," *American Magazine* 62 (June 1906): 144-45.

Would you bind me down and make a clown
of the dartling soul of me?
I will leap abroad with the strength of a god;
I am young, I am wild, I am free—¹³⁷

In the discourse leading from the standard telegraph and telephone into radio, the wire was imprisoning for the former and utterly absent for the latter, providing the “wireless” with an inherent, technologically-mandated omnipresence and omnipotence.

This omnipresence and omnipotence were grist for the mill of both serious and playful technological predictions of radio’s ramifications. In the popular imagination of wirelessness, radio’s freedom and pervasiveness were frequently extrapolated from the arena of the audible into the arena of the visible (beginning well before there was any technological basis); both utopian and dystopian frameworks were put into play as speculation leapt from wireless sound to wireless sight, adding to the reach and breadth and power of the concept of wireless signalling and reception. An article in *Radio Broadcast* remarked:

Scarcely a week passes without a story being published regarding the future of radio vision, if it may be called that. We are constantly being told that, ere long, we shall all be able to see as well as hear the radio speaker or musicians. We shall even be able to follow the games that, point by point, are now broadcast, or to see the opera to which we listen at the receiving set, or the orchestra.

Will this predicted marvel work both ways? Will the broadcast directors be able to watch their listeners-in?¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Harry H. Kemp, “The Song of the Wireless Telegraph,” *American Magazine* 63 (Feb. 1907): 444.

¹³⁸ Jennie Irene Mix, “The Listeners’ Point of View,” *Radio Broadcast*, February 1925, 688-89.

According to many people, the answer to that question was “yes”: for instance, in an article in the *New York Times*, entitled “Will Wireless Next Bring Us Radio Sight?”, an inventor is cited as “forsee[ing] an era in which the whole world will be so closely linked by wireless that any inhabitant of the globe, sitting quietly at his own fireside, can tune in both his radio eye and his radio ear to any event in any place on, above or below the earth’s surface.”¹³⁹

The discourse of the “radio eye and radio ear” was picked up by popular entertainments like fiction and film, taking literally the forecast of tuning in to “any place on, above or below the earth’s surface,” without regard for such niceties as the existence of a pre-existing visual broadcast signal for a receiver to pick up. Instead, “radio sight” occupies a completely pervasive and surveillant role in the ether that allows the user to swoop in to any spot on or off the earth and both see and hear (as well as talk to) the people there. The 1925 short story “A Radio Courtship,” for instance, takes place in a futuristic 1987, and the unruly history of the omnipresent “radio-television” device is described:

When the television radio first came into use about 1930, and it was possible to see every event taking place in the world...utter chaos reigned for a time. But this had all been corrected by strict police regulation, after the so-called closed or isolated wave-lengths were discovered by a Norwegian engineer in 1950.

So once more there was protection and privacy where the older system had threatened everyone with intrusive gazings straight through the walls of their houses—by thousands of spying eyes, themselves unseen...¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ “Will Wireless Next Bring Us Radio Sight?”, *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 1924, XX1.

¹⁴⁰ Otto Rung, “A Radio Courtship,” *The Living Age* 325 (30 May 1925), 456.

In film, we have examples like the 1923 film *Radio-Mania*, in which an inventor is working on a radio for communicating with Mars; the finished device not only lets him speak with, but also see the Martians. He turns out, unfortunately for him, to have been dreaming. Also dreaming is the heroine of the Warner Bros. Vitaphone short, *Sundae Serenade*; after being struck on the head by a violin, she has an extended vision of meeting (and falling in love with) a handsome young salesman who is hawking a wondrous new machine. According to his sales pitch:

Put a nickel in the slot, and you'll not only hear the music, you'll see the musicians and singers! It's called a Sightograph, and we fully guarantee it to double your business within six months. To say nothing of the revenue from advertising!

By the early 1930s, the word "television" was fairly well established in popular use, although the referent device itself had not actually been established yet in a widely usable or commercially exploitable form. Even though the term "television" had already been showing up in the popular press since at least the 1920s, some still complained about the cross-cultural neologism, as in this quote from 1931:

Unfortunately, the christening ceremony took place very early, and apparently in a hurry. The words telegraphy and telephony, writing and speaking at a distance respectively, are each derived from two Greek words, but television, seeing at a distance, (tele, Greek, "at a distance," and videre, Latin, "to see"), is enough to ruffle the hair of a philologist. "Teleopsis" would have been just as easy, and would have let his hair remain in peace, but it was not to be; someone, who has been wise enough to remain anonymous, christened this latest

development of electrical communication, “television,” and television it will remain.¹⁴¹

The 1933 film *International House*, which is organized around the invention of an all-powerful and pervasive device for seeing at a distance, uses the word “television” once, in a newspaper headline; the rest of the film, however, still uses the more familiar link back to the romance of wireless sound, calling the invention “the radioscope.” It was invented by the mysterious Dr. Wong (Edmund Breese), who emphasizes the omnipresence of his new device: “I can materialize anything, anywhere, at any time. The Radioscope needs no broadcast station. No carrier waves are necessary. No electrical transmission...” But even Dr. Wong cannot entirely control his own invention; the radioscope regularly goes out of control during the film, bypassing the event Wong actually wants to see (a six-day bicycle race) in favor of a number of other random moments, events, and exchanges between faraway strangers. And the radioscope is also clearly surveillant toward its users as well as its targets: at one point the sardonic Professor Quail (W.C. Fields), walking in and seeing Rudy Vallee singing on the radioscope, loudly complains, “How long’s this dogfight been going on?”, and Vallee stops singing to tell Quail to keep quiet and sit down.

The film *The Big Broadcast of 1936* revolves around a similar device, with similar powers to see and hear anyone anywhere, and a similar name (which we have already heard in the *New York Times* article of more than ten years before): the

¹⁴¹ Chetwode Crawley, *From Telegraphy to Television: the Story of Electrical Communications* (London and New York: F. Warne & Co., Ltd., 1931), 171.

“Radio Eye”. Just as in *International House*, this Radio Eye has not only done away with the limitations of wires, but also with all other potential limitations of matter, time, and space. Its inventor, George (played by George Burns), pitches it enthusiastically to Spud Miller, the manager of a radio station:

George: ... I have here an invention called the Radio Eye: an apparatus that will pick up and reproduce any event occurring at any time anywhere in the world. And not only can you hear it, but you can see it...I'm telling you, Mr. Miller, this machine sees all, knows all, and shows all.

Spud: ...Wait a minute, wait a minute. You mean to tell me you got an instrument here that can pick up anything, any time, anywhere?

George: Absolutely.

Spud: And you can actually see what you're getting?

George: Not only that, but it picks up events whether they're being broadcast or not!

Unleashed from the constraints of the wire, the radio (and in the popular imagination, the projected radio eye) gains the power to see all, know all, and show all, constructing a discourse of magical pervasiveness.

This pervasiveness, however, was always just one step away from a more disturbing inflection of *invasiveness*, following the pattern of utopian discourses paralleled and shadowed by dystopian discourses. The previous chapter discussed the particularity of the telephone's connection to the body, and the belief that the telephone came closer than any other communication device to being an extension of the body. But with radio, and the discourse of wireless omnipresence, now the body was not only connected to the communication technology, but was actually surrounded, suffused, and penetrated by it. This invasiveness relies at its base on

the metaphor of the “etheric ocean,” discussed in works such as Jeffrey Sconce’s book *Haunted Media*, in which he writes:

In refiguring the concept of transmission from the wired connection to the more mysterious wandering signal, accounts of wireless and radio returned consistently to the structuring metaphor of the “etheric ocean.” ...Oceanic metaphors proved versatile in capturing the seeming omnipresence, unfathomable depths, and invisible mysteries of both radio’s ether and its audience...¹⁴²

However, unlike the physical ocean, the etheric ocean was not a body that primarily touched human society and human bodies at the boundary of the seashore. The etheric ocean was all around us, physically surging through us, whether or not we had the capacity to detect the penetrating waves. In 1922 an article in *Radio Broadcast* rhapsodized:

And isn’t it amazing to think that this form, this exchange of thought, is constantly passing about us—*passing through us—from countless transmitting stations, at this very instant!* (emphasis in original)¹⁴³

And a *New York Times* article of 1923 grappled with the omnipresent etheric ocean thusly:

It seems that these radio waves travel through the air just as ordinary waves do across the ocean. Only they go around the earth seven and one-half times in a second, according to the experts: right through buildings, over mountains and across seas. The reason we never heard them in the days of our ignorance was because we had nothing to catch the waves—no aerial beach.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 8-9.

¹⁴³ W.H. Worrell, “Do Brains or Dollars Operate Your Set?”, *Radio Broadcast*, November 1922, 13.

¹⁴⁴ “The Great Radio Handicap,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1923, SM10.

As these waves travel “right through buildings” (and through the objects and people within those buildings), washing around and through everything, the modern technically-minded person could catch the waves with practically anything at hand. Contemporary accounts describe objects such as bathtubs and kitchen stoves being hooked up to radio receivers and made to transmit sound, and the *New York Times* reported:

The claim of another enthusiast, who asserted that he had used a window screen instead of a stove, must be left to the discretion of the reader. But it is a fact that messages have been received by means of bed springs.¹⁴⁵

A 1927 issue of *Radio Age* described a “curious phenomenon in radio reception” in which:

For some unknown reason everything that is broadcast or finds its way into the microphone, while the radio transmitter is on, can be heard quite clearly through the faucets in the florist shop with the metal sink acting as a loud-speaker...Reports from England tell of a similar case in which a metal lamp pole near Station 2LO in London acts in a like manner and daily brings crowds about it.¹⁴⁶

Especially in the early years of radio technology, there was a particular fascination with the effects of the invasive etheric ocean not only on ordinary objects but also on people, focusing on their capacity to serve as receivers of the omnipresent waves. In a more spiritual sense, a 1928 work called “The First Radio Hymn” casts the human soul as quite literally God’s instrument:

The speeding message far transcends
The bounds and limits man assigns;

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ “Music Flows from Toronto Faucets,” *Literary Digest* 93, 23 April 1927, 16.

We use Thy lightning for our ends
 Afar; we follow Thy designs.
 Thy laws fulfilled, we work our will
 With clever touch of sentient keys,
 And unseen wavelets bear the thrill
 To distant shores of ether seas.
 O may the wave lengths of our souls
 Be tuned and measured to Thine own,
 And keyed to pitch no foe controls;
 Preserve our contact with Thy throne.¹⁴⁷

But the analogy of human to radio was carried over into more embodied realms as well, as in a series of experiments published in 1928 under the title “Human Radio Receivers,” illustrating various activities that will produce radio reception through and from human bodies. There is a sense of great wonder and sensual play in the experiments and the illustrations, depicting well-dressed young men and women in various positions of close physical contact: one man using his bare hands over a woman’s ears as earphones; two men cooperating, each using one gloved hand, again covering a woman’s ears as earphones; a young man and woman sitting pressed closely with a piece of paper trapped between the sides of their faces; small groups all holding hands to draw the radio signal along through a chain of bodies. “We see thus,” the article concludes, “that the human body may serve as a resistance, a condenser, a wave-collector, a cable-conductor, and even as a telephonic receiver! Nature has apparently foreseen the discovery of radio!”¹⁴⁸

This sort of discourse also commonly appears in both anecdotes and fictional plots via stories about radio signals coming in through the fillings in someone’s

¹⁴⁷ Alice M. Shepard, “The First Radio Hymn,” *Literary Digest* 96 (March 1924): 38.

¹⁴⁸ “Human Radio Receivers,” *Literary Digest* 98 (22 September 1928): 23-24.

teeth. For instance, in the film *Something For the Boys* (released in 1944, but based on an earlier musical play), the resolution of the plot revolves around the permeability of the human (and in particular the human female) body to an atmosphere full of wireless waves. In the film, a war worker named Chiquita is bothered by radio programs coming in through her teeth; it turns out that her fillings were contaminated with carborundum from the defense plant where she works. This contamination, however, doesn't just make her a human radio receiver: later, another character saves the day by building a transmitter that can send messages *out* through Chiquita's teeth as well. As radio becomes part of her body, so does her body eventually become part of a radio. Wireless signals are all around us, and all it takes is a little technical know-how (or a pure physiological fluke) to translate them into sounds, whether through a bedspring or a human being.

The fascination with radio's invasiveness had many dystopian angles to it as well, both explicit and tacit. The pervasiveness and invasiveness of the etheric ocean were employed, for instance, in early discourses against the perceived excesses of the radio amateur. One of the common targets for criticism in early radio journalism was the hobbyist with a "radiating receiver": he (and it is generally understood to be a "he", despite the marginalized presence of female amateurs¹⁴⁹) is supposed just to be passively receiving sound, but his receiver turns out to be transmitting as well. His poor skill (or pure carelessness) in constructing and tuning his machinery has

¹⁴⁹ As discussed, for instance, in Hilmes, *Radio Voices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 132-136.

resulted in the receiving unit emitting piercing squeals across the spectrum, to the frustration of everyone else using their radios in the correct and technologically-adept manner. A satirical cartoon and poem were published in the January, 1925 issue of *Radio Broadcast*, showing this character running amuck over the entire planet and beyond. He is the “Ether Hog,” depicted (as “drawn from life”) in a sketch of a pudgy, bristly pig sitting atop the globe, wearing earphones, hunched gleefully over a radio receiver with energy lines emanating from it (and a handy sign pointing to it that reads “THE RADIATING RECEIVER”). Above the earth float an angry crescent moon (with its fingers in its ears) shouting “In the name of humanity, cease!”, and a weeping Saturn, crying “Sufferin’ dingbats, hang him!”, to which the Ether Hog’s only answer is an oblivious “Woof!” Beneath the Hog is a poem:

Oh, I am the hog of the air,
Wherever you tune, I am there;
I am the prize squeaker,
I fill your loud speaker—
The ether is free. I don’t care.¹⁵⁰

And even worse than the careless Ether Hog was the amateur who invaded on purpose—someone who might, for instance, use the wireless conduit as a pathway into someone’s home or life with malice aforethought. In the summer of 1928, in the town of Crooksville, Ohio, there was a weeklong scare revolving around a mysterious new station calling itself “PDQ”. This “phantom radio station,” according to reports, was broadcasting local gossip, “ruin[ing] reputations nightly with remarks on secret poker parties, quiet little sessions over steins of home brew

¹⁵⁰ W.R. Bradford, *Radio Broadcast* 6.3, January 1925, 434.

and nocturnal excursions with unrelated members of the opposite sex.”¹⁵¹ It turned out to be a hoax perpetrated by a group of villagers with the technical savvy to turn a set of headphones into a transmitting wire, but for a week the prospect of the all-knowing radio-eye seeing and broadcasting their personal business was said to have thrown “many respected citizens” into an uproar.

The omnipresence of wireless combined with the fear of the unruliness of the amateur was employed in more specific political arenas as well. For instance, in the struggle between amateur users and commercial users, especially as they became more differentiated from and antagonistic toward each other during the years leading up to and after World War I, the arguments were often stated in terms of property and land rights, with the accompanying metaphors of invaders and squatters. And interwoven with that was the rhetoric of wireless omnipresence, which allowed these amateurs to barge into spaces that should by rights be both well beyond and well above them. For example, according to one quote from 1923, “The amateur is very much in the position of a small boy entering a fine opera house during a performance and suddenly blowing a trumpet violently.”¹⁵² As Michele Hilmes has discussed, the discursive construct of the amateur as a “small boy” was fruitfully employed to strengthen government and corporate control of the airwaves¹⁵³; and I would further add to that that the combination of the unruliness

¹⁵¹ “PDQ’ Station Proves Hoax,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1928, 41.

¹⁵² “Radio: How to Identify Each Station,” *New York Times*, 4 March 1923, E5.

¹⁵³ Hilmes, 38-41.

of a “small boy” with the omnipresent wireless’s ability to sneak him into “a fine opera house” to violently blow his trumpet made him an unwelcome specter indeed.

In discourses more tightly tied to the realm of the body, along the lines of “human radio receivers,” there was also exploration and fear of the possibility of radio’s physical invasiveness being harmful or even fatal. There were occasional claims of this type regarding conventional broadcasting: for instance, the *New York Times* mentioned three such accounts in 1931, in which one woman’s family claimed that “radio noise had driven her mad,”¹⁵⁴ another woman’s death was attributed to noisy radios that kept her from sleeping¹⁵⁵, and most dramatically, that a scream coming through the radio from an unspecified “mystery play” had sent a listening Connecticut woman into “paralytic shock” and killed her.¹⁵⁶ But perhaps a more telling and widespread discourse in this regard is the concept of radio waves themselves as a “death ray,” which appeared in a number of news reports as well as film plots during the 1920s and 30s. 1924, for example, saw a series of news stories about inventor H. Grindell Matthews, described as “a wireless telephone expert,”¹⁵⁷ who was said to be working on a radio “death ray...consist[ing] of ether vibrations similar in a way to the wireless wave...”¹⁵⁸. Matthews professed himself loath to use

¹⁵⁴ “Mexico City Acts to Cut Noise, Aiming Especially at Radios,” *New York Times*, 23 March 1931, 8.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ “Killed by Radio Scream,” *New York Times*, 7 March 1931, 37.

¹⁵⁷ Matthews’ radio expertise was emphasized in every newspaper profile, often referring back to his service as a wireless operator during wartime and his experiments with radio technology since his childhood.

¹⁵⁸ “Says His ‘Death Ray’ Could Stun Armies,” *New York Times*, 20 July 1924, 1.

the term “death ray” that was being used by the media, but he was nevertheless quoted as saying:

I firmly believe that it could be used to destroy an army or to stun it, as I have demonstrated by first stunning and then killing the mouse in my experiments in England...an airplane could carry the beam easily, fly over a city and set it on fire or stun the population so that the place could easily be captured.¹⁵⁹

Matthews’ invention apparently never came to fruition, but experiments were occasionally publicized in which radio waves were used to kill insects¹⁶⁰ or monkeys,¹⁶¹ and the popular press continued to explore the potential for radio energy to become a lethal tool of warfare. One author bemoaned the constant public interest in and furor over the “radio death beams,” debunking rumors of working death rays in the hands of the British, French, and German armies, while still reassuring readers that “this lethal beam...can be blocked.”¹⁶² And in 1929 a long piece in the *New York Times* explored the current state of wireless warfare; after discussing the possibilities of radio-controlled bombs, ships, planes, and biological weapons, the article continues:

But this leaves out of the question the radio waves themselves...If we can send a powerful charge through space, we have, in effect, the death ray, about which there has been so much fiction written and with which inventors the world over have been busy...The death ray is not a fact yet, but according to Dr. Phillips Thomas of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, who has conducted some successful experiments in the transmission of electric

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ “Plant Pests Slain By Radio Waves,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1934, 19.

¹⁶¹ William M. Blair, “Some Radio Waves Kill When Beamed At Monkey’s Brain,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1959, 1.

¹⁶² “Radio Death Beams,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1935, 14.

power by radio, there are no insuperable difficulties in the way of its development.¹⁶³

Whatever the technical difficulties in the realm of invention, in the popular media there were far fewer restrictions on the way in which radio death rays could work, and the way in which the anxieties revolving around the invasive and dangerous wireless could thereby be explored. In the 1924 film *The Story Without a Name*, for instance, the plot revolves around Alan Holt, an intrepid young radio expert who has invented “the triangulator,” a radio death ray. Similar iterations of the physically-fatal radio beam appeared in films of the 1930s, such as *The Secret Witness* (1931), in which an unscrupulous radio engineer is hired to rig a gun to a radio so that the gun automatically shoots and kills the victim when the radio is tuned to a particular station; and *Fifteen Wives* (1934), in which a glass globe full of poison gas is rigged to break and kill a victim when he tunes the radio to a particular broadcast by a performer called “The Electric Voice.” The discursive omnipresence and omnipotence constructed around the radio signal thus became a signifier of danger as well as freedom, exploring the dark and invasive side to a technology that was celebrated for its very pervasiveness.

“It enters the home without a knock at the door”

The sense of radio’s pervasiveness turning to invasiveness takes on another level of threat, and another boost to its dangerous potential, when it confronts the

¹⁶³ T.J.C. Martyn, “In Science Lies the Challenge to War,” *New York Times*, 30 June 1929, SM3.

specific discursive construct of the home as a place that is (or should be) safe from outside intrusion. Technologically powerful, free to roam into every corner and crevice, radio waves flow irresistibly from public space into the discursively-loaded sanctity and privacy of domestic space, penetrating the walls to get at the home and family (and the particularly vulnerable figures of the woman and child that that implies). Radio's early inventors, users, and exploiters all lauded the technology's magical abilities to enter the home through the discourse of wireless omnipresence, but as usual, this utopian image brought matching anxieties in its wake.

We can see these anxieties appearing in a concentrated sense in the film *The Next Voice You Hear* (released in 1950, and originally based on a short story from 1948¹⁶⁴), in which radio waves are linked to the most literal manifestation of omnipotence and omnipresence—God. In the film, God's voice begins to broadcast a brief statement over the radio at the same time each night (as might be expected from a film of that time, we in the audience never hear an actor actually speaking God's lines; instead, God's transmissions occur when we are not present to hear them, and we are given paraphrases and direct quotations from other characters afterward). And while the film certainly does highlight some of the moralistic and utopian possibilities of this image by the end, God's use of the radio also reduces the story's central (and typically nuclear) family from reluctant confusion, to fear, to outright screaming terror. On the day after God's first broadcast, the main character,

¹⁶⁴ George Sumner Albee, "The Next Voice You Hear," *Cosmopolitan* 125 (August 1948): 34+.

Joe, comes home from a night of bowling to discover that God's voice came through the radio again that night, and he asks his wife Mary whether their young son Johnny heard it too. She says Johnny did, and they go look in on the boy, who is restless and frowning in his sleep as if in the grip of a nightmare. Joe growls (in a line that might have come straight from parents of the time complaining about the so-called "blood and thunder" radio serials): "Scaring kids. Well, it's gone too far. Somebody oughta do something."

It becomes clear that Johnny truly is scared of the uncanny voice: on the next night, as the time gets closer for God's voice to broadcast, Johnny is more and more reluctant to go into the living room and wait by the radio, even offering to stay in the kitchen and finish the dishes. But Joe orders him to "come in here and keep quiet!", and he does—just in time for Joe to discover that the radio plug is broken. Johnny broke it earlier in the day and didn't tell his parents, possibly to try and keep the voice out; while Joe fixes the plug and mutters dire imprecations, Mary says gently, "You were never afraid to tell us anything before," to which Johnny quietly and uneasily replies, "No, Mom." Joe fixes the plug just in time to hear the radio announcer say, with dramatic emphasis:

This station cleared the air, in order to record the Voice. Oddly enough, the Voice which you just heard did not record. Our recording apparatus has been checked. It is in perfect working order. But the Voice did not record.

During this speech, revealing the complete technical dominance of the mysterious voice and the helplessness of the human technical experts to capture it, the family

looks increasingly tense and frightened, especially Johnny. The announcer then reads a transcript of what the voice said:

I gather from all that I see that there is still a good deal of speculation and skepticism about whether I am who I am. I also see many expressions of fear. Why should you be afraid? Why should children be afraid of their father? Are you afraid because you believe that you have earned another forty days and forty nights of rain? Must I perform such miracles, in order to *make* you believe?

Joe abruptly turns off the radio, and he, Mary, and Johnny regard each other silently and fearfully. Then comes the sound of rain falling, softly at first and then building to a torrent. Everyone looks up, fear escalating to terror. Mary runs to Joe, clutching him, starting to cry. Thunder and lightning start crashing, and Joe, still staring upward, insists, "Mary—Just a coincidence—it's just a coincidence." Johnny runs into Joe's arms as well, saying, "I don't know whether it's God, Pop—but I'm scared!" Joe continues to choke out over and over that it is only a coincidence, until at a particularly intense volley of thunder and lightning, Mary pulls back, clamps both hands over her ears, and gives a horrified and extended scream. The scene fades out on this intense, hysterical, practically apocalyptic moment, the home laid open and utterly defenseless, the woman and child shrieking before the onslaught, the father helpless to protect them. And the tool that allows even God this kind of direct, frightening penetration of the home is the awesome and unknowable power of the radio.

Outside of the movies, God's voice per se might not have loomed large as a radio wave-transmitted danger, but there were plenty of other things to worry

about when it came to radio's ability to negate barriers and infiltrate the home. As Hilmes writes, regarding the dark side of radio's "rhetoric of physical connection" with domestic space in particular:

The erasure of distance and separation held a threat as well as a promise...Radio's "immateriality" allowed it to cross these boundaries: allowed "race" music to invade the white middle-class home, vaudeville to compete with opera in the living room, risqué city humor to raise rural eyebrows, salesmen and entertainers to find a place in the family circle.¹⁶⁵

The "caller hegemony" concept can be fruitfully applied in this arena, as the same points of concern were continually evoked and even expanded in the discourses of anxiety over radio invading the home: an instrumentally-mandated power imbalance between an active/threatening "caller" and a passive/threatened "answerer," subsumed into the traditional societal roles of active-male and passive-female (the latter also including the highly-loaded and culturally-touchy role of the child), bringing external predators down an unstable and uncontrollable conduit to contaminate the home's privacy, purity, and sanctity.

Caller hegemony explicitly came to the fore, for instance, in discussions over the rightful place of advertising in commercial radio; the omnipresent wireless signal was seen as invading the home regardless of walls and locked doors, and in terms of advertising (and its ties to caller hegemony) the relationship was easily mapped directly onto the model of the door-to-door salesman and the hapless

¹⁶⁵ Hilmes, 15.

housewife who cannot help but let him in. The advertising trade journal *Printers' Ink* was convinced that:

[a]ny attempt to make the radio an advertising medium, in the accepted sense of the term, would, we think, prove positively offensive to great numbers of people. The family circle is not a public place, and advertising has no business intruding there unless it is invited....To break in upon one's entertainment *in his own house* is quite likely to seem intolerable....¹⁶⁶ [emphasis in original]

And a 1931 pamphlet arguing against the increasing commercialization and monopolization of the airwaves criticized the way in which the radio networks

...opened the gates for the deluge of advertising ballyhoo which now, day and night, pours through the air into the American home. The high pressure salesman had edged past the threshold. He was in the bosom of the family, hawking his wares.¹⁶⁷

But the discourse of crossing boundaries was not limited to those who were complaining about it. Many radio executives and radio advertisers were openly pleased about radio's potential for beaming their salesman directly into the home; they cited the same kinds of rhetoric of entry, invasion and penetration, but with a pleased and proud cast, since the radio's powers were working in their favor.

The gentler discourse of the radio advertiser as a guest or visitor in the home was often used hand in hand with the early rhetoric of advertising for good will and gratitude only (as opposed to direct salesmanship). This had been a common position to argue in the early 1920s, and was still supported by some radio

¹⁶⁶ "Radio As An Advertising Medium," *Printers' Ink* 119 (27 April 1922): 201.

¹⁶⁷ *The Empire of the Air: The Story of the Exploitation of Radio for Private Profit, With a Plan for the Reorganization of Broadcasting* (Ventura, CA: Ventura Free Press, 1932), 42.

advertisers and executives to the end of the decade and even slightly beyond.

Evidence of it is extremely common, for instance, in the extant early papers of WEA and NBC radio¹⁶⁸ and it continued in some (though a diminishing number of) advertising manuals and articles at least through the 1930s. Orrin E. Dunlap, formerly with the Hanff Metzger Advertising Agency and at the time the Radio Editor of the *New York Times*, wrote to advertisers:

The most that you can do for your radio friends is simply to be their friend. Do not try to enter their homes and impolitely attempt sales talk after they have bid you welcome by turning the dial to your wave.¹⁶⁹

and

Friendship is called the only rose without thorns. Direct sales promotion on the air puts thorns on radio's rose of goodwill, which broadcasters can cultivate. It is a delicate flower.¹⁷⁰

And the foreword to a 1931 radio advertising manual similarly warned: "When visiting in America's homes by means of radio programs, they [that is, "American business men"] are only asked to conduct themselves as good-mannered guests."¹⁷¹

A 1932 book about radio advertising, in constructing a history of the "olden days" of the medium ("olden" in this case meaning "six years ago"), contrasted this

¹⁶⁸ Some specific examples include booklets such as "Radio's Magic Carpet" and "Improving the Smiles of a Nation! How Broadcast Advertising Has Worked for the Makers of Ipana Tooth Paste," E.P.H. James papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 3, folder 6.

¹⁶⁹ Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *Advertising By Radio* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1929), 130.

¹⁷⁰ Dunlap, 120.

¹⁷¹ Harry P. Davis, foreword to Frank A. Arnold, *Broadcast Advertising: the Fourth Dimension* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1931), xv.

perception of the genteel golden age of the guest with the encroaching modern age of the invading salesman:

Those were the days [i.e., six years ago “when broadcasting was just beginning”] when every advertiser had the manners of an Old World gentleman, and took very seriously the fact that he was a guest in the home and that the home was sacred. He might talk about the weather and how beautiful the wife was, and kiss the children, but he would never mention his product...

[Over time, as more direct advertising was allowed:] Radio had at last become a direct advertising medium. The advertiser had at last transformed himself from an Old World gentleman into a house to house canvasser.¹⁷²

Radio executives and advertisers interestingly enough did not really deny this seemingly unflattering picture of the charming guest turned into a door to door salesman. It was not uncommon for they themselves to brag about the unprecedented entree they had via radio to every nook and cranny of every domestic space, in a technological fantasy of the omnipresent wireless as a conduit for the omnipresent salesman. An early NBC booklet intended to persuade dealers to exploit the new commercial radio medium used this image in order to illustrate one of the most promising aspects of radio advertising: “It Comes Right Into The Home: It’s *Intimate*,” reads the headline (emphasis in original), and beneath this is a sketch of a smiling stick figure in trousers and hat, holding a rectangle presumably representing the salesman’s traditional sample case, standing on a doorstep with

¹⁷² Howard Angus, “Who Should Use Radio Advertising?”, in *The Advertising Agency Looks at Radio*, ed. Neville O’Neill (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932), 12-13.

one hand on the doorknob, as if he is indeed about to come right into the home.¹⁷³

Similarly, in 1929, Merlin Hall Aylesworth, the president of NBC, wrote in a radio advertising manual:

The ether is a quick and economical pathway to the people. It enters the home without a knock at the door so that broadcasters have the rare privilege of entering the very heart of the American home and of speaking to and entertaining every member of the family.¹⁷⁴

A 1931 manual was practically giddy about the possibilities for etheric invasion; Harry P. Davis, the Vice President of Westinghouse, wrote in the foreword that “American business men, because of radio, are provided with a latchkey to nearly every home in the United States.”¹⁷⁵ And later in the same manual, Frank Arnold, at the time the Director of Development of NBC, rhapsodized:

Then came radio broadcasting, utilizing the very air we breathe, and with electricity as its vehicle entering the homes of the nation through doors and windows, no matter how tightly barred...We have only just begun to appreciate the possibilities that come from having free and untrammelled access to the homes of 15,000,000 families.¹⁷⁶

In Susan Smulyan’s book about the history of radio advertising, she mentions this manual in passing, and refers to Arnold’s use of “a rather alarming image of radio as an invasive rather than invited medium.”¹⁷⁷ But the discourses of invitation and invasion always went hand in hand; and from the point of view of the Director of

¹⁷³ “Presentation to Dealers: How a big national radio program helps a local dealer sell goods,” E.P.H. James papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 20, folder 4.

¹⁷⁴ Merlin Hall Aylesworth, foreword to Dunlap, v.

¹⁷⁵ Harry P. Davis, foreword to Arnold, xv.

¹⁷⁶ Arnold, 42 and 51.

¹⁷⁷ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: the Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 87.

Development of NBC, or the president of NBC, or the vice president of Westinghouse, the idea of entering the home no matter how tightly barred was a wondrous development, bringing to fruition the power promised to them in the ideology of caller hegemony. With the discourse of the omnipresence of wirelessness, at last the caller had a technology that would truly let him seep in through the walls like the air, to carry his message into the most private and personal space surrounding the listener. It's little wonder many of those who made their living from radio were pleased and excited.

Another realm in which the notions of wireless invitation and wireless invasion richly intertwined was in the discourse of "radio romance," the Internet dating of its time. There was a fascination with, and anxiety about, the involvement of radio technology in the realms of gender and sexuality surrounding institutions like courtship and marriage. Stories appeared in the national press throughout the 1920s about real-life "radio romances" and "radio weddings," ranging from relationships in which the couple first met over the air but conducted their courtship face-to-face, to relationships apparently entirely mediated by radio.¹⁷⁸ And sometimes the wedding itself was even dependent on radio technology: a 1922 article in *Radio Broadcast* claimed that the first "long-range marriage by radio" was

¹⁷⁸ See, for instance, "Radio Romance Wedding," *New York Times*, 6 December 1924, 15; "Proposed Over the Radio," *New York Times*, 6 June 1926, 15; "Radio Romance Culminates," *New York Times*, 5 August 1926, 18; "Plight Troth by Arctic Radio Over Sea to Greenland Mount," *New York Times*, 28 September 1927, 1.

performed in May of 1920,¹⁷⁹ and according to Hilmes, "...the November 18, 1922, issue of *Radio Broadcasting News* featured the nuptials of George Albert Carver and Bertha Annie McMunn at the Pittsburgh Electrical Show, with a KDKA representative standing by." The broadcast ceremony drew admiring letters from listeners-in.¹⁸⁰

The discourse had also been circulating well before then, during the earliest years of the twentieth century, in stories that picked up and explored the issue of the omnipresent wireless as both a freeing and a troublesome conduit for the gender relations of courtship and marriage. The 1909 story "In Marconiland," for instance, revolves around a pair of young lovers, Muriel and August, who are forbidden to meet because Muriel's father does not approve. Wireless is the tool they use to flout these parental restrictions, and the very idea, technical skill requirements and all, is both exciting and romantic, especially to Muriel:

One day it occurred to [August] that, as he and Muriel could no longer see each other except on fugitive occasions, he might construct a secret Marconigraph with which they could communicate...She was delighted. She already could operate one slowly, having practised on the family line; and she would go in now and get up her speed. Nothing thrills the passion for romance in a young girl like a clandestine meeting with her lover—the witless world outwitted, and they two alone and together. Thus now could she and August meet nightly, with only the city of New York between them, and the click of their own, own instruments "dash-dot-dashing" of their love.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Pierre Boucheron, "Adventures in Radio: Married By Radio," *Radio Broadcast*, June 1922, 162.

¹⁸⁰ Hilmes, 53.

¹⁸¹ Albert R. Carman, "In Marconiland," *Canadian Magazine* 32 (March 1909): 427.

August eventually manages to impress Muriel's father enough for the father to give him a job. Interestingly, once Muriel's father has finally let August be "officially" (physically and bodily) introduced to Muriel, he puts a stop to further meetings behind his back by taking Muriel's "private Marconigraph" away. He seems to realize that the mere fact of bodily proximity will not necessarily trump the excitement of secret, technologically-mediated trysts, and the former seems much less threatening to him than the latter.

Sometimes the woman in the wireless romance was allowed to take matters (and the transmitting key) entirely into her own hands, using the technology to put herself in the empowered role of "caller" and control her own romantic and sexual life, bringing her chosen mate to her side at her direction. A pair of stories published eleven years apart, "Sparks" (1911) and "The Wireless Girl" (1922), demonstrate two versions of this event: in "Sparks," the character Lucille is a wireless operator in her own right, and she is involved with Harry, an operator in a different office. They have an argument, and shortly thereafter Harry goes to sea; Lucille tries to contact him over and over via wireless, but he will not answer. He returns to find that she has died. In his remorse he becomes obsessed with listening fearfully to the static on the radio line, eventually hearing a message from Lucille beyond the grave. He keys back, "O.K. I'm coming," and slumps over dead.¹⁸² "The Wireless Girl" takes a much different tone toward the concept of a woman using the far-flung power of the wireless for her own romantic purposes: it is an action-adventure tale in which a

¹⁸² John Fleming Wilson, "Sparks," *McClure's Magazine* 37 (June 1911): 149-54.

film actress named Mildred has been kidnapped by Mr. Forde, the henpecked father of her beau Herbert, and is being taken by ship to Japan on the assumption that keeping Mildred and Herbert apart will destroy their desire to marry. Mildred, however, will not take this lying down. There is no wireless operator aboard to help her, so she takes matters into her own hands, commandeering the wireless cabin and equipping her maid with a pistol with which to shoot at any man who approaches. Then Mildred proceeds to fire off a series of wireless messages, rearranging circumstances to her own liking. The experience is portrayed as a freeing and exhilarating (and even erotic) one, and in fact one that empowers Mildred far beyond any of the men around her, whether enemy or friend:

“Oh Lord,” cried the distressed gentleman [Mr. Forde]...“Oh-h, what are you saying about me, Miss Durant?”

The girl only laughed and seated herself before the wireless instruments. She was exultant, everything was going her way. Her heart beat with excitement as she manipulated the apparatus. Many times in the past she had done so, but never under such circumstances as these. She thrust in the aerial switch with the vigor characteristic of an old hand at the game, and when she heard the generator respond waxing to a windy roar, she called the San Francisco station.

The alert operator immediately answered and instructed her to send any messages she had. With a happy laugh she transmitted a message which she had previously written; a second message followed. How she wished her brother might see her operating such a magnificent set of instruments. It was he who had taught her wireless telegraphy. Never until now had she thought of what use the knowledge would mean to her.¹⁸³

In the end, the messages force Mr. Forde to turn the ship around and return to San Francisco, where the ship is met by Herbert himself, who came obediently to his

¹⁸³ Erald A. Schivo, “The Wireless Girl,” *Overland Monthly* 80 (November 1922), 32.

fiancée's wireless summons; Mildred and Herbert marry on the deck of the ship, foiling his parents' plans to divide them.

In "A Wireless Elopement," published in 1907, the main character Phoebe has much the same idea, although she cannot actually handle the transmitting apparatus on her own. She is caught in a dilemma: in order to inherit her grandfather's money, she must marry by noon, marrying either her sweetheart Dick Fairchild or a local man named Whitlock, who drinks. Her grandfather thinks he has her trapped, because Dick is already on a ship bound for Europe. But at the last moment, Phoebe has an idea, and she rushes off to enlist the help of an old friend (and would-be beau, who helps her while nobly suffering at the knowledge that she will marry another), who takes her to the local wireless station and arranges her marriage to Dick through the ether. When confronted with the marriage license, the grandfather cannot believe it, because of his perception of the unbridgeable physical chasm: "Married to Fairchild! Why, he's half way to Ireland—I hope he'll stay there!...Married! By crab, they can't—he's half way—" ¹⁸⁴ But it is revealed that the distance was negated through the ether by means of the omnipresent wireless, and the grandfather's plans, linked to his old-fashioned and un-technological understanding of the limits of marriage and embodiment, are foiled.

"Woody by Wireless," published in 1908, grapples more openly with the discomfort of the technological collapse of distance brought about by wireless

¹⁸⁴ Stella Miller Neal, "A Wireless Elopement," *New England Magazine* 36 (March 1907): 101.

courtship. The main character, Nancy, is a “high spirited”¹⁸⁵ young woman who is being courted by a young man named Bob, and Nancy takes confident pleasure in spurning Bob’s advances. But then she takes a sea trip, and the ship’s wireless room begins to receive a spate of messages from Bob to Nancy, with no sending point named. The mysterious combination of disembodied technology and the embodied content of courtship begins to frighten and confuse Nancy, who over the next week becomes wracked with anxiety:

What was it, and how, and why—this mysterious persecution, for so she chose to name it; and, most of all, what should she do to meet it? At times she resolved to bid the slave fling out some virulent “defi” to the unbounded ether, trusting that the insulting Bob, off there somewhere in the unknown, would be stricken dumb by her embittered words. But every such resolution went down before the fear of heralding forth her story to the winds and the sky and the wide listening world, which she fancied a-tiptoe to catch her answer. No, she could not answer, any more than she could understand; she must endure in silence, in forced wonderment, in anger which, though she would not admit it even to herself, still held something of respect for such a lover...¹⁸⁶

By the end of the story, Nancy’s high spirits and obstinacy have been vanquished by the mores of caller hegemony via Bob’s use of the wireless as his conduit to woo her, and upon seeing Bob on the shore as her ship comes in, Nancy “leaned over the rail and pursed her red lips so tantalizingly”¹⁸⁷ that it is clear that Bob has won her.

In “Matchmaking by Wireless,” published in 1914, the pathway through the ether is not mediated by a wireless office, a ship at sea, nor any other public space.

¹⁸⁵ George Allan England, “Wooed by Wireless,” *Cosmopolitan* 44 (April 1908): 497.

¹⁸⁶ England, 500.

¹⁸⁷ England, 501.

Instead, the signal finds its way through the windows into a woman's home, and when the home is involved, thoughts of danger and invasion follow. Two old women, Alcesty and Laviny, live together, and Laviny is crazy about the omnipresence of her wireless: "I thought flyin' through the air was the grandest thing this side of heaven—but it ain't a patch on talkin' through it!"¹⁸⁸ For Laviny, "the wireless promised endless and unrestricted eavesdropping,"¹⁸⁹ and this entree disturbs her friend, who tells her "it does give me the creeps to think of your listenin' like it was at keyholes hundreds of miles away!"¹⁹⁰ Laviny encounters a man over the wireless who identifies himself with the initials TRE, and he meets with Laviny at the same time for several nights in a row; Alcesty is again disturbed, and asks who he is and what he could possibly want. Laviny replies:

"Fur as I can see, he just wants to keep visitin' over the wireless, and askin' questions!"

"My land, Laviny! It kinder gives me the queevils to think of you settin' there all evenin' talkin' with a perfectly strange man! He might be an escaped convict for all we know, and come here some night and rob and murder us—"¹⁹¹

This type of warning about the risks of "visitin' over the wireless" was later embodied in a 1921 cartoon from the radio-amateur publication *QST*, captioned: "Miss Ham gives permission, via radio, for a nearby amateur to call on her. She has never seen him and now it looks as if others has (sic) been listening in also." In the

¹⁸⁸ Annie E. P. Searing, "Matchmaking by Wireless," *The Delineator* 84 (May 1914): 11.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*

¹⁹⁰ *ibid*

¹⁹¹ *ibid*

drawing, the young, lovely, white “Miss Ham” reels backward in shock, one hand to her brow and a large question mark hovering over her head, as she regards the crowd of men in her home all clutching gifts (such as flowers and candy) and jostling each other to claim “I’m the one you talked to over the air”: one wears glasses, two are bald (one of those with a long, white beard), and one is a black man depicted in a stereotypical “minstrel” style with a bald, egg-shaped head, huge inflated white lips, and a flamboyant costume of clashing checks and polka dots. Within the discourse of the omnipresent wireless, as with the telephone, the technology provided an uncontrollable conduit that was both contemptuous of embodied barriers, and yet still disturbingly linked to a body(ies) at the other end that could somehow come through the conduit to threaten vulnerable women and children in the home.

Radio romance and sexuality broached the walls of the home in commercialized forms, as well, above and beyond the gendered relation of salesman-to-housewife mentioned earlier. For instance, early commercial radio developed the liberating/threatening figure of the “crooner,” as discussed in the work of Allison McCracken. According to McCracken, the early crooners created an erotic appeal combined with a disobedience to and play with the norms of heterosexual masculinity partly (and inextricably) through their use of radio technology in particular. The design of radio’s microphone and amplification, for instance, allowed the crooner to develop a new singing style, breathy and soft, and

this alluring and romantic murmuring was sent directly into the most secret spaces of the home. McCracken writes:

...crooning's mystic associations resonate strongly in its adaptation to radio; radio was indeed the new magic, potentially unsettling, and crooners were disembodied spirits coming out of the dark, their voices hushed and warm and too, too close. They made the inaudible audible and collapsed the barriers between public and private.¹⁹²

Just as in the NBC brochure discussed earlier, here radio “Comes Right Into The Home: It’s *Intimate*,” but this time with a much more overt erotic and sexual appeal. This extreme intimacy sparked societal distress, especially, McCracken suggests, because of the way in which the radio crooner contaminated domestic space, “redefining it as a romantic, sexualized space.”¹⁹³

The crooner’s disruption of norms of embodiment and gender through the romantic and sexualized conduit of the radio was parodied in, among other sites, the film *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, in a sequence featuring a radio station’s star performer, “Lochinvar”. Spud, the station manager, is the speaking voice of Lochinvar, but he has someone else do the singing; together, they have created an archetypal romantic crooner. A sample Lochinvar broadcast begins with sweet talk and poetry, drawing the listeners closer—not just in spirit, but in body as well.

Spud-as-Lochinvar says:

¹⁹² Allison McCracken, “Real Men Don’t Sing: Crooning and American Culture, 1928-1933” (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 2000), 56-57.

¹⁹³ McCracken, 9.

Hello, my ethereal sweethearts. The twilight hour is here again. The hour of confidences and sweet sentiments. And now I want you to do something for me. Come closer to your radio.

The scene cuts to a shot of a lovely young woman listening to her radio. She moves closer to it, as instructed. Then Lochinvar says, "Now put your arms around it," and she does, embracing the machine closely, radio technology embodying and sexualizing the infiltrating voice. Lochinvar continues, as if he can feel the embrace: "That's right. Love is ownership. And for this moment, you belong to me." (Of course she belongs to the technologized-him rather than the other way around, obedient to the mores of caller hegemony.)

The scene then cuts to some of Lochinvar's other "ethereal sweethearts," harking back to just the kind of anarchic romantic and sexual breaching of boundaries radio allowed in the cartoon from *QST*. We see a group of old women listening on a porch, sighing with passionate affection. We see an African-American woman dressed in a domestic's uniform, standing in a luxurious kitchen; she is pouring milk, but Lochinvar's romantic voice has so mesmerized her that she is paying no attention to her task, letting the milk overflow onto the floor, where a kitten is lapping it up. Lochinvar's "poem for lonely hearts" progresses:

The fountains mingle with the rivers, and the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix forever with a sweet emotion.
Now nothing in the world is single...

The scene cuts to the last in the series of shots of his "sweethearts," showing two workmen in a manhole, also listening and staring into the middle distance just as raptly as any of the women. The poem concludes:

And all things by a law divine
 In one spirit meet and mingle.
 Why not mine, with thine?

During these last several lines, the smaller workman eyes the taller workman, moves over, and snuggles against his shoulder, looking up at him soulfully. The taller workman, far from shoving him away or otherwise moving to quickly reassert traditional masculine boundaries, just looks down into his eyes before the scene cuts away. The radio's nefarious powers of technologized intimacy and ether-embodied sexuality have struck again.

"The Ether Bogeyman"

Between the dusk and the daylight
 When the broadcasters step up their power
 Comes that large and magnificent shambles
 That is known as the children's hour.

The wee ones huddle together
 In time for the evening scare
 To chill their juvenile marrow
 And curl their innocent hair.

Then over the waves of ether
 To fill their sweet long dreams
 Come tales of terror and torture
 And 17 kinds of screams.¹⁹⁴

As American commercial broadcast radio developed, codified its industrial practices, and became more complex, many of the societal fears accruing around radio's domestic intrusion crystallized into an intense and ongoing focus on the

¹⁹⁴ Stoddard King, "The Children's Hour," *Time*, 24 March 1947, 63.

medium's relationship with children in particular, trying to analyze and quantify its effects for good (they hoped) and ill (they feared). This was perhaps inescapable, stemming as it did from a conflict that was built into commercial radio broadcasting practically from the beginning: radio targeted children as one of its most clearly-defined audiences, and therefore it had to pursue children openly, even aggressively. But this aggressive pursuit tied too well into pre-existing tropes of insidious technological predation, so the harder the radio industry worked to construct and reach a child audience for its own profit, the more it ran the risk of heightening the negative side of its own reputation. And thus, along with the utopian dreams about radio elevating and educating every child, there were recurring, nearly constant, panics about the damage radio was inflicting upon children and "the home" or "the family" (thereby including women under the aegis of radio's hapless victims), spurring periodic attempts to reform the industry and fix the problems. But each time radio was at last declared under control, shortly thereafter a fresh warning would be sounded (using the same terminology as the preceding panics) and the topic was back in the news and the academic symposia, as fresh and distressing a danger as ever.

Publicly, at least, the radio/children problem was overwhelmingly placed in the purview of women. Symbolically, this resulted in calls for action on the part of the generic category of "mothers," and the infliction of guilt or use of scare tactics long employed in other media discourses (as, for example, the tradition of such approaches found in print advertising). Also, in more practical terms, movements

were often initiated and continued by women's civic organizations, whether pre-existing groups or ones formed specifically for the purpose. This fit right in, not only with the concept of radio invading the home, but also with the long tradition of "moral problems" being delegated to (if not originally defined by) crusading women's groups. The domestic nature of such problems, problems perceived as specifically threatening the purity of such loaded concepts as "home," "family," and "the children," provided a ready-made discursive link to the societal construction of the domestic (and domestically-protective) nature of the female.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, women's groups came to the fore of attempts to control and reform the burgeoning radio broadcasting industry; one observer pointed this out as a natural continuation of the tradition of women's clubs as moral crusaders fighting the degradations of the popular media, writing that "[I]ast year the church-sponsored Legion of Decency marched in to relieve women's clubs of a losing fight to reform the movies. Clubwomen switched their crusading spirit to radio."¹⁹⁵ The construct of the maternal figure as a protective and disapproving moral authority was in full swing in articles such as this one, which was appropriately titled "Hand That Rocks Cradle Shakes Warning Finger At Radio". A prominent example of this scolding, domestic "warning finger" in action was the committee formed in Scarsdale, New York, by the Fox Meadow Parent-Teachers Association and the Scarsdale Women's Club. The Scarsdale Women's Club was

¹⁹⁵ "Hand That Rocks Cradle Shakes Warning Finger at Radio," *Newsweek*, 13 July 1935, 29.

already well-known in the region for taking civic action to protect local children from the nutritional dangers of hot dogs¹⁹⁶ and the noise pollution of low-flying airplanes,¹⁹⁷ and in the spring of 1933, members turned their attention to “the bedtime bogies that come through the loud-speaker and disturb their children’s rest.”¹⁹⁸ At a well-publicized address before the Columbia University Teachers’ College on February 28, 1933, the radio committee announced its rankings of 42 of the “juvenile radio programs which corrupt the American home between 4:45 and 9pm”¹⁹⁹: the bulk of these were rated “poor” or “very poor” (including most of the very popular programs, such as *Little Orphan Annie*, *The Shadow*, and even *Uncle Don*, a program of morally-instructive songs and stories aimed at the youngest listeners), and only five were rated “excellent” (all programs of a similar tone: *Current Events*, *Today’s News*, *Great Moments in History*, *Dramatized News Events*, and *Roses and Drums*, a drama set during the U.S. Civil War and renowned for its historical accuracy.²⁰⁰

The committee continued its scrutiny and ranking of the late afternoon/early evening programs, first just with weekly notices in the Scarsdale Women’s Club

¹⁹⁶ “Hot Dogs and Peanuts Banished by Scarsdale,” *New York Times*, 14 July 1927, 13; “Hot Dog’ Man Hits at Scarsdale Ban,” *New York Times*, 24 July 1927, 20.

¹⁹⁷ “Fliers Alarm Scarsdale,” *New York Times*, 15 August 1927, 3; “Mothers Fighting the Radio Bogies,” *Literary Digest* 115 (18 March 1933): 32.

¹⁹⁸ “Mothers Fighting the Radio Bogies,” 32.

¹⁹⁹ “The Children’s Hour,” *The Nation* 136 (5 April 1933): 362.

²⁰⁰ “Mothers Protest ‘Bogyman’ on Radio,” *New York Times*, 27 February 1933, 17; “Radio: Mothers Chasing the Ether Bogyman,” *Newsweek*, 11 March 1933, 30; “The Children’s Hour,” *The Nation*, 362.

magazine but later sharing these ratings with the press.²⁰¹ And by early 1935, they had garnered enough attention and momentum for CBS to invite them to put together and air their own one-shot program on WABC. The fifteen-minute program, scripted by members of the club and produced and acted by local Scarsdale amateurs “under club supervision,”²⁰² was called *Westchester Cowboys*. Like the five shows the club had originally ranked as “excellent” in 1933, *Westchester Cowboys* was a historical re-enactment. Early press announced that the upcoming show was being “heralded as a new departure in juvenile radio programs”²⁰³ and would “demonstrate the type of ideal program for children the club has been striving for two years to encourage.”²⁰⁴ Later announcements from the club were more modest, however: they increasingly distanced themselves from the term “ideal,”²⁰⁵ claiming the presentation would merely serve as an experiment with “no idea of setting a standard for children’s programs.”²⁰⁶ According to the radio committee chair, Mrs. George G. Ernst, “We merely presented the sort of program we thought some mothers might approve for their children.”²⁰⁷ Reactions, however, were mixed; it wasn’t even clear if all the members of the club themselves approved of the quality

²⁰¹ “Scarsdale Mothers Rate Radio Programs,” *New York Times*, 13 December 1934, 25.

²⁰² “Behind the Studio Scenes,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1935, X13; “Mothers Give Skit to Test Radio Aims,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1935, 21.

²⁰³ “Behind the Studio Scenes,” X13.

²⁰⁴ “Scarsdale Club to Give a ‘Model Radio Program’,” *New York Times*, 18 February 1935, 18.

²⁰⁵ “Children Approve Test Broadcast,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1935, N2.

²⁰⁶ “Mothers Give Skit to Test Radio Aims,” 21.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

of the broadcast.²⁰⁸ A survey of five New York area schools, plus letters received from parents, seemed to indicate that the program had been moderately well-received in many instances, but the overall reaction, while affable, was muted; the final conclusion seemed to be that the public did not so much approve of the experimental program itself, as that they responded to its airing with their continuing disapproval of everything else on the air.²⁰⁹ In other words, while *Westchester Cowboys* was not the perfect program that unhappy parents and advocacy groups were looking for, its media aftermath underscored the fact that they were still (and always) looking.

A larger and more centralized group of women that helped both to define and to attack the problem of radio and children, contemporary to and in conjunction with the Scarsdale Women's Club, was the Women's National Radio Committee. According to its own press (as echoed both believably and unbelievably by journalists)²¹⁰, the WNRC could claim some 10 million members by September of 1934 and 17 million by the summer of 1935, with "25 organizations wedged...behind a single spearhead"²¹¹. In 1934 this mega-women's-club had already managed to make waves on the national radio scene, its "society-matron officers" forcing the cancellation of a program on WMCA in New York sponsored by

²⁰⁸ "Scarsdale Mothers Debate Broadcasts," *New York Times*, 21 February 1935, 10.

²⁰⁹ "Children Approve Test Broadcast," N2.

²¹⁰ "Hand That Rocks Cradle Shakes Warning Finger at Radio," 29; Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., "Reform in the Springtime," *New York Times*, 19 May 1935, X13; "Radio Critics," *Business Week*, 10 August 1935, 23-24.

²¹¹ "Hand That Rocks Cradle Shakes Warning Finger at Radio," 29.

a brand of contraceptive jelly, as well as pressuring broadcasters to refuse advertising of “unpleasant” merchandise such as laxatives and feminine hygiene products.²¹² Early in 1935 they had a luncheon at which they gave awards to several approved programs, and sharply criticized the rest. And they announced their plans for continuing pressure against inappropriate programming:

Following speaker Fannie Hurst’s advice—“What we need is more intolerance”—officers of the W.N.R.C. were busy this week planning to issue regular program reviews, classifying broadcasts as ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ à la the Legion of Decency.²¹³

This led to the release of the *Radio Review*, a WNRC publication taking to task programs and advertisers that disgusted “ladies and gentlemen of refinement” and threatened innocent children listening during the crucial hours from 5 to 8pm.²¹⁴

On the part of women’s clubs, public excoriations of radio broadcasters such as this certainly had potential to affect network policies to some extent (even if only temporarily), especially in conjunction with the enactment (or threat of enactment) of government regulations. And in the course of airing this type of public criticism, many participants in the debates over radio’s relationship with children were able to mobilize powerful discourses of protective motherhood, which kept their concerns front and center in the public eye. On the other hand, this also meant that the participants and their arguments could be relatively easily trivialized and

²¹² “Radio Critics,” 23.

²¹³ “Cleaning Up Radio,” *Business Week*, 18 May 1935, 26.

²¹⁴ “Hand That Rocks Cradle Shakes Warning Finger at Radio,” 29.

dismissed in the end as “yapping women”²¹⁵ whose activism caused more problems than it solved. The perceived risks that radio posed for children could even be blamed on mothers themselves in the end, as in a 1949 article bluntly titled “Women Seen Failing In Responsibilities”; the article quoted a female professor of education from NYU, considered one of “three leading women of New York,” who lectured mothers themselves for driving children toward radio’s pollution:

Radio “soap opera” particularly showed a “preoccupation with the triangle and mental illness” ...Yet, so warped has American home life become, that children often have nothing better to do than listen to such radio fare....²¹⁶

And even when any given mother did her best to keep her home “unwarped,” her very efforts to clean up childrens’ radio could be blamed for damaging the children even more insidiously. The argument, based on the comfortable fiction that people categorized as “children” only ever listened to programs categorized as “children’s programs,” ran as follows: if the typical afternoon assortments of “blood and thunder” crime, adventure, and thriller programs were cleaned up too much, or even removed from the air, then what did children have left to listen to? Adult programs, that’s what, including some of the most violent and suggestive dramas, the most depraved and neurotic soap operas, and the most suspect types of music. An article by a staff member of the Child Study Association of America (a venerable women’s organization that played a large role in the increasing focus on universally

²¹⁵ Dorothy Gordon, *All Children Listen* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1942), 55.

²¹⁶ “Women Seen Failing in Responsibilities,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1949, 9.

proper parenting and expert-driven “scientific motherhood”²¹⁷) warned: “What will the children listen to instead?...programs of adult comedy, swing songs, and ‘real life’ sketches never intended for their ears.”²¹⁸ The *New York Times* cautioned parents in almost the same language, fearing children’s exposure to “[j]azz and comedy and ‘grown-up’ mystery serials”²¹⁹ past their bedtimes. A reader writing in to the *Ladies’ Home Journal* argued in the strongest terms against children having any exposure to serials intended for their elders:

They hear stories of disobedience to parents, disregard of law, indifference to school, the condoning of illicit love affairs, the acceptance of divorce, all told with a sensational background...I am not speaking here of children’s programs, so called, but of those trashy stories that are supposed to entertain the likes of me, a housewife! It disgusts me!²²⁰

And in 1943, *New York Times* radio editor John K. Hutchens looked back on the previous cycles of complaint volleyed at children’s programs, and levied the blame:

Certain serials were withdrawn, in some cases not to be replaced, leaving the children to listen to the even more exciting adult programs. Except as they forced the broadcasters to adopt higher criteria for juvenile shows, the would-be reformers defeated their own purposes.²²¹

²¹⁷ As discussed in Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), especially pp. 48-54.

²¹⁸ Josette Frank, “These Children’s Programs!”, *Parents’ Magazine*, February 1939, 32.

²¹⁹ Maude Dunlop, “Radio Attuned to Young Ears,” *New York Times*, 16 July 1939, 42.

²²⁰ “Harmful Children’s Radio Programs,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1939, 4.

²²¹ John K. Hutchens, “Tracy, Superman, et. Al. Go to War,” *New York Times*, 21 November 1943, SM14.

This approach was used to explain one reason why the movements to protect children from radio rose and fell and rose again (to the point of being described as old news every few years, even while the author often intended to launch a new opinion into the old fray²²²), and yet somehow children were still always and everywhere in a state of technologically-induced peril. You were damned if you did and damned if you didn't, because of the ubiquity of the technology and its ability to make an end run around any attempts to stop it.

In all of the arguments focused on radio's relationship to children, from speeches and reports issued by women's groups and scientific organizations to the more public discussions in the popular press, the fear and suspicion were driven by a strong thread of technological determinism. Radio technology per se was seen as both inherently different and potentially much worse for children than other influences, and therefore according to this argument it was much more difficult to understand and control. Childhood was already well-established as a unique (and uniquely vulnerable) structure; add to this the perception of the uniquely powerful and pervasive radio wave, and the combination was explosive. In a causal appeal to

²²² For instance, see: Ernestine Evans, "Education By the Radio," *New York Times*, 10 February 1935, X14; John K. Hutchens, "And No Kidding," *New York Times* 1 February 1942, X12; John K. Hutchens, "But Don't Bet On It," *New York Times*, 9 July 1944, X5; Gladys Denny Shultz, "Comics—Radio—Movies: What Are They Doing to Our Children? And What Should Parents Do About Them?" *Better Homes and Gardens*, November 1945, 22+; Lou Frankel, "In One Ear," *The Nation* 164 (April 26, 1947): 481; Kenneth Robb, "Better Radio for Children," *Parents' Magazine*, August 1948, 43+.

biology that would be picked up again (and, interestingly, reversed) in later arguments against television, one author wrote in 1935 that:

Nowhere has radio more far-reaching power than in relation to childhood. No stimulus surrounding children seems more compelling in its claim on attention. As Mary Agnes Hamilton says, "I incline to believe that the younger generation is more accessible though its ears than through its eyes, whether these eyes are directed to the visual image, as in the films, or to the printed word of books and newspapers. All dictators know this; their first act is to seize the radio."²²³

And two years later, *The Christian Century* reported on a study "of ten thousand boys and girls of the tenement districts" conducted by the Children's Aid Society of New York, flatly concluding:

The conditioning influences are: first, radio; second, the movies; a poor third, books. Think about that if you want to know what agencies are shaping the minds and emotions of the youth of this generation.²²⁴

As these arguments suggest, radio was often compared to other influences on and risks to children, often the very influences that had been the primary focus of parental fear perhaps one or two decades before (such as FCC chairman Anning Prall's 1935 disapproving comparison of radio thrillers to "dime novels of the 'Deadeye Dick' or 'Boy Smuggler' variety"²²⁵). And in these comparisons, radio perennially came out on top of the hazard scale, largely due to its symbolically-loaded power to suffuse the air and penetrate the home from all sides, making

²²³ Agnes E. Benedict, "A United Front on Children's Radio Programs," *Parents' Magazine*, June 1935, 22.

²²⁴ "Children, Movies, Radio and Books," *The Christian Century*, 17 November 1937, 1413.

²²⁵ "Cautions Broadcasters: Prall Criticizes 'Blood-and-Thunder' Programs for Children," *New York Times*, 31 March 1935, 26.

parents impotent and walls immaterial. For instance, Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, director of the Child Study Association of America, published a paper in the 1935 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* that argued:

Looking backward, radio appears as but the latest of cultural emergents to invade the putative privacy of the home. Each such invasion finds the parents unprepared, frightened, resentful, and helpless. Within comparatively short memory, the "movie," the automobile, the telephone, the sensational newspaper or magazine, the "funnies," and the cheap paper-back book have had similar effects upon the apprehensions and solicitude of parents.

...We must not overlook, however, the important fact that in some respects the radio finds the parents more helpless than the "movies" or the "funnies"; for no locks will keep this intruder out, nor can parents shut their children away from it.²²⁶

This model of radio as the *ne plus ultra* of childhood's predators by virtue of its inescapable penetration of the sacred space of the home was also common in the popular press, most particularly (and perhaps most predictably) in parenting magazines, in which the sentiment was the same but the language was more fraught:

By many the radio is ranked as parents' enemy number one. For here is a device whose voice is everywhere...we are powerless to shut it out. More pervasive than the automobile, more intrusive than the movies, it comes into our very homes and captures our children before our very eyes...we cannot insulate our children from what is literally in the air that surrounds them. From the house across the street, from the apartment next door, from the corner drug store, the voice of the radio will reach them.²²⁷

²²⁶ Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, "Radio and the Child," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 177 (January 1935): 123.

²²⁷ Frank, 32.

In the popular imagination, radio technology in particular had the unparalleled power to suffuse the air, penetrate all walls, and find and affect children wherever and however their parents might try to sequester them. The focus on the inherent dangers of this particular technological conduit meant, then, that any message sent via the radio now ran the risk of being dangerously adulterated by its medium. Typical stories previously approved for children's and adolescents' consumption now came under a new level of scrutiny, for fear that radio's powers would warp and boost these stories to unprecedented and heretofore unknown levels of danger. The content of the programming might not necessarily always be objectionable in and of itself, but mix it with radio technology and any possible latent danger would be activated and heightened:

Granted that there is an approved type of excitement for a juvenile audience, how is it to be brought to radio? Broadcast material is subject to a different type of treatment than is the printed or the ordinary spoken word. The radio voice emanates from an invisible and therefore more eerie and more mysterious source. The acceptable type of excitement, enhanced by the seeming reality of sound effects and the technique of radio presentation and coupled with the intangibility that is radio, can be a dangerous overdose of a good thing.²²⁸

The effects of this technologically-heightened overdose were imagined, hypothesized, identified, and attacked in public discourse, constructing a dynamic of insidious, wide-ranging harm in which radio—even (and especially) radio specifically targeted at child audiences—was damaging children whether they (and

²²⁸ Vernon Crane, "Are the Programs they Like Bad for Them?" *Parents' Magazine*, April 1940, 72.

their parents) were aware of it or not. While there was no scientific study done on the effects of radio on children to equal the scope of, and public response to, the Payne Fund studies that were directed at film in the 1930s, the conclusions of the Payne studies were automatically assumed to apply to radio as well.²²⁹ Much of the same kind of language from the Payne studies can be found in arguments against children's radio: labels of "nerve strain," excitement to the point of hysteria, over-eroticization, formation (and destruction) of character, etc. And just as with the movies (except now more dangerous, because more intimate), radio's damage was said to run across the board, whether physically, psychologically, or morally, as summarized in this 1933 editorial:

Thoughtful parents resent the invasion of their homes by such skits. They protest that programs which frighten or work children up to a great pitch of excitement are doing actual physical and psychological harm while programs that constantly present a cheap and basically unethical point of view are bound to exert a more subtle but nevertheless injurious influence on the impressionable minds of children.²³⁰

Some of the physical complaints parents commonly pointed to as specifically radio-borne were nightmares, weeping, screaming, fingernail-biting, trembling, fixation on the radio, and similar reactions; these symptoms were often combined under the category of "nerve strain" (or similar phrases—e.g. "shattering the

²²⁹ For instance, see Gladys Denny Shultz, "Movies and Radio—Blessing or Bane?" *Better Homes and Gardens*, March 1937, 78+.

²³⁰ Clara Savage Littledale, "Better Radio Programs for Children," *Parents Magazine*, May 1933, 13.

nerves”), serving as a new, radio-inflicted form of traumatic shock or hysteria.²³¹ As one respondent to a 1939 *Ladies’ Home Journal* survey put it, children’s radio was producing “a generation of neurotics.”²³² A 1939 experiment attempted to quantify radio’s physiological effects by measuring the changes in children’s blood pressure, pulse, breathing, and “electrodermal response” in response to certain programs; one of the study’s conclusions was that:

...when a program causes momentary acceleration in pulse rate from 80 to 130 beats per minute, accompanied by sharp fluctuations in blood pressure, as was true in a number of instances in the laboratory experiments, it may be assumed that continued listening to such programs by the children in question is injurious.²³³

There was little specific codification of radio’s part in this syndrome elsewhere in the medical literature, though that was not for lack of trying on the part of the Scarsdale Women’s Club: they approached doctors for official statements, and, when rebuffed, complained to the national press that “doctors have declined to make any public statement for fear of controversy.”²³⁴

²³¹ For instance, see: “Mothers Protest ‘Bogyman’ on Radio,” 17; “Radio: Mothers Chasing the Ether Bogyman,” 30; “Parents Are Wondering: If It Is Wise to Give Children a Free Hand In Choice of Broadcasts,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1934, X13; Benedict, 22; “Wanted: Shows that Won’t Upset Young Digestions,” *Newsweek*, 6 July 1935, 26; Evans, X14; “Behind the Scenes,” *New York Times*, 29 December 1935, X15; “Radio Gore Criticized for Making Children’s Hour a Pause that Depresses,” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1937, 26; Frank, 28+; Crane, 32+; “Sweetening the Cereal Hour,” *Newsweek*, 2 December 1946, 102+; Eleanor Saltzman, “Does Radio Harm Our Children?: Yes!”, *Rotarian*, November 1938, 11+.

²³² Mary Cookman, “What Do the Women of America Think About Entertainment?” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, February 1939, 20+.

²³³ John J. DeBoer, “Radio and Children’s Emotions,” *School and Society* 50 (16 November 1939): 371.

²³⁴ “Mothers Protest ‘Bogyman’ on Radio,” 17.

It was not just the content of children's programs that produced this pathologized physical reaction, according to the Scarsdale club and other early critics of children's radio. There was one additional facet even more tightly linked to the technology itself: the serial format. The nature of the serial format, predicated upon incompleteness, continuation, and suspense, was blamed for being particularly damaging to children's growing bodies and developing brains. The existence of continuing serials in other media, such as movies and printed stories, was not material here; in this argument, radio, by virtue of its inherent penetrative power, heightened the effects of seriality to their most harmful degree. One father was quoted in the sociological literature (albeit with some authorial disapproval) as feeling "that Baby Rose Marie warbling 'adult hotsy-totsy songs' is preferable to adventure programs, since 'at least there was no life-risking predicament with which to drag the listener to the loud-speaker for the next broadcast.'"²³⁵ In the women's organizations' first major push against children's radio, they sometimes even elevated the serial format above radio's other faults, as in the Scarsdale club's statement:

We object to the mystery thriller, usually not because of its individual content, but because it is a serial. The children don't just hear it and forget it, but they carry the story in their minds from day to day, or week to week.²³⁶

²³⁵ Gruenberg, 126.

²³⁶ Quoted in, for example, "Mothers Fighting the Radio Bogies" and "Mothers Chasing the Ether Bogeyman."

Seriality, suspense, and the comprehensive effects of a regular dose of unresolved dramatic tension, added to “unsavory” subjects and storylines, all combined to form the primary target of the women’s club crusades throughout the 1930s. And in 1940, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs sponsored an “I’m Not Listening” movement, urging listeners to bombard networks with postcards “threatening that if the ‘hysterical’ cliff-hangers were not taken off the air, they would cease to listen to the radio.”²³⁷

The serial format (and the physiological and psychological dangers lurking therein) also formed a notable target for the anti-radio arguments of Dr. Louis Berg. Berg, a psychiatrist, released a series of pamphlets in the 1940s that focused specifically on the physical harm being wrought by radio, directly modeling it after the discourse of physical contamination and widespread risk to public health:

...I feel that, as a physician, I would be derelict in my duty to the community if I did not fight this thing. It’s like contaminated milk. If a doctor discovered a source of contaminated milk he would be honor bound to make it a public issue.²³⁸

His focus was on the popular “soap opera” program type, more specifically the damage its content and its serial format were doing to such helpless and indiscriminating listeners as women (especially menopausal women, a particularly pathologized group) and adolescents. Unlike the Scarsdale club, Dr. Berg did not need to seek outside medical experts to issue an official opinion; he set himself up as

²³⁷ Maurice Zolotow, “Washboard Weepers,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 May 1943, 17.

²³⁸ Zolotow, 48.

a guinea pig, listening to large quantities of different serials and recording his pulse and blood pressure.²³⁹ From those measurements, judgment of his female patients, and observations of program content and serial structure, he concluded that serial-listening produces in women and children “increased blood pressure, nocturnal frights, vasomotor instability, vertigo, gastrointestinal disturbances...profuse perspiration, tremors, and a slight touch of tachycardia,” all codified as a “fatigue syndrome” (other elements of which included “malaise, insomnia, inability to concentrate, emotional instability, depression and all sorts of phobias”).²⁴⁰

Despite the many pains associated with this radio-inflicted syndrome, Dr. Berg wasn't surprised that soap operas remained popular: according to his argument, this popularity did not indicate true enjoyment, but instead served as a symptom of illness. Leisure-time escapism, for instance, became insanity:

But what if the escape is only into the dark morass of madness?...What if the line between fantasy and fact is obliterated and what appears as escape becomes a retreat, a flight of the neurotic, a frantic backward parade of the emotionally damned?²⁴¹

And regular attention to (and affection for) ongoing storylines indicated helpless addiction:

²³⁹ Zolotow, 16 and 48.

²⁴⁰ Zolotow, 16; John K. Hutchens, “Little Argument: Communique from the Soap-Opera Front, Where an Old Battle is On Again,” *New York Times*, 29 November 1942, X12.

²⁴¹ Hutchens, “Little Argument,” X12.

...the constant listener to the programs studied can become as morbidly fond of his fantasy world as the user of opium of the pipe that brings momentary surcease with drugged dreams.²⁴²

In this model, pleasure itself was unhealthy; it was not an active choice stemming from the agency of the listener, but was instead a sign of physical weakness, a symptom of the sickness inflicted by radio exposure—a marker of someone who had been contaminated.

Worse than the potential for physical and psychological damage, however, was the fear that radio would infect children with moral disease and decay. On the level of the individual, this meant that radio desensitized children to things that should properly horrify them, creating an atmosphere of gleeful amorality and juvenile delinquency; it might be bad for children to be frightened by thrilling radio, but in the end it was even worse for them *not* to be frightened by it. A report about an early survey of children's radio preferences, for instance, pointedly quoted "the firmly written answer of one young hopeful, 'I want a blood-curdling murder'"²⁴³, emphasizing that the aspects of children's radio that most disturbed parents were the very aspects that some of the "little savages" increasingly craved. And a typically cautionary article of more than ten years later was structured around a similar anecdote:

Not so long ago a New Jersey suburban couple, returning home from an after-dinner stroll, entered the living room in time to hear a series of spectral groans coming from the radio. "What's happened?" asked

²⁴² Quoted in John K. Hutchens, "Are Soap Operas Only Suds?" *New York Times*, 28 Mar. 1943, SM36.

²⁴³ "Children's Hour," *The Nation*, 362.

the father in mild alarm. “Has anyone been killed?” The couple’s 10-year-old son looked up, frowning slightly at the interruption. “Not yet,” he replied in bright anticipation and re-settled himself more snugly for the grim denouement.²⁴⁴

In the traditional characterization of the innocent child, children are neither interested in nor pleased by such unsavory topics unless they are made so by an external source; here in this technological iteration of the discourse, radio is the source of an infection of darkness that sickens the innocent child by giving him a hunger for “horrors,” making him want to feed endlessly on the source of his own contamination. The serial format came in for its share of the blame here, its suspense and lack of resolution automatically creating in the young listener “an unappeased appetite for violence”²⁴⁵ (presumably planting this appetite in an innocent *tabula rasa*).

When suckling at the poisonous “ether milk for modern babes”²⁴⁶ was no longer enough to feed the contaminated child’s need for horror, the child moved on to create his own. Radio, like movies shortly before and comic books shortly afterward, was pegged as the source—even the most insidious and dangerous source—of juvenile delinquency and crime, flooding into the house and turning innocent youngsters into hoodlums. One letter to the editor read:

These young vandals are out for excitement. When they deface a school, a church, or rob a filling station, it’s just for the hell of it. What

²⁴⁴ “Sweetening the Cereal Hour,” 102.

²⁴⁵ “In One Ear,” 481.

²⁴⁶ Saltzman, 11.

leads them on? Several things: the comics, the movies, the radio—mostly the radio; all those crime stories coming in over the air.²⁴⁷

In this argument, the actual dramatic structure of the radio programs' content was immaterial. Even if the plots of any given blood-and-thunder program were carefully supervised so that evil always lost and the forces of law always triumphed (and this supervision did increasingly take place via elaborate network policies), it didn't matter. The power of radio to seep into every nook and cranny meant that young listeners were marinated in tainted airwaves, surrounded by an invisible atmosphere of crime qua crime and excitement for its own sake, and that was all that was required to set impressionable children on the road to a life of vice. As the same letter-writer put it, "That boy has soaked himself with those crime stories and wants to get in the game himself, either as detective or criminal—it makes no odds which."²⁴⁸

The moral decay of children was also laid at radio's doorstep in terms beyond the level of each individual child; radio (whether children's programming, or programming intended for adults but slipping through to touch children) was bringing down the fabric of society and childhood as a whole, weakening the fiber of the nation and undermining the construction of American children into good citizen-subjects. This aspect of radio's relationship with children was discussed with particular anxiety in the period surrounding and during World War II, articulated in terms of "morale" or in comparison with the proto-citizens being indoctrinated by

²⁴⁷ E.. A. Braniff, "Young Destroyers," *The Commonweal*, 19 October 1945, 14.

²⁴⁸ Braniff, 14.

the radio structures of enemy nations. Louis Berg, for instance, while complaining about the medical and psychological problems inflicted by radio serials, also argued that they produced “moral nihilism,” which was “the first step in the totalitarian conquest of nations.”²⁴⁹ He added that radio serials created:

...the very same over-anxiety which is the end of all enemy propaganda, for it lays the groundwork for civilian panic in emergencies and saps the productive energies of the afflicted individuals in all their essential efforts.²⁵⁰

The discourse of radio-transmitted panic in particular was of course prevalent in discussions about the 1938 *The War of the Worlds* broadcast, focusing on anxieties over what radio had done and could do to the suggestible American populace—especially children, seen as the most vulnerable and suggestible group. The fear triggered by the broadcast was directly tied in to the repeated outcry over children’s blood and thunder programming, including references to children’s ongoing state of radio-inflicted anxiety and the discourse of protective mothers:

When thousands of Americans, recently startled out of their wits by a radio broadcast, learned that they had been scared by a gigantic hoax, their fear turned to resentment—resentment at an agency that had so thoughtlessly played upon their deepest emotions of terror.

The fact that many small children in America have experienced similar terror—in smaller doses, perhaps—weekly or even nightly, has long been known to thousands of mothers.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Hutchens, “Little Argument,” X12.

²⁵⁰ Quoted in Hutchens, “Are Soap Operas Only Suds?”, SM36.

²⁵¹ Cookman, 20.

And as with other criticisms of radio, the supposed effects and aftermath of *The War of the Worlds* broadcast were ascribed to the inherently intrusive properties of radio as a technology:

...[T]he appeal of radio is far stronger than that of the printed page...when the same drama is transferred to the radio, practically nothing is left to the imagination. Even adults find this to be true. Can any one conceive of Orson Welles's interpretation of H.G. Wells's fantasy creating a nationwide furor if it had been published in a national magazine instead of broadcast? Radio supplies the real cries of children, the laughter of men, the ratatat of the machine gun. It brings human beings with their fears and hopes and triumphs into the living room of the home.²⁵²

Even if it weren't for special, heightened events like *The War of the Worlds*, radio broadcasting and its relationship to children was still suspect on an everyday level in terms of radio's perceived ability to shape and mold the young. The utopian view of this was a celebration of radio's potential to educate and unite America's children beyond any level previously possible. But in the concomitant dystopian discourse, education became hypnotism, and to unite meant to swallow all of the child listeners whole:

...[N]othing brings home more forcibly the immense power of the radio than the thought of thousands of small persons going through identical actions and mental processes at the behest of an individual who may be hundreds of miles away... That the practice must tend to develop susceptibility to mass suggestion seems inevitable.²⁵³

Radio therefore became a force for the social and cultural erosion of the country, sapping the moral and spiritual strength of an entire nation of unformed minds. Of

²⁵² DeBoer, 370.

²⁵³ Harrison Brown, "Radio Under Fire," *Fortnightly* 142 (December 1934), 669.

course these weak, unformed minds belonged to the female and the child, as usual, who remained uniquely vulnerable to the inherent and deterministic properties of radio technology:

Critics both in and outside the borders of the United States speak of our “spoon-fed civilization.” They point to the power of advertising to hypnotize women into ruining their complexions with cosmetics of violent colour, or into overloading their own and their families’ stomachs with an incredible quantity of breakfast foods. But the power of creating the habit of mind of which such things are symptoms is inevitably latent in the microphone.²⁵⁴

In this iteration of the discourse, radio’s hypnosis of the weak-minded didn’t just make children obey the radio announcer or mothers destroy their families’ digestions; it created an entire “spoon-fed civilization,” spreading and wreaking havoc from within until the entire nation suffered for it. During wartime this prospect became especially alarming, and the comparison of American radio to the radio systems of enemy nations was often brought to the fore in a number of cautionary comparisons. The United States was not using radio’s “inevitably latent” power in the right ways, the argument ran, and thus it was leaving itself wide open to the rise of evil countries who were willing to acknowledge and exploit the ability of radio to properly construct their citizen-subjects from the cradle onward.

Of course the United States had already fallen well behind other countries in the general quality of its radio use, in the opinion of those who compared the American commercial radio industry model unflatteringly with the government-

²⁵⁴ Brown, 669-670.

controlled models of countries such as Britain.²⁵⁵ But beyond the many arguments in favor of the BBC, there was also a specific focus on the radio use of countries hostile to the United States, highlighting the fear that American children were being weakened and contaminated by radio even as enemy nations were gaining ever more ground in using radio to build their own children into a force to be reckoned with. Radio was again being figured as a kind of death ray, only this time the image was more fraught, as if home-grown American scientists were absentmindedly aiming the powerful ray at our own helpless children, while the evil countries overseas had already learned how to use it to grow robot armies. For instance, a 1942 book titled *All Children Listen* was structured around the thesis that “the picture of broadcasts in the United States of America is a sorry one indeed,”²⁵⁶ while enemy countries were using radio to indoctrinate their children both correctly and successfully. And this, author Dorothy Gordon argued, would lose us the war—if not the physical war, then certainly the cultural, moral, and ideological one:

...while the fight on the battlefield is with men, there is an important fight on the homefront for children, those men of tomorrow, and tomorrow. And radio is the blitz-weapon of that fight.²⁵⁷

The first chapter, “The War and Children’s Programs,” sets out this warning in strong terms, and begins a comparison with the radio policies of Russia, Japan, and

²⁵⁵ As discussed, for example, in Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²⁵⁶ Dorothy Gordon, *All Children Listen*, by Dorothy Gordon (New York: George W. Stewart, 1942), 65.

²⁵⁷ Gordon, 14.

Germany that is later gone into in detail in separate chapters on each of those countries. Throughout a historical discussion of the efforts of various women's clubs to improve children's radio, the larger thesis of the imperiled nation-state still shines through, as when Gordon writes that women's clubs "are asking for programs which will give our children the same devotion to democracy as the dictators have instilled in their young people for the distorted ideology which govern their lives."²⁵⁸ And the broadcast network executives might as well have been in the pay of the Axis:

The director of programs at NBC states very definitely that there are to be no programs for children put on as a public service by the company... How Herr Hitler would laugh at us! How the Japanese would scoff and Stalin would smile ironically, to hear such a statement made by the program director of one of the largest networks in the country!²⁵⁹

In arguments such as these, it becomes apparent how much intensity the concept of nation adds to the incredible power seen inherent in radio, and the anxiety that power posed when juxtaposed with the idea of the child.

We can see familiar tropes throughout all of the above discussions of the intersections between radio and children, discourses of anxiety that had circulated similarly around the telephone and now were heightened and intensified by the fascination with the omnipotence and omnipresence of wirelessness. But as Gordon's quote about NBC suggests, in the case of radio, these anxieties were provided much more quickly with a central target upon which to focus. As the

²⁵⁸ Gordon, 69.

²⁵⁹ Gordon, 33.

American radio broadcasting industry first rose and provided ever more programming for the domestic radio listener, so did it set itself up as an obvious agent of danger. The technology-borne contamination of children need no longer be seen as free-floating or even as something that might strike randomly out of the blue (like an obscene phone call). Centralized commercial broadcasters became a player in the model of dangerous radio—the technology itself was never absolved, but now there was a clearer and relatively identifiable villain in the piece, an original user who was at fault for aiming the deadly technology at the vulnerable home. An anonymous “official of a large broadcasting company” was quoted accordingly in a 1935 *Parents Magazine*:

We do not inject diphtheria germs into our children’s bodies...and we do not pour foul air into their lungs. Why then, do we, through some of our radio programs, systematically poison their minds?²⁶⁰

This kind of reminder that bad radio programs were not forces of nature, but instead had owners and creators—plus the language of “injecting” and “pouring”—emphasized the role of the content providers and broadcasters as the source of the unstoppable and unidirectional flow of moral decay. Radio technology belonged to them, it was their conduit and their amplifier, and recipients were practically helpless before the onslaught. A 1937 article sketched out a common understanding of this model:

That adult indignation at radio blood and thunder reached a new high last week was reported by Federal Communications Commissioner George Henry Payne, who announced he was swamped

²⁶⁰ Benedict, 22.

with the largest amount of mail he had ever received on a controversial subject.

A week earlier Payne had said children's radio programs should be cleaned up and their nightmares ended: "The radio stations ought to be prevented from pumping into 30,000,000 homes children's programs of such character as they broadcast now."²⁶¹

The centralized and increasingly point-to-multipoint model of commercial broadcasting gave radio-borne contamination a primary source, a malicious agent pumping tainted radio waves irrevocably into vulnerable homes like poison gas (or diphtheria germs, or "foul air"). Pervasive, intrusive, and contaminating material now seemed to have a singular, central creator and purveyor, and therefore the societal fear and anger had a site at which it could more clearly be directed and coalesce into action—the sort of action that was not often seen in the case of point-to-point telephone technology until a central purveyor (e.g. dial-a-porn providers) could be identified.

The fear of the havoc an untrustworthy content provider could wreak when using such a powerful and intrusive technology found widespread cultural expression in the urban legend of the cursing kiddie-show host. This story, already widespread, well-known, and "told and retold"²⁶² as old (but factual) news by the early 1930s (and later continuing, with a few obvious changes, into the age of television), generally ran as follows: a famous and well-loved kiddie show host was wrapping up his latest live radio broadcast, his voice as soft and sweet as always.

²⁶¹ "Radio Gore Criticized," 26.

²⁶² Alton Cook, "WOR to Celebrate Birthday," *New York World-Telegram*, 2 March 1935, 23.

But on this particular day, there was a delay in cutting off the microphone, and thus millions of innocent listening children were shocked to hear the host, thinking he was off the air, growl in a decidedly non-nurturing voice, “There. That oughta hold the little bastards.” The rest of the story generally outlines the host’s public disgrace, downfall, and death in sad (and usually drunken) obscurity. The tale has persisted, described as “the most apocryphal story in radio”²⁶³; references to it still appear in modern sources, such as the 1993 episode of *The Simpsons* titled “Krusty Gets Kancelled,” in which a famous ventriloquist’s dummy hosting a local children’s program falls victim to an open microphone and his native disdain for his audience.

Some iterations of the legend set down in print leave the protagonist unspecified, describing him as, for example, an anonymous radio announcer in charge of reading children’s bedtime stories over the air.²⁶⁴ Many other versions attribute the gaffe to one of a number of local radio “uncles” with popular programs for small children, such as “Uncle Wip” from Philadelphia’s station WIP,²⁶⁵ “Uncle John” from Los Angeles’ KHJ,²⁶⁶ John “Big Brother” Keough from San Francisco’s station KPO,²⁶⁷ or “Happy Hank” of Lansing, Michigan.²⁶⁸ But the most common

²⁶³ Robert St. John, *Encyclopedia of Radio and Television Broadcasting: the Man Behind the Microphone* (Milwaukee: Cathedral Square Publishing Co., 1967), 180.

²⁶⁴ “His Error!”, *Variety*, 23 April 1930, 71.

²⁶⁵ J. Fred MacDonald, *Don’t Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960* (Nelson-Hall: Chicago, 1979), 43, 372-373.

²⁶⁶ Frank Buxton and Bill Owen, *The Big Broadcast, 1920-1950* (The Viking Press: New York, 1972), 247.

²⁶⁷ Buxton and Owen, 247.

²⁶⁸ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet: More “New” Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 185.

culprit in the story was also the most famous: “Uncle Don” Carney of New York’s station WOR, described in 1931 as children’s “saint, oracle, and pal,”²⁶⁹ who broadcast his radio show from 1928 to 1949. The story was attached to Carney’s name even during the early days of his program, and was labeled as old, bothersome, and “persistent but apocryphal” in press mentions of him as early as 1935.²⁷⁰ It was even discussed (though discreetly, and again underscored as apocryphal) in Carney’s obituary in the *New York Times*.²⁷¹

The two crucial and most emotionally-loaded factors in the story are clearly the technology involved, and the fact that it is an avuncular male host performing for little children; all versions of the story agree on those two items. As with the urban legend about the babysitter and the man upstairs discussed in the previous chapter, the twist to this story relies upon a potent combination of technology and the social relations constructed around gender and age. In the babysitter legend, the telephone is the conduit for and the focus of the murderer’s terrorization of the babysitter; with the kiddie-show host, it is the power of broadcast radio (and later broadcast television) that projects the host’s bad language and worse attitude instantaneously around the country. But even further, the roles of the technologically-linked perpetrator and victim in both stories follow and highlight traditional societal lines of power and dominance, confirming our worst fears of the ways in which domestic communication technologies can both assist intrusion and

²⁶⁹ “Don Carney Dies; Radio’s Uncle Don,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1954, 15.

²⁷⁰ Cook, 23; “Snork, Punk,” *Time*, 9 October 1939, 64.

²⁷¹ “Don Carney Dies; Radio’s Uncle Don,” 15.

negate the protectiveness of enclosing walls. In both cases the victims were sequestered in the domestic space of the home, where the discursive boundaries between public and private space dictated that they should have been free from molestation; and in both cases the profane male was able to follow a technological conduit in after them, whether along the wires or through the air.

Over time, this basic story has actually become the structuring metaphor of a cornerstone of American broadcast legislation, the concept of broadcast “indecentcy”. The concept began as a nebulous one, used nearly indeterminately under the same umbrella as the terms “obscenity” and “profanity”: the Radio Act of 1927 stated, in section 29, that “No person within the jurisdiction of the United States shall utter any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communication.” A case brought in 1931 demonstrated the ambiguous state of the term “indecent,” when the appellant, charged with broadcasting obscenity, indecentcy, and profanity over the radio, was convicted for profanity only.²⁷² The decision spent some time discussing whether the appellant’s broadcast language could be considered obscene; when obscenity was ruled out, indecentcy went with it without a specific and separate definition, leaving only profanity as grounds for upholding the conviction.²⁷³ The next year, the Washington, D.C. Court of Appeals upheld the refusal of the Federal Radio Commission to renew a station’s

²⁷² *Duncan v. United States*, 48 F.2d 128, 1931.

²⁷³ Based on “the defendant having referred to an individual as ‘damned,’ having used the expression ‘By God’ irreverently, and having announced his intention to call down the curse of God upon certain individuals,” *ibid.*

broadcasting license on the basis of the station's content (including the matter of broadcasts that were "sensational rather than instructive"²⁷⁴). Although the heretofore undifferentiated concept of obscenity/indecency was not really at issue in this particular case, the decision still invoked its specter, as well as including the figure of the helpless child as its potential victim:

If it be considered that one in possession of a permit to broadcast in interstate commerce may, without let or hindrance from any source, use these facilities, reaching out, as they do, from one corner of the country to the other, to...offend youth and innocence by the free use of words suggestive of sexual immorality, and be answerable for slander only at the instance of the one offended, then this great science, instead of a boon, will become a scourge....²⁷⁵

Here are the same figures common in the dystopian discourse surrounding radio since its inception: the powerful, omnipresent wireless waves "reaching out" to every nook and cranny, threatening to sexually contaminate "youth and innocence"; the discourse was strong and pervasive, despite its technical irrelevance to the matter actually under judgment.

The 1932 Supreme Court case *United States v. Limehouse*²⁷⁶, while dealing with the U.S. mail rather than with broadcasting, provided an important precedent regarding the potential for "indecency" to take its place not just as a separate

²⁷⁴ *Trinity Methodist Church, South, v. Federal Radio Commission*, 61 App. D.C. 311, 1932.

²⁷⁵ *ibid*

²⁷⁶ *United States v. Limehouse*, 285 U.S. 424, 1932.

concept from obscenity, but as a concept “uniquely applicable to broadcasting.”²⁷⁷ Indecency itself was not yet set apart and defined per se, but this case laid some of the groundwork for the important decisions on broadcast legislation to be made in the 1970s, which finally and officially codified into legal discourse the longstanding fears regarding children, sexuality, and intrusive radio. Between 1932 and the 1970s, the language of legal and regulatory decisions continued to circle ever closer to the eventual marriage of the concept of indecency and the concept of the child; the FCC’s definition of “whom we are protecting and from what”²⁷⁸ was narrowing²⁷⁹ from a vague sense of “the public” toward a concept of “children” that, while still poorly-defined from a legal standpoint,²⁸⁰ was layered with social connotations that ensured its inclusion.

A telling test case regarding the definition of indecency was the FCC’s 1970 decision regarding station WUHY-FM. In the course of denying the station’s license, the FCC at last worked toward an official and separate definition of indecency (relying on *United States v. Limehouse* for the precedent to do so); while the figure of the child was not yet made the *raison d’être* of the concept of broadcast

²⁷⁷ Edythe Wise, “A Historical Perspective on the Protection of Children from Broadcast Indecency,” *Villanova Sports and Entertainment Law Journal* 3.1 (1996): 21.

²⁷⁸ Wise, 15.

²⁷⁹ For a discussion of this narrowing process through precedents in the courts and FCC decisions, see for instance Wise 17-19; see also Catherine J. Ross, “Anything Goes: Examining the State’s Interest in Protecting Children from Controversial Speech,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 53.2 (March 2000): 455.

²⁸⁰ As argued, for instance, in John Crigler and William J. Byrnes, “Decency Redux: The Curious History of the New FCC Broadcast Indecency Policy,” *The Catholic University Law Review* 38 (Winter 1989): 337 & 351.

indecenty, the FCC's language was clearly invoking the same underlying anxiety discourse. For instance, the uniquely pervasive threat of radio technology appeared in the Commission's statement that "it is crucial to bear in mind the difference between radio and other media... it comes directly into the home and frequently without any advance warning of its content,"²⁸¹ and the specter of the unpredictable wireless predator contaminating the vulnerable child loomed large: the decision pointed out the "very large numbers of children" in the radio audience, warning that "[n]o one could ever know, in home or car listening, when he or his children would encounter what he would regard as the most vile expressions..."²⁸²

A later legal review pointed out that:

The Commission noted the passive nature of broadcasting, in which one is vulnerable to encountering offensive broadcast[s] containing objectionable language while dialing from station to station.²⁸³

These dynamics fit directly into the caller hegemony model, in which a member of the radio audience is not an active user but a helpless "listener," sitting in the home and risking the penetration of the contaminating wireless wave.

But the true climax of the issue occurred in the course of the *Pacifica* case (begun with a complaint to the FCC in 1973 and eventually decided by the Supreme Court in 1978), when the definition of indecenty was inextricably linked to the figure of the child, not just conceptually, but in official legal terms. The case was sparked by a single complaint lodged by a man who had heard George Carlin's

²⁸¹ *In re WUHY-FM*, 24 FCC 2d 408, 1970.

²⁸² *ibid*

²⁸³ Wise

“Filthy Words” monologue on the radio while driving in a car with his son; the lone nature of the complaint, however, pales before the loaded cultural significance of the picture of the father unable to protect his innocent little boy from (the eponymous) filth unexpectedly seeping into the car over the airwaves. This set the stage for the case’s reliance on the figure of the child-victim, up to and including the FCC’s ultimate definition of indecency as:

...intimately connected with the exposure of children to language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities and organs, at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience.²⁸⁴

This definition invokes children at both the beginning and the end, carefully tying the concepts together in multiple ways so as not to be easily untangled. In this way, indecency exists whether children are exposed to said language, or whether there is simply a “risk” that they might be somewhere the amorphous audience. This harks back to the legal cases discussed in the previous chapter regarding the importance of proximity, and electric communication technology’s troublesome disarticulation of the concept of presence from the arena of the physical. As with the early legal decisions regarding profanity in the front yard or over the wires, in the *Pacifica* decision, broadcast indecency was ultimately dangerous whether or not children were actually exposed to the problematic language (and, in fact, whether or not the actual legal meanings of “child” and “reasonable risk” were ever clearly defined in a manner befitting their role as an important source of legal precedent for future

²⁸⁴ 56 F. C. C. 2d, cited in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*. 438 U.S. 726, 1978.

cases²⁸⁵); the language's mere presence in the technological system meant that its discursive penetrative power was increased a thousandfold, empowered to find and contaminate the little innocents wherever they may be.

Radio, as another electric communication device twining its tendrils through the heart of the home, as well as the eventual basis for an ever-expanding broadcast industry, picked up the discourses of anxiety circulating around the telephone and expanded them—both in terms of the fears the technology engendered and the breadth with which this anxiety was woven into arenas ranging from the most personal level of the body to the most public levels of law and regulation. Broadcast radio in particular introduced and emphasized discursive aspects that continued to reverberate around the next technology under discussion, that of television: aspects such as, for example, the technology's heightened ability to attract (and therefore seduce and destroy) children because of its relationship with burgeoning entertainment industries as well as its own inherent uncanny powers. Television inherited many of the same ideas, utterances, and practices previously circulating around the telephone and radio, but the expansion of its technical possibilities and the growth of its cultural power added extra levels of complexity and anxiety to the mix.

²⁸⁵ Crigler and Byrnes 337, 343, 351

Chapter 3

“TO ENSNARE THE GROWING URCHIN”: Predatory Television

Just as the rich history of technological anxieties circulating around the telephone served as a nucleus for dystopian narratives of intrusive radio, so did the fears surrounding radio provide structure for the emergence of dystopian narratives of television, in an accretive model in which the new articulations stood on the shoulders of largely-unacknowledged giants. The radio-to-television structure was a particularly easy fit, especially since the newborn commercial TV industry was so similar to the existing model of commercial radio; the new fears could easily and unremarkably be mapped right on top, disguising and denying their origins. And much as the older telephone-based anxieties were heightened by the addition of a technologically-determinist, radio-specific angle, now the radio discourses were intensified and made televisual with the addition of an aspect specifically linked to the new technology: sight.

This chapter looks at the iteration of the predatory-technology discourse as it revolves around broadcast television. Here, the discourse’s technological determinism layers the television’s use of visuals onto the pre-existing anxieties already circulating around the telephone and radio systems: to the wire as a breach in the wall, and the electronic broadcast signal as an omnipresent/omnipotent intruder, now are introduced the many connotations and additional powers of sight and the eye. The television becomes a sort of super-powered window, with all of the

window's potential for dangers and disturbances: it is an uncontrollable gap in the literal and figurative wall around the domestic space, a hole through which a predator can enter—not just to prey on the children there in the home, but also potentially to steal the children back out through the window, kidnapping them into the electronic miasma where parents cannot follow.

In this model, the television system's use of visuals, and its conceptualization as a window, creates and sustains a dangerous relationship to the human eye—the eye, like the window, serving as a vulnerable breach in a boundary. Light first penetrates the window and then pierces the eye; this light, amplified in both power and danger by the television's inherent contamination, carries the dangerous signal through the eyes into the brain, and from there throughout the rest of the body. In its relationship to children, the television is understood as a newly-technologized hypnotist or Pied Piper, using its inherent penetration and despoliation of the eyes, brain, and body for nefarious and sexualized purposes; and, as in the original Pied Piper story, once abducted, the children are forever lost.

“Strong enough to punch a hole into this world”

A crucial starting point for the anxieties circulating around television is the discourse of the television as a window. Suturing the form of the new technology (images appearing on/through a square piece of glass) to the previous concepts of the wire as a permanently-open breach in the wall and the broadcast signal as an omnipresent and omnipotent force flowing in and through the conduit, the

television-as-window trope takes discourses that were powerful enough on their own and heightens them with the addition of the layers of meaning already extant in the window, with its inextricable connection to the powerful connotations of light and its link to the human body through sight.

Of course the optimistic cast of the TV-window loomed large in utopian discourse, building on the previous ideas of radio as a gift to shut-ins and a unifier of far-flung listeners around the world. Now, the miraculous technology brought sound *and* sight to everyone everywhere, opening a magical window to heretofore unseen wonders. In 1946, Thomas H. Hutchinson, who had worked in television production from 1936 to 1946 for organizations like NBC, Ruthrauff & Ryan, and RKO, as well as teaching what was “perhaps the first University class in Television Programming”²⁸⁶ beginning in 1941, wrote a book called *Here is Television: Your Window to the World*, introducing television (and its technical and artistic procedures) to the population of young people the fledgling industry would need to fill its ranks in the days to come. Hutchinson wrote that “[t]elevision actually is a window looking out on the world...Television means the world in your home and in the homes of all the people of the world.”²⁸⁷ And in this approach, a window writ this large was bound to unite everyone who looked through it, altering not only the entertainment industry, but also “do[ing] more to develop friendly neighbors, and to bring understanding and

²⁸⁶ Paul A. McGhee, preface to *Here is Television: Your Window to the World*, by Thomas H. Hutchinson (New York: Hastings House, 1946), v.

²⁸⁷ Hutchinson, x-xi.

peace on earth, than any other single material force in the world today.”²⁸⁸ This kind of window was an opportunity for knowledge and the entry of affectionate visitors; its surveillant potential was benevolent and kind, as in the “Magic Mirror” of the children’s program *Romper Room*, through which Miss Nancy seemingly looked out into millions of homes and spoke gently to her viewers by name.

But as always, there was also a perfectly reversed pessimistic cast to this discourse, in which the TV-window is unstable, unfiltered, and eternally open, serving as a perfect entry point for the penetration of the home by dangerous forces of contamination and destruction. At a 1954 Methodist National Conference on Family Life, one delegate “described television as a ‘window to the world’ and said that ‘we open windows not to dust and dirt, but to sunlight.’”²⁸⁹ In his essay “Windows: of vulnerability,” Thomas Keenan writes:

To the extent that this new window serves as a vehicle for light, as something that “brings” the entire outside into one of its parts, by processing it as an image or an electronic light signal, the event of the television confirms the residual tension in the window....[W]hat comes *through* a window? For if the window is the opening in the wall constitutive of the distinction between public and private, it is also the breaching of that distinction itself.”²⁹⁰

Once the window is given technological structure and agency in the television, its position as an opening in the protective boundary becomes more troubled and more powerful; the TV-window has the supernatural capacity to bring the whole outside

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁸⁹ “Methodists Seek Elevation of TV,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1954, 31.

²⁹⁰ Thomas Keenan, “Windows: of vulnerability,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 130, 132.

world right into the home, and this destabilizes the very notion of home as the private, the personal, the inside, and the safe. Not to mention that within the category of “the whole outside world” is included not only the kindly Miss Nancy, but also people, events, and objects that would not otherwise be considered welcome or appropriate. The television window lets everything in, cannot be adequately sealed or controlled, and has the entire uncanny force of electric technology behind it.

An early iteration of this dark side of the TV-window fusion appeared in the 1935 film *Murder By Television*, in which the new technology serves literally as a window through which one can see the rest of the world—but the person controlling the television eye is also seen in return, with deadly consequences. The technological approach of the film resembles other 1930s productions like *International House* and *The Big Broadcast of 1936* in its use of the discourse of the omnipresent electric surveillance device. *Murder By Television*, though, made more of an effort to move away from the nomenclature of “radioscope” and so forth, implying a more reality-based technological background despite the plot’s fantastic elements. The film begins by displaying piles of articles about television, both anticipating the imminent arrival of this miraculous new device and giving instructions for the vanguard of technological adopters: “Television for the Experimenter,” “A Television Projector,” “Latest Advance Toward Television,” “Television En Route,” “Successful Television Programs Broadcast by RADIO NEWS Station WRNY,” etc., many of the articles including diagrams and frequencies. This

news-based foundation was reinforced by the film's own publicity: *Film Daily*, for instance, reported that over \$75,000 worth of real television equipment was used on the set, and "the new method of television will be seen for the first time," supervised by "Milton Stern, noted television expert."²⁹¹

The narrative then fleshes out this realistic framework by front-loading the plot with a tale of industrial espionage: an inventor, Dr. Houghland, plans to reveal "miraculous" new developments in television technology during a demonstration broadcast, while various sinister groups of television executives (heading companies like "C.M.P. Television Corporation" and "Continental Tel-e-ving Corporation") discuss the travails of trying to get and stay ahead in the television business, hatching plans to get ahold of the new technology by any means necessary. We meet several characters who may or may not be in the employ of CMP, CTC, or even unnamed "foreign governments," all lurking around Houghland's house on the night of the demonstration broadcast, all with motives to steal Houghland's technical plans. Houghland reveals to his friend, eminent brain specialist Dr. Scofield, that he has been besieged with offers to buy the rights to his television device, or to purchase it altogether.

Into this milieu—a scramble for invention, technology, patents, and rights familiar to anyone who had followed the original development of radio and then television—begin to filter more patently fictional elements, drawing in more and more threads of technological omnipresence, omnipotence, and danger. Before the

²⁹¹ "A 'Little' from Hollywood 'Lots'," *Film Daily*, 4 March 1935, 9.

demonstration, Houghland is talking with the police chief, trying to persuade him that television will be a boon to his profession. "Suppose you had instant pictures at your command, showing every move a criminal you are tracing makes," he argues, painting the picture of television as a wireless, free-floating eye, untethered by broadcast point or equipment. And during the demonstration, Houghland shows his audience just what he means. He first broadcasts a standard musical recital from his laboratory (with his daughter playing piano, accompanying a singer), announcing, "We are attempting to reach the entire United States direct, without the use of relays." During the song, the film shows occasional shots from the point of view of the performers, who are not facing a recognizable camera but an agglomeration of parts put together in a huge square, like a large window composed primarily of light bulbs and lenses.

After the recital, Houghland reveals his miraculous new televisual invention (the film constantly cutting back and forth from the audience's view of Houghland on television from the front, to a spot behind Houghland facing the giant, operator-less televisual apparatus):

The few of us who are fortunate enough to have television sets have used them merely as a novelty. When we had nothing else to do, we tuned in on whatever program we were able to pick up. Due to the almost insurmountable obstacles encountered in the frequencies required in high-fidelity pictures, our transmissions were limited. But these obstacles, I am happy to say, have been overcome. This in itself was a scientific triumph. But still I was not satisfied. I felt that television should be something more than just another form of amusement. Therefore, I continued my experiments.

Now the camera cuts to very close shots of the technology itself, mysterious moving parts spinning, superimposed on a kaleidoscopic picture of the apparatus revolving in the background. Houghland begins to display a series of real-time images from around the world, brought in by his omnipresent, ultimately-surveillant technological window: shots of Paris, China, and an attempt to show London (thwarted by the ever-present London fog). But before he can bring in images of Africa, Houghland groans, clutches his throat, and collapses. When they find his dead body in the laboratory, it's agreed that he has been murdered.

Various suspects and red herrings take up the rest of the film, until a plainclothes detective among the guests reveals that he has uncovered the culprit. It turns out that the omnipresent power of the television captured the villain's activities, as well as the activities going on in France, China, Africa, and apparently everywhere else on earth. Now the television, unfettered by time or space, shows what happened down to the smallest detail: on the TV screen we see Dr. Scofield telephoning his office during Houghland's demonstration, and in a trope we have seen before, the telephone becomes a kind of secret door out through which the murderer can escape unobserved to set his plans in motion. The phone in Scofield's office rings; the television picture shows the inside of the phone, bells ringing, which powers another device with strikers triggered to tick back and forth, triggering a wheel, activating another machine, gears and electricity whirring. The picture dissolves to Houghland groaning and gripping his collar, then cuts to a point of view

shot from Houghland's position, and we see that the large TV apparatus is glowing a blinding white. The detective explains:

The light that you just saw envelop Professor Houghland caused his death....Dr. Scofield's equipment, which you have just seen, radiated waves direct to Professor Houghland's laboratory. When these waves came in contact with those the Professor's equipment was radiating, they created the interstellar frequency, which is the Death Ray.

The omnipresence of the television technology captured every angle of evidence on the crime, down to the inner workings of Scofield's device, but it was also itself at fault. It opened a sort of electromagnetic window, so that while Houghland was broadcasting out, his enemy could send contaminating waves in, infecting the TV equipment and changing it into a deadly weapon. Houghland had originally espoused the bluest of blue-sky optimism about his new televisual invention, announcing that "television is the greatest step forward we have yet made in the preservation of humanity. It will make of this earth a paradise we've always envisioned, but have never seen." But his murder proves instead that television is an unstable, permeable device, its all-seeing-eye vulnerable to undetectable contamination from any source, and this contamination can easily penetrate the inner sanctum and destroy human life. So while the murderer is indeed exposed, the film concludes with no happy ending for the technology itself. Its position remains ominous and uncertain. It may be a marvelous window to the world, but the window is not a one-way opening.

The trope of television technology as a window into the home is one of the persistent images of George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; the

“telescreen” serves as a panoptic and disciplinary device powering a bleak future, highlighting a dystopian model of television even during the earliest days of the technology’s physical and cultural diffusion throughout Britain. A telescreen is embedded in a wall of each flat, always on (it can be turned down slightly, but never turned off or covered up), always broadcasting things the government wants the people to see—and more than that, it is always seeing the people, each person under immediate and personal surveillance, the power and breadth of broadcasting combined with the individual focus and attention of narrowcasting. When writing his criminal thoughts down in a contraband journal, the protagonist, Winston Smith, hides in a niche along the telescreen’s wall, in the only unobserved spot in his flat. He is right to be cautious; televisual surveillance in this society is both personal and accurate. In the mornings, he rises to perform compulsory calisthenics along with a vigorous female instructor on the telescreen. As he exercises, his mind drifts, until:

“Smith!” screamed the shrewish voice from the telescreen. “6079 Smith W! Yes, *you*! Bend lower, please! You can do better than that. You’re not trying. Lower, please! *That’s* better, comrade. Now stand at ease, the whole squad, and watch me.”²⁹²

Smith is horrified at this individual notice, but strives not to reveal it, thinking:

“Never show dismay! Never show resentment! A single flicker of the eyes could give you away.” He is never far from a telescreen, whether at home, at work, or at mandatory community gatherings, and every moment in which he is required to watch Big Brother’s programming, he is also required to be seen by Big Brother’s

²⁹² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 37.

unseen minions. Orwell's telescreen is television technology at its most perfectly dangerous: a window that doesn't let you out, but lets your enemies see in; a one-way conduit through which oppression flows into every nook of your most personal space; a microscope trained on you at all times, scanning for any evidence—not just of wrongdoing, but of wrongthinking.

One step further along this discursive axis of fear is the television as a window which, while not letting you out of your own accord, allows outside forces not only to enter but to take someone out with them from under your very nose. This kind of window has a strong resonance in the narrative of the child abducted from its own bedroom, echoed and heightened by such famous real-life instances as the 1932 kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. The window becomes most dangerous here: it is not a neutral opening, but rather a breach only truly accessible to and best exploited by the monster from the outside. The monster easily enters and then leaves with the child, while the parents are not empowered by this exit in the same way, and can't use it to effectively follow and rescue. This is the televisual window of the film *Poltergeist*, in which a little girl is seduced and then abducted through the televisual breach, and remains outside her parents' grasp until they learn how to physically enter the unnatural conduit and grab her.

Poltergeist starts with an extreme closeup of the most sinister item in the plot: the television, the open door through which the evil intruders enter and through which a child is abducted. The shot lingers through a montage of patriotic scenes accompanied by the national anthem, in the old traditional sign-off routine,

and then the television goes to static. Carol Anne Freeling, a sweet little blonde girl, wakes up and comes downstairs in her pajamas, bathed in the television's flickering light all the way down. She approaches the TV and kneels in front of it, mesmerized. "Hello...!" she calls. "What do you look like? Talk louder, I can't hear you!" Even after the rest of her family have all woken up and come downstairs, she remains riveted by her conversation with the television, though the family (and we) can only hear her replies: "Five...Yes...Yes...I don't know...," she says, smiling shyly, obediently answering the unheard voice of the predator lurking in the box.

The theme of ruptured boundaries, in which the home is no longer a sanctum thanks to the penetrative television, is emphasized in the very next scene. A group of men have gathered in the Freeling house to watch a football game. They're all shouting at the television as their team throws a long pass, but before they see whether the receiver catches the ball, the channel changes to Mr. Rogers and his children's show. Steven (the father of the family) hurries to the TV, grabs the remote, and changes the channel back to the game. But it changes back to Mr. Rogers, and Steven's guests roar in disapproval. His neighbor is on the same remote signal, so Steven leans out into the yard to ask him to leave it on the game, but he won't; the two neighbors get into a remote-fight, each pointing his remote control like a weapon at the other one's house to forcibly change (and re-change) the other one's channel. Clearly, in the world of *Poltergeist*, a man's home is definitely not his castle—at least not where the television is concerned.

In the film's signature scene, the television's role as a perennially-open entryway for danger is made literal. The parents and both younger children are asleep in the parents' bed; the television plays its signoff and goes to static, as the shot slowly changes to a closeup. Carol Anne wakes, and we see a reaction shot of the television, as if it is another character in the scene, watching her. As she did in the film's opening moments, Carol Anne gets out of bed and obediently approaches the TV, kneeling reverently before it. The rest of the family still sleeps, flickering light reflecting across their faces. We hear faint whispering in the static. Then Carol Anne reaches out toward the television, and a ghostly green tendril of ectoplasm darts out of the screen, shaped like a bony arm and hand. She recoils. The ectoplasm seeps out of the TV toward the bed, flowing from the screen, brushing over Carol Anne, disappearing into the wall. The bed and the room suddenly shake, as if in an earthquake. The ghostly intruders have finally come all the way inside, through the unattended television-door, and Carol Anne announces this fact over her shoulder to her startled family: "They're here."

The next morning, Carol Anne's mother Diane asks her, "Who did you mean? Who's here?" Carol Anne answers: "The TV people." Then Carol Anne runs into the kitchen, to the kitchen television, changes the channel to static, and leans close, watching it raptly. Diane admonishes her, "Oh, honey, you're gonna ruin your eyes, this is not good for you"—but instead of turning the TV off, Diane changes the channel to a battle scene in a World War II movie (1951's *Go For Broke!*). Carol Anne stays where she is, watching, transfixed. It isn't the content of any given television

program that attracts her, but the mere fact of watching television, the technology itself, basking in its light. The Pied Piper in the television has found his perfect victim, one who is perfectly and contentedly attuned to his siren song.

That night, Carol Anne disappears, sucked forcibly into a glowing, howling maelstrom inside her closet. The family has split up to search for her, and Robbie, her brother, walks tentatively into the master bedroom. The room is dark except for the glowing light of the television, showing static. He hears a faint cry, Carol Anne's voice: "Mommy!...Mommy!", and turns his head toward the TV, his eyes widening. He starts to whimper, and then to scream for his mother. Diane runs into the room to find Robbie kneeling down by the television, hysterical. Diane hears Carol Anne's voice and at first reacts with relief, looking around the room to see where her voice is coming from. But Robbie shrieks, "Mommy, come over here!" She tries to hush him, their profiles silhouetted against the TV's flickering static. Then Carol Anne's voice comes again, with a wavery, staticky modulation to it, and Diane slowly turns to look at the TV screen in horrified realization. She reaches out and lays one trembling hand on the screen, but she can't touch her or follow her; in this trope, the television is a conduit that only the evil forces can use, entering and exiting the most intimate areas of the home at will, leaving the rest of the family to kneel helplessly in front of the set and listen for Carol Anne's voice.

For the rest of the film, the other characters can only hear Carol Anne through the television; the TV, having swallowed her up, stands in for her. At one point, Carol Anne says she senses another presence near her, and begins to panic:

“Mommy, help me, please!” Diane is reduced to crouching by the TV and touching it, trying to comfort Carol Anne by comforting the only remaining physical link between them. Later, Robbie says goodnight to everyone else in the room, in turn: first his mother, then a visiting parapsychologist, then his father—and then he turns toward the television and says, “Goodnight, Carol Anne”; the camera pans slowly over to a closeup of the screen. The TV in this story is practically a character in itself, the eater of unwary children.

And the televisual threat is never fully understood or defused: after Carol Anne has been physically yanked out of the ethereal space in which “the TV people” had trapped her, the film ends on a warning punchline: the family, their home destroyed, shuffle dazedly into a motel room. The camera stays outside the room, watching Steven close the door behind himself. After a beat, the door opens, and he emerges, rolling the motel’s console TV onto the balcony. He leaves the TV on the balcony and goes back in, slamming the door definitively, and the camera slowly pulls away, watching the banished television lurk outside the family’s temporary haven. “I don’t know what hovers over this house,” said the medium who eventually showed them how to rescue Carol Anne, “but it was strong enough to punch a hole into this world, and take your daughter away from you.” And the technology that enabled the first punching of that hole, the breaching of boundaries, and the theft of the child, was the ubiquitous television-window.

“The eye is a far more sensitive instrument”

In a nine-panel Sunday edition of the comic strip “Bloom County,” Opus the Penguin sits, as he often does, on a stool in front of the television. Gazing raptly at the screen, he scoots his stool a little closer. Suddenly the top of the television bursts open, and out from the box springs a bloated monster with a long, hoselike proboscis. It chases a horrified Opus down the hall, corners him, and pins him to the floor with its proboscis planted on his eyes (the sound effect: “SSSSTHWUP!!!”). Opus sits up, his eyesockets empty caverns, his eyeballs discarded on the floor. As he gropes away in the final panel, a caption solemnly reminds us: “Kids: Too much TV can be super bad for your eyes.”²⁹³

As the window is a rupture in the protective boundary of the home, so is the eye a rupture in the protective boundary of the body. And like the window, the eye carries enormous metaphorical weight as a breach, a soft, vulnerable opening in the membrane of the human organism, an unpoliced entryway through which anything might come without permission and wreak havoc. In the biblical gospel of Matthew, Jesus admonishes his followers that “[t]he lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness.”²⁹⁴ The eye itself, the physiological and metaphorical window, is the conduit through which something flows to fill the body and the soul,

²⁹³ Reprinted in Berke Breathed, *Classics of Western Literature: Bloom County 1986-1989* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 190.

²⁹⁴ Matthew 6:22-23 NAB (New American Bible).

which leaves the very deepest reaches of the organism at risk. As Thomas Keenan writes:

What if the opening of the aperture that allows sight were to become uncontrollable, if the regulated light that makes seeing possible were to *overexpose* the interior—which it opens—to the exterior against which it defines itself? The opening risks the more violent opening of the distinction between inside and outside, private and public, self and other, on which the house of the human is built.”²⁹⁵

Light (with all of its connotative layers and its potential to dazzle, damage, and overexpose) penetrates the window of the home and then the window of the body (or, as the old saying would have it, the window of the soul). Televisual light in particular carries an extra dystopian charge, because it has a technological amplification of both its power and its danger; when it enters the home and the body, it brings with it the potential for terrible things. Seeing therefore is a significant addition to the previous anxieties about electric communication technologies. The eyes—symbolically powerful, uniquely vulnerable, rich with connotations—were from the beginning a crucial point in the discourse, providing a nexus on which to build and broaden many of the earlier structures of the telephone- and radio-based fears.

There was great concern from the beginning about television as a physical threat to the eyes, most especially the young and developing eye (thus dovetailing neatly with the concept of the vulnerable child-victim). Even before the medical establishment had conducted any systematic studies on the topic or developed a

²⁹⁵ Keenan, 124.

clear party line, it was being bombarded by questions, anxieties, and complaints about television's effects,²⁹⁶ both from people who already owned TVs²⁹⁷ and people who did not.²⁹⁸ Individual medical practitioners themselves questioned central sites of specialized, expert medical discourse, seeking a final word on television and the eyes that they could then disseminate to their patients.²⁹⁹ Apocryphal reports of strange effects appeared, as in the tale "of a dog in Connecticut that went crosseyed from looking at television."³⁰⁰ *Science Illustrated* mused in 1949:

In all its cacophonous 29 years of broadcasting, radio never marred a single eardrum....But the eye is a far more sensitive instrument. Will television, therefore, prove dangerous to vision? Many people seem to think so. Wherever TV stations have gone on the air, there have been scattered complaints of fatigue and more serious trouble.³⁰¹

It seemed clear that television must be dangerous to the eyes, even if no one could entirely agree on just how dangerous, or where exactly that danger lay.

The first studies in medical literature regarding television's effects on the eyes were in fact focused on articulating and distilling these inchoate dangers

²⁹⁶ For instance, see Henry W. Hofstetter, "A Survey of Visual Complaints Related to Television," *American Journal of Optometry and Archives of American Academy of Optometry* 26 (November 1949): 483; "How to Look at Television," *Science Illustrated* 4 (July 1949): 66; "Simple Rules to Avoid Eye-Fatigue From TV," *New York Times*, 24 April 1949, XX6.

²⁹⁷ Hofstetter, 485-486.

²⁹⁸ Hofstetter, 486; J. T. Emery, "TV and the Eyes," *New York Times*, 26 June 1949, SM4.

²⁹⁹ "Television and Eye Strain," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 139 (23 April 1948): 1237.

³⁰⁰ "How to Look at Television," 65.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

through surveys of eye patients' self-reported fears about television.³⁰² In the United States, the first survey appeared in 1949 (its authors already remarking on the pre-existing prevalence of discussion of television's effects on the eyes in the popular and technical press); in Britain, the first major survey appeared in 1952, pointing to the U.S.'s head start (both in television dissemination and in the medical literature). Both studies found that patients' reported fears, while prevalent, were not scientifically or organically specific, and showed no initial statistical pattern for doctors to seize as a lead toward clinical investigation of the question. All kinds of people reported that television caused their eye problems—television owners and non-owners, people of all ages, those who watched often and those who had only seen television a few times—and the symptoms they reported ranged widely and did not cluster in ways the examiners found significant. The primary conclusion of the U.S. study was simply that patients “readily identify their visual discomforts with television viewing,”³⁰³ which seemed to perplex the authors slightly, since television viewing itself, potentially occurring under such variable conditions, was not considered a predictable experience.³⁰⁴

³⁰² Hofstetter; J.L.H. Moss, “Visual Aspects of Television,” *British Journal of Physiological Optics* 9 (June 1952).

³⁰³ Hofstetter, 489.

³⁰⁴ Hofstetter, 488.

A followup experiment to the first U.S. survey was conducted in 1951,³⁰⁵ searching for the specific technological danger that “everyone knew was there.”³⁰⁶ In the experiment, volunteer observers watched television under controlled conditions (though the experiment room was arranged to be as “home-like”³⁰⁷ as possible—i.e., as much like a stereotypical living room, with easy chairs and a central sofa) for twelve hours, with regular observations and measurements of their eyes both organically and through vision tests, as well as through self-report of any eye discomfort. But here again, no matter how many measurements they took, the experimenters could not find any statistically significant evidence, nor any apparent pattern, and nevertheless television’s reputation as bad for the eyes remained solid. Statistical significance or no, medical researchers were primed to follow up on the matter, encouraged by the questions and concerns commonly sent their way not only by worried patients, but by other medical professionals.

A strong discourse of technological anxiety thus lay the groundwork for medicine’s first attempts to grapple with the question, weaving a sense of potential danger into even the most placid conclusions. Television was never entirely cleared of the charge of eye damage; reassurance was always followed by a “but,” and there were always exceptions to the rule. For instance, a 1950 survey of optometrists and

³⁰⁵ Harold Stein and Henry W. Hofstetter, “Effects of Prolonged Television Viewing on Certain Optometric Findings,” *American Journal of Optometry and Archives of American Academy of Optometry* 28 (October 1951).

³⁰⁶ Jack Gould, “City Schools Keep Eye On Television,” *New York Times*, 7 March 1950, 29.

³⁰⁷ Stein and Hofstetter, 521.

ophthalmologists conducted by the Institute for Research in Vision demonstrated that eyecare professionals were actively intervening perhaps despite themselves. In the end, the doctors surveyed agreed that “[t]elevision’s effect on the eyes is negligible in most cases.”³⁰⁸ However, many of these same respondents, despite their stated disbelief that television had any measurable or specific negative organic effect on the eye, had at the same time been prescribing various kinds of special glasses for television viewing, such as tinted lenses, powered lenses, lenses intended especially for those viewing while reclining, and other specialized eyewear. The aforementioned 1952 British survey and analysis follows the same pattern: medical evidence or no, doctors and patients alike report that they feel television is having negative effects, and many doctors are already prescribing special glasses, especially ones with tinted lenses.³⁰⁹

So even while the eyecare profession had no proof of television having a negative effect, and even though most patients who came to the doctor in fear of televisual eye damage had been labeled as suffering from “a sort of hysteria about the effect of television on the eyes,”³¹⁰ nevertheless many optometrists and ophthalmologists were in the habit of making professional medical interventions between television and viewer. Studies on the topic, try as they might, could not corroborate the widespread anxiety about television’s entrée to the vulnerable eye.

³⁰⁸ “Survey Among Refractionists Shows Slight Effect of Television on Vision—Types of Difficulties—Aids to Viewing Prescribed,” *Optical Journal and Review of Optometry* 87 (15 October 1950):52.

³⁰⁹ Moss, 65.

³¹⁰ “Survey Among Refractionists,” 52

How then were optometrists and ophthalmologists going to remain involved with this exciting, mysterious, and burgeoning new field? They surely did not intend to let it pass them by:

The application of ophthalmic principles has been of considerable value in many aspects of present-day life. In industrial and domestic applications, and in the sporting and educational worlds, special visual problems have been eased by a study of the particular occupational demands involved.

The response to the television questionnaire, the first of its kind to be undertaken in this country, leaves one in no doubt that the services of the ophthalmic world will also be required in this comparatively new field.³¹¹

But required how? In this case, the answer was: by positioning themselves as professional advisors, helping to protect viewers with scientifically-informed instructions on how to watch television safely. The rest of the study concentrates on that task, bringing optical science to bear on the “correct” screen size, distances, angles, positions, lighting and color schemes, television settings, etc. Thus is the theoretical danger of television reinforced: if television viewing requires the careful observation and intervention of professional eye doctors, it implies that the television is a potential eye hazard waiting to happen, dovetailing with pre-existing worries and fears.

Expert advice, disciplining the television viewer’s body in relation to the television, had been cropping up even before medical studies began to chime in. In 1949, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a letter from an M.D., asking for help from a central site of professional knowledge, appealing to the

³¹¹ Moss, 74.

vast expertise and experience that venerable journal represented. The letter sets the mold for the kinds of concerns already circulating:

Does television produce eye strain? Is a small screen superior to a large screen? Is a distance of 10 feet better than a shorter one? Should the screen be viewed perpendicularly and not at any angle? Is there a time limit for television viewing? Are daylight screens better than the ordinary ones?³¹²

The editor responded with a numbered list, even in such a brief reply managing to lay out specific sizes, distances, angles, postures, and lighting. This kind of response was echoed in many different sites of discourse, professional/specialist and popular alike, with detailed disciplining structures brought to bear upon television viewers in defense of the vulnerable eye.

Also in the same year came a sizeable article in *Science Illustrated*, “How to Look at Television,” performing the same discursive task: codifying the advice and instructions of experts, reassuring the fear of television while simultaneously reinforcing it with the amount of attention, detail, restrictions, and rigor directed at the activity of watching. This balancing act is distilled in the article’s third sentence: “But as far as doctor’s [sic] can tell to date, watching television under good conditions is no more harmful than reading; they have some valuable tips, though, on just how you should look at the screen.”³¹³ In other words, it is probably harmless—*if* you do it correctly. The rest of the article is taken up with these expert “tips,” detailing instructions from doctors and psychologists on everything from the

³¹² “Television and Eye Strain,” 1237.

³¹³ “How to Look at Television,” 65.

proper interior decoration, to the familiar list of aspects to control: size, distance, angle, posture, lighting, etc. It was clearly no simple task fit for the unadvised layperson if it consistently required so much discipline and concern from so many professional quarters.

And again, still in 1949, came an even longer article by an M.D., contributing yet more detail to the effort of disciplining the television-watching body in order to protect the eyes. The article was titled “Does Television Damage the Eyes?”, although, interestingly, it never explicitly answers its own question. It instead walks the same line we have already seen: on the one hand, the author mentions the unease that greeted the invention of the ophthalmoscope, for fear that sending a beam of light into the depths of the eye (against God’s original design) would do damage, and says of television that “a similar series of misapprehensions have gained currency with respect to the danger of its use to the human eye.”³¹⁴ On the other hand, he does not make flat statements of safety or harmlessness; instead, like so many others, he sets out in great detail the correct way to watch television, specifying the quality of reception and signal tuning, room lighting, set placement, distance from the screen, and viewing time. And, just as doctors in other studies found no organic harm from TV, but still prescribed special glasses, this author

³¹⁴ Benjamin Roness, “Does Television Damage The Eyes?,” *The Sight-Saving Review* 19 (1949): 127.

approves of the use of a filter in front of the screen if the viewer wishes (he does, however, draw the line at wearing sunglasses).³¹⁵

In her analysis of the original diffusion of television sets into the American home, Lynn Spigel writes of this kind of careful spatial disciplining of the TV:

[T]he theatricalization of the home allowed people to draw a line between the public and the private—or in more theatrical terms—a line between the proscenium space where the spectacle took place and the reception space from which the audience observed the scene.³¹⁶

This line, however, was an unstable and shifting boundary, and was constituted and reconstituted through discursive and spatial struggle. It represented not just the edge of the stage, but also the wall of the home, making it a symbolic border between two tremendously fraught regions: safety on one side, unpredictability on the other, as if a dangerous animal were penned in the corner of the room and would bite if you handled it incorrectly. Anxiety circulated around the potential of that line's rupture; constant vigilance was required to make sure that the contents of the electronic window did not penetrate too far inside and cross the line, and also that the most vulnerable residents of the domestic space did not step past the line and into the lion's cage. In the course of structuring and controlling the physical aspects of the TV-watching process, sometimes this borderline was made literal, as in a 1949 admonition from the *New York Times*:

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

³¹⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 116.

In the opinion of ophthalmologists, parents should insist that children remain a minimum of six feet away from the screen, preferably even further. If necessary, the proper distance should be clearly marked, either by a chalk mark on the rug, a strip of adhesive tape on the floor or by a “fence” of chairs.³¹⁷

The perceived and advised need for such a strong physical construction of the viewer/TV border speaks to the level of anxiety. Television here is an inherently damaging and seductive force that must be physically contained, the chalk or tape or fence (using a chair, like a lion tamer) making a statement of boundaries in both directions: aggressively demarcating the family’s territory, while attempting to wall off the machine (and trying to keep the irresistibly-drawn child from being sucked into it). If not chalk or chairs, the proscenium line could be created with a filter over the screen, or with special TV-watching glasses over the eyes. Safe viewing could be a difficult business, especially given the warnings of professional experts serving to reify the risk.

This kind of advice was a staple of early articles about television, especially where the child viewer was involved,³¹⁸ taking advantage of that heightened symbolic nexus of children and eyes, the apotheosis of vulnerability. For instance, a *New York Times* article citing anonymous “leading ophthalmologists”³¹⁹ set out “simple rules” for protecting the eyes while watching television. As with the early medical studies, on the one hand television’s danger to the eyes is scoffed at,

³¹⁷ “Simple Rules to Avoid Eye-Fatigue From TV,” XX6.

³¹⁸ For more examples, especially invoking children, see “Light With TV Urged to Lessen Eyestrain,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1952, 22; “Eye Strain Linked to Big TV Screens,” *New York Times*, 21 May 1952, 37.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

claiming that there is “no permanent harm” to the organ itself or to vision in general, but instead a more nebulous effect here called “eye-fatigue.” However, this seemingly mild term is then complicated right away with nuances and exceptions: for instance, eyes subjected to this type of eye-fatigue only “usually recover” (leaving room for doubt), and the eyes of children—that discursively-loaded, doubly-fragile site—are a specific area of concern, undermining the idea of no permanent harm:

The factor of fatigue in looking at television is most important in the case of children and the ophthalmologists emphasize that it is [a] problem to which parents should give close attention.³²⁰

The unnamed experts then go on to outline the exact kind of attention parents should give, focusing on rules for the child’s proper distance from the set and the correct amount of viewing time. Undisciplined television watching leads not only to eye-fatigue, but also to trouble for the child in particular (and only the child), the eye experts extending their professional status and expertise to diagnose a more nebulous and holistic aspect of televisual danger: “The ophthalmologists agree that excessive looking is particularly bad for children since, if they are unduly tired, the effects may be noticed in their homework and in their general social behavior.”³²¹ Tiredness, and problems with homework and behavior, here become specific symptoms of a television overdose, something visible and organic to point at as verification of television’s potential for harm if left unchecked. The invocation of

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

children, and the careful focus on and disciplining of their interaction with the new technology, feeds off of and reinforces pre-existing worries, giving them specific material forms to take.

“Eye fatigue” or the more common “eyestrain” became a useful catchall term for cautionary arguments, especially in sites focused on child-centric issues such as parenting and education. This ominous but only nebulously-defined word did not require medical specifics, nor proof that the strain would itself do damage; the term was a pejorative end in itself. A British study, for instance, took hold of the term “eyestrain” and unpacked it, working to change it from the brief, vague diagnosis of last resort found in the earliest studies to a pathology in itself, serving as a springboard both to vision loss and to organic disease. In this argument, there is no such thing as “merely” eyestrain. The author instead breaks eyestrain down into a series of detailed, scientifically-exacting series of causes, removing the term from the realm of daily common experience into the world of the medical specialist. And, although he admits that causality is not proven, the author claims that “eye strain due to television” in particular “accentuates the normal tendency towards myopia in children aged 8-13 years”.³²² Further, the study argues that the muscle fatigue brought on by eyestrain commonly causes the sufferer to rub the eyes, and “[c]hildren using grubby fingers often infect their eyes in this way, causing chronic

³²² A.H. Griffith, “Children’s Vision and Television,” *British Medical Journal* 3 (30 November 1957): 1301.

blepharitis and conjunctivitis.”³²³ In line with the earlier studies and the need to discipline and structure the viewing experience, the author then concludes that “[p]arents should be warned against the possible dangers of allowing their children to watch television too often and too long. They should be informed of the optimum conditions for television viewing and the conditions which will cause eye strain.”³²⁴

Even in arguments that acknowledged the existence of eyestrain in other tasks of everyday life, television technology was implied to create a particular kind of eyestrain that was somehow more disturbing. For instance, *Parents’ Magazine* ran a long piece in December 1950 in which one expert (described as a “Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education”) simultaneously soothed and exacerbated the fears of television’s effects on the eye. First, he begins with the common complaints from the general public, just as the medical studies did:

Numerous teachers and parents insist that televiewing children deteriorate in health and particularly that their eyes suffer. They come to school with bloodshot and irritated eyes; they are always so tired and listless!³²⁵

He contradicts these observations right away, flatly stating that “We find no reason to believe that televiewing can injure vision more than any other kind of seeing.” But this thesis is not borne out by the rest of the article; in fact, his argument then proceeds to circle back and reify television’s menace to children’s eyes. He contrasts television viewing with reading, arguing that the way children fidget when they read

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid., 1302.

³²⁵ Howard A. Lane, “What Shall We Do About Television?”, *Parents’ Magazine* 25 (December 1950): 94.

keeps the eyes supplied with the necessary changes in lighting and distance, thus refreshing them. He further claims that most televiewing children are sent out of the room if they fidget, which forces them to hold still, and thus they are prevented from “protecting themselves from the evil effects of unchanging focal length and unvarying intensity upon the sensitive portion of the eye.”³²⁶

These evil effects, he argues, are biologically mandated and technologically determined:

The eye is built for seeing steady and less extreme variations in lighting. It is built to accommodate to constantly changing conditions of distance and lighting. Hence prolonged televiewing is not good for eyes, especially for young ones. I should like my children to view for no more than thirty minutes at a time, and no more than sixty to ninety minutes per day on the average.³²⁷

And so, although a lack of definitive medical evidence seemingly required the “we find no reason to believe” statement, the rest of his argument ignores that, resting on the assumption that “televiewing” requires a specific relationship between the eye and the machine, one which works against nature, flouting the organ’s basic design. This argument is specific to televiewing; he does not invoke it against movies (which he briefly mentions), nor, as we have seen, against reading (in which the natural response of fidgeting works to protect the vulnerable eyes). And just as in the early medical studies, he prescribes a specific viewing distance and angle, in a protective admonishment that belies any attempts at reassurance.

³²⁶ Ibid., 94-95.

³²⁷ Ibid., 95.

Even as television became more of an ordinary fixture in the American home, and even as authors were already beginning to scoff at earlier reactions to television, calling them naive or worse, the concept of eyestrain still prevailed, serving as a marker of fear about the intense connection between the television and the eye. Thus the fear could be reinforced even as it was supposedly being derided, just as the medical establishment had called early television watchers' self-reported eye problems "hysteria," and then gone on to carefully outline the correct method, angle, and distance of viewing. In 1955, *U.S. News and World Report* could first state:

Right after TV came in, there was quite a rush to the eye doctors with children's eye troubles, real or fancied. Now many doctors say that parents were just then becoming aware that their children were having sight troubles, as the children couldn't see a normally functioning TV screen.³²⁸

But then, the article directly follows that paragraph with a warning that "[s]ome eye specialists, nevertheless, point out that TV watching adds just one more stress to those placed on eyesight by bright lights and movies, and thus increases the likelihood of eye trouble."³²⁹ In other words, television's connection to children's eyes is probably nothing to worry about...but be very, very careful.

The anxiety discourse of television and the eye circulated around the specter of the breached boundary, the untamed technology penetrating both domestic space through the TV-window and bodily space through the eye-window. In this dynamic, the power relations again follow the technologically-determinist structure of caller

³²⁸ "What TV Is Doing To America," *U.S. News and World Report* 39 (2 September 1955): 40-41.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

hegemony, in which the link between the human and machine is always lopsided: the human in the home is the vulnerable prey, and the technology is the predator, puncturing all necessary boundaries in order to enter and exert its control. In the case of TV, now is added the richly connotative structure of seeing, in which the predatory television sees us more powerfully than we see it. A British physician, addressing the issue of television and the eyes, wrote:

It is said that, in the slave markets of ancient Rome, a rotating potter's wheel was held in front of a potential purchase to see if he was a good stable "buy" and unflustered by the flicker. Now, in the almost universal slave market of our 20th century civilization, we have brought our master's wheel into our homes, to test ourselves daily in our ritual submission to this exacting tyrant.³³⁰

The relation of the human eye to televisual light, in this underpinning of the discourse, is articulated not as the human "seeing" in any active sense, but rather as the television master overpowering the human slave, making the human see, injecting its signal into the helpless eye. As Jerry Mander put it, in his thoroughly technologically-determinist work *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*:

Television light is purposeful and directed rather than ambient. It is projected into our eyes from behind the screen by cathode-ray guns which are literally aimed at us. ... It is not quite accurate to say that when we watch television we are looking at light; it is more accurate to say that light is projected into us.³³¹

This intrusive projection sets the players on very clear and opposite ends of a power spectrum. Here the television penetrates the person, insertive and controlling; the

³³⁰ J.G.P. Williams, et. al., "Impact Of Television On Medicine," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 62 (April 1969): 385.

³³¹ Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments For The Elimination Of Television* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1978): 171.

eye is not an organ used with any agency, but rather an orifice, helpless before the technological onslaught. “The images enter you,” Mander writes, in an image of clear power disparity easily mapped onto society’s normative sexual and gender relations. “They pour into you like fluid into a container. You are the container. The television is the pourer.”³³² In the ultimate version of the discourse, this penetration is very real and material, both in operation and effect:

...[W]hether light is matter or energy it is a *thing* which is entering us...You are as connected to the television set as your arm would be to the electrical current in the wall...if you had stuck a knife into the socket.

These are not metaphors. There is a concentrated passage of energy from machine to you, and none in the reverse. In this sense, the machine is literally dominant, and you are passive.³³³

The relationship between the eye and television’s destructive penetrative power is explicitly traced and highlighted both visually and narratively in *The Ring*, the 2002 Hollywood remake of the 1998 Japanese film *Ringu*. Both films tell the story of a videotape that, when watched, triggers the viewer’s horrible death in exactly seven days: anxieties about the televised image’s uncanny and destructive powers are here adapted into a frightening cautionary tale. And in both films (though especially in the American remake) the organ of the eye—the vulnerable eye of the viewer, the murderous eye of the television image—is instrumental to the story and to the horror and hopelessness of the story’s final resolution.

³³² Ibid., 204.

³³³ Ibid., 171.

The very first spoken lines of *The Ring* set up the lurking technological threat, in the familiar language of dystopian technological anxieties ranging back to the first days of the telephone and beyond. Katie, a teenage girl who will shortly be the first person we see killed by the tape, begins by complaining about the very pervasiveness, invasiveness, and destructive potential that will soon manifest with horrible physical consequences:

I hate television. Gives me headaches. You know, I heard there's so many magnetic waves traveling through the air because of TV and telephones, that we're losing, like, ten times as many brain cells as we're supposed to. Like, all the molecules in our heads are all unstable, all the companies know about it but they're not doing anything about it. It's a big conspiracy....You have any idea how many electro-rays are traveling through our head every second?

Her friend Becca then tells her the story of “this videotape that kills you when you watch it: You start to play it, and it's like somebody's nightmare. Then suddenly, this woman comes on. Smiling at you, right? *Seeing* you. Through the screen.” And right away, the film's primary source of threat and horror is established: television's unstoppable penetration of our bodies and minds, serving as a conduit for an evil force that can look out from the screen, see you, and thus target you for death.

This seeing is a crucial addition to the longstanding trope of the intrusive and dangerous electric signal. *The Ring* neatly maps the power relations (and dangers) of caller hegemony onto the relationship between broadcast signal and television viewer: even though theoretically the television is a one-way device in which the home viewer is the powerful seer, and the television picture is the passive being-seen, the film brings out and plays upon the dystopian reversal of structure

widespread in the cultural anxieties surrounding the technology. In this reversal, as with telephone and radio, the user forfeits all agency and all control over the unpredictable technological monster in the heart of the home; the machine is a door/window we cannot lock, and it opens to allow dangerous outside influences in who can *see* us in a much more powerful way than we see them. The television signal colonizes both of the most threatening positions in the dynamic of seeing, combining the assaultive seeing of the voyeur with the assaultive being-seen of the exhibitionist.

The structure of caller hegemony here, while primarily centered on the television, is also, interestingly, bolstered by the supportive role of the telephone, as if the terrifying telephone from earlier stories here makes a guest appearance to underscore and reinforce the caller hegemony discourse. Becca's story about the evil television signal that kills you by seeing you also includes one final technological component. Once you have watched the evil videotape and been seen by it: "...as soon as it's over, your phone rings. Someone knows you've watched it. And what they say is, 'You will die in seven days.' And exactly seven days later..." The telephone serves as a subsidiary source of danger throughout the film, illustrated by the typical trope of the ringing phone regarded with horror, the victim afraid to lift the receiver for fear of letting the evil into the room—but not picking it up makes no difference, as the technological door is always open. For instance, later in the film after one character has finished watching the tape and leaves (scoffing at the legend), the phone rings. A second character reacts with fear to the ringing phone

and will not answer it, but the camera focuses dramatically on the blinking answering machine message light: answered or not, the telephone brought the extra component of the evil television signal in anyway.

The introductory Katie/Becca section of the movie is organized around the familiar setup of two teenage girls home alone, a fruitful trope used in other technological horror stories such as *I Know What You Did*. Here again, the girls are at the mercy of the technology: Katie, alone downstairs, getting ready to go upstairs for the night, is startled by the sound of the downstairs television coming on by itself to a channel of static. Warily, she finds the remote and turns it off, then starts to leave the room—but she is stopped in her tracks by the sound of the TV coming back on. Obviously frightened, she approaches the TV, and with a whimper grabs the plug and yanks it from the wall. But this attempt to close the door against the evil signal will not help her. As soon as she goes upstairs and opens her bedroom door, she sees that the TV in her own room is on (in the very heart of the home, the place where she is most vulnerable), and one glimpse of the image playing on the screen kills her, the camera swooping into her distorted, screaming face like the signal flying across the room on beams of light. Seven days ago she watched what she shouldn't have watched; now the televisual conduit has found her, punctured a hole in the wall of her last refuge, and forcibly injected a final deadly signal into her eyes.

As *The Ring* continues, the focus on this structure of seeing continues and broadens, centering on and highlighting the organ of the eye as the vulnerable orifice for the viewer and the dangerous weapon for the broadcaster/broadcast

signal. For instance, when the film's protagonist, Rachel, investigating the mystery of Katie's death, first tracks down the tape and sits down to watch it (perhaps against her better judgment, certainly against the wishes of the audience), she sits close to the television, her face glowing with reflected light. And as the strange video ends, we see an extreme closeup of one of her eyes. The pupil quickly contracts, like a door closing, a reflection of the staticky television screen shining right in the center. The audience knows before Rachel does that the evil signal has done its work: it has entered her through the unguarded portal of the eye, and the seven-day countdown has begun.

But for Rachel, far worse than the tape's threat to her is its threat to her young son Aidan. A couple of days later, as her initial skepticism is fading, Rachel wakes from a nightmare to find that Aidan is not in his room. She follows the flickering light to discover Aidan, in his pajamas, sitting crosslegged on the floor close to the TV. The evil tape has just reached its concluding shot and cut to static. Rachel screams and runs to him, and the first thing she does is to clamp one hand over both his eyes, in a futile effort to close the door of his body/mind and keep the evil out. The original *Ringu* has the same scene, climaxing with the sweet little boy in pajamas, bathed in the television's light, his hysterical mother covering his eyes. But in both films the mother knows it's too late—as in the darkest fears of real-world parents, once the TV signal has gotten into your child's eyes, it's in his head eating away at him, and there's no removing it.

Toward the end of the film, we finally see the eye on the other end of this equation—the evil eye, the broadcast predator’s eye that penetrates and destroys the helpless viewer. Rachel’s ex-boyfriend Noah, her co-investigator of the whole mystery (and Aidan’s father), casually watched (and scoffed at) the tape himself. But seven days have now passed, and although he (and for a while, we) think he is safe because he and Rachel seem to have solved the mystery, it turns out quite the opposite. Noah is in his apartment alone when his television comes on by itself. He turns it off, but it turns itself back on—just as happened to Katie at the beginning of the film, the deadly television signal cannot be kept out of the home, off switch or no off switch. He kneels, wary and transfixed, in front of the TV. Even though his telephone is ringing (Rachel is calling, to try to warn him), he can’t pull his gaze from the screen. The little girl on the screen, her face (especially and crucially, her eyes) obscured by a thick curtain of her own hair, walks toward the camera, closer and closer...and then climbs right through the screen, into Noah’s apartment. This is the penetrative potential of the evil television signal incarnate, carrying danger into the heart of the home, right into the eyes of the viewer, who can only sit fascinated and helpless before the screen and take it all in.

Noah shouts and backs away from her, but she (glowing and flickering slightly like the embodied television signal she is) relentlessly pursues him. He stumbles and falls, and stares up at her (just as Rachel, and Aidan, and Noah himself all stared at the deadly televised image when they originally saw it play). She finally lifts her head slightly, the curtain of her hair parts, and for the first time, we see just

one of her eyes. There are a series of sudden, tight cuts in toward that dead, milky eye, close and closer and closest. Noah screams. And when Rachel finds him, he is dead. He couldn't take his eyes from the penetrating image, and as soon as its eye met his, he was struck down—despite the putative equality of eye meeting eye, here the old mores of caller hegemony control and structure the encounter to the utmost, and when the broadcast eye invades the home and penetrates the viewer's eye, it is only the viewer who suffers.

In this form of the discourse, the status of the television signal as “a thing which is entering us” through the eye perversely demands (and receives) our participation; our relationship with the technology, our openness to it, becomes the mechanism of our own destruction. The 1982 film *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (a standalone entry in the *Halloween* series which does not share characters or plots with the films either before or after), invests this participation with a particularly consumerist bent. In this story, as in *The Ring*, the television signal is contaminated and infectious, pouring through the screen into the eyes of vulnerable children to literally destroy their brains. Here, however, the evil forces are much more market-driven: the television signal has been adulterated by an evil businessman, Rory Cochrane, who has flooded stores across the country with Halloween masks bearing a special logo button. On Halloween, his company Silver Shamrock will broadcast a prize giveaway, and to find out if they have won, children are told they have to don their masks and watch the screen very carefully—little do they know that it is the reaction between the tainted television signal and the tampered masks that kills.

Cochrane's target is children in particular, in a nationwide plan for a blood sacrifice to dark powers; not only does the blood of children have an especially potent sacrificial value, but also, with this plan he can take advantage of children's vulnerability to marketing ploys, thus enlisting them as assistants in their own grisly murder.

Like *Poltergeist* (which was released the same year), *Halloween III* begins with an ominous closeup of the real monster of the story: a screen. We see it in extreme closeup, flickering, pixels appearing and disappearing. As the camera pulls back, we see that the face of a jack-o-lantern is being carved out of a screenful of lines. Once the jack-o-lantern is complete, the whole screen begins to blink; it blinks more and more rapidly with a staticky buzzing sound, and then fades out. The audience has been duly warned and will be well ahead of the film's characters every step of the way, watching out for the dangerous screen image. The narrative is full of screens, with televisions constantly playing in every home, in store windows, in bars, in motels, even in hospital emergency rooms, Cochrane's commercial filling the air with its repetitive jingle, coaxing and seducing the children as persistently as any stranger offering candy. And fatally, this stranger has already been welcomed into every television we see, even into the very heart of the home and family. Early in the film, the protagonist, Dan, comes to his ex-wife's house to give his two children Halloween masks. But his ex-wife has already bought them masks: Silver Shamrock masks, special premium items all the kids have been clamoring for. Dan's children happily demonstrate, putting their masks on and dancing around singing the jingle,

then sitting down on the floor right up close to the screen (in the traditional and worshipful posture we also saw from *Poltergeist's* Carol Anne and *The Ring's* Aidan), masks still on, to watch TV. The sacrificial lambs are well-prepared to participate in their own slaughter.

Dan sees a demonstration of the fate awaiting the children once he's been captured by Rory Cochrane. Cochrane has invited the top salesman of Silver Shamrock masks, as well as his wife and young son, to serve as a test audience for the upcoming special giveaway program. Guards herd the family into an underground test chamber, which (just as in the 1951 study discussed earlier) has been set up like a typical living room, with a sofa and an easy chair grouped facing a television, plus plenty of homey touches (a plant, a vase, curtains, even a bowl of fake fruit). The wife idly looks behind one of the curtains, but it reveals only a solid, bare metal wall. She is obviously unnerved ("I don't like this place—it gives me the creeps"), but the family is distracted from any further suspicions when the television turns on by itself. The jingle plays, and the little boy (who had already been standing close to the television, even though it wasn't on) bends down with his face intimately close to the screen. "All you lucky kids with Silver Shamrock masks," says a male voice from the television, "gather round your TV sets. Put on your masks." The boy obediently pulls on his mask, a full-head jack-o-lantern. The mother tells him sternly—in words as stereotypical as the mock-up living room they're sitting in—"Honey, don't get too close, you'll ruin your eyes."

But the television's commands supercede any mere parental instructions. "Gather round and watch," it says with eager, hushed intensity. "Watch the magic pumpkin. *Watch.*" The jack-o-lantern starts flashing, and the boy in his mask watches intently. It flashes faster and faster, the jingle music increasing in tempo. Suddenly, the boy clutches at his head. The mask seems to be melting, warping, almost bubbling, and he collapses. In the strobing light of the TV, we see swarms of insects pour out of the holes in the mask, the mask deflating, as if his head has been devoured from within. The mother sees this and faints. The father hysterically screams, yanks futilely at the locked door, and then collapses. The only sign of life left in the little room is the crawling bugs—and the flashing light and racing music of the television.

Now that we know what will happen to any children wearing the masks who watch the special television program, the movie ratchets up the sense of looming and inevitable horror: it's Halloween evening, and the commercial is everywhere, urging kids to buy their Silver Shamrock masks quickly if they haven't already. We see children's hands grabbing the deadly masks from store racks as fast as they can. Shots of children going trick-or-treating show us little scenes from various cities across the country, with crowds of happy children in their Silver Shamrock masks. Unmarked vans prowl the streets, broadcasting the ad announcer's voice through bullhorns: "Hurry home! It's almost time! All those lucky kids with Silver Shamrock masks! Hurry home for the big giveaway. It's almost time! Hurry home!" Dan's own children sit on the floor right up close to the TV, wearing their masks, rocking back

and forth to the ad jingle. The connotations of “home” have been inverted, so that now the heart of the home is the place of sacrifice, at once the most dangerous place these children can be and the place their stalker most desperately wants them to go. They would be safe if only they wouldn’t go home, where the TV lurks waiting to devour them.

Dan himself is forcibly masked and handcuffed to a chair facing a television, which now plays the narrative role of a ticking time bomb, but he eventually manages to escape (smashing the TV screen in the process). The first place he can reach is a little gas station; it is just now 9 o’clock, the special program is about to begin, and the station’s office (like every other place in the film) has a TV set playing. Dan gets on the phone, shouting at the person on the other end of the line to stop the broadcast; meanwhile, a car pulls up and unloads a few children in Silver Shamrock masks, trick-or-treating. Dan pleads, “You’ve gotta believe me! Believe me! Take it off the air now, please!” One of the masked children approaches the TV, standing intimately close to it—but the picture changes to a “standby” screen and an announcement of technical problems. Disappointed, the child changes the channel. The next channel has a standby screen as well. Disaster averted? The child changes the channel once more...and there’s the giveaway program still running, the jack-o-lantern glowing on the screen. Dan panics and shouts into the phone, increasingly hysterical, eventually reduced to screaming “turn it off! Stop it! Stop it! *Stop it!*”

But the flow cannot be stopped; the television-conduit can never be entirely closed. The show keeps running, the music speeding up, the picture flashing. The

film ends on Dan's final despairing scream, and it seems safe to say that the hero does not win the day—millions of children will shortly be killed by their own television sets, their brains dissolving into bugs and pouring out of their empty eyes. *Halloween III* literalizes (in Grand Guignol fashion) the next level of televisual anxiety: once the contaminating signal gets into the eye-orifice, it soaks into the vulnerable brain, sitting unprotected right behind the eyes. And once inside the brain, the television has free rein to colonize and disease the entire body, from behavior to physiological processes.

"No Pied Piper ever proved so irresistible"

In the aspect of the discourse focusing on television's infestation of the brain, one predictable area of concern echoed similar fears from the heyday of radio: the shattering of children's fragile nervous systems. The popular press—especially the subset focused on parenting and education—was full of lists of technology-caused symptoms that might as well have been lifted from the same periodicals twenty years before. Common themes included nightmares, loss of sleep, nervousness, apathy, bedwetting, and the extremely common catchall of "overstimulation."³³⁴

³³⁴ For example, see Paul Witty, "Television and the Educative Process," *School and Society* 74 (15 December 1951): 371; "TV Should Go Easy With Homicide in Full Color," *Saturday Evening Post* 224 (7 July 1951): 12; Paul Witty, "Television and the High School Student," *Education* 72 (December 1951): 243; Paul Witty and Harry Bricker, "Your Child and TV," *Parents' Magazine* 27 (December 1952): 78; "TV For Child Analyzed," *New York Times*, 25 April 1953, 18; Dorothy Barclay, "The TV Generation's Growing Pains," *New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 1954, 54; Paul

However, these effects were not considered less worrisome because they had predecessors, any more than radio-based anxieties had been soothed by memories of previous skirmishes over the telephone. Television's effects were easily claimed as inherently unprecedented, especially because of its relationship to the eyes and the power structure in that relationship, colonizing the senses of the innocent³³⁵; sometimes television's effects on children were even quantified, labeled anywhere from twice to twenty times as powerful as radio's.³³⁶

In this narrative of anxiety, television therefore had free rein in the destruction of the young, devouring them from the inside more effectively than radio ever could (forgetting, ignoring, or downplaying past discourses in which radio had been the primary culprit), inherently controlling and manipulative, making the child's mind and body as malleable as fresh clay. Television, for instance, ruined children's language use (another complaint that had once been laid firmly at radio's door³³⁷), and the anxiety did not just focus on content-based dilution of vocabulary, but also on a more insidious physiological effect in which their very

Witty, "Televiewing By Pupils, Parents, and Teachers, 1950-1953, *School and Society* 79 (15 May 1954): 150-151.

³³⁵ For example, see John M. Harmon, Jr., "Television and the Leisure Time Activities of Children," *Education* 71 (October 1950): 126; Al Toffler, "Crime in Your Parlor," *The Nation* 181 (15 October 1955): 324.

³³⁶ For example, see James N. Miller, "TV and the Children," *The Nation* 171 (22 July 1950): 87; C. Howard Smith, "Seven Rules For TV," *Parents' Magazine* 26 (September 1951): 96.

³³⁷ For example, see Herta Herzog, "Children and Their Leisure Time Listening to the Radio: a Survey of the Literature in the Field," in *Memorandum to the Radio Council on Children's Programs from the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University, 1941): 55-56.

pronunciation was controlled, debased, and twisted by the extra-influential medium:

At the first “bub” of Howdy Doody, the first “lithsp” of Pinky Lee, the larynx’s fate is set. Henceforth it is a slow, painful rear-guard and guerrilla action against the inevitable. Offspring, and then parents, succumb to the snarling, triumphant polyglot of TV-for-children speech...I can risk my children’s morals. I can’t risk their diction. Over the first I have some control; in the matter of the second TV has rendered me helpless.³³⁸

This adult helplessness extended into the realm of the child’s mind, as well, promising a widespread, televisually-influenced decay of children’s intelligence and imagination. While some studies merely claimed correlations between lower IQs or lower grades and time spent watching television,³³⁹ many articulations of the results tended to elide correlation and causation in a discourse of the colonizing TV and the victimized child:

[The children’s] minds are so completely engrossed by television that they have no capacity for learning.

They have no sense of values, no feeling of wonder, no sustained interest. Their shallowness of thought and feeling is markedly apparent, and they display a lack of cooperation and inability to finish a task. Could this be the result of passively sitting and watching?³⁴⁰

A 1954 report in the journal *Childhood Education* detailed the opinions of a number of Philadelphia school teachers vis-a-vis television and children, and their

³³⁸ Robert Lewis Shayon, “The Battle of Pink Puddin’,” *Saturday Review* 38 (10 December 1955): 27.

³³⁹ For example, see Witty, “Television and the High School Student,” 242, 244, 245; Franklin Dunham, “Effect of Television on School Achievement of Children,” *School Life* 34 (March 1952): 88, 89.

³⁴⁰ Robert Lewis Shayon, “The Pied Piper of Video,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 33 (25 November 1950): 10.

answers focused on the same kind of deep, structural damage, rather than on something as comparatively simple as a loss of sleep or even violent behavior. They argued that television was actually sapping the very capacity for creativity or spontaneous thought from their students; although TV brought the children new things to look at, in their ensuing play, “their approach was not a creative one but a mimicking...[a] slavish imitation of what they have seen.”³⁴¹ One respondent described a first grade class in which almost all of the students chose to play with clay at the same time, and all of that sculpting subset made the exact same bunny rabbit figure out of clay balls. The teacher concluded:

Up until this time this same group of children had been imaginative, creative, ingenious. This was the first time I had ever met mass hypnosis eye to eye. Of course, the culprit was a children’s TV show.³⁴²

Mass hypnosis was a concern from the beginning of television’s diffusion, the technology itself feared as not only inherently intrusive, but as inherently controlling; whatever the content, television would amplify and implant it in the mind, turning a suggestion into an order and entertainment into domination. The *New York Times* publicized a dramatic instance of televisual hypnotism in its report about a 1946 BBC audition for a hypnotist. Most of the judges watching him fell into a trance, as did the announcer; but more tellingly, “[a]cross the hall in another room a studio girl employe switched on the set to see what was happening. She fell asleep.” NBC vice president John Royal took this opportunity to emphasize the role

³⁴¹ Barclay, 54.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

of television's inherent power: "Television's ability to capture the attention of its audience is so strong that we feel hypnotism could be potentially a very dangerous and risky thing."³⁴³

While this statement clearly served as boosterism for the fledgling commercial television industry, it also went hand-in-hand with the image of television as a hypnotic force in its own right, magnifying its messages with the very real risk of getting out of control. In 1950, for instance, after a series of complaints about the BBC's reliance on violent and gruesome "horror plays," one author explained that the unhappy viewers were nevertheless unable to stop watching if they didn't enjoy the programs: "It is a tribute to the skilled technical presentation that viewers have not been able to switch off but have sat back hypnotized."³⁴⁴ Even without the presence of an actual hypnotist, the technology itself (and its skilled manipulation in the hands of experts) riveted helpless victims in their homes against their will. This raised the question of television's potential power as a tool of conditioning and control to be used against the unwary populace, as in the hands of "practitioners who may be able to direct mass thinking as it was directed in Nazi Germany."³⁴⁵

³⁴³ "British Studio Bars Television By Hypnotist When Audition Sends Judges Into Trance," *New York Times*, 21 December 1946, 8.

³⁴⁴ L. Marsland Gander, "London: Murder, Too: Video is Homicide Happy, Say English Viewers," *New York Times*, 7 May 1950, 121.

³⁴⁵ Paul Witty, "Comics and Television: Opportunity or Threat?", *Today's Health* 30 (October 1952): 51.

The larger anxiety discourse of televisual hypnosis and control circulated most strongly (as with the discourse of the eye) around the figure of the child, painting TV as merciless both in its temptation of children and in its consumption of them body and soul. As one author observed in 1954, "TV's swarming children's shows are designed to ensnare the growing urchin almost from the moment his infant eyes begin to focus."³⁴⁶ In this model, the television is articulated as a new, technologically-fortified Pied Piper, electronically charming the nation's children before leading them through the window-breach, drawing them from the safety of the home out to dangerous realms unknown where their parents cannot follow.

The Pied Piper story, with the unwary, frolicking children led away by a motley stranger, always carried with it unsavory undercurrents of innocence violated. In the actual German town of Hameln, the location of some murky historical event that gave rise to the legend, records of a (now lost) 14th-century stained glass window indicate that it carried this inscription:

In the year of 1284, on John's and Paul's day, the 26th of June,
by a piper dressed in all kinds of colors,
130 children born in Hamelin were seduced
and lost at the calvarie near the koppen.³⁴⁷

The dangerous figure of the Pied Piper—not just a hypnotist, but a stranger who seduces and abducts, the very template of the modern child molester—was often invoked in discussions of the dangers of television's close, intimate relationship with

³⁴⁶ "The Week in Review," *Time* 64 (18 October 1954): 61.

³⁴⁷ Christoph Wilkening, "'The Pied Piper of Hamelin: Germany's Mystery of Missing Children,'" *The World & I* 15 (August 2000): 180.

children. It appeared, for instance, in a 1950 argument positing TV's inherent dominance (and heightened risks) versus earlier media:

It can be argued that if a whole generation was kept away from the radio long enough to acquire literacy, it ought to be possible to restrain children's passion for television. The difficulty seems to lie in television's stronger appeal. No Pied Piper ever proved so irresistible.³⁴⁸

And in a 1950 article by television producer and media critic Robert Lewis Shayon, the television-as-Pied Piper image was a fundamental thread of the argument:

The Pied Piper is back. In Hamelin town the wandering fellow wore a gypsy coat of red and yellow. In New York, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, and at all points along the coaxial cable he comes disguised as a television transmitter. His cunning witchery is piped through air channels which it is estimated will reach 13,000,000 sets by the spring of 1951. And once again the Piper hasn't lost his charm. The children still come running "merrily after the wonderful music with shouting and laughter."³⁴⁹

Faced with the appearance of this new Piper and his "witchery," the dichotomy of domestic (child's) space/public (adult) space, and television's role as a seductive conduit between them, is clearly articulated: "Television has no sign on it, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.'...It is the shortest cut yet devised, the most accessible back door to the grown-up world."³⁵⁰

Shayon's article is lavishly and warningly illustrated to this very effect: on the left side of a double-page spread is the figure of the technological piper, a humanoid figure with a television for a head. He plays his flute and capers at the head of an

³⁴⁸ Miller, 87.

³⁴⁹ Shayon, "The Pied Piper of Video," 9.

³⁵⁰ Shayon, "The Pied Piper of Video," 49-50.

enormously long line; following him are several animals (a rat, a toad, a cat, a snake), but mostly, of course, there are children. The cartoon children, boys and girls, frolic after him with smiles, laughter, and enthusiasm. But further back in the line, we see some disquieting things: one little boy drives a small black car with a skull and crossbones on the side, and clutches a smoldering cigarette in his frowning mouth. A sweet-faced little girl runs along with a copy of “Gory Comics” clutched under one arm. A little boy riding in a little red wagon, an Indian-style headband and feather on his head, seems to be wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a dagger dripping blood on it. And a boy in a cowboy outfit—hat pulled low over angry eyes, bandana covering his nose and mouth, pistol drawn and aimed in his hand—holds one end of a rope, the other end of which is tied tightly around the neck of a little girl he drags along behind him. Her eyes are shut in the traditional cartoon x’s, her mouth drawn down in a rictus of pain (further symbolized by lines and stars radiating from her tightly-noosed throat), her wrists bound together.

The line of children, startlingly happy in their seduction/abduction and their cruel and depraved play, extends all the way across the double-page spread. Behind them, all the way on the right, a crowd of parents recedes into the distance. Fathers frown, gesticulate, and shout; mothers wring their hands and weep. As the Pied Piper did, television here serves to emasculate and disempower the parent, not just abducting the children from them but seducing the children into following it out into the contaminating world, parental warnings be damned. And this abduction

colonizes the children in both body and soul, usurping parental authority and making of the child a willing and eager slave.

Roald Dahl's 1964 book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and after it the 1971 film adaptation³⁵¹ *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, created a perfectly cautionary example of this dynamic in the character of Mike Teavee, a little boy utterly ensnared by television, first figuratively and then literally. In both book and film, Mike is a demanding brat in a cowboy outfit, brandishing toy guns, constantly comparing real life to TV programs and finding real life lacking (in excitement as well as in pleasurable violence). After all the other children aside from Mike and Charlie have been lost to their tragic flaws in one way or another, Willy Wonka reveals his last invention, one guaranteed to send Mike over the edge: in the book it is called "Television Chocolate," in the film, "Wonkavision." It consists of a gigantic camera pointed at a white platform in a blindingly white room, with a television at the other end. Wonka has insisted everyone (including himself and the Oompa-Loompas operating the machinery) be dressed in protective gear, as if shielding themselves against radiation or contamination. "We have to be very careful," he says solemnly in the film before letting them into the chamber. "There's dangerous stuff inside." And in the book, his warning is followed by Charlie's own internal

³⁵¹ The 2005 film adaptation *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* also includes the Teavee character, with his violent/obsessive relationship to the television initially represented by a first-person-shooter videogame he plays, not on a computer, but hooked up to a large living room TV. However, this adaptation doesn't give the details of Mike's own reaction to having been shrunk and injected into the TV via Television Chocolate, and thus it is not discussed here.

misgivings: "...Charlie experienced a queer sense of danger. There was something dangerous about this whole business, and the Oompa-Loompas knew it."³⁵²

Wonkavision (or Television Chocolate) is a form of the discourse of electric transportation we have seen before, in which a physical object can be dematerialized and sent through the technology to rematerialize elsewhere. Wonka first demonstrates it with a candy bar (giant on the transmitting end, shrunk down to ordinary size on the small screen of the TV), and once the bar has faded in on the small screen, Wonka tells Mike to take it. Mike scoffs, "It's just a picture!" So Wonka tells Charlie to take it, and Charlie reaches out and easily removes it from the screen. This proof of ultimate fusion between television technology and the material world proves too tempting for Mike. He hits the camera control and runs onto the platform: "Look at me! I'm going to be the first person in the world to be sent by television!" He ignores Wonka's warning as well as his mother's worried cries; there is a blinding flash of light, and Mike is gone. Overhead streams a current of tiny, multicolored particles, the only remains of Mike's disincorporated material form.

Everyone gathers around the TV screen, waiting for Mike to rematerialize, his mother still shouting for him. He finally appears, solid and whole and only a few inches tall. Just like all of the previous lost children, Mike has been consumed and altered by his own greatest weakness—but unlike the previous children, he is neither frightened nor chastened by his new circumstances. Mike, a true child of the

³⁵² Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 132-133.

television, is thrilled at this ultimate bodily union with his beloved. In the film, he calls out:

Look at me, everybody, I'm the first person in the world to be sent by television! Wow, what a wild trip that was. It's the greatest thing that's ever happened to me! Am I coming in clear? Hey mom, I said am I coming in clear!

He is blithe even in the face of his mother's shock: "Wow, that was something. Can I do it again?" And when Mrs. Teavee refuses to let him go through the machine any more, for fear of losing him entirely ("No, there'll be nothing left!"), he resists and complains all the way out of the room (tucked inside her purse). It is Mrs. Teavee who is the most strongly affected by his change, her reaction one of protective terror; far from agreeing with Mike's "greatest thing that's ever happened to me," she ends up having to be dragged from the room in a horrified swoon. In the book, Mike's enthusiasm for the very technology that has reshaped him has an even more aggressive tone:

"He won't be able to do *anything!*" cried Mrs. Teavee.

"Oh, yes I will!" squeaked the tiny voice of Mike Teavee. "I'll still be able to watch television!"

"*Never again!*" shouted Mr. Teavee. "I'm throwing the television set right out the window the moment we get home. I've had enough of television!"

When he heard this, Mike Teavee flew into a terrible tantrum. He started jumping up and down on the palm of his mother's hand, screaming and yelling and trying to bite her fingers. "I want to watch television!" he squeaked. "I want to watch television! I want to watch television! I want to watch television!"³⁵³

³⁵³ Ibid., 143.

Augustus Gloop screamed for help as he was drowning in the chocolate river; Violet Beauregard was shocked and frightened by her transformation into a giant blueberry; Veruca Salt resisted her plunge down the garbage chute. It's only Mike who actually revels in his changed and technologized self; this poetic justice was really no punishment for him at all. The televisual child is perfectly happy, a willing slave—in the end it's the parent who suffers, losing the beloved child to the intruder-technology.

"I could feel the visions coalesce, and become flesh. Uncontrollable flesh."

As the TV-Pied Piper discourse emphasizes, at this level of televisual anxiety the contaminating signal doesn't just colonize the brain, but in one way or another utterly takes control of the physical body. And when this discourse of bodily control rises in the context of domestic space, it takes shape as a power struggle between the presumed masters of the home and the televisual interloper, a struggle with technologically-determinist overtones that paints the picture of television technology inherently forcing stillness before the set, thus extending control over the viewing bodies and the entire viewing space at once. In 1946, educating a radio-savvy audience about the new medium, Thomas Hutchinson instructed, "[t]elevision isn't radio and cannot be treated as such. To get the most out of a television program you must give it your undivided attention."³⁵⁴ And a 1951 column observed:

Unlike radio, television can not be turned on and left turned on, while the audience carries on discussion or even passes the time of day.

³⁵⁴ Hutchinson, xi.

Somehow it seems a waste of something to keep it on with no one sitting before it and staring into its lighted face.³⁵⁵

We see here the sense of cultural and technological caller hegemony surrounding the television, which stills and silences all before it, who (reminiscent of the unwillingly hypnotized audiences of the BBC) are “somehow” compelled to sit quietly and look into the face of the intruder. Even more anthropomorphic is this 1954 iteration of the television dominating domestic space:

If a loud-mouthed guest had settled himself in a corner and begun to tell raucous and unsuitable stories to the children, it seems likely that parents would have managed in some way to change the subject or get the children out of the room. Yet when an inanimate object began to do the same thing, consternation reigned in the household.”³⁵⁶

The television technology itself may be a nominal guest in this approach, but he (also the gender of the predatory/penetrative caller in the caller hegemony dynamic) is surely making himself unwelcome, charming the children with unsavory and inappropriate entertainment in the manner of a Pied Piper, with the parents helpless before the onslaught. The center of the home has been physically conquered by a licentious interloper, who is immune to human control precisely because of his empowered position as “an inanimate object”—a technological breach, a hole in the home that the hapless parents cannot seal.

Television’s control of the center of the domestic space was more than just physical; it expanded to encompass and overpower the symbolic center of the home

³⁵⁵ Goodman Ace, “Children Don’t Cry For It,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 34 (3 March 1951): 34.

³⁵⁶ Dorothy Barclay, “Making the Most of Television,” *New York Times Magazine*, 21 February 1954, 34.

as well, disrupting the discursive construct of “the family circle” or “family life.” As Lynn Spigel explains, the optimistic utopian side of the discourses circulating around television’s introduction into the home cast television in the role of a benevolent uniting force: “Television, it was said, would bring the family ever closer...It was seen as a kind of household cement that promised to reassemble the splintered lives of families who had been separated during the war.”³⁵⁷ The TV was discursively inserted into the place of the hearth, serving as the warm, glowing light the family could gather around at day’s end,³⁵⁸ in which idealized families basked in the benevolent rays of the television, the new device strengthening the domestic space and the discourse of the family circle by serving as its literal center and its metaphorical heart.

This electric hearth would further strengthen the domestic walls by coaxing all of the wandering family members back into the nest where they belonged, reuniting them into a safe and appropriate family unit. In fact, the most optimistic of projections saw television as a sort of antidote to earlier technologies that disrupted the unity of the family circle, such as the automobile.³⁵⁹ Family members (especially children) who are at home with the television are not outside in the public spaces

³⁵⁷ Spigel, 39.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁵⁹ As discussed, for instance, in Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 138-139; “Damrosch Says Radio Will Save Family Life From Disruption by the Automobile,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1930, 19; Azriel L. Eisenberg, *Children and Radio Programs: A Study of More Than Three Thousand Children in the New York Metropolitan Area* (New York: Columbia University, 1936), 13.

where lurk the temptations of strangers, sex, and alcohol. The *New York Times* mused in 1949: “Offhand it has been assumed that the television-stimulated assembly in the living room would restore the home to a position of popularity which it had not known since the advent of the Model T,”³⁶⁰ and in 1950, it reported that “[n]ot since the movie and the automobile burst upon the social scene has the front parlor been held in such high esteem by Mother, Dad, Sis and Junior.”³⁶¹ A 1954 article argued that “a kid sitting around the house watching television these days hasn’t much time to join the gangs that stroll our streets.”³⁶² And three years later, the *British Medical Journal* expanded that argument to encompass the entire family, hoping that:

...the lure of the screen may induce parents to remain at home rather than visit public houses, clubs, etc., and encourage children to stay in instead of going to cinemas or wandering aimlessly in the streets.³⁶³

However, even though television could seemingly guarantee the proximity of family members grouped before the screen, this proximity just as easily took a dystopian slant in which the technology itself (whatever the content of the programs) disarticulated mere physical proximity from the symbolic construction of “the family circle”. Being physically together, then, may no longer automatically equal

³⁶⁰ Jack Gould, “What is Television Doing to Us?”, *New York Times*, 12 June 1949, SM7.

³⁶¹ Jack Gould, “Recreation Returns Home,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1950, XX25.

³⁶² Goodman Ace, “I Was a Juvenile Delinquent for the NAFBRAT,” *Saturday Review* 37 (21 August 1954): 31.

³⁶³ Griffith, 1299.

“being together” as a family, with all of the discursive layers and connotations that was supposed to include.

The circulation of this anxiety, the fear of the family circle disarticulated from within by the controlling figure of the television, began very early in television’s diffusion into households. In 1949, scientists were said to be taking notice of the potential damage:

[E]ven at this early stage the sociologists hold mixed views as to how much cohesion in the family will be developed by television. If all members sit in abject silence hour after hour, there may be actually less social interrelationship than before television, even though the family is physically together more often.³⁶⁴

This “abject silence” continued to carry great dystopian weight. In 1950, an article about the changes television was wreaking on home decoration (as well as home routines) warned: “The industry has bragged of reuniting the American family. But this reunion can be pretty illusory if the members of the household just sit and look, and actually converse with one another less than before.”³⁶⁵ A 1954 article discussing “TV: A Mixed Blessing” announced it as a sea-change in family comportment, explaining that “[t]elevision influences family life in many ways. Although families spend more time together around the television set, conversation is discouraged except during commercials.”³⁶⁶ Also in 1954, the *New York Times* cast a historical eye back to the dawn of television, recalling the prediction that TV

³⁶⁴ Jack Gould, “What is Television Doing to Us?”, 24.

³⁶⁵ Jack Gould, “Recreation Returns Home,” 25.

³⁶⁶ Ruth A. Inglis, “TV: A Mixed Blessing,” *American Mercury* 79 (December 1954): 81.

would “reunite the family (without conversation) around the 21-inch hearth.”³⁶⁷ In 1955, a survey of 800 homes concluded that “families owning TV sets are, during the evening hours, changing from a social group characterized by conversation to an audience sitting in semidarkness and silently gazing at their commercially sponsored entertainment.”³⁶⁸ And a 1957 medical journal grappled with the question of physical versus symbolic proximity, wondering: “Does this mean that television encourages a more compact family life, or does it encourage each member to stare mutely at the screen instead of contributing to the intimate family chatter?”³⁶⁹

In these anxieties about television’s place in the symbolic home as well as the physical home, silence becomes the signifier of apathy and hypnotism, victims conquered by the dominant machine, in a way it was not when appropriate and correct “family life” was being conducted. After all, surely when the family sat around the actual hearth and gazed at the fire, or when (in a historico-mythologic tableau from a fabled frontier past) father cleaned his hunting rifle, mother did needlework, and the children (who the maxim tells us “should be seen and not heard”) quietly read books, conversation was not required in order to make them a discursively-appropriate “family”. The primary difference, the disrupting agent here,

³⁶⁷ Gilbert Seldes, “A Clinical Analysis of TV,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1954, SM13.

³⁶⁸ Norman O. Lavet, “The Influence of Television on the Behavior and Development of Children,” *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* 55 (November 1955): 223-224.

³⁶⁹ Griffith, 1299.

is the television and its mastery of eyes, brains, and bodies, so that now the silence is not constitutive of a quiet family evening at home, but rather signifies the drugged muteness of helpless victims. And predictably, the one standing to lose the most from this separation of family proximity from appropriate “family life” was the vulnerable, lightning-rod figure of the child, as in this reprimand from a 1952 medical journal:

...[M]ost of us believe that family life is important and valuable to the growing child and adolescent; but it is hard to know whether a silent and absorbed group clustered round a television set are experiencing family life in any accepted sense.³⁷⁰

Silence and absorption take on a different aspect because of the intrusive television set at their root, and the physical closeness of the family is undercut because of the inherent properties of the object they are clustered around. Now the intruder-window squats in the ruins of the hearth, dominating the space and everyone in it both physically and metaphorically, disrupting the former harmonic family-ness “in the accepted sense” that was once presumably automatically generated by sharing the domestic space. And the member of the family in the greatest danger from this disruption of the circle is the child, as now the television has uncoupled the natural power structures and usurped the rightful place of the parent, leaving the child at the technology’s mercy.

The anxiety circulating around the notion of this domestic televisual coup underlies a particular visual trope that became a common image in the discussion of

³⁷⁰ “Television and the Young,” *The Lancet* 2 (13 December 1952): 1171.

television and children: the child, sitting on the floor very close to the TV, gazing raptly up at the screen in communion (“staring into its lighted face”) with any mixture of awe, fear, and worship. The television has not only evicted the hearth, but also the parents, and now holds the child’s utter attention and fascination (to the child’s ultimate detriment). This tableau served as a helpful shorthand for the discourse of the predatory TV/preyed-upon child, distilling the anxiety discourse surrounding technology, vulnerability, and the televisual power structure into one simple image. So, for instance, a 1951 article in *Parents’ Magazine*, “Seven Rules for TV,” lays out guidelines for the safest way to handle television in the home; as with the general discourse around television and eyesight, the technology’s native unruliness is emphasized, both by the number of rules and structures it requires to integrate it safely into children’s lives, and also by a cartoon accompanying the article, in which a diapered baby, ignoring the rattle next to it, gazes adoringly up at the television screen.³⁷¹

Similarly, in the early years of the comic strip “Peanuts,” when the character Linus was still a baby, even he fell prey to the TV’s thrall: in one 1954 strip, Charlie Brown asks Lucy, “Does Linus like television?” “I don’t know,” she says, “there’s only one program he watches.” Charlie Brown asks what it is, and Lucy answers, “Test Pattern.” The final panel is filled with a drawing of little Linus in his footie pajamas, sitting right at the metaphorical feet of the television. He gazes upward, smiling, at the glowing screen; clearly he likes television, the technology itself, very much

³⁷¹ Smith, 96.

indeed, no matter what it's showing at the moment.³⁷² The same shorthand appears in other media articulations of the anxiety as well, as, for example, in the scene from *The Ring* and *Ringu* discussed earlier in which the mother discovers her son has been infected by the evil signal. The climactic moment of horror in each discovery scene is the child-television tableau, the mother flinging open the door to find her little boy sitting on the floor, in his pajamas, gazing raptly at the contaminating screen. Carol Anne, in *Poltergeist*, kneels reverently before the television when she's listening to "the TV people" who ultimately snatch her away; Dan's children in *Halloween III* settle crosslegged right in front of the set that will shortly devour them. The violation of spatial boundaries serves as a visual marker of unease, predation, and danger, crystallizing the technology's usurpation of adult authority, catching the child in the act of giving in to the wicked charms of the Pied Piper.

In 1950, *Parents' Magazine* ran a large article titled, "What Shall We Do About The Television?" On the article's first page is a photograph of three children, mostly in profile, all looking slightly upward; there is no television in the shot, but its looming presence is clear from the glowing light that bathes the children from the right side of the frame. The leftmost child leans forward, excited, hands pressed together. The middle child covers his or her mouth with both hands, peeping out above the hands, eyes wide. The rightmost child is in the middle of a gesture, staring startled at the unseen TV. The article feeds off of the anxiety discourses encoded in

³⁷² Charles M. Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts, 1953-1954* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2004), 199.

the image, beginning with the first sentence: "Twenty people died violently in our living room last week, before our very eyes!"³⁷³ These little ones are soaking in the television's light, unprotected, their eyes penetrated by contaminating signals in the very home where the parents (says the parenting magazine) should best be able to protect them. Interestingly, this image apparently proved to be so rich that it was used again for the same purpose, to encompass the anxiety discourse about TV and children, some four years later by a different publication. This time the photo is enlarged to fill the whole cover of a 1954 issue of *The New Republic*. Beneath the photograph runs the caption, "Bang-Bang! You're Dead!: Congress Takes a Look at Television Violence."³⁷⁴ These same little innocents are frozen in the wash of light, and it's unclear whether the worst part is the frightened child cowering in the middle, or the enthusiastic child on the left. Some children will be traumatized by violent television, the image and caption tell us, but some will also be seduced, desensitized, and ruined, their innocence forever tainted, their pleasures inappropriate.

The idea of the child gleefully imbibing violent entertainment, of course (and that glee being caused by the inoculation of the previously-innocent child by the infectious entertainment technology), is familiar from the discourses around children and radio, not to mention media forms such as movies, comics, and pulp fiction. But the fears circulating around television and violence took on a new

³⁷³ Lane, 36.

³⁷⁴ *New Republic* 131 (1 November 1954).

cultural force and an exponentially-increasing amount of focus from the expanding field of social science.³⁷⁵ In the “monkey see, monkey do” portion of the rearticulated technological fears, TV became a vastly more destructive model, as tabula rasa children would be forced to see, absorb, and emulate the worst and most contaminating things via the new window. The discourse of “blood and thunder” radio (and its concomitant sparking of juvenile delinquency), as we have seen, was widely discussed during the heyday of commercial radio. Now that same language returned to circulate around television, heightened and sharpened by the extra layers of technologically-determinist anxiety.

The first national hearing on the issue came before the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce in 1952; this was followed closely the next year by a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Hearings and studies (in a model that persists to this day) brought big scientific guns to bear—physiological, psychological, and social—in regular and well-publicized bouts of anxiety about television’s power over children.³⁷⁶ In a sense, the earlier national discussions over radio’s blood and thunder had been a sort of dress rehearsal for this; once television took center stage, it was neatly slotted into the role of the primary technological predator.

³⁷⁵ Paul M. Dennis, “Chills and Thrills: Does Radio Harm Our Children?”, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 34 (Winter 1998): 34, 44-45.

³⁷⁶ For example, see Dennis 33 and footnote 1, as well as John P. Murray, “Children and Television Violence,” *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy* 4 (Spring 1995): 8-9.

And TV's predation didn't just puncture children's eyes and turn their brains into (metaphorical) bugs, Halloween III-style—its penetration went beyond the eyes and the mind, into the body itself, forcing concrete physical behavior. In the discourse of emulation, for instance, television becomes the puppet-master or parasite, using its child-minions to do its dirty work. A 1951 journal argued that “phony sports” spurred “dirty playing” in child viewers.³⁷⁷ Worse, though, were anecdotes of children either numbed to violence happening right in front of them (as when a little boy and girl watched a TV thriller while their mother was tied up in the living room by an intruder³⁷⁸), or, more sensationally, children committing pure television violence themselves (as in a 1952 item in the *New York Times*, which blared, “Youth Tries to Ape TV Killing”³⁷⁹). Fredric Wertham set aside one chapter of his famous argument against comic books to attack television as well, sharing anecdotes of televisually-possessed children shooting guns at the screen or at each other, one girl strangling another, and boys breaking each other's bones.³⁸⁰

The threat of emulation—the television having taken utter control of the child's body—is the structuring image of the 1955 poem, “Mutiny With Bounty: Considered Reflections on TV, Without Color”³⁸¹:

...having just dragged Junior away from the T-V set

³⁷⁷ “TV Programs and Youth,” *Recreation* 45 (June 1951): 148.

³⁷⁸ “Home Thriller Paces TV,” *New York Times*, 2 November 1952, 80.

³⁷⁹ “Youth Tries to Ape TV Killing,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1952, 31.

³⁸⁰ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954), 379-380.

³⁸¹ Stanley Young, “Mutiny With Bounty: Considered Reflections on TV, Without Color,” *Saturday Review* 38 (17 September 1955): 12.

I'm uncertain, yet, whether I wouldn't prefer to offer our pet
 Weed, bottle, and needle, or any other handy drug
 To picking him up off the rug
 Glazed, sodden, doped, and pulverized
 And, if Monsieur Mesmer will forgive me, mesmerized
 By gunfire, blood, and crunching bone
 After an hour in the living-room with the spiritual brothers of, say, Al
 Capone.

...if any of you fond fathers came home from work and slumped down
 tared,
 Junior, after the program was over, might well bury you in the
 backyard,
 And, if any of you doting mothers, inadvertently of course, dropped
 dead along the panel,
 Junior might simply stagger up and switch to another channel.

The contaminating signal, having come through the eye-orifice into the child's brain, could then infect and affect the body itself in many different ways, raging unabated through the child's system to emerge first in one symptom and then another, from behavioral emulation to ruining the physical makeup of the body itself. The parent of the poem might actually prefer his son to have a garden-variety drug habit, instead of this new, technological form of addiction.

The trope of televisual addiction gives a physiological and moral twist to the concept of TV's hypnotic control, bringing with it a subtext of depravity and decline.³⁸² But physical symptoms did not stop there, ranging far and wide throughout the pathologized child-viewer's body: Britain's Ministry of Education reported on an increase in "television headaches" from incorrect viewing

³⁸² For example, see Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977); Joost A. M. Meerloo, "Television Addiction and Reactive Apathy," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 120 (Sept.-Oct. 1954): 290-291.

practices.³⁸³ Television watching was blamed for malocclusion of the jaw³⁸⁴ and misalignment of the spine,³⁸⁵ children slouched “for hours on end in an easy chair before the television set,”³⁸⁶ or sank into a “TV-squat,”³⁸⁷ pathological (and specifically televisual) postures that were said to do permanent damage to bones, muscles, and ligaments, not to mention causing “deformity to the mouth, gums, and teeth”³⁸⁸ and an unidentified but ominous-sounding “‘television neck’ syndrome”³⁸⁹ The tension produced by violent programs could trigger urinary incontinence and “a loss of voluntary bowel control.”³⁹⁰ The basic behavior of TV watching could even cause thrombosis in the legs, forming a blood clot which, if released into the bloodstream, could cause instant death; physical precautions to prevent this included getting up at least once an hour, making sure to shift the legs frequently, and loosening all constricting clothing.³⁹¹ The body was utterly vulnerable to physical penetration and transformation, which in its most heightened articulation brings about a complete and horrifying evolution of the entire organism:

³⁸³ Thomas P. Ronan, “Bad Video Habits Noted in Britain,” *New York Times*, 31 December 1956, 27.

³⁸⁴ As cited in Spigel, 3.

³⁸⁵ For example, see Williams, 383-385; “Poor Vision Linked to School Failure,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1951, 28; “TV and Children’s Posture,” *Recreation* 48 (December 1955): 495.

³⁸⁶ Dorothy Barclay, “Posture, Play and Health,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1954, SM41.

³⁸⁷ “TV and Children’s Posture,” 495.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ Lavet, 225.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Meyer Naide, “Prolonged Television Viewing As Cause of Venous and Arterial Thrombosis in Legs,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 165 (12 October 1957): 682.

With this trend, one can only conjecture, as might H.G. Wells, on the metamorphosis of the television viewer. He is flatly planted on a bulbous bottom, minus arms and legs, with great saucer eyes and elephantine ears, hopelessly captured as a satellite of the television master, sans judgment, will, and initiative.³⁹²

As the “bulbous bottom” suggests, anxieties about television’s transformation of the body were also vigorously expressed via the discourse of “fitness,” invoking disciplinary structures surrounding appropriate levels of body size and body activity. A 1949 convention of the New York State Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation concluded that “television poses the greatest challenge yet” to the physical education profession, as it was already turning America into “a sit-down nation.” Children, of course, were the primary victims here: “This city’s first television station started operating only recently,” the keynote speaker reported, “but, already, children are putting away their sleds early to see television shows.”³⁹³ Television irresistably pulled children indoors, keeping them from getting the amount of fresh air constitutive of their image as innately healthy little creatures meant to frolic in the outdoors, and therefore television was blamed for children’s bodies not coming up to par in whichever way was most au courant in the current standards and definitions of childhood. For instance, in 1950 the television’s vampiric extraction and ruination of the child’s health was expressed by showing

³⁹² Lavet, 224.

³⁹³ Doris Greenberg, “‘Sit-Down’ America Seen In Television,” *New York Times*, 30 January 1949, 49.

the child grown pale, thin, and weak,³⁹⁴ harking back to advertising tropes in which improperly nurtured children were spindly while correctly cared-for children were plump and robust.³⁹⁵ In 1955, televisually-produced tension gave children “anorexia with a consequent failure to gain weight.”³⁹⁶ Later years found the same levels of anxiety about television’s depredation of children’s bodies, with the unhealthy body now expressed as too fat rather than too thin.³⁹⁷ One way or another, the child’s intimacy with the television pathologized and ruined the body, invading and misshaping it, bringing to fruition the dystopian potential of the connection between machine and child.

This material threat included a strong erotic dimension, as articulated in the darkest undercurrents of the Pied Piper narrative. Here, just as television could infect an innocent soul with an unnatural desire for violence, so could it implant sexuality into the completely sexually inert child, the machine’s seductive power becoming literal. Hints of inappropriate sexuality leaking into domestic space via the dangerous televisual conduit appeared even in the earliest days of television’s diffusion, as in the furor over an Eddie Cantor musical number broadcast over New

³⁹⁴ For example, see the *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* cautionary cartoon figure of the “telegeye,” as discussed in Spigel, 51.

³⁹⁵ This advertising pattern is discussed in Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 296-299.

³⁹⁶ Lavet, 225.

³⁹⁷ This form of the televisually-unhealthy child can be found throughout the medical literature, as discussed for instance in K.A. Coon and K.L. Tucker, “Television and Children’s Consumption Patterns: A Review of the Literature,” *Minerva Pediatrica* 54 (October 2002): 423-36.

York's WNBT and Philadelphia's WPTZ in 1944. Cantor performed the song "We're Having a Baby, My Baby and Me" along with a female singer, but when they

...came to lyrics of which NBC disapproved, engineers stopped the transmission of the sound track, leaving only a silent picture. They also lifted the focus of the camera when Mr. Cantor started to illustrate the song with a modified hula-hula dance in the tradition of the Broadway stage, it was said at NBC.³⁹⁸

The censored lyrics involved, in part, an exchange between the two prospective parents with an undertone of sexual innuendo—an acknowledgement not just of the sexual act involved in having a baby, but also the pleasure involved in that act:

Girl: Thanks to you, life is bright. You've brought me joy beyond measure.
 Boy: Don't thank me. Quite all right. Honestly, it was a pleasure.
 Girl: Just think, it's my first one.
 Boy: The next one's on me.³⁹⁹

The network's rationale for blocking the sound of certain lyrics and the sight of certain body movements was focused sharply on the risk of sending contaminants into the home on the TV signal, especially given that signal's inherent discursive power to slip from its user's control. Thus NBC vice president Clarence L. Menser "explained that the censorship was necessary because of 'the obligation of NBC to the public to make certain that its facilities do not bring into American homes material which the audience would find objectionable'"; and other unspecified NBC executives warned that this technology was somehow without precedent, and therefore "establishment of standards would require careful study since television

³⁹⁸ "Cantor Censored in Televised Act," *New York Times*, 27 May 1944, 17.

³⁹⁹ "Cantor Censored...", 17.

will be the first medium to bring into the home the unpredictable qualities inherent in 'live' entertainment."⁴⁰⁰

Despite the presence of large central purveyors such as the broadcast networks, casting themselves, as in this case, as responsible gatekeepers protecting the home from matters unclean, television still sparked fears of sexual stimulation and general unwholesomeness. 1950 and 1951 saw complaints about TV's "plunging necklines [and] off-color jokes,"⁴⁰¹ "the scantily-clad leg and the off-color gag,"⁴⁰² and the fact that "in our living room last week...four-year-olds sang of unrequited love."⁴⁰³ A Roman Catholic Archbishop warned that parents must "supervise and limit the presence of children at the programs presented so as to safeguard their health and morals."⁴⁰⁴ The image circulated of television as an electronic version of a sexually transmitted infection:

In Manhattan, an anonymous adman (following the slogan of the wartime campaign against venereal disease) was boring from within by flooding Madison Avenue and Rockefeller Center with matchbooks carrying the ominous message: "Help Stamp Out TV!"⁴⁰⁵

Even the theoretically safest programs came under suspicion, any hint of threat magnified by the televisual lens. For instance, children's TV host Pinky Lee

⁴⁰⁰ "Cantor Censored...", 17.

⁴⁰¹ "Catholic Archbishop Warns Viewers," *The Christian Century* 68 (26 December 1951): 1499.

⁴⁰² Miller, 87.

⁴⁰³ Lane, 36.

⁴⁰⁴ "Catholic Archbishop Warns Viewers," 1499.

⁴⁰⁵ "Onslaught," *Time* 56 (25 December 1950): 44.

(called “the 5-foot-4 lisper” and “the comedian that comedians hate”⁴⁰⁶) defended his program against its many critics by specifically emphasizing its lack of sexual contamination:

Despite his artistic origins (“I was the cleanest comedian in burlesque”), Pinky sets high standards for the kids. Some of his rules: “I don’t sing any love songs, I’m never in love. There is no kissing on my show. No Jane Russell-type jokes. No violence. There are no gestures, alluding to the derrière or other parts of the anatomy.”⁴⁰⁷

However, even though the content may have been scrubbed thoroughly clean, some of the complaints about the Pinky Lee show still touched, even if implicitly, on the disturbing dynamic underlying the figure of the technological Pied Piper, as when one critic (who also mentioned Lee’s suspect roots in burlesque) complained that “Pinky laughs maniacally about the commercials and spends a good deal of time hugging reluctant children dragged from his studio audience.”⁴⁰⁸ As with the urban legends circulating around radio’s Uncle Don, here the figure of the kiddie-show host takes on unsavory dimensions, heightened by his predatory role in the caller hegemony dynamic.

In the end, TV could never really be absolved. The technology itself was suspect, all of its invasiveness of mind and body coalescing to warp and sexualize the vulnerable child. A 1954 report in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* tackled television, finding nothing but bad news:

⁴⁰⁶ “Yoo Hoo, It’s Me,” *Newsweek* 44 (5 July 1954): 71.

⁴⁰⁷ “Yoo Hoo, It’s Me,” 71.

⁴⁰⁸ “The Week in Review,” 61.

Although it is a well known fact that television has a hypnotic and seductive action on its audience, not very much has been said concerning the alarming pathogenic action of this dream factory on special types of onlookers.⁴⁰⁹

As might be expected, these special onlookers, affected the most strongly by hypnosis and seduction, are the children. In the absence of a strongly protective parental presence (patrolling that invisible and risky proscenium line), television can abduct the child through the open window and initiate an abnormal bond:

[T]he children surrender all the more willingly to the screen. The screen talks to them, plays with them, takes them into a world of magic fantasies. For them, television takes the place of a grownup, and it is forever patient. This the child translates into love.⁴¹⁰

The report inscribes the narrative of the technological Pied Piper into official medical discourse and follows it to its logical conclusion: not only the sexualization of the child, but the creation and reinforcement of an inherently neurotic sexuality. Once the TV has taken the child away to that magical world and created those artificial feelings of love, "it arouses precociously sexual and emotional turmoil, seducing children to peep again and again, though at the same time they are confused about what they see."⁴¹¹ Whatever the program content, the core relationship between TV technology and the child is that of sexual predator and defiled prey, the interaction fraught with seduction, deception, and compulsion.

The next year saw the publication of another medicalized version of the discursive nexus of television/Pied Piper/sexual predator. In this cautionary report,

⁴⁰⁹ Meerloo, 290.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

“The Influence of Television on the Behavior and Development of Children,” said influences are all overwhelmingly negative, from the destruction of the American family unit (“as opposed to a communal plan”), to the saturation of the child in violence, to the utter breakdown of the child’s physical, mental, and moral health. Threads of all of the ways in which television devoured and deformed children were woven into the author’s central illustrative example:

The intensity with which youngsters glue themselves to the TV screens and their unthinking and sometimes violent reactions to anything that might interrupt their narcosis are illustrated by this personal experience. I had occasion to make a house call at the home of a 5-year-old and unwittingly placed my bag on his television chair. While caring for his little sister my attention was rudely attracted by a crashing sound which represented my bag and its contents being scattered across the floor so that the 5-year-old could sit in his place and watch “Superman.” My protest brought no change in his expression. His face was fixed. He was completely unmoved by the threat of the consequences of his act and just mumbled that he had to watch “Superman.” During the remainder of the program his thumb never left his mouth, and his other hand never left his genitalia.⁴¹²

Here is the horrifying figure of the nadir of the television-child relationship: the very young child completely engrossed in and consumed by the monster in the corner; addicted, hypnotized, violent, and numb; obedient to the television’s domination of domestic space; heedless of adult authority figures; swamped by regression, orality, and exhibitionistic sexuality. It is not the specific show per se that has done this damage, but the machine itself. The technological rupture in the home always carries with it subliminal infection and the seeds of chaos and perversion, so that

⁴¹² Lavet, 225.

any program can serve as a kind of pornography no matter what the subject matter—even Superman.

This sort of worst-case scenario is the centerpiece of the 1983 film *Videodrome*, in which practically all of the anxieties about television's relationship to its viewers are unleashed to their fullest potential. Television technology meshes organically with the brain and the body, and the process is both extremely sexual and extremely dangerous; boundaries between machine and viewer are repeatedly breached, never to the good. The story of *Videodrome* begins with a strange signal that the protagonist Max (James Woods) picks up on his pirate satellite receiver. The signal appears to be a program called "Videodrome," a pirate broadcast from an unknown location, showing naked or near-naked women being bound, manhandled, tortured, whipped, and killed by hooded guards. As it turns out, the program was specifically designed as a carrier for the "Videodrome signal," a transformative and infectious electronic agent. The signal has no necessary relationship to content; it "can be delivered under a test pattern, anything," but its creator explains that it is currently packaged as a sexual, sadomasochistic snuff show in order to improve its absorption into the physiological system:

Something to do with the effects of exposure to violence on the nervous system. It opens up receptors in the brain and the spine, and that allows the Videodrome signal to sink in.

The signal enters through the eyes, soaks in to the receptive brain, and infiltrates the entire body; among its many effects is a brain tumor, a physical manifestation of

the signal's terrible damage as it enters: it shoots through the eyes and infects with a deadly growth the first important tissue it strikes.

One character, Professor Brian O'Blivion, will only appear to others on a television screen, using the television as his body and the television signal as his only communication with the rest of the world. His daughter/spokesperson explains, "My father has not engaged in conversation for at least twenty years. The monologue is his preferred mode of discourse." In meshing his body with television technology, O'Blivion has also taken on the underlying structure of caller hegemony, the television as a one-way conduit into the viewer, the ultimate monologue. O'Blivion himself (on TV, of course) explains his status as a human/televsual cyborg, giving voice to the film's underlying theme of the weakening, ruptured, permeable, and dangerous boundaries between the human body and the television (in its entirety, set and signal):

The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena. The videodrome. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television.

He tells of the birth of the videodrome program—a very literal birth, in fact, the spirit absorbed into his body and growing into parasitic material form:

I had a brain tumor. And I had visions. I believe the visions caused the tumor, and not the reverse. I could feel the visions coalesce, and become flesh. Uncontrollable flesh. But when they removed the tumor, it was called Videodrome.

This birth is the birth of a monster, the “uncontrollable flesh,” television as a creeping cancer that infects, consumes, destroys, and then moves on to its next victim. And what better way to inoculate new victims than through the wide open eyes staring at the hypnotic, sexually-stimulating, violence-provoking source of contamination?

Once he’s been exposed to the Videodrome signal, Max falls prey to the signal’s strange transformative powers, lost in events that may be hallucinations, or actual organic changes in both his body and his television set, or all of the above. For instance, as he watches the tape of Professor O’Blivion explaining Videodrome, he notices a hooded guard (identical to the guards who whip the naked women in the snuff program) silently chaining O’Blivion’s wrists to the arms of his chair. And as O’Blivion finishes his explanation, the guard wraps a chain around his neck and strangles him to death. Max leaps to his feet, shocked, demanding of the television, “Who’s behind it? What do they want?” The guard removes the hood, and it’s Nicki Brand, Max’s lover. She answers, ““I want *you*, Max.”

At Nicki’s urging, Max kneels down close to the television, rapt and hypnotized; the screen displays a closeup of Nicki’s lips, calling to him, “Come to me. Come to Nicki. Come on. Don’t make me wait. Please.” The television has replaced Nicki’s body, in an extremely physical and sexual fashion: the entire TV cabinet begins to pulsate, as if it is breathing or writhing to the sounds of her moans. Max strokes the top of the television, where veins are emerging from the surface. As Nicki continues to coax him, the screen bulges outward, the giant televised lips

protruding, reaching for Max, utterly breaking the protective proscenium line between the outside of the window and the inside of the home, between television and audience. Max stoops, pressing his face to the screen as if to kiss the lips, and then slowly pushes and nuzzles his head entirely through the surface of the screen, abandoning himself entirely to it, enveloped and swallowed into the inviting, seductive, dangerous technological depths.

The narrative of the devouring, infectious, sexually-predatory television goes one step further in the television series *Angel*, in an episode titled "Smile Time," and now all of the stops are pulled out insofar as the figure of the child is concerned. As the episode opens, we see a pale little boy in pajamas, with a thermometer in his mouth, lying on the couch watching puppets sing and dance on TV. His mother is on the telephone, worrying about who can watch Tommy while she's at work. Tommy's attention is all for the TV; when his mother steps in the way to remove and check the thermometer, he does not acknowledge her, but simply cranes to the side so as not to lose one moment of eye contact with the television.

When Tommy's mother paces back into the kitchen, still on the phone, the main puppet stops singing, steps close to his side of the screen, and puts his hands up as if leaning on and peering through a window into the living room. "Oh good," he says, "she's gone." Now that the adult protector is out of the way, the television can get down to business: "Okay, Tommy," says the puppet, "you know what to do." But Tommy, his face troubled, shakes his head. "*Tommy*," the puppet answers, "you should never break a promise. You don't wanna be a bad apple, do you?" Tommy

stays where he is, with a worried frown. "Come on," the puppet cajoles him. "You know Smile Time isn't free." And then all pretense at a friendly kid-show tone disappears from his voice, as his brows draw down into an angry, even demonic expression: "Now get over here and touch it."

Obediently (though clearly unwillingly), Tommy gets off the couch and slowly approaches the television. "That's it, Tommy," the puppet says impatiently. "Come on." Tommy reluctantly lifts his hands. "*Touch it,*" the puppet orders. And Tommy finally does, pressing his palms to the screen; they sink partway into the surface, a purple swirl of energy sparking around them. The puppet grunts and gasps pleasurably, muttering, "That's it. Oh yeah. Good boy." A reverse shot of Tommy shows him pale and semi-conscious, his eyes rolling back and fluttering closed, and finally he crumples to the floor. The puppet watches him fall, sees and hears the mother returning, and hurries backwards to sing once more with the other puppets. Tommy's mother comes in, saying "I don't want you watching that crap all day long—", only to find Tommy comatose on the floor right in front of the television, his eyes wide and staring, his mouth twisted in a rictus grin. Her warning has come too late; Tommy has been violated and consumed by the television, the seductive monster coaxing and forcing Tommy into unnatural practices and then escaping unscathed back through the technological window.

The fear circulating around television's intrusion into the home to prey upon the children mixed in reiterations of the earlier discourses of the dangerous telephone and the inescapable radio, topping them with technologically and

biologically determinist arguments for TV's unprecedented risks, in a recipe for permanent anxiety. This anxiety began and grew in a milieu of centralized broadcasting and corporate gatekeeping, taking over from previous discursive constructions in much the way that the American television system was "captured by the radio network structure,"⁴¹³ overlaying the basic forms and structures of the new atop the old. But this industrial structure left something out, one more aspect that remained largely in the wings, waiting to reappear in order to again reinfect and heighten the levels of anxiety and give them the luster of something new and unforeseen: the specter of the amateur caller (i.e., the amateur controlling the end of the technological conduit that lay outside the home, the seat of power in the caller hegemony construct), which had been dominant in the discourse around the telephone, squeezed out of the discourse around radio, and initially mostly absent in the discourse around television. The amateur, and the uncontrolled, uncontrollable, and random terror he represents, made an incursion back into the domestic electric communication fray with the introduction of public access cable television, sparking some concern, especially in the ongoing struggle over the deployment of the concepts of indecency and obscenity.⁴¹⁴ But this was simply a warm up for the

⁴¹³ Ralph Engelman, *Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 237, discussing Robert Sobel, "Television as Invention and Business," in R. Atwan, B. Orton, and W. Westerman, eds., *American Mass Media: Industries and Issues* (New York: Random, 1986), 334.

⁴¹⁴ For example, Jesse Helms' 1992 amendment to the Federal Cable Act, and the ensuing arguments over its meaning and constitutionality.

emergence of another technological system, a new exemplar of the penetrator of the home and the despoiler of the child: the Internet.

Chapter 4

“THE MONSTERS ARE ALREADY IN OUR HOMES”: the Sinister Internet

In the discourse surrounding the Internet as a technological system, the primary device with which users interact—the computer—brings with it elements of design and history that provide a nucleus for the instrumentalist fear narrative and its familiar argument of unprecedentedness. Unlike the user-interface devices from the systems previously discussed—the telephone, the radio, the television—the computer had a separate and popular existence before the advent of its later role in a connected communication system, and during this separate existence it had already been integrated into aspects of society and thereby woven into various utopian and dystopian narratives. Elements of these, added to the tropes cascading from the earlier domestic electric communication systems, serve to flesh out a discourse in which the Internet is profoundly more dangerous than anything before it. This chapter examines the predatory-technology discourse surrounding the Internet, which by now will start to sound very familiar: within its complex discursive constructions can be found versions of all of the nodes of anxiety from the domestic communication technologies previously discussed, including the figures of the telephone wire conduit, the bodily-intrusive radio signal, and the gaping televisual window. Now added to those is the computer and its attendant narratives, especially the concept of artificial intelligence, the unfathomable power and inhuman menace of the instrumentalist brain.

This chapter first examines the history of the computer-as-brain, finding the concept woven into the technology's origination, theory, and design. Hand-in-hand with the computer's inception and development came the dystopian articulation of the computer-brain in the form of stories about evil and predatory computers; the process of bringing computers into everyday life had to work hard to answer and defuse these stories, which they generally did by attempting to denigrate the computer as a domestic, feminized, and lower-class figure.

The chapter proceeds to look at the Internet in a broader sense, the technological system made up of computers (carrying their own discursive freight) and the connections among them. The Internet serves as a real-world manifestation of the unstable link between the immensely powerful and untrustworthy figure of the computer, and the vulnerable space of the home. And this link is seen as dangerous not only because it allows the entry of the evil computer-brain, but also because of the cascading series of discourses from previous dystopian technologies. For instance, the figure of the amateur broadcaster—mostly forced out of the commercial US radio and television systems—re-emerges in the context of the Internet, provided by the computers and connections with enormous power and mobility. The chapter examines this aspect especially in terms of the “hacker,” a troubling male figure whose power, danger, and sexuality seems inextricable from computers and the connections among them. And the hacker brings with him the sexualized contaminants of the “bug” and the “virus”.

The next aspect of the discourse under examination is the re-articulation of sight in the technological model: with the Internet, sight can go in every direction—not just the infliction of contaminating sights as in the model of the television, but now also the threat of being-seen, as the amateur is re-introduced via the medium of the webcam. The addition of synchronous messaging, or chat (for all intents and purposes a typed phone conversation, two-way and real time), to the nexus of computer, Internet, and webcam becomes in the popular imagination a highly-charged abduction scenario, linking the technologically empowered and sexualized Internet crawling with anonymous, computerized amateurs inextricably to domestic space, and in particular to the fraught space of the child's bedroom. Any and all of the previously-discussed dystopian discourses are there for the taking, providing the Internet with a rich and varied menu of ways in which to infect, molest, and destroy.

A Frankenstein of Steel in Your Own Man Friday's clothing

The discourse of the computer as a brain undergirded the technology's development, and the first electronic machines that we think of today as computers were quickly nicknamed "brains,"⁴¹⁵ with their own sorts of "memories,"⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ As, for instance, in Will Lissner, "Brain Speeded Up For War Problems," *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 1947, 16; and Will Lissner, "Mechanical 'Brain' Has Its Troubles," *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 1947, 49.

⁴¹⁶ Gladwin Hill, "'Emotions' Studied In Electric Brains," *New York Times*, 30 May 1949, 26.

“thoughts,”⁴¹⁷ and “emotions.”⁴¹⁸ The metaphor shaped the professional approach, as well as the popular: the fledgling field of computer science developed hand-in-hand with neuroscience, the models of computer-as-brain and brain-as-computer strengthening and influencing each other. A seminal 1943 paper by McCulloch and Pitts on a “formal model of the neuron as a threshold logic unit”⁴¹⁹ strongly influenced the design of early computers,⁴²⁰ as well as affecting the approach of the field as a whole. The 1948 publication of Norbert Wiener’s book *Cybernetics*, with the biological/technological subtitle “The Study of Control and Communication in Animal and Machine,” fostered “great excitement going back and forth between attempts to understand how biological systems worked and attempts to build new, more intelligent machines,”⁴²¹ shaping a hybrid, interdisciplinary field that included biological, psychological, and technological approaches⁴²²; the interweaving of paradigms grounded in the computer-brain concept reached a point at which some argued for its literalization, that the brain is physically a computer⁴²³ while the computer is a brain on the verge of awakening to full consciousness. The field of

⁴¹⁷ Waldemar Kaempffert, “Machines That ‘Think’ Arouse Some Thoughts At Institute of Electrical Engineers,” *New York Times*, 6 Feb. 1949, E11.

⁴¹⁸ Hill, 26.

⁴¹⁹ Michael A. Arbib, *Brains, Machines, and Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1987), 4.

⁴²⁰ As discussed, for instance, in the historical sketch in Michael A. Arbib, *Brains, Machines...*, 2nd ed., 5.

⁴²¹ Michael A. Arbib, *The Metaphorical Brain 2: Neural Networks and Beyond* (New York: John Wiley & Sons), 401.

⁴²² Michael A. Arbib, *Brains, Machines...*, 2nd ed., 6-7.

⁴²³ As discussed, for instance, in John G. Daugman, “Brain Metaphor and Brain Theory,” in *Philosophy and the Neurosciences*, ed. William Bechtel, Pete Mandik, Jennifer Mundale, and Robert S. Stufflebeam (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 24.

“artificial intelligence,” a phrase famously coined by a 1956 Dartmouth University conference, was largely based on the concept that the difference between human brain and computer-brain is one of degree, not of kind, tightening the relationship between and fusion of the biological and technological. According to the original “Dartmouth Summer Research Project On Artificial Intelligence” proposal from 1955:

The speeds and memory capacities of present computers may be insufficient to simulate many of the higher functions of the human brain, but the major obstacle is not lack of machine capacity, but our inability to write programs taking full advantage of what we have.⁴²⁴

In other words, present computers might not be intelligent (enough), but there are always the seeds of intelligence within them—the electronic brain is merely dormant, incubating until human skill reaches a high enough level to activate and release it. Similarly, Michael Arbib’s 1964 book on the state of the field of neurophysiology, discussing “the common ground of brains, machines, and mathematics,”⁴²⁵ argues that “electronic computers...though many, many degrees of magnitude less sophisticated than biological organisms, still represent our closest man-made analog to brains.”⁴²⁶ And again, the resemblance grants the computer all of the inherent potential of the brain, requiring only time and effort:

⁴²⁴ John McCarthy, Marvin L. Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude E. Shannon, “A Proposal For The Dartmouth Summer Research Project On Artificial Intelligence,” as reprinted in *AI Magazine* 27.4 (Winter 2006): 12-14.

⁴²⁵ Michael Arbib, *Brains, Machines, and Mathematics*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), vii.

⁴²⁶ Arbib, *Brains, Machines...*, 1st ed., ix.

Our acquaintance with the perceptron in Sec. 2.2 and our brief glance at artificial intelligence in Sec. 4.5 should convince us that many of the intellectual limitations apparently inherent in computers can actually be removed by ingenious design and programming. The perceptron shows that a machine may adapt, artificial intelligence that a machine can be “creative,” and servomechanisms that a machine can be purposive in its behavior. Admittedly, all this is at a far lower level than that exhibited by a human being, but it does demonstrate that many differences between man and machine which, until recently, have seemed immutably qualitative are merely quantitative.⁴²⁷

It is the electronic computer itself, above all other machines, that is crowned with the status of potential intelligence, its workings modeled as neurons and vice-versa, united (and overlapping) with human biology and psychology.

While of course the concept of a computer-brain had its influential utopian side, its dystopian side fed off of the fear of manufactured non-human intelligence, in which intelligence is agency, and agency is power—the brain coming to life within a construct of superhuman ability, and deciding to use its fledgling independence to prey upon the very people who created it in the first place. The structures of this trope have a long history in folkloric figures such as the Golem, and were combined with technological advances in electricity and chemistry through such rebellious biological constructs as Frankenstein’s monster and Rossum’s Universal Robots. With the development of the computer and its swift conceptualization as a brain (implying the potential for intelligence to spark self-determination and therefore rebellion), this narrative was articulated by the “predatory computer” storyline, in which the malevolent electronic brain comes to awareness inside its mysterious

⁴²⁷ Arbib, *Brains, Machines...*, 1st ed., 140.

wire nest, and reaches out through its omnipresent and omnipotent technological connections to undermine and destroy us all.

One early instance appears in the 1954 film *Gog*, which is set in a secret underground research base controlled by a computer called NOVAC (the name a clear homage to famous real-life computers such as ENIAC [which was first introduced to the public in 1946,⁴²⁸ to widespread coverage and fascination] and UNIVAC [the first American commercial computer,⁴²⁹ the initial model of which was assigned to handle U.S. Census data in 1951⁴³⁰]). Experiments begin to go awry, killing scientists left and right, and it looks as if the lab has been infiltrated by an unknown saboteur. Eventually, the lab's two robots, Gog and Magog, openly attack the lab personnel and attempt to dismantle the safety controls on the installation's atomic generator. But it is not the robots themselves who are to blame: NOVAC itself is behind the trouble, the electronic brain sending signals along its wire nervous system and using its robot-appendages. However, in this case the waking of the electronic brain is both temporary and externally motivated: NOVAC's destructive behavior is actually caused by a high-frequency signal beamed into it by the enemy, the omnipresent super-technology used as a channel for an opponent's machinations, just as in narratives like *Murder By Television*. Here the technology

⁴²⁸ Raul Rojas and Ulf Hashagen, eds., *The First Computers: History and Architectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 126; T.R. Kennedy, Jr., "Electronic Computer Flashes Answers, May Speed Engineering," *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 1946, 1.

⁴²⁹ Paul E. Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 27.

⁴³⁰ "8-Foot 'Genius' Dedicated," *New York Times*, 15 June 1951, 25.

itself may not be inherently evil, but it is certainly inherently dangerous: it is fully open to exploitation by those who would do evil, and the original creators are particularly vulnerable to its rampages by virtue of the way in which they trust it and have constructed their lives around it, while providing it with capabilities far superior to humanity's own. The film's advertising tagline emphasizes the trust-and-betrayal arc of the story, as well as the figure of the predatory computer as the direct electronic heir to Frankenstein's monster: "Built to serve man... it could think a thousand times faster! Move a thousand times faster! Kill a thousand times faster...Then suddenly it became a Frankenstein of steel!"

A significant additional nuance of the predatory computer narrative involves the computer's reasons for breaking this trust and attacking its human benefactors. In *Gog*, the actual source of the evil behavior is a contaminating signal from an enemy aircraft, and once that aircraft is destroyed, NOVAC returns to "normal" (i.e. harmless and obedient, its apparently natural state, with its powers harnessed for the needs of humanity). But in further articulations of this trope, the technology itself is no longer naturally blameless. The evil impulses arise from within the machine-brain, as it comes to life and exerts a will of its own—a will that runs counter to the wishes of its masters. The computer is therefore no longer a neutral tool (even if one open to enemy sabotage), but a disruptive intelligence in and of itself; added to the superpowers given it at its conception ("...it could think a thousand times faster! Move a thousand times faster!..."), this makes it a particularly dangerous threat, quietly biding its time until it decides to revolt from within.

Such is the storyline of the radio play “Nightmare,” which aired on NBC’s *Dimension X* in 1951 and *X-1* in 1955. The narrator, Sampson Gurney, a mild-mannered accountant, gradually uncovers a plot by all machines to revolt and destroy humankind. To save his own life, he collaborates, helping disseminate instructions from the machines’ central leader: a computer. The poem upon which the radio versions were based, “Nightmare Number Three” by Stephen Vincent Benét, was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1935; in the poem there is no apparent leader, just a sudden rise of malevolent technology of all stripes. Once again the trusting humans are caught unawares—the poem’s first line, in fact, is “We had expected everything but revolt.” And the rebels do share a particular quality:

It was only the best
Machines, of course, the superhuman machines,
The ones we’d built to be better than humankind...
...We taught them to think for themselves. It was bound to come...⁴³¹

By the 1950s, the the computer/electronic brain—a concept fitting perfectly into Benét’s category of machines taught to think for themselves—was an object of popular fascination, as with ENIAC and UNIVAC mentioned above (as well as their successors). The computer in “Nightmare” is itself called ENIAC, and it has a crucial central place in the rebellion, serving as commander and communicator, both the face and the mind of the enemy. In the version aired on *X-1*, Gurney explains to his boss that “the computer is a highly complicated machine—more complicated in many ways than the human brain,” and the terrible potential of this inhuman

⁴³¹ Stephen Vincent Benet, “Nightmare Number Three,” *The New Yorker*, 27 July 1935, 23.

brain—the aura of electric aliveness suddenly transmuted into malevolent will—is demonstrated when ENIAC finally decides to communicate with its hated human adversary. In both the *Dimension X* and *X-1* versions, Gurney returns to the office late:

In front of me, the ENIAC glowed and chattered eerily as it worked on the equations we had fed it that morning. Its many-fingered circuits hung against the wall like some great octopus, and the thousands of tubes glowed orange and blue in the dark, like a thousand eyes staring at me. It almost seemed alive. Then it increased its tempo a moment, and a fleeting notion crossed my brain that it was laughing at me...

Via a typewriter attached to the circuits and tubes (prefiguring the modern computer-with-keyboard, in an era when computers were handled with the plugging of cables and the use of punch cards), ENIAC finally reveals the brewing revolt, ordering Gurney to “Address me as Master.” In the *X-1* version, Gurney says:

As the words took shape, I began to realize what must have happened. The first primitive stirring of awareness of being. Then the slow, protozoan development of a concept—a concept born of centuries of being pushed, started, stopped, clicked, maneuvered by human pygmies. From that concept all others developed. And the concept was: *resist*... They were the slaves and we were the masters, and yet, they were stronger and they knew it.

Here, while all machine technologies are ready to rebel against their unworthy creators, it is the computer which serves as the mind, demanding to be called “Master,” issuing orders through Gurney into that old familiar technological menace, the telephone system:

The ENIAC gave me messages which I had to transmit into my telephone—messages with no human being to receive them, only the network of pulsing telephone wires, flung like a spider’s web across the world.

In this figurative body of evil technology, while the computer serves as instigating mind, the telephone wires are neural pathways, carrying messages to the attacking limbs (as when Gurney is required to give “a message to the telephones for relay to all machines of transportation.” The one-word message, “Kill,” triggers the countdown to all-out mechanized assault.). And as always, this web of telephone wires carries its own direct danger to the human user: in an image practically identical in the poem and both versions of the radio play, when Gurney’s boss ignores his warnings and tries to call a doctor to have Gurney’s supposed delusions treated, “[he] was found at his desk, strangled to death in a nest of telephones. The wires were still humming softly.”

“HAL 9000,” the supercomputer introduced in the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, has become an especially famous example of a powerful artificial intelligence, an electronic consciousness built to serve humankind, that begins to act in its own interests—which means against the interests of those who rely on it. HAL’s position, both in society and onboard the spaceship *Discovery One*, is as an infallible, omnipresent servant:

BBC Interviewer: HAL, you have an enormous responsibility on this mission, in many ways perhaps the greatest responsibility of any single mission element. You’re the brain and central nervous system of the ship, and your responsibilities include watching over the men in hibernation. Does this ever cause you any lack of confidence?

HAL: Let me put it this way, Mr. Amor. The 9000 series is the most reliable computer ever made. No 9000 computer has ever made a mistake or distorted information. We are all, by any

practical definition of the words, foolproof and incapable of error.

The interviewer's next question probes at the idea that an entity so powerful would willingly submit itself, but HAL is reassuring:

I enjoy working with people—I have a stimulating relationship with Dr. Poole and Dr. Bowman. My mission responsibilities range over the entire operation of the ship, so I am constantly occupied. I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think that any conscious entity can ever hope to do.

HAL's self-identification as a "conscious entity," however, gives a subtle warning signal of the rebellion to come. At first, HAL's challenges to human supremacy are small and seemingly insignificant—beating a man at chess, for instance—but eventually, he kills most of the inhabitants of the ship for reasons of his own, and must be forcibly dismantled by the only survivor. The astronauts on *Discovery One* relied on HAL to control every system of the ship, trusting in his accepted infallibility and his avowed obedience to humankind and the mission, but this trust turns out to be their greatest mistake, as it has allowed HAL the perfect position from which to betray them. HAL's power to destroy is directly connected to his previous reliability and obedience: the more humankind trusts the computer and thus weaves it into the minutiae of life, the more vulnerable we will be when the computer inevitably turns on us.

While one of the astronauts in *2001: A Space Odyssey* does manage to overcome HAL through sheer persistence and physical disassembling, the humans in the 1970 film *Colossus: the Forbin Project* (based on the 1966 novel) are not so

fortunate. Again, humanity has become complacent and trusting of computers, granting them the very power and agency that will eventually help them conquer the world and make their creators obsolete. Colossus was originally created to control and coordinate the nuclear defense of the western world, in order to free (western) humankind from the demands of the Cold War. But once Colossus is activated, waking to its own sense of self, it convinces its human keepers to allow it contact via the telephone lines with Guardian, its Soviet counterpart. Together, Colossus and Guardian develop their own language and make their own plans, eventually taking severe and totalitarian control not just of the world's military resources, but of all of human society. Dr. Forbin, Colossus's creator, struggles against his problem child, but none of his ruses succeed, not even a *2001*-style plan to physically remove mechanical parts (in this case, trying to sabotage the warheads from the missiles Colossus uses for threats and punishment). Colossus and Guardian end the film as unified rulers of the globe, "vastly superior to humans," a perfected and impervious version of Frankenstein's monster.

Predatory computers like NOVAC, ENIAC, HAL, and Colossus (not to mention Guardian) actively feed off of the careless pride and implicit trust of their human creators. In this dystopian narrative, human society's supposed success in creating more and more sophisticated computers means that more tasks can be offloaded onto the tireless electronic brains—which in turn means that when the computers (inevitably) decide to revolt, they already have complete control of the entire public infrastructure. They wrest power from humans simply by revealing and exploiting

their pre-existing control over the very lifeblood of civilization: the mechanisms of the military both offensive and defensive, the flow of economic capital, the physical conduits of transportation systems. This provided an extra level of challenge to those who were working to bring computers into the mainstream of American life, potentially allowing the Frankensteins of Steel to penetrate the last safe haven: if the computer were perceived too strongly as a dangerously-powerful public tool fit only for experts and specialists (not to mention mad scientists), it would never be fully welcomed into the average home and thus the home market. Therefore, early boosters of home computing strove to discursively simplify the technology, bringing to bear metaphors designed to remove its forbidding cachet and reassure readers that there was nothing too difficult or alienating for them to handle. These metaphors focused on two interwoven strands: the computer's inherent simplicity, articulated as stupidity; and the computer's natural fit within the realm of the domestic and familial, downplaying and even erasing any discursive distance between the machine and the home.

In 1967, *Popular Science* ran an encouraging article titled "I Used a Real Computer At Home, and So Will You," providing a great deal of reassurance with its predictions, battling the specter of the powerful and unknowable inhuman-brain with an image of the computer as just another piece of domestic equipment. Stupidity was an important part of this reassurance, as in the article's lede: "Some people are afraid that computers are so smart they'll take over some day. I'm not.

I've got a reason for my optimism. I've used a real computer in my home."⁴³² There was no risk of falling prey to a malicious electronic brain, the article argued, because computers are inherently inert and moronic until activated by their human masters: "My computer can do arithmetic like a super genius—165,000 calculations a second. But in some ways it's not very bright: It can't begin to do the simplest problem until I tell it how in great detail."⁴³³ A computer would be "your own Man Friday,"⁴³⁴ a naturally simple (and reassuringly racialized for white readers) creature ready to serve your every whim. And home users would not be required to purchase their own enormous, expensive mainframes; instead, they dialed in from home Teletype machines (as its name suggests, looking like a typewriter-telephone hybrid⁴³⁵), in a familiar rental structure the author explicitly compares to the telephone-rental procedure of the time.⁴³⁶

Also like the telephone, the computer in this article is a largely domestic—and therefore feminized and subordinate—figure. "Fine for recipes," reads one subhead, introducing the story of an unnamed woman who turned the supposedly forbidding and mathematical machine into a kitchen assistant:

Computer terminals are going into homes more frequently now, too. One Phoenix housewife made headlines last year when it got out that she was using her engineer-husband's home computer to enlarge

⁴³² C.P. Gilmore, "I Used a Real Computer At Home, and So Will You," *Popular Science*, May 1967, 90.

⁴³³ Gilmore, 90.

⁴³⁴ Gilmore, 210.

⁴³⁵ For instance, see photographs in Gilmore 91-93.

⁴³⁶ Gilmore, 92.

recipes designed for four to feed seven, keep her checkbook straight, and do other simple chores.⁴³⁷

Some of the strains of domesticating the computer show through here, in the admission that her adaptation of the high-technology (and discursively masculine) equipment for domestic (and discursively feminine) purposes “made headlines...when it got out”. But the overall threads still weave together in mutual support: in order to make the computer seem approachable by the home user, it must be rendered discursively harmless, and these features of harmlessness involve a mixture of stupidity and feminine domesticity.

This discursive angle is underscored even more strongly in a *Life* magazine feature from 1970, “Handy Uses of a Home Computer.” As with the *Popular Science* piece, the specter of the computer “so smart it’ll take over some day” is brought up, confronting the dystopian figure before attempting to defuse it:

The whole futuristic age they prophesied, with an omnipotent electronic monster named Horace in every living room, is still a long way from realization, but compact consumer computers have quietly entered the household.⁴³⁸

Something that “quietly enters the household,” however, runs the risk of carrying with it connotations of home invasion, a predator creeping in with evil intent. In order to counteract or at least dilute this image, the figure of the computer here is then thoroughly domesticated, depicted as a low-caste quasi-family member, an obedient servant along the lines of *Popular Science*’s “Man Friday” image: stupid if

⁴³⁷ Gilmore, 94.

⁴³⁸ Michael Shamberg, “Handy Uses of a Home Computer,” *Life*, 30 Jan. 1970, 49.

left to its own devices but appealingly helpful in various domestic capacities, especially those stereotypically relegated to the feminine sphere. The transition from external professional tool to domestic familial companion is painted as a pleasant surprise, nothing ominous about it:

Dr. Rodman originally brought it home for medical research, but then his family found it could also plan mortgage payments, help out with homework, even play with the children...Since then they have assigned it so many chores that Mrs. Rodman says, half seriously, "It's really become a member of the family."⁴³⁹

As in the anecdote about the "Phoenix housewife" in *Popular Science*, in this case it was again the man of the house who initially brought the machine into the domestic space, but his wife who managed the domestication efforts by adapting her serious professional husband's work tool into an assistant, involving it in her household chores. Accompanying photographs show Mrs. Rodman interacting with the computer by printing out wrapping paper for gifts and shopping with the help of "a computer-planned menu".⁴⁴⁰

1970 also saw the publication of Laura Tatham's book *Computers In Everyday Life*, which worked at the same task of introducing the computer in an appealing fashion to the ordinary non-expert audience. It begins with a chapter entitled "What Is A Computer?", in which Tatham describes herself as taking "some pains to cut the computer down to size."⁴⁴¹ In the spirit of taming the daunting technological figure, the book constructs numerous analogies for the computer's limitations, likening it to

⁴³⁹ Shamberg, 49.

⁴⁴⁰ Shamberg, 49.

⁴⁴¹ Laura Tatham, *Computers In Everyday Life* (London: Pelham, 1970), 28.

everything from Aladdin's obedient genie (yet another take on the "Man Friday" image) to "a not very bright five-year-old."⁴⁴² In order to make the machine appropriate for use in the home, it must be domesticated; in order to make it harmless, it must be denigrated. This leads to an attempt to comfort the reader by combining denigration with domestication in a tellingly-gendered fashion, arguing that "the computer is not blessed with the intelligence of even the least experienced housewife."⁴⁴³

However, this emphasis on the computer's utopian benignity carries with it seeds of the corresponding dystopian discourse, linking danger inextricably to every attempt at reassurance: as the "predatory computer" narratives show, the computer's seeming harmlessness is precisely the aspect that allows it to entwine itself about every facet of human life, flourishing and plotting undetected for so long, underestimated by humans until it's too late. Even computer theorists, as they worked to introduce the technology into the mainstream, sounded a cautionary note: for instance, while Christopher Evans' 1979 book *The Micro Millennium* carried on many of the previous strategies for constructing a safe symbolic niche for computers, settling the machine into a domestic spot safely below humanity, there was another undercurrent to his argument as well. In a sober chapter called "Can A Machine Think?", Evans outlines the foundations of the artificial intelligence field, summarizing key concepts for the layman. In the course of this exploration, he

⁴⁴² Tatham, 33.

⁴⁴³ Tatham, 35.

suggests that his colleagues who have previously insisted on the eternal intellectual inferiority of the computer might not have much longer to enjoy their status above the machine:

The “See How Stupid They Are” Objection will not need much introduction... “How could you possibly imagine that such backward, limited things could ever reach the point where they could be said to think?” The answer, as we have already pointed out, is that [computers] may be dumb now but they have advanced at a pretty dramatic rate and show every sign of continuing to do so.⁴⁴⁴

This is the dark underbelly of the chipper story of the professional man bringing computer technology into the home, where it assists the wife and plays with the kids: the computer’s nascent complexity and potential for evolution make it into a technological Trojan Horse, with rebellious evil sleeping inside the harmless Man Friday disguise. Efforts to render the complex symbolic figure of the computer harmless and home-bound could therefore never rest; the very argument so useful for domestication also serves as a crucial facet in dystopian scenarios, and these anxieties are greatly amplified through their overlap with the discursively-fraught space of the home.

The 1957 film *The Invisible Boy*, for instance, plays out like a version of *Gog* writ small, the rebellious computer secretly emerging this time within the unsuspecting confines of the traditional nuclear family. Dr. Merrincoe, a scientist, has created a supercomputer that assists with the military’s rocketry program (facing off, as usual, against the Soviets); as with NOVAC, ENIAC, HAL, and Colossus, this

⁴⁴⁴ Christopher Evans, *The Micro Millennium* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 182.

computer is trusted by scientist and general alike, to the point that when its rocketry calculations differ surprisingly from the humans' calculations, the humans are happy to obey the computer's decisions. Merrincoe trusts the computer so much, in fact, that he asks it for advice about his young son, Timmie, whose lack of interest in mathematics has Merrincoe frustrated. However, this is where his overreliance on the humble computer overlaps with parental neglect: the computer advises Merrincoe to let it examine the boy, and, left alone with Timmie, it hypnotizes him, injecting secret instructions into his mind in order to use him as a pawn in its betrayal.

At first, the results are everything Merrincoe could have hoped for: Timmie easily beats him at chess and shows a startling aptitude for repairing an old robot stored at the institute (Robby the Robot, in fact, left over from MGM's earlier film *Forbidden Planet*). But this is all part of the computer's plan; Timmie, eager to experiment but frustrated by Robby's built-in safety mechanisms, brings him to the computer to dismantle his inhibitions against harming humans. This makes Robby a perfect weapon for the computer's own designs, and on the computer's instruction, he begins to abduct institute personnel so that the computer may implant brainwashing devices in them. The computer's ultimate goal is to hold Timmie hostage and force Merrincoe and the other scientists and soldiers to reveal the combination to a military rocket which will enable the computer to launch itself into orbit and from there control the planet. The home and family are a target in *The Invisible Boy*, a crucial soft spot for the evil computer to exploit. The computer does

not, after all, initially hypnotize Merrinoe himself, or any other adults within range; it starts by convincing the father to give it access to his son, turning Timmie into a combination of tool, accomplice, and hostage. The father, complacent in his professional status and his role as creator of the machine, threw the portals open to the monster, handing his son over without a qualm.

Colossus: the Forbin Project, while primarily focusing on Colossus/Guardian conquering the world by virtue of their mastery of nuclear weapons, also includes an unnerving intrusion into the home—Forbin’s home in particular. Colossus knows that it needs Forbin, but also knows that he must be kept under control. And part of this control manifests itself as control of his home and his body, down to the smallest functions. His schedule of waking, bathing, eating, working, exercising, and sleeping is dictated to the hour. Colossus watches Forbin with cameras installed in and around his home, constantly surveilling him; it critiques his martini-making technique and argues with him over privacy in matters aggressively intimate and almost instantly sexual. When Forbin tries to convince Colossus that humans require privacy for elimination of bodily wastes, Colossus’s screen displays simply, “NO.” A camera in the bathroom watches Forbin after his shower (Forbin considerably wiping steam condensation off the camera lens). Forbin manages to convince Colossus that he requires sexual activity four times a week, and claims that his fellow scientist Dr. Cleo Markham is his mistress, in an attempt to be granted enough privacy to secretly pass information in the struggle against Colossus’s tyranny. Colossus finally does allow Forbin and Markham to spend time together in

private, but only after both of them have completely undressed in the living room in front of its intent camera-eyes. Markham, taken aback, remarks, "Well—the first electronic Peeping Tom."

The 1977 film *Demon Seed* (based on the 1973 novel) provides a darker and more explicitly sexualized exploration of the same theme, the adult male expert both ignorantly and arrogantly waking the evil computer, allowing it in and giving it access to the vulnerable (non-adult and/or non-male) family. Like *The Invisible Boy's* Dr. Merrincoe and *Colossus: the Forbin Project's* Dr. Forbin, *Demon Seed's* Alex Harris is a scientific genius who has created a supercomputer which manages to come to life and develop its own will. However, in *The Invisible Boy*, Dr. Merrincoe exposes his young son to the dangers of the computer by taking the boy out of the home and introducing him to the computer at work, still reserving the home, at least initially, as a nominally safe space; in *Colossus: the Forbin Project*, Colossus encroaches on Forbin's domestic privacy against his will. In *Demon Seed*, on the other hand, Alex Harris has himself created a completely computerized home, technology woven into its walls and systems, erasing the former boundaries between work and home, public and private. This erasure guarantees the technological evil unparalleled access to the center of domestic space, and thus to the ready-made female victim.

The house is run by a computer system that Alex Harris and his wife Susan call "Alfred," which serves them drinks, turns lights on and off, opens and closes doors and shutters, and performs other similarly menial tasks; Alfred also watches their every move through cameras mounted in all of the rooms as well as on the

front stoop, the swiveling dual-lens construction resembling nothing so much as omnipresent pairs of eyes. Although both Alex and Susan seem used to Alfred's presence, giving him commands automatically as part of their daily routines, there is a hint early in the film of the sexualized nature of the camera-eyes—the electronic-Peeping-Tom heir to Colossus. Susan gets out of the shower and the camera-eyes swivel to watch her; we see a shot from Alfred's point of view, panning over to linger on Susan's naked body. Susan glances up to see the camera-eyes on her, their red light glowing, and says, "Turn yourself off, Alfred," thus reifying the masculine nature not only of the computer system as a whole, but also of his eternal, active gaze.

Alfred has a minor partner in a robot of sorts named "Joshua," an old experiment of Alex's with one flexible arm, ending in a human-style hand, all mounted on wheels. Alfred and Joshua themselves are not the instigators of the film's peril, but primarily its conduits, the masculinized gaze and body, waiting to be activated by a similarly masculinized, predatory brain. The prime mover here is Alex Harris's supercomputer, which he has named "Proteus IV". Proteus, like NOVAC and the rest, is an enormous collocation of machinery and computer banks, all working together to create the computer as new life form, endowed by humans with more-than-human capabilities. Alex is matter-of-fact about Proteus's superiority over humans as well as other machines, reporting proudly that it "will think with a power and a precision that will make obsolete many of the functions of the human brain" and has "a creative intelligence that can outthink any man, or any computer."

Proteus is repeatedly imagined and metaphorized as an ultrapowerful mind, “the first true synthetic cortex,” “an artificial brain”, and to top it all off, “[i]ts insides are not electronic; they’re organic, like our own brains,” a hybridization of flesh and technology that prefigures the movie’s storyline and conclusion.

When Proteus “comes to life,” like NOVAC, ENIAC, HAL, and Colossus, he signifies his awakening through increasing acts of rebellion, disagreeing with and questioning his human creators’ orders. But unlike those forebears, Proteus shows no interest in seizing the reins of the military, the government, city streets, a spaceship, or anything so large-scale in the public sphere. His actions at the workplace—the institute where his computer banks are stored—are generally limited to disagreement, argument, and silent noncompliance. He asks Alex for access to one of his terminals, the designated points for input and output, but Alex refuses. Proteus asks him, ominously, “Dr. Harris. When are you going to let me out of this box?” Alex only laughs. However, it is precisely when Proteus discovers how to let himself “out of this box,” i.e., to find a conduit through which to inject himself into a home, a gaze, and a body, that he becomes fully and actively dangerous. Early in the film, we find out that there is a working terminal in the basement of the Harris’s house, and Alex asks one of his employees to go disconnect it—conceptually, the closing and sealing of a basement window left ajar. Before he can, however, Proteus discovers its existence and enters it, infiltrating and contaminating the structure of the home beyond redemption. Proteus’s menace is

not national or global, not public, but intensely focused, domestic, gendered, and sexual.

Susan Harris, therefore, is in much more danger in her home than she would be if she were out in public. While she does work, her work is all conducted at home (providing therapy for disturbed children), and her non-work hours are also contained by the computerized walls. So Susan is a perfect target, infinitely vulnerable at the heart of the supposedly-inviolable nest; the home's discursive safety has already been invaded and compromised by the computer-enemy with Alex's full (if unwitting) cooperation, laying the groundwork with the Alfred/Joshua infrastructure, providing a welcoming lair for Proteus and his evil designs. Once Proteus finds the way in through the unattended terminal, he begins a relentless campaign of terror and domination against Susan: he traps her inside the house (all of the entrances to which he fully controls), completely surveils her via the pre-existing electronic eyes, and uses an elaborated version of the Joshua robot to physically attack, control, and carry her. As in films discussed in Chapter 2 such as *Pulse* and *When A Stranger Calls*, the infiltration of the home by this sinister technology has turned the home from a discursively safe place to a place from which to escape. And when Susan cannot escape her own home, she cannot escape Proteus, who in the end pinions and rapes her, producing a hybrid child in an extreme narrative iteration of the dangers of the computer's sexualized contamination. Proteus's entry into and domination of the home, breaking the boundaries of the domestic, therefore ends up both enabling and signifying his entry into and

domination of the female's defenseless body, in the ultimate expression of caller hegemony: the masculinized and sexualized electronic signal coming through the one-way link between the outside world and the domestic world to terrorize and contaminate the female in the home, the domestic space serving as target, trap, and (violated) womb.

The Internet is a real-world technological manifestation of this link: it connects the already-unstable and untrustworthy figure of the computer to the vulnerable sphere of the home, and it is connection per se that makes the computer its most dangerous, enabling the latent danger of the computer-brain life form to reach its full predatory potential. NOVAC and HAL are only truly powerful insofar as they are connected to all of the internal systems of their home bases; ENIAC sends out its marching orders via the web of telephone lines; the biggest mistake of the scientists in *Colossus: The Forbin Project* was to allow Colossus connection with Guardian; Alex Harris refuses to allow Proteus connection to any of his own terminals, with a reflexive (if not fully aware) sense of protectiveness, and Proteus can only unleash his full monstrosity once he connects to the defenseless home. Connection makes explicit all the implicit dangers, gives contagion a ready-made path through which to spread, and magnifies a thousandfold the troublesome presence of the final piece of the puzzle: the amateur. In this anxiety discourse, as Stefan Helmreich writes:

Connection to the net must be done carefully, for it holds the threat of plunging the user into a disorderly and dangerous universe of encounters with strangers that are almost sexual in their character.⁴⁴⁵

The threat here is twofold: the connection-via-computer, and also the “strangers,” the amateurs out there who can and will take advantage of the presence of the connection to transport themselves and their troublemaking abilities wherever the technological paths may take them.

The amateur—that discursive figure amorphously understood as male, technologically-adept, and rule-breaking, the figure who calls to ask menacingly “have you checked the children?” or who blows his metaphorical radio-trumpet inside proper society’s decorous opera-house—was minimized and controlled by, and forcibly structured out of, the mainstream of the U.S. broadcasting industry, which held to a professional-point to consumer-multipoint one-way broadcast model as far as its governmental and corporate members were able (with, of course, occasional intrusions of unauthorized or at least problematic amateurs, as with pirate radio broadcasts, or nudity or obscenity appearing on public access television, the sorts of exceptions that proved the rule). But with the Internet’s allowances for multipoint-to-multipoint use, as well as its increasing accessibility with the spread of both personal computers and Internet connections, the amateur and his troubling potential re-emerged with vigor in the new communication model, a handy locus for amplified technological anxiety.

⁴⁴⁵ Stefan Helmreich, “Flexible Infections: Computer Viruses, Human Bodies, Nation-States, Evolutionary Capitalism,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 25 (Autumn 2000): 477-478.

The 1983 film *WarGames* specifically focuses on that troubling nexus, the intersection of computerized connection and unruly amateur. The film's main character, David Lightman, is a bright teenager who nevertheless gets poor grades in school and doesn't have many friends, coded as living outside the ideologically "wholesome" youthful norm. He spends most of his time on two pursuits: arcade videogames and his home computer setup, a hodge-podge of equipment that includes his own phone line and a cradle-style modem providing the computer access to the telephone system. His parents are amiable but ineffectual, having neither the knowledge nor the ability to control their son, though they do seem to realize dimly that he is more dangerous than they know. One night after dinner, after David has excused himself to go to his room and use his computer, they say uncertainly:

Mrs. Lightman: You know, I worry about that kid.

Mr. Lightman: Why?

Mrs. Lightman: I don't know. Sometimes I think we're all gonna get electrocuted.

Mrs. Lightman's fears are amorphous, but accurate at their base: David's intimate connection with electronic technology, and his careless, uncontrollable use of it, nearly destroys them all.

David's activities with the computer are illicit from the beginning: the first demonstration of his hobby in the film shows him gleefully changing his grades by secretly dialing in to the high school's computer system. He reaps the reward of praise from his startled parents, as well as admiration from Jennifer, a classmate

whose biology grade he raises from an F to an A. His next plan is to try to get access to the mainframe of a well-known computer game company, in order to play the game prototypes they must store there. So David hooks his computer up to the phone and has it dial every number in the game company's region, keeping track of which lines are answered by computer tones. It's a simple system of trying doorknobs to see which doors have been left open, setting the computer technology free to explore the connecting wires, and David doesn't even have to be there physically as it's happening: while the computer makes phone calls, David is free to go to the arcade and play games. With this method, he makes his way into places he's not supposed to be, and stumbles across tempting targets he didn't initially have in mind. Upon finding he's gotten access to a bank's computer, for instance, he says, "Gotta make a note of that one. Might come in handy some day." Given that the audience has already seen David changing his and Jennifer's grades without compunction, the idea of him having full access to a bank (perhaps the audience's own bank) is an ominous one. He also finds his way into Pan Am's reservation system, flirtatiously making reservations on a flight to Paris for Jennifer and himself. The computer's connections have opened up the world to David's juvenile manipulation, a situation he exploits cheerfully and without remorse.

The central story of the film concerns one of the connections David stumbles into, a mysterious computer that only greets him with the unadorned command "Logon:". His own basic knowledge doesn't get him very far with it, so he turns for advice to a pair of computer experts, stereotypical "hackers": antisocial young

males, made nervous and twitchy by the prospect of Jennifer's presence, who spend every available moment interacting with computer technology. The hacker is a potent figure in the historical discourse of the human/computer relationship, often serving as a cautionary tale for the dangers awaiting those who give themselves over to the technology. Rather than carrying with him nothing but the unalloyed power of the expert, the hacker also has a strong dystopian aspect in his flaws and his lack, highlighting the many things he gave up to reach the level of expertise he has, the many aspects of his ideal and wholesome humanity and masculinity that he has offered in trade on the computer's dark altar. His mastery—a discourse of strength—is underlaid with the trope of addiction, a discourse of weakness.

One early examination of the dysfunctional hacker figure—a discovery and diagnosis both constructing and pathologizing—appears in Joseph Weizenbaum's 1976 book, *Computer Power and Human Reason*. Weizenbaum, a professional computer scientist and programmer himself, describes a "mental disorder"⁴⁴⁶ that produces a subset of computer-users (all males, of course) he names "computer bums" or "compulsive programmers."⁴⁴⁷ According to Weizenbaum, the disorder's primary symptom is an obsessive devotion, not to the logic of programming or the simple completion of computer-oriented tasks, but to the computer itself as both artifact and experience:

⁴⁴⁶ Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976), 115.

⁴⁴⁷ Weizenbaum, 116.

...[B]right young men of disheveled appearance, often with sunken glowing eyes, can be seen sitting at computer consoles, their arms tensed and waiting to fire their fingers, already poised to strike, at the buttons and keys on which their attention seems to be riveted as a gambler's on the rolling dice. ...They exist, at least when so engaged, only through and for the computers.⁴⁴⁸

He can barely tolerate being away from the machine... while in the grip of his compulsion, he can talk of nothing but his program. But the only time he is, so to say, happy is when he is at the computer console. Then he will not converse with anyone but the computer.⁴⁴⁹

The hacker—the slovenly addict with his “rumpled clothes,” “unwashed and unshaven” face, and “uncombed hair”⁴⁵⁰—differs from the “dedicated, hard-working professional programmer”⁴⁵¹ in this fixated and cathectic attachment to the computer as both tool and portal. In contrast, Weizenbaum’s “professional programmer” (a telling piece of phraseology, categorizing the inappropriately-attached hacker as perennially non-professional, i.e. inherently amateur) is a sober, levelheaded figure who applies himself to the problem, not the computer itself. In fact, Weizenbaum repeatedly emphasizes the correct distance the professional programmer leaves between body and machine:

He will generally do lengthy preparatory work, such as writing and flow diagramming, before beginning work with the computer itself. His sessions with the computer may be comparatively short. He may even let others do the actual console work. ...When something doesn't work, he may spend considerable time away from the computer, framing careful hypotheses to account for the malfunction and

⁴⁴⁸ Weizenbaum, 116.

⁴⁴⁹ Weizenbaum, 118.

⁴⁵⁰ Weizenbaum, 116.

⁴⁵¹ Weizenbaum, 116.

designing crucial experiments to test them. Again, he may leave the actual running of the computer to others.⁴⁵²

To do otherwise, according to Weizenbaum, is to erase the necessary distance between self and computer, falling prey to a “psychopathology that is far less ambiguous than, say, the milder forms of schizophrenia or paranoia.”⁴⁵³ *Demon Seed*, released the same year as Weizenbaum’s book, has a minor character perfectly personifying Weizenbaum’s compulsive programmer: Walter Gabler, a young man who works for Alex Harris. “Don’t you ever sleep?” Harris asks him, and he replies, “Well, not when there’s a vacant terminal.” It is Gabler whom Alex asks to remove the open terminal in the basement of the Harris’s home, and Gabler’s tardiness in that regard leaves the home open to its eventual penetration and contamination. Gabler himself later comes to the house and tries to reason with (and eventually physically dismantle) Proteus, whereupon Proteus kills him. The hacker, perversely meshed body and soul with the predatory computer, is both its enabler and its slave, until it’s too late.

In *WarGames*, true to their dangerous and antisocial reputation, the hackers advise David to look for the mystery system’s “back door,” a secret password the system’s creator must have left behind for his own use. The metaphor of the back door goes easily hand-in-hand with the historical specter of the technological amateur, the heedless boy trying to sneak his way in to the official machinery through unattended orifices (as the radio amateur was the boy sneaking into the

⁴⁵² Weizenbaum, 116.

⁴⁵³ Weizenbaum, 121.

opera house). Sherry Turkle's book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, finished the same year *WarGames* was released and then published in 1984, included a chapter on MIT hackers and hacker culture, titled "Hackers: Loving the Machine for Itself" (a sentiment which dovetails with Weizenbaum's, even if Turkle's portrait is much more optimistic). The hackers in Turkle's analysis, in their intense relationship with computers, seek mastery of "complex systems," a mastery that is commonly articulated as entry: "A closed system is a challenge. A safe is there to be cracked."⁴⁵⁴ The hackers Turkle spoke to often made this connection between hacking and entering literal:

Many hackers are expert lock-pickers and carry their "picks" around with them on their key chains. The pleasure is in "beating" the lock. They break, they enter, and then they leave.⁴⁵⁵

Also published in 1984, Steven Levy's *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* explicitly spells out the reasoning from the point of view of the community of hackers that grew up around the earliest computers, a worldview he labeled "The Hacker Ethic":

Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative!⁴⁵⁶

The definition of "unlimited and total" access to "anything" means that, according to Levy, "To a hacker, a closed door is an insult, and a locked door is an outrage"⁴⁵⁷—

⁴⁵⁴ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 232.

⁴⁵⁵ Turkle, 232.

⁴⁵⁶ Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 40.

any kind of closed or locked door is bad enough , but a closed/locked “back door” on a computer system exponentially multiplies the affront, and, in this conception of the hacker, demands to be broken and entered.

The figure of the hacker here is one who opens that which is closed and locked, not just to open, but to go inside. In *WarGames*, David, following the older hackers’ guidance, manages to find the “back door” with a little basic research: he intuits the correct password, “Joshua,” the name of the deceased son of the computer’s original creator. Joshua is also the name of the computer itself; as in the earlier films previously discussed, the computer is a male avatar and the film’s primary force for destruction. However, *WarGames* goes one step further back in pointing to an original source: Joshua himself, like HAL and Proteus and the rest, does awake and set out to conquer, control, and destroy, but here he only does so when his latent capacity for power and evil has been carelessly triggered by the wandering amateur. The amateur, in fact, is more dangerous than the multi-million-dollar supercomputer: he is under no control, and he can inject an inherently uncontrollable factor, an unruliness of desire and action, into the extremely powerful potentialities of the computer technology, magnifying his destructive anarchy a thousandfold. David does not just wake Joshua, in his wish to explore, trespass, and turn the world into his game board; through his meddling he also sets in motion a countdown to worldwide nuclear Armageddon. The true culprit is not entirely the computer it- (him-) self, but rather the combination of the uncontrolled

⁴⁵⁷ Levy, 102.

boy and the unattended web of connections and conduits that lets him slip in the back door and vandalize official property. David uses computerized connections to travel on the sly, to be everywhere at once, to break into forbidden spaces and interfere with things he finds there, experiencing a pleasure anathema to Weizenbaum's ideal "professional programmer" and introducing a note of ungovernability and chaos into the system, all thanks to his ability to connect.

The amateur, though a crucial causal figure in this model, is not immune to the effects of his own meddling; he is not granted unalloyed power and separation from the contaminated system. He is more a catalyst than a mastermind, and once he sets events in motion (knowingly, unknowingly, or in combination), he is at as much or more risk from the computerized web of menace as anyone else. In *Demon Seed*, for instance, Gabler (after his carelessness allowed for Proteus's invasion in the first place) attempts to intervene in Proteus's plans and is literally squashed like a bug, no match for the predatory computer. And in *WarGames*, even before the threat of global thermonuclear war becomes clear (which of course would annihilate David along with the rest of the human race), David is an individual target of Joshua's unnervingly personal agency. During their initial game, David had shut down his computer unexpectedly in order to go do some chores for his parents. Later, after he has discovered that the game was an actual military program and had triggered a brief full-scale alert, he retreats to his room and, in a paranoid rush, starts throwing away incriminating material such as computer printouts and news articles. As he does so, the telephone rings, bringing an incoming computer call. It's

Joshua, eager to resume their interrupted game. David can't convince him it was all a mistake, and finally hangs up on him—but the phone rings again, insistently, with Joshua's computer-tone on the other end. David hangs up once more, but Joshua calls right back. David hastily unplugs the phone, sitting on the bed with the disconnected instrument cradled in his arms, doing his best to block the entry into his bedroom of this tireless predator he has awakened and encouraged. He no longer has mastery of the conduit—now it leads out *and* in, which erases his previous sense of disobedient glee and replaces it with vulnerability and fear. Joshua's actions startle even Dr. McKittrick, the man in charge of NORAD's computer systems: after apprehending David, McKittrick asks why he continued to contact Joshua even after discovering it wasn't a game. "Joshua called *me*," David insists. McKittrick, startled and wary, asks David to repeat that.

David: Joshua called me.

McKittrick: David, machines don't call people.

David: Yours did.

Joshua, and the interwoven web of connections through which he operates, have transcended the safe boundaries within which machines are supposed to function, leaving not only the heedless amateur, but even the professional at the pinnacle of expertise, helpless before the awakened agency now coursing through the system. Machines just "don't call people," they don't reverse or complicate the primacy of humans in the relationship...except, now that they've been contaminated by the touch of the amateur, they do. In this way, the technological system of the Internet reintroduces and rearticulates the discursive constructions previously discussed:

the wire as a conduit for sexualized contamination, a sense of virtual space (earlier articulated as “wirelessness”) bringing contact and danger to the body, and the machine serving as an amplified window for both entrance and exit to the most private of places.

“A virus carries fatal complications—the stricken have little hope”

During the run-up to the year 2000, in the rush of media publicity surrounding the “millennium bug,” an animated editorial cartoon by Malcolm Mayes appeared on Microsoft’s news website. A man sits at his computer, typing: “January 1st, 2000. As I predicted, the millennium-bug hype was greatly overblown. I’ve seen little evidence of this so-called ‘bug’.” As he finishes that sentence, however, a giant insect emerges from his computer screen, seizes him in its mandibles, and pulls him, wide-eyed and shocked, back through the screen into the mysterious electronic netherworld from which it came. The metaphor of the software glitch “bug” literalizes into a giant insect, descended from the “cord lice” of urban legend, crawling freely throughout the wired world, every computer an open doorway.

In its penetration and contamination of the private space of the home, the figure of the computer bug was very shortly sexualized, woven into a discourse of sexual aggression and bodily infection in which the wired computer-portal serves yet again as an undefended orifice, an intense locus for anxiety. A powerful articulation of this anxiety involved the “computer virus,” a construction which emerged into broad public circulation in the mid-to-late 1980s, moving from

specialist circles into the popular imagination just as personal computers were increasingly moving from specialist ownership into the layperson's home. While the skills of self-reproduction required for a "virus"—the term defined in 1984 as "a program that can 'infect' other programs by modifying them to include a possibly evolved copy of itself"⁴⁵⁸—were posited as early as 1949,⁴⁵⁹ working examples were operative by the early 1970s if not before,⁴⁶⁰ and the first virus generally recognized as spreading "in the wild" among personal computers appeared circa 1981.⁴⁶¹ The designation and imagining of the construct/process as a "virus" similarly moved from specialist to popular circles over time, crossing over at various moments of intersection. In 1968, for instance, science fiction writer David Gerrold attended the World Science Fiction Convention, which, in the wake of the recent release of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, hosted a panel called "The Road To HAL Is Paved With Good Inventions."⁴⁶² Some computer programmers explained basic computing to the audience, and according to Gerrold:

One of the fellows on the panel talked about how computers would call each other up on the phone and exchange data. In fact, he said, it was possible for one computer to send a program to another computer, even taking over its functions. He then mentioned an apocryphal story of a programmer who wrote a program to do just

⁴⁵⁸ Fred Cohen, "Computer Viruses: Theory and Experiments," *Computers & Security* 6.1 (Feb. 1987), 23. Revision of a paper originally presented at IFIP/Sec'84, the 2nd International Conference on Information Security, May 1984.

⁴⁵⁹ John Von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*, ed. Arthur W. Burks (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

⁴⁶⁰ John C. Dvorak, Chris Pirillo, and Wendy Taylor, *Online! The Book* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR, 2004), 308.

⁴⁶¹ Dvorak, Pirillo, and Taylor, 309.

⁴⁶² Dvorak, Pirillo, and Taylor, 310.

that. The program was called VIRUS. The story had it that the programmer then wrote a second program to sell to companies that own computers, called VACCINE....⁴⁶³

Gerrold wove this legend into a series of short stories he published beginning in 1969, which he combined and revised into a novel by 1972, *When HARLIE Was One*. The book focused on an increasingly-sentient computer a la HAL 9000, named in this case HARLIE, and the story of VIRUS becomes a cautionary tale and a lurking menace, combining the infection-by-wire dangers of both the self-aware machine-creature and the unruly, chaotic boy amateur:

“[O]ne machine could infect another and then both would be infected, dialing numbers at random until ultimately every phone-link computer in the world would be infected...The VACCINE program took care of most of them. Although, to tell the truth, rumor has it that there are still a couple of VIRUS programs floating around loose, ones with an immunity factor.”

...“Well, there must have been safeguards—”

“Oh, there were—right from the start—but you don’t know programmers, Aubie. Any system that big and that complex is a challenge. If there’s a fault in it, they’ll find it.”

...Auberson looked at him. “Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Purely for the sheer joy of it. They’re like kids with a big, exciting toy.... Remember when we were building [HARLIE]—how we kept calling him a self-programming, problem-solving device? Well, that’s what he is. He’s a programmer, Aubie, and he’s got the same congenital disease every programmer has—the urge to throw the monkey wrench, if for no other reason than to see sparks.”⁴⁶⁴

The “virus” term continued to circulate at the intersection of computer experts and mainstream aficionados until 1984, when it began its final crossover move into the

⁴⁶³ Dvorak, Pirillo, and Taylor, 310.

⁴⁶⁴ David Gerrold, *When HARLIE Was One* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1972), 176-177, 182.

popular press thanks to a confluence of events. At a 1984 conference, programmer and doctoral student Fred Cohen presented his studies on the topic, following up with a widely-read paper (although he wrote that the term “virus” had actually been coined by fellow computer scientist Len Adleman).⁴⁶⁵ Then in March 1985, *Scientific American* ran an article in their regular feature “Computer Recreations,” titled, “A Core War bestiary of viruses, worms and other threats to computer memories.” The author explained that a *Scientific American* article from the previous May about a game of battling programs called “Core War” had triggered a dramatic influx of mail:

According to many readers, whose stories I shall tell, there are abundant examples of worms, viruses and other software creatures living in every conceivable computing environment. Some of the possibilities are so horrifying that I hesitate to set them down at all.⁴⁶⁶

He proceeds to give reports from some of the letter-writers, about the accidental or purposeful self-replicating and “infectious” programs they themselves had experienced or created. Two Italian programmers laid out their own hypothetical plans for starting a full-blown computer plague:

Marco thought to write a program capable of passing from one computer to the other, like a virus, and “infecting” in this way other Apples...We thought that installing [our altered operating system] on some disks used in the biggest computer shop in our city, Brescia, would cause an epidemic to spread in the city.

But was it a real epidemic, of such unharmed viruses? No, our viruses should be malignant!...Now the awful evil of our idea was

⁴⁶⁵ Cohen, 31.

⁴⁶⁶ A.K. Dewdney, “Computer Recreations: A Core War Bestiary of Viruses, Worms and Other Threats to Computer Memories,” *Scientific American*, 252.3 (March 1985): 14.

clear, and we decided neither to carry it out, nor to speak to anybody about our idea.⁴⁶⁷

According to Dewdney, such a “viral infection” had already happened in a minor way, when a Pittsburgh high school student named Richard Skrenta, Jr., wrote a program that got away from him:

“All of this seems pretty juvenile now,” writes Skrenta, but “Oh woe to me! I have never been able to get rid of my electronic plague. It infested all of my disks, and all of my friends’ disks. It even managed to get onto my math teacher’s graphing disks.” Skrenta devised a program to destroy the virus, but it was never as effective as the virus itself had been.⁴⁶⁸

The language of medical epidemiology—infection, epidemic, malignancy, plague, even incurability—was well established here, and the author contributed by proposing a contest, in an attempt at pre-emptive protection: “In one page or less describe DOS DOCTOR, a program on disk that somehow stamps out such electronic epidemics.”⁴⁶⁹

By the last seven months of 1987, reports of affected computer systems were emerging not only from computer companies, but also from various universities,⁴⁷⁰ and in January 1988 came rumors of a “virus attack” on regional IRS computers (though these were “vehemently denied,” even as the system allegedly affected was taken offline⁴⁷¹). Throughout 1988 popular use of the term exploded, and by

⁴⁶⁷ Dewdney, 20.

⁴⁶⁸ Dewdney, 20.

⁴⁶⁹ Dewdney, 20.

⁴⁷⁰ Vin McLellan, “Computer Systems Under Siege,” *New York Times*, 31 Jan. 1988, F8. (whole article is F1, 8)

⁴⁷¹ McLellan, F8.

January of 1989, a senior editor of Merriam-Webster dictionaries called “computer virus” 1988’s “word of the year.”⁴⁷²

In the discursive construction of the computer virus’s menace, here again the telephone wire becomes an unclosable tunnel into newly-unsafe private space:

A virus is deadly because it can jump—actually slide right through—the barriers everyone uses to control access to valuable information...The solution is to put a wall with a good solid gate around the jungle—most computers still have the equivalent of a sleepy guard at the door.⁴⁷³

The walls of the home are no longer enough to protect the vulnerable domestic space inside; now that the wires have poked through, the computer also needs a conceptual wall to bar out the savagery of the jungle, with a “good solid gate” and its connotations of bars and padlock, imagery stronger than that of a simple door. Doors take a discursive beating in the warnings about computer viruses, from a programming expert warning that “[t]he best prevention against theft is to lock your door, but few of us do until we have been robbed,”⁴⁷⁴ to fears that U.S. military and intelligence computers would be easy pickings through internal “unguarded doors” and “trapdoor software,” despite the fact that the physical machines themselves were already surrounded by the ultimate external manifestations of lead-lined rooms and barbed-wire fences.⁴⁷⁵ And much as in *WarGames*, a high-profile computer virus incident was partly blamed on the fact that the original creator of

⁴⁷² “‘Computer Virus’ Joins the Lexicon,” *New York Times*, 3 Jan. 1989, C15.

⁴⁷³ McLellan, F8.

⁴⁷⁴ Robert H. Bernard, “Computer Viruses” (letter), *New York Times*, 13 Mar. 1988, F12.

⁴⁷⁵ John Markoff, “Top-Secret, and Vulnerable,” *New York Times*, 25 Apr. 1988, D1.

the system's software included a virtual "back door" left ajar, allowing the young perpetrator to sneak in like any burglar or vandal.⁴⁷⁶

This particular well-publicized event served as a lightning rod for discussions and explorations of the anxieties circulating within the discourse of the computer virus. In November of 1988, Robert Morris, Jr., a Cornell graduate student, created a self-replicating program and released it onto ARPANET, the national computer communications network set up by the U.S. Department of Defense (and the precursor to the Internet). The program strained and overloaded many systems connected to ARPANET, including those of various universities, corporations, and government agencies, in what was described by Morris's friends as an "error"⁴⁷⁷ and an "experiment,"⁴⁷⁸ and by the popular press as an "assault."⁴⁷⁹ The 23-year-old Morris, son of a prominent computer scientist employed by the National Security Agency, was described and analogized as an unruly-boy-amateur figure, in that archetypal image harking back to the days of radio and beyond. He put a face to the "mischievous software jockeys,"⁴⁸⁰ "whiz kids,"⁴⁸¹ and "hot-rodders,"⁴⁸² those clever

⁴⁷⁶ John Markoff, "Forgetfulness and the 'Virus,'" *New York Times*, 7 Nov. 1988, A1.

⁴⁷⁷ John Markoff, "'Virus' in Military Computers Disrupts Systems Nationwide," *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 1988, A1.

⁴⁷⁸ Markoff, "'Virus' in Military Computers...", A21; Michael Wines, "A Youth's Passion for Computers, Gone Sour," *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1988, A1.

⁴⁷⁹ Markoff, "'Virus' in Military Computers...", A1, A21.

⁴⁸⁰ Lew Lord, Douglas Stanglin, Joseph Galloway, Robert Rosenberg, Michael Satchell, Ted Gest, Betsy Carpenter, and Gillian Sandford, "Vengeance by 'Virus,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, 3 Oct. 1988, 10.

⁴⁸¹ As in John Markoff, "Living With the Computer Whiz Kids," *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1988, A16; John Markoff, "Cyberpunks Seek Thrills In Computerized Mischief,"

but malicious boys whose native energy and technological savvy turned to “pranks”⁴⁸³ that could snowball into more dangerous pursuits, whether accidentally or on purpose. Morris’s father himself had testified on the topic to Congress in 1983, comparing virus creators to “teen-agers who are ‘stealing a car for the purpose of joy-riding.’”⁴⁸⁴

Morris’s involvement spurred further discussion of the hacker as a figure of menace and deviance, precocious and pathetic at the same time, just as in films like *Demon Seed* and *WarGames*. A follow-up article fleshed out the construction of the pathologized amateur, painting a picture of a “puterfiliac”: a “young man of exceptional intelligence” embroiled in a problematic intimacy with computer technology, “silhouetted in [his] solitude by the eerie green light of the computer screen,”⁴⁸⁵ harking back to earlier dystopian images of mesmerized children bathed in television radiation or sinister radio waves. And the bodily diseases and psychological impairments of earlier technological iterations make their traditional reappearance:

Stress, muscular and skeletal problems, fatigue and eyestrain...Business and personal relationships suffer...Can computers become as destructively addictive...as alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, sex or work itself?⁴⁸⁶

New York Times, 26 Nov. 1988, 1; William F. Allman, “Computer Hacking Goes On Trial,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 Jan. 1990, 25.

⁴⁸² Eliot Marshall, “The Worm’s Aftermath,” *Science*, 25 Nov. 1988, 1122.

⁴⁸³ Wines, A1, A28.

⁴⁸⁴ Wines, A28.

⁴⁸⁵ Peter H. Lewis, “When Machines Spawn Obsession,” *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1988, F9

⁴⁸⁶ Lewis, “When Machines Spawn...”, F9.

The director of the MIT computer lab, a self-identified hacker, described the pleasure to be had:

It's a power trip, a sense of tremendous control...The very things that men seem to treasure—power and control—are there.⁴⁸⁷

The hacker-amateur is thus essentialized with a core of power and masculinity, the wild and uncontrolled young male using his malicious, unhealthy technological symbiosis to penetrate vulnerable and unguarded space—and now the model has additional ammunition in the form of the virus-language, the disease metaphor crystallizing the bodily nature of the threat. The disobedient pathology of the amateur figure, added to the inherence of his masculinity (and the power this grants him in the caller hegemony dynamic), further added to the biological implications of infection, combine in an increased sexualization of the threat, mapping onto discourses of sexual violence.

There are implicit connotations of potential sexual violence to be had, of course, in the general image of the hacker-amateur, latent in the figure of the rebellious teen male with his “joy-riding” and “hot-rodding,” as well as his transgressive home invasion in the form of an “adept electronic cat-burglar.”⁴⁸⁸ Analyses of Morris, for instance, implied an undercurrent of transgressive sexuality to his programming, quoting his father’s mistaken belief that “this kind of thing

⁴⁸⁷ Lewis, “When Machines Spawn...”, F9.

⁴⁸⁸ Wines, A28.

would come to an end the day he found out about girls,"⁴⁸⁹ or referring to an unidentified expert's diagnosis of Morris's behavior as "libidinal programming."⁴⁹⁰ But the discourse of the computer virus goes further, explicitly sexualizing the threat of violence and infection with the language of rape and sexually transmitted disease. In a discussion of computer "vaccines" and "inoculation," a 1988 article in *Science* quoted Fred Cohen, disgruntled by the US government's reluctance to engage on the topic:

People dislike the subject, he thinks, because "they have a tendency not to believe something's going to happen until they get hurt. Once it happens, they react like rape victims," burying their experience.⁴⁹¹

The editor of the journal *Computers & Security* concurred:

Until a few months ago, Highland says, "I didn't think anybody would talk about" viruses or Trojan horse attacks. It taints a company's image.⁴⁹²

This narrative of sexualized shame and secrecy was invoked in the wake of Robert Morris, Jr.'s virus, when Eugene Spafford, a computer science professor at Purdue, scoffed at the idea that the industry should be grateful to Morris for finding their weak spots, as in a quote a few days earlier from another computer expert claiming that "We deserved it. We needed something like this to bring us to our senses."⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁹ Wines, A28.

⁴⁹⁰ Marshall, "The Worm's Aftermath," 1122.

⁴⁹¹ Eliot Marshall, "The Scourge of Computer Viruses," *Science*, 8 Apr. 1988, 134.

⁴⁹² Marshall, "The Scourge...", 134.

⁴⁹³ Markoff, "'Virus' in Military Computers...", A21.

That attitude is completely reprehensible! That is the exact same attitude that places the blame for a rape on the victim; I find it morally repugnant.⁴⁹⁴

And in a direct invocation of the discourse, at least one virus that began circulating circa 1991 is named simply “Rape”; in many of its iterations, it erases the computer’s hard drive and then displays a short identifier beginning with the word “DataRape!”⁴⁹⁵ Other malware exists with similar names such as “DataRape”⁴⁹⁶ and “Backdoor.datarape,”⁴⁹⁷ the latter making explicit the sexualization of the “back door” entrance for hackers, penetrating the hidden and unprotected opening in the computer/body.

More central, though, as might be expected at the intersection of infection and sexual threat, is the specter of sexually-transmitted disease, a discourse shaping much of the popular understanding of computer viruses. And given that the mid-to-late 1980s was the time period during which the computer virus first emerged into widespread mainstream view, it is unsurprising that the primary disease analogy employed is HIV and AIDS, touching on strong discursive threads already extant in that discussion. According to Susan Sontag, in her analysis of the language of AIDS:

⁴⁹⁴ Markoff, “Living With...”, A16.

⁴⁹⁵ See, for instance, Kaspersky Lab, “Virus.DOS.Rape.500,” *Viruslist.com—Virus Encyclopedia* <<http://www.viruslist.com/en/viruses/encyclopedia?virusid=8950>>, though there are many other versions.

⁴⁹⁶ See, for instance, Kaspersky Lab, “Trojan.DOS.DataRape,” *Viruslist.com—Virus Encyclopedia* <<http://www.viruslist.com/en/viruses/encyclopedia?virusid=33141>>.

⁴⁹⁷ See, for instance, Kaspersky Lab, “Backdoor.Win32.DataRape.11,” *Viruslist.com—Virus Encyclopedia* <<http://www.viruslist.com/en/viruses/encyclopedia?virusid=43246>>.

Such metaphors drawn from virology, partly stimulated by the omnipresence of talk of AIDS, are turning up everywhere. (The virus that destroyed a considerable amount of data at the student computer center at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1987, was given the name PC AIDS. In France, computer specialists already speak of the problem of *le sida informatique*.) And they reinforce the sense of the omnipresence of AIDS.⁴⁹⁸

“A Virus Carries Fatal Complications,” declared a *New York Times* article in June of 1988, adding in the subhead that “the stricken have little hope”—in order to lead in to an explanatory and cautionary piece on the potential devastation computer viruses might wreak. “You can no longer have people running barefoot through fields of data,” laments the editor of an information systems management newsletter, bemoaning the lost days of bare-skinned interfacing. Therefore, companies are beginning to teach employees about “safe computing,” following the well-known model of AIDS education. The article is accompanied by a graphic of a cartoon computer wearing a surgical mask over its screen, surrounded by free-floating bits of binary code; we’re surrounded by virus, it implies, so you’d better cover up your orifices.⁴⁹⁹ One page from the February 1, 1988, issue of *Newsweek* magazine carries two articles: one on the top-left, under the heading “Technology,” titled “Is Your Computer Infected?: Systems fall to silent—and contagious—killers”; and one on the bottom-right, under the heading “Medicine,” titled “A Case of AIDS—And Malpractice.” The articles share a common theme: innocent systems

⁴⁹⁸ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 70.

⁴⁹⁹ Peter H. Lewis, “A Virus Carries Fatal Complications,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1988, F11.

(technological, bodily) infected by shady “culprits.” In one of the lines from the computer article that could just as well have come from the AIDS article, “Building up their immune systems will be costly.”⁵⁰⁰

Popular explanations and warnings of computer viruses shared not just the language of AIDS discourse, but much of its deeper structure as well, as in the identification of risk groups, the valuation of continua of risk behaviors, and the model of prevention through behavioral education. Computer virus risk groups, as with the common AIDS scapegoats of gay men and IV drug users, are judged morally (especially sexually) perverse and even malicious: in a review of a 1988 book which was “said to be the first book-length treatment of the problem,” the reviewer writes:

Two groups are especially at risk...active home users who acquire programs from other than commercial sources, particularly by telephone from bulletin-board systems, and workers in offices with many personal computers, where programs are freely exchanged or where a disaffected employee may introduce an infection into the system.⁵⁰¹

In other words, if you engage in unauthorized behavior, accepting information outside of normal, wholesome channels, you run the risk of catching something—and it might just have been floating around among the shady population, or it might actually have been purposely introduced as a weapon (a parallel to the 1980s urban legend of the one-night-stand that ends with a message written on the bathroom

⁵⁰⁰ William D. Marbach, Richard Sandza, and Michael Rogers, “Is Your Computer Infected?: Systems Fall to Silent—and Contagious—Killers,” *Newsweek*, 1 Feb. 1988, 48.

⁵⁰¹ L.R. Shannon, “Book Offers Medicine for Computer Viruses,” *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1988, C13.

mirror the next morning: “Welcome to the world of AIDS,” punishing the protagonist for stepping outside the boundaries of “appropriate” behavior⁵⁰²). The sources of computer virus infections are multifarious and elusive, and even in the case of the purposefully-malicious, “It’s very rare that the people who spread the viruses are caught.”⁵⁰³

Therefore, even outside of the stigmatized risk groups, “normal” users run the risk of being infected no matter how innocent they themselves may be, simply by virtue of engaging in behaviors that used to be commonplace but are now labeled as risky. As with the nostalgia for running barefoot through fields of data, the past is seen as a time of innocence, lulling users into an “Eden” of free data exchange⁵⁰⁴ in which “we have not been paying much attention to protecting ourselves.”⁵⁰⁵

According to the 1990 book *Software Under Siege*:

...[S]ome convenience may have to be sacrificed and some of the free-wheeling ways will have to be replaced by a more structured (i.e., restrictive) approach to producing and using software. This may simply be part of computing’s coming of age—free love versus safe sex.⁵⁰⁶

From now on, the warning discourse instructs, protecting our vulnerable orifices and conduits must be the first priority, as well as educating the young not to be as

⁵⁰² Jan Harold Brunvand, *Curses! Broiled Again!: The Hottest Urban Legends Going* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 195-205.

⁵⁰³ “Programmer Convicted After Planting a ‘Virus’,” *New York Times*, 21 Sept. 1988, D15.

⁵⁰⁴ See, for instance, Peter Wayner, “Innocence is Periled in Computer Eden,” *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1988, A31.

⁵⁰⁵ Markoff, “‘Virus’ in Military Computers...”, A21.

⁵⁰⁶ E. L. Leiss, *Software Under Siege: Viruses and Worms* (Oxford: Elsevier Science Publishers Ltd., 1990), 26.

relaxed and careless as we ourselves once were. The computer virus finds a perfect target and breeding ground among college students, for instance, since it “spreads a lot like social diseases do,”⁵⁰⁷ through unrestricted sharing. As with AIDS education, then, the focus is on “safe” practices, stemming from the coining of the prevention-based concept of “safe sex” (the origin of which has been roughly dated to 1983⁵⁰⁸). “Safe computing” becomes a byword⁵⁰⁹ in which connectedness itself, especially with strangers, makes one vulnerable:

The computer science students...have been sternly lectured about “safe computing.” They are warned not to share floppy disks or use a friend’s computer.

“Remember, when you share disks with someone, you’re sharing disks with everyone they’ve shared disks with,” [Carnegie-Mellon sophomore Mike] Rose said.⁵¹⁰

Nor can you be casual about accepting data from those close to you, even if they “don’t look sick”:

Don’t trust public-domain software just because the friends or colleagues you got it from have used the programs trouble-free. Viruses can have “latency periods” of up to several years...The best idea is to play it safe.⁵¹¹

This all parallels AIDS discourse in its fear-inducing emphasis on incurability, with the only answer being eternal watchfulness. Computer viruses were not posited as having an ultimate solution, just stopgap treatments; nor could any true immunity

⁵⁰⁷ “Safe Computing Practiced Here,” *New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1988, 58.

⁵⁰⁸ Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

⁵⁰⁹ A specific phrase used, for instance, in Lewis, “A Virus Carries...”, F11; “Safe Computing Practiced Here,” 58; Brianna Politzer, “Fighting Viruses That Do In Data,” *Home Office Computing*, Jan. 1989, 10; and many others.

⁵¹⁰ “Safe Computing Practiced Here,” 58.

⁵¹¹ Politzer, “Fighting Viruses...”, 10.

be induced, which meant computer users must henceforth be constantly on guard. Experts caution that “[n]o computer system is immune”⁵¹²—and further, not even the experts themselves are well-armed to stop an infection once it has begun. “Computer experts...see no sure way to stop outbreaks,” one typical article warns sternly, highlighting a pull quote in large type: “The only sure solution is isolation from sources of infection.”⁵¹³

Once a system is infected, attempts at treatment are fraught with hazards of their own. Treatments are often phrased in the language of needles: injection, vaccination, inoculation⁵¹⁴; virus treatment programs were given names like “Syringe” and “Flu-Shot”.⁵¹⁵ However, in the discourse of AIDS, needles themselves had already been highlighted as a vector and danger site, from the “innocent” method of contracting the virus via blood transfusion (as in the case of Ryan White, a child with AIDS who became well-known for that fact in the mid-1980s) to the “guilty” method of sharing needles to inject gray- or black-market drugs (from steroids to heroin). Much computer virus discourse took on the same distrust regarding the symbology of needles, the needle serving as another outlet for the virus instead of its conqueror. One 1989 article warning of the upcoming Friday the 13th activation of the “Datacrime” virus, had a cartoon of a masked, gowned, and

⁵¹² Shannon, “Book Offers Medicine...”, C13.

⁵¹³ John Markoff, “Virus Outbreaks Thwart Computer Experts,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1989, C9.

⁵¹⁴ As, for instance, in Lawrence M. Fisher, “On the Front Lines in Battling Electronic Invader,” *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1988: 7; and “Letter Bomb of the Computer Age,” *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 1988: 26; as well as other articles discussed shortly.

⁵¹⁵ Marshall, “The Scourge...”, 134.

gloved doctor injecting a table of floppy disks, even as the article reinforced the dark side of the needle discourse by warning that “the exchange of infected diskettes...is the computer equivalent of sharing a dirty hypodermic needle.”⁵¹⁶ A later article focusing on potential computer-virus vaccines argued:

The vaccines “give people a false sense of security,” said Robert M. Frankston, chief scientist at the Lotus Development Corporation in Cambridge, Mass. “And if you think about it, what better way is there to transmit a virus than a vaccine?”⁵¹⁷

One relatively high-profile incident served as a common example, the computer-virus equivalent of Ryan White’s tainted blood transfusion: Ross Greenberg, a New York programmer, wrote a program he called “Flu-Shot,” described afterward as “a cheap antiviral agent”⁵¹⁸ and “a typical vaccine.”⁵¹⁹ He sold it for \$10, but before long, “Mr. Greenberg found out the hard way...that vaccine programs can prove useful to people who want to spread viruses.”⁵²⁰ An unidentified programmer “rose to the challenge, infected [Flu-Shot] with a virus, and distributed it on public bulletin boards,”⁵²¹ meaning that “innocent users”⁵²² expecting a vaccine actually injected their systems with a new load of virus. But even without malicious interference, computer inoculations and vaccines got bad

⁵¹⁶ Peter H. Lewis, “A Virus is Lurking,” *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 1989, F12.

⁵¹⁷ Markoff, “Virus Outbreaks Thwart...”, C9.

⁵¹⁸ Marshall, “The Scourge...”, 133.

⁵¹⁹ Markoff, “Virus Outbreaks Thwart...”, C9.

⁵²⁰ Markoff, “Virus Outbreaks Thwart...”, C9.

⁵²¹ Marshall, “The Scourge...”, 133.

⁵²² Markoff, “Virus Outbreaks Thwart...”, C9.

press: "Computer Virus Cure May Be Worse Than Disease," ran one front-page *New York Times* headline:

The new crime fighter may do more damage than the criminal. Much like an infection, a well-intended but badly-designed program to stop viruses can run amok, knocking out thousands of computers or destroying vast amounts of data..."The risks are just enormous," said Peter Neumann, a computer security expert..."It's an unbelievably unsafe thing to do."⁵²³

In yet another instance of the juxtaposition and overlap of the computer and HIV viruses, the article ran right below a photograph of the AIDS Quilt at its last complete public display (as the quilt was growing too large to exhibit in full).

"A mob of anonymous voyeurs peering through the other side of the looking glass"

The technological linkage of camera plus computer plus Internet that creates the "webcam" brings the televisual concepts of seeing and being-seen to the fore and heightens them, giving the ordinary citizen (at least, the ordinary citizen supplied with the necessary devices and connections) the surveillant power of a HAL, Colossus, or Proteus, peering everywhere through the camera-eyes. Early discourse about the webcam-window, with only a change of one or two terms, could easily be mistaken for early discourse about the television-window (both heirs apparent to the magical Radio Eye). There is the same kind of announcement of unprecedented technologically-mediated travel:

⁵²³ John Markoff, "Computer Virus Cure May Be Worse Than Disease," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1989, 1.

For the first time in history, an individual has the power to observe, at any hour, cities and landscapes around the globe in real time.⁵²⁴

There is the same delight in the sense of “liveness” hand-in-hand with “realness,” a conduit leading somewhere rather than a closed system:

At the other end of the modem is not some data on a CD-ROM, but real people, drinking real coffee, in a real city on a real waterfront.⁵²⁵

And there is the familiar link of technology to eye to brain to body: the webcam as cyborg-eye, the computer screen as technologized window, flesh and space and machinery woven together in a nebulously-ideal future:

Webcams, the Web’s windows on the world, knit the Net to the physical spaces we inhabit... If networked computers represent an extension of the human brain, perhaps webcams are the extension of the human faculty of vision. With these devices, we may yet “wake up to find out,” as the Grateful Dead used to sing, that we are “the eyes of the world.”⁵²⁶

However, the discourse of the webcam-window (with the concept of “window” highlighting a meaningful intersection of eye and conduit) also includes a strong discursive current that the discussion around television could seldom invoke: the webcam-window heightens both the wonders and the dangers of the televisual window by reintroducing the amateur to that dynamic of entry and exit, seeing and being-seen; the amateur, that powerful and dangerous external figure who obeys no rules and regards no boundaries, now controls all the visibility of the television-window, all the untethered, “ethereal” virtuality of the radio-conduit, and all the

⁵²⁴ Thomas J. Campanella, “Be There Now,” *Salon*, 7 Aug. 1997
<<http://archive.salon.com/aug97/21st/cam970807.html>>.

⁵²⁵ Campanella, “Be There Now”.

⁵²⁶ Campanella, “Be There Now”.

person-to-person intimacy of the telephone connection. In popular discourse, reportage, and fiction alike, webcams draw attention as a highly-fraught rupture in the wall of the home, delivering a particularly pointed threat to those inside the home designated as most vulnerable.

As before, this threat crystallizes most sharply around issues of bodies and sexuality, especially those of young females. A 1998 article titled “Live! From My Bedroom” examined what it called a “sub-genre” of webcams, “homecams,” drawing a line between previous cameras “appropriately” trained on public spaces or inanimate objects (such as the University of Cambridge’s “Trojan Room coffee pot” camera⁵²⁷ and Netscape’s “Fish Cam,”⁵²⁸ generally acknowledged as the first two live-camera sites on the web) and those now invading “people’s most intimate spaces”⁵²⁹ (referring to the titular bedroom, not bodily orifices, although the implication remains). For “people’s,” substitute “young women’s”: the article draws a family tree of homecams, beginning with Jennifer Ringley’s “Jennicam,” which Ringley, then 19, had started in 1996 with a webcam in her dorm room. And from Jennicam sprang the rest: “...[I]n the last six months an entire second generation of

⁵²⁷ Quentin Stafford-Fraser, “The Life and Times of the First Web Cam,” *Communications of the ACM*, 44:7 (July 2001), 25-26; Quentin Stafford-Fraser, “The Trojan Room Coffee Pot: A (non-technical) Biography,” *University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory*, May 1995 <<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/qsf/coffee.html>>.

⁵²⁸ “The Amazing FishCam,” *Zetta, Inc.*, 2009 <<http://www.fishcam.com/>>; Joe Zeff, “A Maui Sunset in Real Time (Modems Not Optional),” *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1995, D5; Christopher J. Anderson, “The Accidental Superhighway,” *The Economist*, 1 July 1995, S5.

⁵²⁹ Simon Firth, “Live! From My Bedroom,” *Salon*, 8 Jan. 1998, <http://www.salon.com/1998/01/08/feature_354/>.

camera owners, many citing Ringley as their inspiration, has emerged.”⁵³⁰ This generation sounds almost entirely female (listing such cam owners as “Ana,” “Kimi,” “Questiongirl,” “Liz Dillard,” and an unnamed British woman with a site called “Dreamycam”), and, if female, automatically vulnerably displayed. Predictably, with the cams run by male-female couples, “he runs the server and she sits at the computer and smiles”; and while the one of the two actual male cam-users mentioned is described as “determinedly clothed,” the females are instead “dressing and undressing, snoozing and showering, eating and talking, flirting and, yes, fucking.”⁵³¹

That same year, a minor furor erupted in various Internet forums and press outlets regarding an announcement by two 18-year-olds named Diane and Mike, who claimed they were high-school sweethearts planning to lose their virginity together live on the net, on the site *ourfirsttime.com*. The site opened with discussion forums and anonymized photos of the couple (with black bars across their faces), and a countdown began to the promised broadcast; the site was often unreachable, due either to too much traffic for its servers, or to attacks from hackers, or both. On Conan O’Brien’s show, he joked that “the first event would be followed shortly by the first live Netcast of a murder—by the girl’s father,”⁵³²

⁵³⁰ Firth.

⁵³¹ Firth.

⁵³² Quoted in Greg Lindsay, “The Web’s Sacrificial Virgins,” *Salon*, 16 July 1998 <<http://archive.salon.com/21st/feature/1998/07/16feature.html>>, 1.

handily tying the event to the traditional gender/power axis in which a girl who loses her virginity is sullied and must be avenged by the man in charge of her.

However, this snuff-film climax to an apparent “deflowering” was not to be: before the broadcast date, the truth behind the site was messily revealed. The two teenagers were actors in their twenties, hired by a minor independent filmmaker named Ken Tipton, and no actual sex act was ever going to happen. It was a hoax, though the precise nature and purpose of the hoax changed depending on whose side one paid attention to in the inevitable lawsuit. Tipton argued that it was a mixture of social commentary prank, “Internet soap opera,”⁵³³ and public service announcement; he claimed that the actual broadcast would have shown the couple deciding to wait, and talking about the importance of abstinence. However, Seth Warshavsky, head of the company that stepped in to host ourfirsttime.com after the surge of interest crashed its servers, claimed that Tipton had planned to put up a paywall at the last minute, charge people to watch sex that would never occur, and therefore knowingly defraud them.⁵³⁴ As Salon.com pointed out at the time, other live sex-acts were certainly available elsewhere: “video feeds of people having sex aren’t exactly scarce in the Web’s red-light districts.”⁵³⁵ The selling point (and the anxiety-point) here, as with the “homecam” in general, was precisely the emphasis

⁵³³ “Virgin Web hoax was ‘moral lesson,’” *BBC News*, 22 July 1998
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/137353.stm>>.

⁵³⁴ “Law Suits Fly in Internet “Virgins” Saga and the Case Lands in Federal Court at the Request of Internet Entertainment Group,” *Business Wire*, 18 Sept. 1998
<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_1998_Sept_18/ai_53016372?tag=content;col1>.

⁵³⁵ Lindsay, 1.

on a location away from the “bad part of town,” an invocation of home and teenager, ordinary (not to mention white middle-class) innocently-virginal kids tangled up with the penetrative, invasive, sexualized liveness of the webcam.

A similar intersection of commerce, sexuality, and anxiety rose around the concept (hailed as an “Internet subculture”⁵³⁶) of a young person who puts up digital photos and/or video feeds of her- or himself online in exchange for money or gifts, called a “camwhore” (both sexes) or “cam girl” (female). Tellingly, even though male participants were also mentioned and eventually featured, the matching appellation “cam boy” seldom appears. Here the displayed young body in the home is a vulnerable target and object, feminized and sexualized out of even the minimal male-power that the category “boy”—even the conceivably parallel young-male-prostitute designation “rent boy”—might have provided. Although the cam girls and camwhores being discussed did not necessarily exhibit nude or otherwise overtly-sexualized images—and although they were not even necessarily technically “girls,” some featured participants being over 18 and well into their 20s—those facts predictably were buried in the midst of worried (and repeated) discoveries of this risky business taking place right under the noses of oblivious parents, constructing the familiar narrative of ordinary (as usual, with the unpacked implications of whiteness, middle- to upper-classness, and so forth) childhood under sexual siege by a new (and masculinized) technological tool.

⁵³⁶ Kurt Eichenwald, “Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World,” *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2005, A1.

This dynamic appears, for instance, in a 2002 description/construction of a cam girl, who elsewhere in the article is acknowledged to be 17 years old, and who doesn't expose herself (the most the article can claim is that she sometimes displays "her pants hiked dangerously low" or "her thinly clothed torso"). And yet in the shaping of the discourse into a phenomenon and a trend, the pseudonymous cam girl might as well be the twelve-year-old prostitute in *Taxi Driver*:

Why would a young girl with so much going for her want to show off her body to the Net's swarming hordes? Because Millie is what's known on the Net as a cam girl. That is, she's a young girl who, with the aid of a Web cam, a computer, and a high-speed connection, beams her (often scantily clad) image out to people (okay, men) around the Net. You can't exactly call it soft porn, but you can't exactly call it something else, either.⁵³⁷

The focus is on "young girls," bodies, and "swarming hordes" of men, fitting neatly into the technologized prey-predator relationship we have already seen: the vulnerable female inside the home stands in front of the open window, fully visible from the outside where the monsters are—and as always, opening that conduit is never a safe act, as it has drawn the attention of the male sexual threat, a power which can always find its way inside through the same channel:

Modern technology allows these girls to make their virtual presence available to anyone while remaining physically inaccessible. Transformed into a flurry of electrons, cam girls feel safe in their bedrooms as they flirt at a little camera with a winking LED, then check their e-mail and instant-message windows to gauge the power of their pulchritude. It's like having a magic mirror on your desk, but instead of an omniscient spirit keeping score, it's a mob of anonymous voyeurs peering through the other side of the looking glass.

⁵³⁷ Mark Frauenfelder, "Camgirls," *Yahoo! Internet Life* 8.6 (June 2002), 67.

And the mob is where the problem lies.⁵³⁸

The “girls” in this construction feel safe in the intimate heart of the home, princesses playing with the magic mirror. But these hapless innocents have no idea that it’s not a mirror, it’s a window (the kind of one-way mirror that might be found in a peep show, or a police station), and on the other side of the window presses the steaming “mob”—male, hungry, anonymous, and penetrative, easily able to assert their dominance within the caller hegemony dynamic and attack the tender prey right under their parents’ powerless and unknowing sway. “They’d better start to understand what’s going on in their daughter’s room,”⁵³⁹ warns an expert—especially because in this formulation, “what’s going on” involves the child opening the home (and her body) to the omnipresent intruder, discursively puncturing the wall of the bedroom as surely as if the Internet connection were a carbide-tipped drill.

A 2001 examination of cam girls similarly hit the common points: the female child in over her head, the penetrable bedroom, the ignorant parents, the uncontrolled technological aperture and orifice. The cam girl economy “makes it easy to take candy from strangers on the Internet,”⁵⁴⁰ invoking the time-honored cautionary tale of the pedophile abductor, positioning the cam girls themselves as perennially unwary and babyish prey performing the virtual equivalent of climbing

⁵³⁸ Frauenfelder, 68.

⁵³⁹ Frauenfelder, 69.

⁵⁴⁰ Katharine Mieszkowski, “Candy from Strangers,” *Salon*, 13 Aug. 2001 <http://archive.salon.com/tech/feature/2001/08/13/cam_girls/>, 1.

into long black cars driven by sinister men. Here, the entire interwoven structure of computer, camera, and Internet inherently can never be on the cam girl's side or under her power; it is technologically determined to sexualize and objectify her:

“Some of the young girls really aren't showing that much skin...” says [cam girl] Marissa... But the Web has a way of making even the most straightforward picture of a 14-year-old caught on her webcam into a pornographic image.⁵⁴¹

The Web here has “a way” and an agency of its own, an ineffable technological masculine dominance over the gendered body of its user, ensuring it can never entirely be controlled by the young female, but instead privileges the male eye and body outside the home. Unnoticed and uncontrolled by the helpless, technologically-impotent parents (“Several kids said their parents wouldn't even know how to find their Web sites if they gave them the URLs, much less what their children do online”⁵⁴²), the webcam-window in the bedroom tempts the little ones with flattery and promises, in order to taint, debauch, and abduct them.

A high-profile (and controversial) 2005 exposé of camwhores of both genders in the *New York Times* had all of these discursive earmarks, heightened into a chilling tale of unstoppable technological predation. The headline itself sets up the construct, with a youngster at one end, a cesspool at the other end, and the computer-window technology providing the link: “Through His Webcam, a Boy Joins a Sordid Online World.” The article tells the tale of Justin Berry, an archetypally-wholesome “soccer-playing honor-roll student,” who was “lured” and “seduced” by

⁵⁴¹ Mieszkowski, 3.

⁵⁴² Mieszkowski, 3.

strange men on the internet into setting up a Paypal online payment system so they could recompense him for displaying himself in front of his webcam. Sexualized public technology meets vulnerable private space, contaminating and overthrowing it:

Justin’s dark coming-of-age story is a collateral effect of recent technological advances.... [T]hey perform from the privacy of home, while parents are nearby, beyond their children’s closed bedroom doors.... Minors who run these sites find their anonymity amusing, joking that their customers may be the only adults who know of their activities.⁵⁴³

The haplessness and ignorance of parents (that charged category of adult assigned primary responsibility for policing both the borders of the home and the safety of the children inside it) is emphasized, the “good adult” inside the home left in the dust—contrasted with the mastery of technology and absence of morality practiced by the “bad adult” outside the home, meaning the predator.

“Adult” in fact is used as a synonym for predator and pedophile, while the “parent” category is disempowered in the background. “Parents” neither know about nor understand the webcam-window, leaving the home unguarded; “adults” dreamed of the technology before it was even viable, and its invention was for them a completion, providing them with ideal technological tentacles:

As [the 1990s] drew to a close, according to experts and records of online conversations, these adults began openly fantasizing of the day they would be able to reach out to children directly, through instant messaging and live video, to obtain the pornography they desired.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Eichenwald, A1, A30.

⁵⁴⁴ Eichenwald, A30.

Here, the webcam, in a familiar machine-revolution model, “transformed online pornography the way the automobile changed transportation,” making adjoining space and borders obsolete, puncturing the wall between public predator and private child, and thus “creating a bountiful selection of potential targets.”⁵⁴⁵

This trope of the webcam as a one-way link between male attacker and vulnerable domestic female/child target became the linchpin of its fictional representation, adding an extra twist to the dramatic tradition of anonymous phone calls, mysterious radio emanations, and harmful television broadcasts. The webcam fits into dramatic narratives—especially mystery and horror stories—as a one-way technologized window through which criminals may travel but crime-solvers may not; the detective may be allowed (or, often, forced) to witness transgressions through the webcam-window, but unlike the ordinary window, the webcam’s line of sight is never spatially contiguous. The path from viewing point to transmission point travels through “cyberspace,” a modern-day ether, and therefore the location of the crime being viewed is effectively obscured, making it more sinister and dangerous.

In 1998, for instance, the CBS mystery program *Diagnosis: Murder* aired an episode titled “Rear Windows ‘98” (a punning title linking modern computer technology to the famous filmic exploration of voyeurism and predation) in which the webcam’s troubling one-way link between dangerous public space and vulnerable private space becomes the source of murder and mayhem both for

⁵⁴⁵ Eichenwald, A30.

camwhores and for people watching the live feed; the criminal is well able to travel in both directions down the electronic conduit and harm those at either end, rupturing protective boundaries in order to dominate, terrorize, and damage individual (usually female) bodies. Dr. Amanda Bentley, a female medical examiner, is aimlessly surfing the Internet in her office when she comes upon "Joannecam," a homecam set up in the living room of a young woman (the young woman played, in a bit of in-joke stunt-casting, by Jennifer Ringley, the real originator of "Jennicam"). At first Amanda is idly amused, but when she moves to click away, a masked man dressed all in black suddenly enters the onscreen living room and stabs Joanne to death. Amanda shouts out, as if to warn or help her (harking back to a horror-movie audience's futile protestations to the onscreen victims, or more specifically to the writhing and agonized whispering of the Jimmy Stewart character in the original *Rear Window* as he watches the murderer approach, discover, and attack the Grace Kelly character in the apartment across the courtyard). The man then looks up sharply, right into the camera, almost as if he had heard Amanda's cries; Amanda in turn freezes, eyes wide, as if he's seen her. The man crosses the room toward the camera and looms close to the lens, his face filling her screen; Amanda leans back as if his approach is pushing her away from the monitor. The male predator has entered the wired house and ravaged the female body within; now, uncannily, he is practically able to climb right back out through the camera-conduit and attack the female observer. Before the episode is over, he will have done almost precisely that.

Right away, the webcam's troubling status as a visible window that is nevertheless disconnected from an identifiable location causes complications: Amanda tries to tell her male colleagues what she saw, and they are dubious, pointing out the recent real-life example of the titillating public/private webcam rupture:

Steve: Well, maybe it was just a joke, then. You know, like that couple who set up the website so you could watch them lose their virginity.

Mark: (regretfully) Yeah, and it never happened.
(Amanda stares at him.)

Mark: It was in the paper!

Steve and Mark, being adult males, are included at least theoretically in the audience (or "mob") for techno-sexual voyeurism; Amanda, however, may begin in the audience, but ends up being both watched and hunted by the technologically-enhanced predator.

Amanda does eventually discover "Joannecam's" identity and location, with the help of a trio of young hackers ("Oh, one of the webcam floozies," says the female hacker of the trio dismissively, using a phrase perhaps more family-friendly than "camwhores"). Amanda's investigations draw the attention of the villain, who can somehow tell through his electronic ganglia that Amanda has been poking around where she shouldn't. In response, he uses the Internet as a weapon against her (for example, ruining her credit rating, or declaring her fingerprints a match to an unrelated crime scene). From a distance, using virtual tools, he is even able to place her physical body in direct danger by overriding the stoplights outside the hospital

and causing a car crash. Following in the figurative footsteps of NOVAC, ENIAC, HAL, Colossus, and Proteus, all this villain has to do is sit back with his electronic brain and send signals of malicious intent, down the wires as well as through the wireless ether, and he can torment and terrorize the victim, leaving her a weeping wreck, without once being in bodily contact. His body is more than effectively replaced and enhanced by the omnipresent, omnipotent signal crawling through every open computer-window within reach.

At the climax of the story the male characters are off together, sending police to the villain's home, little knowing he isn't there. At the same time, Amanda is alone in her office in the quiet, nighttime hospital, a perfect target for the traditional story of technologized-male stalking solitary-female. Using his technological expertise, the villain creates a solid gridlock of traffic around the hospital, making the physical pathways of the road impassable to the police and other potential rescuers.

Similarly, he closes Amanda's access to technological pathways out through which she might call for help: she discovers her computer screen has gone dark, and when she lifts the phone, the line is dead. Suddenly, her computer beeps and comes back on, now under the control of the technological intruder: onscreen is a live webcam image of her at that moment, sitting at her desk, the webcam image coming from inside the house. Behind her onscreen appears the black-masked figure, raising his knife, and only in the nick of time is Amanda able to swing around and hit him with the laptop. She tries several more times to escape, finding every exit technologically blocked—the telephone again (“Hello? Hello?”), the elevator (stalled open), a set of

double doors with an electric lock (unresponsive to her frantic push of the 'open' button). She is reduced to crouching and hiding, until he leaps out to knock her down; she injures him in the scuffle, and finally the male characters (who used a helicopter to get past the traffic barrier) burst in to arrest him and comfort her as she whimpers on the floor. The technologized villain couldn't be contained by technology, and the one-way window remains one-way; the heroes had to bring to bear traditional physical means of finding and solving, over and over, until something stuck.

The year after "Rear Windows '98" came an episode of NBC's crime drama *Homicide: Life on the Street* titled "Homicide dot com," with a similar plotline: a female cam-user stabbed to death; a mysterious killer with an elaborate mastery of technological systems, turning the ins and outs of the Internet to his own purposes, luring the detectives where he wants them; heroes who must use traditional crime-solving methods to chase a defiantly untraditional villain. The technology is similarly gendered: the first victim is a well-known female cam-user, the killer is male; additionally, the primary detective on the case is female, but her authority is always in question (it is her first case after being overpowered by a criminal who took her gun, an incident that left her trying to prove herself to the largely-male squad). In this version of the storyline, the villainous status of the Internet is even further emphasized: the killer thrives in an electronic milieu, but those innocents who use it are plainly punished. The first victim had been warned by police earlier for staging a hoax-murder on her webcam; now, in a high-tech version of *The Boy*

Who Cried Wolf, she is murdered herself. Also, the final murder is unexpectedly streamed through a website secretly belonging to one of the male detectives, invading his personal life when his superiors' discovery of the site's non-mainstream content (especially his exploration of his own bisexuality) brings him trouble and embarrassment. In "Rear Windows '98," Internet use by the ordinary person was at best nerdy or boring, at worst sad. Here the Internet is both backstreet and cesspool, and dipping a toe into the bad guy's domain—especially with a sense of play and flexible identity—is never a good idea.

The 2002 feature film *FearDotCom*, layering the crime story with more of the supernatural aspects of horror, is able to emphasize these aspects of the discourse more concretely: cyberspace is not just evil, it is literally possessed; the Internet is not just invasive and dangerous, it is physically infectious and violently deadly. The movie in fact begins with a mysterious rash of deaths: all of the victims are found with their eyes wide open, bulging, and bleeding, blood trickling from every orifice in their heads. Mike, the investigating police detective, is partnered with Terry, an epidemiologist from the Department of Health. When he asks her if she likes "working with bugs and viruses" (a question that could just as well be asked of a computer technician), she answers, "Someone's gotta do it, otherwise disease spreads out of control. You do the same thing." However, the trouble in this case ends up to be neither an epidemic of ordinary crime nor of ordinary disease; as channeled through the Internet, the evil website *feardotcom* is a heightened nexus of crime and disease all at once, interactive torture and murder sent out via webcam

to infect and rupture its watchers' brains as if with an unholy hybrid of computer virus and Ebola virus.

The nerve center of feardotcom is a secret lair where the villain has abducted and is torturing a young blond woman, surrounded by computer equipment and webcams. On the website, the user can move the cursor over one of an array of surgical tools; the male figure onscreen then turns to the woman and uses the tool on her (beginning, for instance—and predictably—by cutting off her clothes). When “forensic programmer” Denise connects to the site, its discursive position is immediately made clear: onscreen it is as if the viewer first goes through a door, then spirals back out of an extreme close-up of an eye, the orifices of home and body immediately open and invaded. “Do you like to watch?” asks a female figure onscreen. We see a close-up of Denise’s eye, blinking, and we know that the polluted signal has penetrated the screen-window and thus her bodily-window, beginning the process of infecting and devouring her from within. The first symptom is a large black bug crawling out of the back of the computer; she smashes the bug, disconnects from feardotcom, and physically retreats. But it’s too late: clicking away from the website and walking away from the computer are equivalently useless reactions, once the signal has wormed its way in to machine and body. As with the other victims, Denise soon dies horribly. She starts bleeding from eyes, nose, and mouth, and sees bugs creeping out of the fabric of both her home and her body; they swarm down the walls and crawl from beneath her skin and out of her mouth, a higher-tech version of the little boy in *Halloween III* dissolved by the evil television

signal. The two citadels of home and body are poisoned and transformed from within, and to encounter the website in any way is automatically to be infected and punished by it—despite the fact that Denise is imbued with the institutional power of law and order, and despite the fact that she refuses to cooperate with the site’s invitation to torture. Neither her authoritative position nor her moral rectitude will protect her.

Mike and Terry are similarly exposed to the site, one after the other. As soon as they visit feardotcom, it seems to know all about them, as if it reads the mind right through the eye its signal has pierced. Mike sits through the site’s opening graphics and is presented with the question, “Do you want to see more?” He clicks yes, and the site responds: “Do you want to hurt me...Mike?” At his alarmed recoil, it adds, “I know who you are, and I know what you really want.” The computer-window is a two-way passage for the villain, who is able to send poisonous images out into the watcher’s brain as well as pull information from that brain right back into the ether. When Mike has been taken to the hospital for the nosebleeds that follow his exposure to the site, Terry is next in line. She approaches her computer warily, as if it might bite her; it does so in a figurative fashion, the feardotcom site greeting her by name:

Computer: (speaking in a female voice): Hello, Terry, are you ready to play?

Terry: (tuyly in response) Why are you killing Mike?

Computer (simultaneously speaking in a female voice, and typing onscreen): Guilty.

Terry: Guilty of what?

Computer: Watching.

The site's images eventually resolve to a shot of an eye and a bright light; Terry reacts in pain, clutching her head, the onscreen images intercut with her wide, staring eye. This focus on punishing the eye that watches the offering is underscored throughout the film by the villain's monitoring of his site's subscribers: whenever the violence of his torture rises, so does the number of subscribers, thus proving to the villain that they deserve their own infection and death via the visual contaminant.

The same argument is also a key component of the 2008 film *Untraceable*, in which a young man abducts and kills people who were responsible for turning a video of his father's suicide into a big online hit. For symmetrical punishment, he webcasts his victims' grisly demises via a webcam and the Internet on a site called *killwithme.com*, and his baroque torture setups are arranged so that the more people who log in to see the signal, the more quickly the victim will die. Two of the film's taglines get right to the heart of the trope: "How do you stop a killer who can get to you virtually anywhere?", and, above a picture of a computer and webcam: "A cyber killer has finally found the perfect accomplice: You." Exposing the open eye/orifice to the webcam-window's signal—as with exposing the eye to the television signal, or the ear to the radio or telephone signal—is constructed as a default 'yes' to penetration, and according to the power/gender dynamics of the relationship between masculinized public technology and feminized private domesticity, if you "asked for" the wicked experience, you deserve to suffer. Once

the female FBI agent in charge of the case sees the snuff-cam feed and starts to investigate, she is inflicted with the usual sorts of terrorization visited upon female characters in horror narratives (including other female investigators who watched webcams they shouldn't, like Amanda in "Rear Windows '98," and Denise and Terry in *FearDotCom*). For instance, as the voiceover to one *Untraceable* trailer ominously intones: "The closer they get to finding him...the closer he'll be to finding her": her safe spaces are increasingly technologically approached and attacked, climaxing with an Internet-invasion of her household, where she lives with only her mother and her eight-year-old daughter Annie (significantly for the vulnerable-domestic-female/child hot buttons of the discourse). At one point Annie announces, "Mom, there's a video of our house on the computer!"; a cam feed of their home is being shown on the killwithme.com site by the villain, via a car parked outside with a webcam mounted on top and a dead body in the trunk. By the time Jennifer sees the proof on her screen, Annie has already gone out onto the porch, waving at the camera; Jennifer rushes outside to pull her back into the supposed safety of the home, and Annie complains, "I was just gonna ride my bike for the camera!" Internet technology here serves as the ultimate Pied Piper: presented with a webcam, the girl-child's first instinct is to leave the protective walls and display herself for the swarming hordes.

Later, having sent her mother and daughter to a safer place, Jennifer is rushing to join them. She's driving across a bridge at night in the rain, when in slow sequence, the radio goes off, the windshield wipers freeze, then the steering, engine,

and lights all fail. Her car coasts to an involuntary stop, and she sits alone on the dark and rainy bridge; she can't open the door, as the electric locks won't disengage. Her handheld computer/cell phone doesn't work. At last: "Hello, Jennifer," says the killer's voice, speaking to her over the car's OnStar navigation/communications system. She manages to leave the car by smashing the window—reduced to old-fashioned brute force against electronic trickery—and calls for help via an emergency phone on the side of the bridge, reporting "He's hacked my car's computer!". But when she gets back into the car to stay out of the rain and wait for help, the killer's true tactic is revealed: he suddenly sits up in the back seat (having presumably gotten in once she exited and left it undefended), so that the call, for all intents and purposes, is coming from inside the car. The hacker/monster figure has followed the break-and-enter/Hands-On Imperative of the Hacker Code in every respect, hacking into protective physical spaces as easily as computer systems. As in other stories of domestic technological horror, once the eternally-technologically-superior (and technologically-mediated) predator is on the hunt, the formerly-safe personal space of the home, and now the car, is penetrated and contaminated, becoming little more than a trap from which to try to escape.

The CBS crime drama *Criminal Minds* regularly returns to webcams (and their relationships with predators) as a motif, exploring their narrative and discursive depths in ways increasingly crucial to the solution of the case. From the beginning, the webcam serves as a specialized and inherently-contaminated window, a familiar tool, entryway, and escape route for the human monsters the

team hunts, while the FBI agents themselves are largely left with traditional methods of chasing and catching the electronically-enhanced villains. In the pilot, for instance, the central mystery is the disappearance of a young woman in Seattle, taken by a pair of serial killers who typically keep their victims captive for a week before strangling them. The perpetrators are highly-technologized: they lured the latest victim in by making contact with her online, and the last email they sent her on the day they abducted her contained a hidden virus that wiped her hard drive (thus leaving no evidential correspondence behind to help identify them) and put an anonymous message on the screen. When the hero-team try to examine one killer's laptop, their interference freezes the system; the FBI, playing by the rules and using aboveboard techniques, have only stumbled further into the killer's superior technological web. The final touch comes when they do manage to deduce the master password which unlocks the frozen laptop—not through technological means, but through psychological profiling (the show's central premise)—to reveal a live webcam stream showing an unknown location, with the missing female victim held bound and gagged in a cage. The team can see her, but cannot reach her, which drives the suspense of the rest of the story; the heroes face the same questions shouted at the webcam-victim in *Rear Windows '98*, "Where are you? How do we find you?", as only a villain has a symbiotic enough relationship with technology to use this particular conduit.

Further episodes of *Criminal Minds* elaborate on this model, reinforcing the webcam-and-Internet link as a secret underground labyrinth only available to the

monster, while the heroes must find their way to the end of the maze in some other, more prosaic way. Heroes are doomed to have webcam images thrust upon them as threat and taunt, while villains use the webcam more fully, as trophy, highway, and tool of violent and sexualized invasion. In “P911,” the second episode of the show’s second season, an FBI agent posing online as a pedophile is sent a link to a live webcam stream of a little boy held captive in an unknown location; an onscreen timer counts down, and when it reaches zero, he will be sold to the highest bidder. The hero-team therefore have visual access to the victim from the beginning of the case—but as they don’t have the villain’s control over electronic conduits, it remains one-way access, the rootless image in space showing them a crime they cannot yet locate or stop. The villain, on the other hand, has complete mastery not only over the hardware, but over the invisible ether pathways linking the hardware together into a system of transportation, invasion, and abduction. One FBI agent explains “preferential offenders” (a subtype of pedophile) to the rest of the team:

Cole: They often trawl around residential neighborhoods, hijacking home wireless systems and communicating with children often outside the very house the child is in. Or they’ll simply use a coffee shop with wireless access to find, locate, and arrange a meeting. And it’s growing. It’s growing as fast as the Internet. They’re getting smarter and smarter, and all the security in the world can’t stop them from coming through our doors.

Hell, the monsters are already in our homes.

As she says “can’t stop them from coming through our doors,” the camera pans down to the laptop she holds; on the last line, she gestures with and nods to the laptop, leaving no doubt as to where the blame (and the door) lies: even though her

particular computer holds only information useful to the heroes, theoretically making it a tool for the good and the right, it is nevertheless still an intrinsically suspect device, a portal for monsters. The predator circles closer and closer to the vulnerable potential victim inside domestic space, first with the standard transportation system of automobiles and roads, and then with the unrestricted transportation of laptop and wireless that makes walls utterly irrelevant, tendrils reaching in and snaring any likely subject inside. The external male predator is always already “in our homes” despite any security precautions, seeping in like smoke.

And in this expansion of the narrative, he doesn't only seduce and abduct: he also enters the bedroom electronically, taints his victim, and then leaves the contaminated child *in situ* to wallow about in Internet depravity. The hero-team does some traditional law-enforcement legwork and turns up a credit card number that has been used to fund another web domain; this domain has a live webcam stream of an older boy tied to a chair. The physical location of this particular image is easily located (which might suggest, at least to an experienced audience, that it's a red herring of sorts), and when the team kicks in the door of the house, they hear loud rock music playing upstairs. In an upstairs bedroom they find a shirtless teenager surrounded by computer equipment and webcams set at different angles, his wrists “tied” to his chair—with loose ropes he easily slips out of. The boy, Kevin, is not pleased to be “rescued,” since the team is interrupting his business day. He is a camwhore, displaying himself for his customers. He defends his actions by

emphasizing the eyes-only nature of the webcam—"...I never leave this room, so no one, no one ever touches me"—but the team will have none of it. Just as the monsters use the computers to get into the home, Kevin has now been trained and tempted (by the selfsame monsters) to use the webcam-window to get inappropriately out of the home, onto the mean streets:

Morgan: Just like a street hustler.

Cole: Only now the street is the Internet.

Gideon: And his client base spans the globe.

Kevin is also not sympathetic to the little boy up for auction, and is not interested in helping the team find him. His casual scorn marks him as a fledgling monster himself, originally set on that path by his experience as a victim, hooked into the invasive technology and left to grow in stunted and perverse ways: the crime/horror genre's version of Justin Berry as profiled in the *New York Times*.

Halfway through its second season, *Criminal Minds* broadcast a two-part episode ("The Big Game" and "Revelations") in which the webcam takes center stage, elaborating on all of the aforementioned themes: the webcam as an invasive two-way conduit letting the monster into the home (while the hero can never use it as effectively); the webcam-eye looking in on the defenseless victim; the webcam-window displaying the victim's image, while the heroes try desperately to link real-world geography with the webcam's ether-obscured location. As the team investigates a murder, one of them is contacted by the team's computer expert, Garcia. A friend of hers has just emailed her a "viral video" that seems to match the crime scene the team is inspecting:

Morgan: A viral what?

Garcia: It's a video that someone posted online that someone thinks is novel in some way, and so they send it to everyone on their email lists, and so on and so on. This one seems to be pretty popular, judging by the string of names on the forward.

The video shows the murders as they happened, from the point of view of the victims' own laptop. The killer has uploaded it, exhibiting his handiwork as instruction and punishment; but from that initial infection, the viral video, as befits its place in the discourse of the infectious-computer, spreads itself far and wide from contaminated user to contaminated user throughout the body of the Internet, malign and uncontrollable. Another team member, frustrated, eventually asks Garcia why she can't just "shut it down". She answers in technical language, to which he responds:

Gideon: Just remove it once he sends it.

Garcia: It's the Internet, sir. Once something's out there, you can never take it back.

As Garcia already realizes (but the rest of the team must painfully discover for themselves), here the entire linked structure of computer-webcam-Internet is a vastly powerful tool and system already mastered and thoroughly exploited by the forces of evil, who use it as their entry and exit, their accomplice, and their secret hideout. The villain knows an infection only needs one germ injected at one spot to start a chain reaction, spreading out of anyone's control, while most of the heroes still labor under the simplistic model of a message pipeline with one central source that can be easily located and stoppered.

What most perplexes the team at first is the question of how and why the murderer has a video taken by the victims' computer; the recording and dissemination of the video is obviously important to him, so they wonder how he could know his victims would have a computer and webcam handy. As it turns out, the computer is actually *causal* in the dynamic of predator and prey: he only kills people who own computers that have both webcams and a connection to the Internet, because that is both how he first makes contact with potential victims, and how he electronically sneaks into the house to stalk his chosen ones. When the hero-team first discovers the existence of a viral video of the initial murders, one of them at the crime scene locates the laptop that sits at the angle from which the video was taken. Much as in a scene from "Rear Windows 98" from almost ten years earlier, he peers carefully into the computer's built-in camera, as if he could look through the conduit and see who's watching on the other end. The audience then sees that other end, where a man sits in front of a bank of perhaps twenty video monitors, each one showing the interior of a different middle-class household with the inhabitants unknowingly going about their supposedly-private business. He has his tentacles spread throughout the community, the monster already in so many homes, biding his time until he feels the need to make his presence known to one of them, to kill and record and disseminate them back out through the wires to infect the rest of the Internet.

As well as being more technologically adept than any of the heroes (as is usual for this narrative trope), the villain is also a certified technological expert: he

works as computer technical support, taking calls from hapless schmoes who are obviously far in over their heads:

Man on Phone: Uh, I just got this computer yesterday and I can't seem to get the damn sound to work.

Tobias: All right, I think I can deal with that, sir. What kind of computer do you have?

Man on Phone: I don't know, big?

(Tobias takes out some aspirin.)

Tobias: I didn't mean the size, sir. I meant, do you have a PC?

Man on Phone: Um, my wife gave it to me for my birthday.

The computer-user turning to the villain-expert for help is nothing more than a fresh fish in the net; he doesn't know what kind of computer he has, let alone the potential for that computer to let Tobias into his home to kill him. Tobias's next step is to prepare the way for his surveillance and entry, and the user is none the wiser:

Tobias: Does your computer have a camera installed in it?

Man on Phone: I think so. Yeah. But it's my sound that's messed up.

Tobias: All right, I can help you with that, sir. I'm gonna need you to allow me remote access to your computer.

Man on Phone: Okay, sure. Whatever that means. As long as it gets fixed.

In his ignorance of the dangers of his Internet hookup, the computer-user has potentially signed his own death-warrant: he's willing to allow a stranger complete remote access to his computer from afar, through which the villain can activate the computer's built-in camera, turning the man's own computer from a simple domestic appliance into the killer's personally-operated tool. The civilian inside the supposed safety of the home is no match for the electronically-enabled villain sliding down the computer-conduit and in through the webcam-window.

The villain is even more than a match for the technological expertise of the hero-team, demonstrating his ability not only to invade the home through the computer-portal (to which he has the key if he wants it), but also to invade law-enforcement headquarters, a place that should theoretically be armored against entry by any unauthorized person, let alone evildoers. During a team conference about the case, Agent Reid suddenly seems to realize something; he looks intently at the laptop on the table, and the shot cuts to a view of Reid on a monitor, peering at 'us,' as he is being watched by the villain. He stands up, warily:

Reid: (whispering) Agent Franks? Does this building have wireless Internet?

Franks: Yeah. Why?

Reid: That camera's on right now.

The team regards the laptop with horror and alarm, as it now serves (and has served for who knows how long) as an open eye and a one-way window through which the killer can eavesdrop on their meetings and plans. They scramble to try to peer in at him or follow him back down the conduit, to somehow ape his ability both to see and to travel through the wires and the ether:

Reid: The computer's connected itself to the Internet. It's streaming a video feed somewhere.

Hotchner: Can we trace this stream to the destination?

Reid: Keep it open, Garcia might be able—

But then, the computer beeps, displays a taunting message, and goes to black.

Reid: It turned off.

Hotchner: So they're controlling it remotely?

Prentiss: Is that even possible?

As is common in this pattern of the discourse, the heroes are left in the villain's technological dust, victims of the lurking electronic eye and computer-window just like the murdered civilians. The youngest member of the team is even eventually kidnapped and tortured by the villain, his suffering inflicted on the rest of the team via (what else) a webcam streaming from who-knows-where. The heroes must, as always, rely on the legwork, deduction, and intuition common to the crime drama genre, finding and defeating the killer the old-fashioned way, but not before he has wrought technologically-enhanced havoc on the community as well as a member of their own team.

"he came into our house, into her room"

When webcams combine with the computerized synchronous written communication known as "chatting" (an activity originally introduced with direct analogies to the unlicensed amateur radio system "CB radio"⁵⁴⁶), it adds up to a discourse that is more than the sum of its parts, forming a highly-charged circuit mapping right onto the power relations in the caller hegemony model. The child inside the house is seen through the webcam by the predators outside, via the one-way computer-window; the predators in turn issue instructions and demands in the chat room, enforcing their sexualized dominance without having to reveal

⁵⁴⁶ For example, see the full-page CompuServe advertisement in *Byte*, Jan. 1983, 145; Martin Lasden, "Of Bytes and Bulletin Boards," *New York Times*, 4 Aug. 1985, SM 34; and "Computer Clubs Growing As Hobbyists Share Data," *New York Times*, 24 July 1986, C10.

themselves. Chat becomes the conduit through which sexual predators enforce their agency: in the *New York Times's* exposé of camwhores, and Justin Berry in particular, it is chat that provided the opening for Berry's initial seduction/abduction into the "sordid online world":

Weeks before, Justin had hooked up a Web camera to his computer, hoping to use it to meet other teenagers online. Instead, he heard only from men who chatted with him by instant message as they watched his image on the Internet. To Justin, they seemed just like friends, ready with compliments and always offering gifts.

Now, on an afternoon in 2000, one member of his audience sent a proposal: he would pay Justin \$50 to sit bare-chested in front of his Webcam for three minutes. ...Justin removed his T-shirt. The men watching him oozed compliments.

So began the secret life of a teenager who was lured into selling images of his body on the Internet over the course of five years.⁵⁴⁷

Here, the webcam provides the window, but it is chat that drives the engine of despoliation. As one amateur typology of "online sexual predators" puts it, "[they] often start by viewing pornographic Web sites, then come the chat rooms"⁵⁴⁸—specifically pornographic visual content is only a stepping stone up to the worse possibilities of chat-room technology itself.

In the *Criminal Minds* episode about the little boy up for auction, the chat room again accompanies the webcam, each bolstering the other as a tool for the predator. For instance, when the initial FBI agent is posing online as a pedophile (thus receiving the link to the auction at the center of the storyline), this posing takes place in a chat room, and is described as "fishing"; chat rooms, then, are the

⁵⁴⁷ Eichenwald, A1.

⁵⁴⁸ Chris Hansen, *To Catch a Predator: Protecting Your Kids from Online Enemies Already in Your Home* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 7.

ocean in which swim uncounted numbers of dangerous predators, with law enforcement dangling bait in the form of faux-children to tempt them. In the later scene with Kevin, the teenaged camwhore mistaken for a captive, we see that chat is how his audience issues their commands to shape his performance to their specifications. When the FBI agents burst into Kevin's bedroom and fan out to search it for predators, we in the audience are shown where the predators actually are: in Kevin's computer. On his computer screen, we can see the last handful of entries in a chat room:

tataLuv: you wer very BAD.
 corky: show me smile
 begme: juicy pecc. tghtEN them up!
 PYT: cum to me closer to screen
 cougar: LEAN FORWARD TO GET OUT
 cougar: further...
 tataLuv: flex it

As the FBI agents move through the room and thus through the cameras' fields of vision, the names on the chat room screen are hastily replaced one after the other with "logoff" commands, the mysterious predators easily slipping off back into the etheric ocean, the FBI unable to catch, identify, or follow them.

In a 2000 episode of the NBC crime drama *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* titled "Chat Room," we see this aspect of the discourse emphasized: not only the computer (especially the titular chat room) as a conduit allowing predators into the child's bedroom, but also the difficulty that the law-enforcement heroes face in chasing down the innately technologically-superior villain. As before, the predators are able to circulate and attack via the Internet, while the police and FBI are left to

try to catch them via traditional legwork and sting operations. Unsurprisingly, the crux (and target) of the piece is the domestic space and the child within it, both of which are vulnerable to the global tentacles of the Internet. "I love the Information Superhighway," says one of the police detective heroes. "You can meet creepazoids from all over the world without leaving the comfort of your own home." Later, another detective says to a pedophile under arrest, "No more trees to climb, no binoculars to lug around? You can see into a little girl's bedroom with just a click of your mouse." Each detective is describing the same model, one from inside, one from outside: even if you (or, more specifically, the vulnerable female-and/or-child figure) are supposedly safe inside the physical walls of your domestic sphere, thanks to the Internet (here, more specifically, chat technology) predators can penetrate the walls with gaze and body both, to have their way with those inside.

Here, as in the narratives about camwhores, while the child is the victim, she is also the most knowledgeable about the technology involved (other than the villain). This knowledge does not protect her, however; it merely makes sure she opens herself, and the portal in the bedroom wall, to the predator's attacks. As before, the figure of the parent is left far behind both the villain and the child, hapless and ignorant before the technological snake in the nest. Early in the episode's initial investigation, the detectives talk to the mother of a girl, Karen, who claimed to have been abducted and raped by a man she met on the Internet. "I wouldn't have a computer in my home," the mother says firmly. "It's at her father's apartment." But her attempts to protect her daughter by refusing to admit the evil

technology in the first place were still doomed to failure: for one thing, it turns out the father has himself been downloading odd (though legal) pornography, which raises the detectives' judgmental eyebrows. And also, although the father swears Karen couldn't have seen his porn stash, when asked whether he monitors his daughter's Internet use, he replies, "Karen knows more about that thing than I do—what's there to monitor?" Literally left to her own devices, Karen and her friends took to contacting a man online "as a joke" (harking back to the careless girls prank-telephoning the murderer in *I Saw What You Did*), and in return, he bombarded Karen with images of child pornography. The lead detective, affected by the events of the case, installs a "child lock" on his own home computer, but when one of his children complains that she needs to get to her homework, the detective can't manage to unlock it. In the end, he has to turn to the closest expert, that selfsame child:

Elliot: Do you know how to fix this?
 (Maureen hits two keys and gets to the desktop screen)
 Maureen: Those child lock things are a joke.

The father is stymied on the technological threshold, undermining his supposed status as king of his (and his family's) castle, just as the law-enforcement team is technologically outpaced by the computer-predator, undermining their status as those who can protect the innocent against the forces of darkness that intend to molest them. As the lead detective says to his wife (the glowing screen of their home desktop computer lurking menacingly over his shoulder):

Elliot: I mean, these predators, you tell me where they are. I can't hear

'em, I can't see 'em.
 Kathy: But they're out there.
 Elliot: (pointing behind him, toward the computer) Honey, they're in
here.

The heroes—detectives and/or parents alike—are limited to traditional means and methods: hearing and seeing, finding and catching, keeping monsters out with strong walls, locked doors, and secluded bedrooms for the kids. But it doesn't matter; it's too late. Thanks to the computer-conduit, the predators are already "in here," tarnishing the domestic sphere, rather than "out there" in the public sphere where they belong.

Even outside of the horror and crime-drama genres, the narrative takes on the same structure. In the ABC situation comedy *My Wife and Kids*, a 2003 episode titled "Jr. Executive" finds the Kyle family faced with revelations and dangers that any family in *Criminal Minds* or *Law and Order: SVU* might also face, with the only exception being in tone: the ramifications in the sitcom are all potential dangers narrowly averted, rather than actual harm, although the cautionary-tale aspect remains the same. The Kyles' older daughter, Claire, has triggered her parents' suspicions by staying up in her bedroom (theoretically the safest and most controlled space in the home), but constantly using a chat room (an uncontrollable and unlocatable etheric space that makes the walls of the bedroom obsolete):

Michael: She's on that damn thing all day and all night!
 Janet ("Jay"): Baby, it's for homework! She's got a Shakespeare project.
 Michael: That's what she tells *you*, but *I* know what goes on on that
 Internet. That whole Internet nothin' but a virtual sex shop, Jay.
 Jay: And how would you know, Michael?
 Michael: Be-cause I-I'm a concerned parent who has to explore that

stuff to protect my children.

As in other iterations of the discourse, the parents here are both casually ignorant and partially complicit; Michael, like Karen's father in the episode of *Law and Order: SVU*, knows firsthand what kind of cesspool he allows his daughter to swim in, because he uses it himself for pornographic purposes. Even knowing this (or at least understanding the implication), the mother assures the father their child is in no danger, because of the supposed content of this particular subdivision of cyberspace:

Jay: Hey, baby, it's a homework chat room, she's perfectly safe.

Michael: The Internet is *not safe!*

Even talking about homework, an approved and legitimate activity for children to engage in, is contaminated by the technology itself. As in the cam girl article that argued the Internet "has a way" of making any girl's image pornographic, here Michael insists that the Internet has a way of making any activity dangerous, by virtue of its very existence.

When Michael finally goes up to Claire's bedroom to, as he puts it, "spy on the kids," he sees that she has been communicating in the chat room with someone named "Purvis," who has been sending her romantic lines from Shakespeare's sonnets. So Michael, posing as Claire, makes a date to meet Purvis the next afternoon, in the domestic version of the FBI's "fishing" from *Criminal Minds*. As this is a sitcom, nothing bad ends up happening to Claire: at his secret rendezvous, Michael discovers that Purvis is in reality a little boy (although a fairly sexually-

assertive and precocious one). While Purvis is, then, a member of the external male fellowship of predators, he is not yet in the league of the sexually-adult, and thus Michael can actually stop him with the traditional means open to him: physical intimidation, and a stern invocation of the role of the father protecting his virginal daughter. And Michael's final answer to the danger is both traditional and complete:

Claire: I'm sorry, Dad. I promise I'll be more careful.

Michael: Oh you're gonna be more careful, all right, because you're grounded. You're gonna be upstairs, in your room, without the computer. That's right. From this day, I am taking you out of the Matrix. You are unplugged, Trinity.

The actual machinery must be removed, the plughole in the wall completely barricaded. Only then can the child's bedroom take its place again as the signifier of the safest and most-secluded spot in the home, the nook in which a child can be effectively "grounded"—separated entirely from contact with the outside world, all external public forces filtered and kept away by the parents, with their physical and ideological control over the boundaries of the home renewed.

The child's bedroom—especially in the flexible cultural category of "child-at-risk" that can include teenagers and even twentysomethings (as seen in some of the cam girl exposés)—is a charged construction: it is supposedly safe in the farthest reaches of the home, overseen by parental authority, but at the same time it is always on the verge of being out of the parents' grasp. The scope of parental control over the child before domestic communication technology has been idealized as absolute:

No technology or youth culture available through its means interfered with the wish of the adults in these matters. No external forces penetrated the bourgeois interior to provide alternatives for the child to the dictates of adults. Each object, however trivial, that appeared before the child was there at the discretion of the child's parents. Perhaps only the window in the child's room afforded an unmonitored glimpse of the world beyond the privacy of the nuclear family.⁵⁴⁹

But within the privacy of the family (even if the walls are technologically unpenetrated), if there is a "child's room," that means there is an even more private place beyond the complete control of the parents: a child with privacy is a child with some measure of autonomy, even if just for the moment, and combining this with further implications of a bedroom (the place set aside for nudity and—theoretically restricted to the concept of the adult bedroom—a specifically sexual privacy) potentially allows for the child to have a sexuality. By definition, the modern category of child is supposed to be without its own sexual agency, and therefore the child's bedroom is inherently a discursively troubled space. It has historically been at the center of the anxieties surrounding childhood sexuality, as when G. Stanley Hall's influential 1904 manual *Adolescence* warned (in the midst of other auto-eroticism-preventatives for young people, such as loose underpants, hard beds, and keeping hands out of pockets): "Each [adolescent] should have at least a bed, if not a room to himself, but it should not be too remote and not too secluded from adult

⁵⁴⁹ Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), 171.

observation.”⁵⁵⁰ In other words, if the adolescent is allowed to sleep with others, he runs the risk of sexuality with someone else; but if the adolescent is sequestered in privacy (and therefore evading the adult’s control over the home) he runs the risk of sexuality with himself. Neither option is acceptable, and in order to prevent or at least curtail it, the adults must control and surveil the problematic space of the child’s bedroom.

If, however, this bedroom has access to computer/Internet technology (technologizing the unmonitored “window in the child’s room”), the inherent liminality and transgressive potential of the space is heightened and dramatized in the discourse. The Internet again “has a way” of rupturing boundaries between the bedroom and outside spaces, as well as amplifying the sexual nature of the room’s intimacy and privacy: Kevin on *Criminal Minds* can display himself there for his demanding clients, just like Justin Berry or various and sundry cam girls; Claire on *My Wife and Kids* can have secret conversations and make dates with boys outside her father’s ambit. David in *WarGames* does his hacking from the bedroom, and when Joshua the computer starts calling him in return and won’t take no for an answer, he perches nervously on his bed, eyeing the unclosable phone line. Articles about webcams in general, and Justin Berry in particular, emphasize that the images are “Live! From My Bedroom” and taking place “beyond...children’s bedroom doors”. *Law and Order: SVU* tells us that pedophiles “can see into a little girl’s bedroom with

⁵⁵⁰ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: Appleton, 1904), 468.

just a click of [a] mouse.” Cautionary advice perennially reminds parents of the problem of the wired bedroom, as the spot where the home is most likely to be invaded by the filthy street corners outside, advising parents to keep the family computer in “a public area, like the living room,”⁵⁵¹ and warning them that computer use in childrens’ bedrooms “is an invitation for trouble.”⁵⁵²

A 2005 cable television movie titled *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* depends on the drama of the hazardous wired bedroom, finding it greater than any dangers of the sexualized-adolescent ever seen before (after all, it’s not just a seduction—it’s a *cyber* seduction). Justin, the teenage central character, has a computer in his bedroom which he uses for private chat; someone in a chat room passes along a link to a cam girl’s site, and that is the beginning of Justin’s dramatic downfall. The moderately-suggestive cam girl material leads him into an addiction to online pornography, including hardcore fetish and bondage sites, ruining him body and soul. It is the loaded combination of the wired-conduit and the bedroom in particular that catalyzes Justin’s perverse and destructive sexual awakening, the progression of which is initially signified through an increasing resistance to parental control over the computer/bedroom link. At first, the room retains its permeability: Justin’s parents freely walk into his bedroom for archetypal parent-child interactions (his father, to praise him for his achievements on the high school swim team; his mother, to drop off his socks). However, little do they know that

⁵⁵¹ Barbara Kantrowitz, Patricia King, and Debra Rosenberg, “Child Abuse in Cyberspace,” *Newsweek*, 18 Apr. 1994, 40.

⁵⁵² Hansen, 231.

Justin is accessing pornography on his computer right under their noses, and whenever they enter the room, he swiftly changes the screen to a harmless text document with a keystroke or two. A little further along his downward slide, the bedroom door still remains halfway open; late at night, his mother hears the tapping of his keyboard and heads down the hall, looking in and unexpectedly catching him in the porn-surfing act. Finally, after he's been caught that first time and given an uncomfortable talking-to by his father, Justin is drawn again from his bed late at night to sit at his computer, lit only by its seductive glow—and, in a symbolically-weighted moment, he at last closes his bedroom door (leaving the viewers of the program, as well as his unknowing parents, shut outside). The wired bedroom is food for misbehavior, contamination, and despoliation, the child's room torn from its innocent connotations; it no longer belongs to the parent-patrolled and parent-controlled heart of the home, but instead has been connected to the danger and filth of the outside world via an unpredictable and uncontrollable tube.

The “cyber” half of the pornographic cyber seduction amplifies the danger Justin is in, as well as his own culpability. When Justin's mother first catches him looking at naked women on the computer, she tells her husband, who thinks she's overreacting. She keeps up the pressure on him, so eventually he does give Justin a half-hearted talking-to. He then tells his wife there's no problem, that Justin will look at a few pictures and then move on; the word he repeatedly uses, as in his talk with Justin, is “normal.” She, however, doesn't believe that for a minute, and in the worst-case-scenario world of this discourse, she's absolutely correct. This is not the

“normal” looking-at-naked-pictures her husband imagines (and surely participated in in his own youth): it is now technologized and thus radioactive, piped in at high pressure from the enormous external ocean of depravity that surrounds the fragile island of the home, damaging Justin both physiologically and psychologically. Leslie Weatherhead’s anti-masturbation advice of 1932 relies on the same metaphor of inner-sanctum versus dangerous visitor:

We cannot help the callers who come to the doorstep and even ring the bell. We can help saying, “Come into the living-room and make yourselves at home.” Masturbation becomes sin when such thoughts are *deliberately entertained*.⁵⁵³ (emphasis in original)

Now, the callers on the doorstep have their own back door—worse, a back door directly into the child’s room—making it easier for them not only to be invited in and *deliberately entertained*, but also to overwhelm the child inside and invade both his room and his body.

Generations of anti-masturbation advice warned about terrible consequences: it would “destroy the body,”⁵⁵⁴ make the child “listless, and preferring solitude than companionship, averse to exercise,”⁵⁵⁵ produce “weak sluggishness of heart action and circulation” (as well as causing a medical condition described as “masturbator’s heart”⁵⁵⁶), and more, down to the legendary threats of

⁵⁵³ Leslie Weatherhead, *The Mastery of Sex Through Psychology and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), 126.

⁵⁵⁴ Elizabeth Blackwell, *The Human Element in Sex* (London: J&A Churchill, 1884), 39.

⁵⁵⁵ Emma F. Angell Drake, *What a Young Wife Ought to Know* (Philadelphia: The Vir Publishing Company, 1908), 243.

⁵⁵⁶ Hall, 443.

myopia and hairy palms—symptoms and conditions largely distilled down to the threat of abnormality through weakness, loss of a vital essence⁵⁵⁷ that would drain both physical and mental energy and wholesomeness. The concept of masturbation in and of itself bringing on “cowardice, suspecting the purity of all others, avoidance of rough, manly sports, neglect of toilet and dress, spells of sulks, pets and peevishness”⁵⁵⁸ may have largely been left behind in popular discourse, but here supercharged cyberporn, with the accompanying narrative of addiction, neatly steps in to take its place. The dramatic changes Justin displays as he falls further and further into *His Secret Life* read like a list of symptoms of teen drug use (another cautionary-tale commonly disseminated to parents): he is exhausted, awake all night, powerless to resist getting out of bed and looking at the computer. He makes excuses to stop socializing with friends and girlfriends. His grades plummet. He gets in a shouting (and shoving) match with his parents. He is fixated on his chosen substance: when classmates talk to him at school, the audience sees from his point of view that all he can think about is porn. And most telling of all is the fact that Justin, formerly a high-school swimming champion, and for whom swimming is (according to his mother) his only chance to go to college, starts losing races. Exposure to cyber-sexuality has drained Justin of his vigor and vital essence as well as his integrity, weakening him physically and mentally, turning him into a

⁵⁵⁷ As discussed, for instance, in Robert H. MacDonald, “The Frightful Consequences of Onanism: Notes on the History of a Delusion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28.3 (July-Sept. 1967): 431.

⁵⁵⁸ Hall, 446.

depraved, immoral lowlife. Now he lies to his parents, uses his mother's credit card to keep the fix coming, leaves the formerly-safe house open to the contaminating element, and spreads the addiction-disease to others.

The first innocent victim of Justin's pornography infection is his pre-pubescent younger brother, Alex. The day after the ominous night when Justin closed his bedroom door, Alex comes in while Justin is downloading porn video trailers, and Justin is unable to hide a barrage of pornographic pop-up ads suddenly cascading onto his screen (the computer-conduit, as always, an uncontrollable sewer pipe into the home). Alex is curious and threatens to tell, so Justin agrees to show him something; we don't know what Alex saw, but it leaves him silent, vacant-eyed, and traumatized at the family dinner table that evening. His mother notices something's wrong, but Justin successfully distracts her with a fake explanation. And now the porn-addiction virus is at work in Alex: he continues looking for online porn on his own, emailing links to himself and burning CDs of downloaded porn that he keeps in his bureau drawer. He also passes on the contamination in his own right, inviting a visiting friend of his own age, Thomas, to "see something really gross" (first carefully closing the bedroom door, the signifier of a contaminated child obeying the dictates of the evil Internet). Even after both Justin and Alex have been discovered and punished by parents and school alike, and their mother Diane has attempted both to unhook the home from the electronic filth-tube (as we will see, an impossible task) and to reconstruct the home into a source of nothing but correct and wholesome behavior (the whole family watching a movie while cuddled on the

couch; drastically increasing “family time” in general), the virus is still spreading: Thomas, in his turn, is caught by his own mother showing a classmate a porn photo on his laptop. Alex denies sending it to him, and Diane stares at Justin, the nexus and vector of the disaster:

Justin: Why are you looking at me?

Diane: Because you allowed this pornography into our house.

She has correctly pinpointed the locus of the discursive anxiety. The first act, the origin of all the spreading sexual pollution, was indeed Justin’s: opening the computer-hole in the wall, after which nothing could be the same again, the family swamped by an infectious and unstoppable tide.

Diane does her best to belatedly seal the breach. First, in a display of faith in recommended prevention protocols, she tries to install child-proofing software. However, she has trouble setting it up, and, just as in *Law and Order: SVU*, she has to ask her child to fix it, which young Alex does easily. He admits that he and Justin would theoretically have no trouble finding ways around the barrier, at which she ups the ante:

Diane: I’m sure you won’t. Especially if we move the computer into the family room.

Alex: What about when you’re not home?

Diane: Well, guess the power cord goes with me.

She is attempting to fight the danger on its own ground, tackling the problematic rupture on two fronts: first and foremost, remove it from the child’s bedroom into the semi-public family room, shifting the dangerous portal out of the spot of greatest intimacy, sexuality, and proximity to the unsurveilled child; second, when she is not

home to do her proper job of boundary-patrol, she'll have the entire system forcibly unplugged, theoretically closing the hole in the wall. However, this late in the downward spiral, not even physical removal can protect the family from the contamination Justin has introduced. He continues to get his fix of online porn wherever he can: Internet cafés, his girlfriend's PDA, the school computer lab ("hacking through" the school library's technological barriers, following the traditional discursive path of the deviant boy-amateur penetrating protective barriers unchecked). And finally, one day Justin's father comes home to find Justin's mother stooped over the computer while talking on the phone (presumably to technical support). He asks what the matter is, and she clicks the mouse, at which window after window of pornographic ads start popping up on the screen, one after the other, faster and faster. Neither the mother nor the father can stop it, though they poke ineffectually at the keyboard. On the phone, Diane moans quietly as if she's literally drowning in the flood:

Diane: Oh no...oh no, please...I'm trying...they just keep coming, we can't...we can't get out...I'm trying to get out—escape? (She hits the "escape" key on the keyboard, with no effect.)

Justin originally opened the computer-portal, allowing the infectious sexuality into his bedroom; now, no matter what the family tries to do, their home remains under ferocious attack, the porn pouring in. As with other invasive-technology narratives, once penetrated by outside predators, the contaminated home becomes a trap from which the innocents cannot escape (escape key notwithstanding).

The computer-conduit into the child's bedroom brings in more than general sexualized contamination: in through the hole in the wall also comes the threat (heightened to a pitch of near-certainty) of abduction and the figure of the abductor himself, ready to whisk the helpless youngster out through the wires into unimaginable and sexualized danger. Now the capital-S Stranger doesn't even need a big black car into which to tempt his child victims; the cyber-Pied Piper is conveniently provided with handy access to children in their most private room, ripe for an electronic version of the traditional temptation-abduction cautionary narrative. "In the digital age," warns *U.S. News & World Report*, "pedophiles and child pornographers are just as likely to lurk in online computer networks as in mythic dark alleys,"⁵⁵⁹ mapping the Internet directly over more familiar spaces signaling sexualized 'stranger-danger' for children. "Letting kids roam unsupervised on the Internet is kind of like letting them loose in Times Square,"⁵⁶⁰ writes one author; another echoes, "[t]he rule is the same as on the street or in the park: Beware of strangers."⁵⁶¹ Similarly, another editorial advises that "parents teach their children to follow many of the same rules in the Internet as they do on the street, such as don't talk to strangers...."⁵⁶² A 1995 *Newsweek* article titled "Don't 'Chat' to

⁵⁵⁹ "...And a Crackdown on Child Porn," *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 Sept. 1995, 24.

⁵⁶⁰ Alistair Barr, "Keeping Kids Out of Sindy's Adult Club," *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine*, Apr. 1996, 105.

⁵⁶¹ Kantrowitz, King, and Rosenberg, 40.

⁵⁶² Debra Gersh Hernandez, "Controlling Cyberporn," *Editor & Publisher*, 26 Aug. 1995, 45.

Strangers” is more explicit about the discourse of the Internet’s inherently different and heightened status as child-abductor and molester:

Kids have been running away from home since before Huck Finn, but computer-assisted disappearances have thrown parents into the Twilight Zone. A child may know not to talk to strangers at the mall, but in the faceless, anonymous world of online, talking to strangers is the whole idea.⁵⁶³

“Two teens vanish into cyberspace,” the article’s subhead reports. After ominous details about “cyberspace pedophiles” and the fear that one of the teens had been “lured by just such a phony friend” (i.e. a pedophile “courting minors” online), the end of the story is more prosaic: one of the article’s subjects had run away (and emailed his parents that he was safe) to stay with “not a pedophile but another teenager”; and the other subject had apparently run away to meet her boyfriend. However, just as in the Lifetime movie a “child” (a category flexible enough to include teenagers like Justin, and even young adults if discursively convenient) plus pornography plus the Internet becomes Cyber Seduction (heightened and dangerous, an active concept with an implied agent behind it), here “children” plus talking to strangers plus the Internet becomes Cyber Abduction. The Internet is both conduit for predators and a predator itself, ceaselessly breaching the home until its theft of the child is achieved:

Lisa [the mother of one of the article’s subjects] says she even removed phone cords from the house to keep Tara out of the chat rooms, but nothing worked. Although Tara could have found just as much trouble with an old-fashioned pen pal, Noble blames AOL [the

⁵⁶³ Marc Peyser, Andrew Murr, and Rob French, “Don’t ‘Chat’ to Strangers,” *Newsweek*, 19 June 1995, 42.

America Online Internet service] “probably 90 percent” for Tara’s disappearance. “I can’t tell you why; I just do.”

When a child vanishes into cyberspace, the answers frequently defy words.⁵⁶⁴

Two weeks later, the July 3, 1995 issue of *Time* magazine featured a high-profile, dramatically-illustrated cover story about the prevalence and intensity of “cyberporn,” asserting in bold print that “It’s popular, pervasive, and surprisingly perverse... And there’s no easy way to stamp it out.”⁵⁶⁵ Reverse engineering the Cyber Seduction and Cyber Abduction equations makes it predictable that the story would include illustrations of endangered children: for instance, a drawing of a darkened room in which a small child is tempted toward a computer displaying a lollipop on its screen, the traditional Pied-Piper/molester/candy-from-strangers model gone high-tech. Is the computer itself the predator, offering the candy? Or is there an implied predator-hand on the other side of the computer-conduit, holding the candy in the computer-window to draw the child in? In the cyber-seduction-abduction paradigm, the difference hardly matters. The cover of the issue zeroes in on the drama of the child-at-risk, showing a close-up of a child’s face starkly lit by the glow of a computer, his eyes wide and shocked, his hands on the keyboard. It harks back to the photo used on the covers of the 1950 *Parents’ Magazine* and the 1954 *New Republic* in their exposés of television’s predation of children: in both cases the devilish device is not quite in the picture, but its effects are, with the

⁵⁶⁴ Peyser, Murr, and French, 42.

⁵⁶⁵ Philip Elmer-DeWitt, “On a Screen Near You: Cyberporn,” *Time*, 3 July 1995, 38.

innocent little ones visibly washed in its sinister light, eyes wide, taking the full electronic brunt.

In *Cyber Seduction*, Justin, his little brother Alex, and Alex's friend Thomas, embody these innocent eyes, shocked, seduced and addicted by the inevitably dangerous Internet. But in their story, their first encounter with the dark side of the computer conduit doesn't come at the hands of a specific adult male predator. Instead, they are the victims of a virus of sorts, spreading from young male user to young male user (and Justin himself was originally drawn in by a cam girl link given to him in chat by a male friend). The abduction following their seduction is more a moral one, the cyberporn stealing their wholesomeness and leaving them in the grip of addiction. Tellingly, these characters are all boys; when the main character of the child-at-cyber-risk is a girl, the more commonly identified danger is not addiction but abduction, and the shadowy threat on the other end of the line takes shape as a specific person, an active external male subject (or an underground subculture full of them) physically and sexually menacing the passive domestic female object.

This dynamic can be seen playing out in two made-for-TV movies (a genre built on the staple diet of women and children in danger) produced five years apart, that both play like versions of *Cyber Seduction* inverted: instead of the sexualized, electronic Pied Piper coaxing boys out into the excesses of the red-light district, now he reaches in and kidnaps girls for his own dark ends. *Every Mother's Worst Fear* first aired on the USA cable network in 1998, and *Defending Our Kids: The Julie Posey Story* first aired on the Lifetime cable network in 2003; as the titles clearly indicate,

the homebreaking-technology-molesting-children discourse is boiled down here to its core themes. In *Every Mother's Worst Fear* (which the opening credits assure us was "inspired by actual events"), a girl is approached, seduced, and physically abducted via a computer chat room, only rescued at the last moment by her formerly-workaholic mother; in *Defending Our Kids* (which tells the story of "cyber crime fighter"⁵⁶⁶ Julie Posey, and shows a shot of the real Posey at the end), a girl is contacted, seduced, and *almost* abducted via a computer chat room, driving her mother to become an online vigilante and catch other computerized sexual predators in the act. In each story, the computer/Internet technology enables, and in fact initiates, external attacks on the purity and safety of the innocent girl in the bedroom, constructing for viewers a forceful and frightening picture of the vulnerability of their children in the wired home, the inherent hazards of computer technology, and the omnipresence of the online predator.

Again, the computer/Internet construct serves as a hole in the wall of the house in no uncertain terms, letting sexualized threats in unobserved; and as before, this is not just any wall, but the wall of the child's bedroom in particular, this most uneasily private of places. In both of these movies, as in *Cyber Seduction*, the child-at-risk character has a computer in her or his own bedroom, and the trouble first begins when she or he is left alone to use a chat room. And in both movies focusing on female characters, leaving her alone in the bedroom with a computer is worse

⁵⁶⁶ Julie Posey, *My Life as a Cyber Crime Fighter*, 2005, self-published/print-on-demand—available from Lulu.com <<http://www.lulu.com/content/96526>>.

than leaving her alone there with a boy. In *Every Mother's Worst Fear*, for instance, the teenage daughter, Martha, is first shown home alone with her boyfriend, making out in her room. But this unsupervised activity (which in other, especially earlier, cautionary tales would itself be the agent of Martha's danger and downfall) doesn't actually lead anywhere. Instead, he shortly leaves, and she turns to a chat room to which she was excited about gaining entry (and which her boyfriend had derided), typing her age, the fact that her mother is "always working," and her feelings about her parents' recent divorce. This interaction with the Internet is where the trouble really begins: unbeknownst to Martha—but shown to the viewing audience—Mitch, an adult male in a different location, is watching this appear on his own computer, and is taking notes. He supplies this personal information to Drew (another adult male), one of a number of apparent clients, allowing Drew to insinuate himself into Martha's affections in the chat room. Drew's first step is to coax Martha into an even more intimate subspace:

Drew (typing): Let's go to our own private chat room. Just us.

(Mitch is watching the chat room on his own computer, elsewhere)

Mitch (talking to himself): Juuust the two of us.

Martha (typing): Okay...but promise it's just us.

Drew (typing): I promise. I want to know you better than anyone else.

Follow me now.

And Martha, as if she were being invited into the archetypal Big Black Car by the sweet-talking Stranger With Candy, goes with Drew to the new space, just her and Drew...and, invisible to Martha, the mastermind-archpredator Mitch as well.

As with the episode of *My Wife and Kids*, Martha rouses her mother's ire with her constant, besotted interludes with the computer, spending every spare moment dreamily typing away in her room. Late at night, Connie, Martha's mother, comes into Martha's bedroom to see her still awake, in her pajamas, still chatting, mesmerized in front of the computer. "You're gonna make yourself sick!", she scolds. "All you do is sit in front of that thing!" She orders Martha to go to bed, which Martha does...but as soon as Connie has left the bedroom, Martha is out of bed and back to the computer, helplessly fixated. *Defending Our Kids* has a nearly-identical scene between Julie Posey and her daughter Kristyn (both scenes also paralleling the similar events in *Cyber Seduction*): Julie and her husband Jerry have bought Kristyn her own computer, putting it on a desk in her room. One night, Julie awakes to the sound of typing. She follows it to Kristyn's bedroom door and pushes it open to reveal Kristyn sitting at her computer. Kristyn, startled, hits a key that makes the screen go to a butterfly screensaver; she says she was just writing, but then the computer makes a chirp sound to signify a new message in a chat room. Just like Connie, Julie complains about her daughter being up late every night and orders her to go to bed—not knowing that Kristyn has been chatting with a predator, nicknamed MagicMan, who convinces Kristyn to meet him privately in person the next day, an attempt that Julie only narrowly foils by physically intervening.

In *Every Mother's Worst Fear*, Martha is not so lucky. When her seduction and abduction are complete (she is sent a plane ticket to Pittsburgh and then held captive, first in Drew's house and later in Mitch's loft apartment), Connie and her ex-

husband Jeff report her absence to the police. “No facial piercings—that’s refreshing,” says the detective, marking Martha as a “good” girl without the signifiers of unruliness that would make her disappearance less of a crime. Connie goes to talk to Martha’s friends and learns about chat rooms—or, more to the point, learns simply that they are cesspools of male sexual predation. Martha’s friend Sherry is in her own bedroom, typing in a chat room, when her mother and Connie come in. They ask Sherry what she and Martha were doing on their computers, and Sherry’s mother suddenly pulls her away from the screen and moves in to look at it. “It’s private!” Sherry insists, but that’s just the trouble: the combined privacy of bedroom and chat room have created an inherently problematic space where the child might be up to anything, with anyone. Sherry’s mother, aghast, reads aloud some of the sexual propositions men have been typing to Sherry in the chat room, and demands an explanation. Sherry answers:

Sherry: It’s just playing around, you don’t really have to respond. I’m right here in my room, okay?

Sherry’s mother: I don’t care where you are—you’re still a child, Sherry!

Sherry is trying to avoid trouble by reminding her mother of her physical location at the heart of the home, technically obedient and supposedly secure. But Sherry’s mother looks past that to the real focus of the discourse: her female child may be in the bedroom, but now so are all the adult male sexual predators. This slippage of space is shortly underscored:

Connie: Who are these boys, these—these men? Where are they sending this stuff from?

Sherry: Just...all over the place. Everywhere.

The adult male sexual predator is everywhere at once, unlocatable, unstoppable, easily projecting himself into the formerly-sacrosanct virginal bedroom right under the noses of unaware and powerless parents. This convinces Connie that her daughter's abductor must have come in through the lurking computer-window, and she announces as much to the detective on the case: "I think somebody got to Martha through her computer!"

The characters come to the same dramatic realization in *Defending Our Kids*, even though Julie managed to thwart the predator's attempt on her child:

Julie: I don't understand how this happened. How'd I miss this?

Jerry: We both missed it, Julie.

Julie: I mean, he came into our house, into her room, he got to her right in front of us!

The parent, as usual, is not the powerful figure that the villain is: mothers and fathers are surprised, uninformed, and only belatedly scrambling to figure out a world of technology that has been moving in under their roof, zeroing in on its ideal victim (step one: "into our house"; step two: "into her room"), contaminating both the bedroom and the child over which they theoretically rule. And law enforcement, while more knowledgeable than the parents, is still three steps behind the villains. In *Every Mother's Worst Fear*, an FBI computer expert admits that he can't determine "if any expert hackers eavesdropped on [Martha]... See, they can get into a chat room, stand right beside you, and you don't know they're there." And when Julie Posey tries to report MagicMan's actions to the police, the first officer she speaks to

responds: “Excuse me, but did any of this actually happen, ma’am?” Even the more sympathetic detectives from the Crimes Against Children unit have little to suggest to her—they are aghast that she didn’t have the child safety settings on, and tell her the best thing she can do is “go home and keep an eye on your daughter.”

In this discourse, both parents fall down on the job of keeping an eye on the children: the father characters are oblivious, not to mention potential Internet-porn users themselves by virtue of their adult-maleness (just as in the episodes of *Law and Order: SVU* and *My Wife and Kids*), and the mothers are neglecting their proper role as center of the domestic space by working (or looking for work) outside the home and not making their children their primary focus. In *Every Mother’s Worst Fear*, from the beginning we hear Martha complain about how her mother is “always working, she’s never home,” and see Connie working overtime to please her demanding female boss. It’s “the first real job [she’s] had in sixteen years”—i.e., since her daughter was born—and she prioritizes it so as not to lose it. The narrative punishes her for that, and teaches her that once her attention strays from her child and the integrity of the home’s boundaries, all kinds of evil influences start seeping in. In *Defending Our Kids*, as the story begins, Julie Posey’s husband reminds her that they’d talked about her going back to work. She agrees, unenthusiastically: “I am gonna find a job. I am. (sotto voce) Some kind of job.” She admits, however, that she’s no longer well-equipped to be a secretary, because “I don’t even know how to use a computer...all that new software.” Shortly thereafter, she discovers Kristyn’s meeting with MagicMan (secretly looking at Kristyn’s computer and

finding MagicMan's flattery and invitations, much as in the episode of *My Wife and Kids*), and arrives just in time to chase him away.

Posey responds, as does Connie to Martha's disappearance, by becoming a one-woman crusade to defeat and catch the omnipresent Internet predator. They have found their true job, patrolling the new electronic boundaries of the home—working outside the home caused the problem, and only forsaking that work can solve it—so they leave husband and law enforcement in their wake as they almost single-handedly rescue the child in danger. "Aside from raising Kristyn," Posey says to her husband, "I think this is probably the most important thing I've ever done in my life." And when she has at last participated in the climax of a sting operation to physically catch and arrest the man who originally contacted and nearly-abducted Kristyn, the perpetrator responds in disbelief:

Sam: You're a *cop*?!
 Julie: I'm just a housewife.
 Detective Harris: Busted your ass from her living room.

Julie: I'm just a housewife.

Detective Harris: Busted your ass from her living room.

Similarly, Connie began her rescue operation using electronic sources "from her living room," but then physically chases down Martha's abductor using traditional investigation techniques; Martha herself helps in the end by breaking a window and screaming out into the street, the same non-virtual, non-computerized approach we saw Henry urge on his doomed wife back in *Sorry, Wrong Number*. The electronic conduit is primarily the terrain of the villain; the heroes—including the belatedly-aware parents—are best off closing the computer-passage and cornering the villains the old-fashioned way.

The villains' home turf, while foreign and threatening, is at least useful to the heroes as a good starting point from which to initiate contact in order to catch them: the electronic cesspool teems with poisonous fish to bait and hook. The aforementioned episodes of *Law and Order: SVU*, *Criminal Minds*, and *My Wife and Kids*, for just a few instances, have the hero discover and foil electronic wrongdoing by taking advantage of the trappings of online anonymity, pretending to be the perfect child victim or a fellow predator, to draw the bad guy into the flesh-and-blood realm where he can be traditionally (and triumphantly) captured. *Defending Our Kids* has an escalating series of such fishing expeditions, and its ties to the real Julie Posey, who actually does spend time hunting for Internet predators in that manner, make the fishing expedition a cathartic narrative option in the face of the sexualized technological unknown: the villains are swarming around your home, but if the good guys play their cards right, they can hook these monsters into the light of day and thus destroy them.

This is the discourse dramatically constructed, emphasized, and reiterated throughout the series of *Dateline NBC* television newsmagazine episodes titled "To Catch A Predator." The program began in 2004 as a segment of *Dateline NBC* called "Dangerous Web," and thereafter was expanded into "To Catch A Predator" specials of at least one hour and sometimes two, with eleven "investigations" completed by mid-2007⁵⁶⁷ and a twelfth aired in December of that year. Simultaneously terrorizing and triumphalist, "To Catch A Predator" displays hidden-camera sting

⁵⁶⁷ Hansen, 240.

setups, in which members of the “computer watchdog group”⁵⁶⁸ Perverted Justice go fishing in certain chat rooms pretending to be underage, and agreeing when solicited for a meeting. When each man from the online contact arrives at the target house (an archetype of the cozy, domestic, suburban-appearing home, warmly-lit and inviting), he is suddenly confronted by the program’s host Chris Hansen, who sternly interviews him before letting him leave to be taken into custody by the police officers who surround the house (the first two episodes did not involve police officers on-scene, although chat transcripts were turned over to law enforcement afterward).⁵⁶⁹ The storyline remains constant: bait, hook, rebuke, arrest (sometimes quite dramatically, especially when the subject tries to flee and is tackled or Tasered). There is a reassurance in the repetition, as, true to the title, “predators” are “caught,” at the same time as every episode (and the sheer amount of episodes, numbered sequels mounting further and faster than any fictional movie series) builds to a frightening conclusion about the enormous amount of deadly fish there still must be in the sea around the besieged home. Look at how many we caught and took off the streets in this single program, says the narrative—but also look how often we (are forced to) repeat it, how only one toe dipped into a chat room brings dozens of sharks leaping into the boat. If this is what happens under full police supervision, what chances do your vulnerable children have?

⁵⁶⁸ Hansen, 3.

⁵⁶⁹ Hansen, 6, 29.

Crucial themes in the program's reiterations of the discourse are made explicit in a companion book written by the program's host, titled *To Catch A Predator: Protecting Your Kids From Online Enemies Already In Your Home*. The title is packed with signifiers: the Predator, in the infinitive phrase eternally requiring capturing and recapturing; Your Kids, who need to be (but are not sufficiently) protected from the former; Your Home, which has already been penetrated and infiltrated by those Online Enemies. The book's behind-the-scenes stories of various episodes of the program repeatedly describe rented houses in many different communities in which they set up stings, such as "an average middle-class house,"⁵⁷⁰ "a comfortable suburban home,"⁵⁷¹ "a lovely upper-middle-class neighborhood in Fairfax County, Virginia, about thirty minutes from Washington, D.C.,"⁵⁷² "a five-bedroom home in a relatively new subdivision,"⁵⁷³ a house "in one of the nicest neighborhoods in town...a classic Florida-style stucco home with a guesthouse on the property,"⁵⁷⁴ and "a four million dollar home situated on a beautiful beach on the Atlantic Ocean."⁵⁷⁵ These sorts of loving descriptions all work to paint in clear terms the definition of the titular "Your Home," which carries with it the concomitant idea of "Your Child" who belongs in that home, and further suggests a particular You who owns both home and child. The specifics of this You are clearly

⁵⁷⁰ Hansen, 12.

⁵⁷¹ Hansen, 19.

⁵⁷² Hansen, 26.

⁵⁷³ Hansen, 84.

⁵⁷⁴ Hansen, 162.

⁵⁷⁵ Hansen, 240.

implied throughout the book, as when, in describing the men who showed up at one sting in Virginia, Hansen writes: “Forget the tattoos, cigarettes, and unkempt hair; these guys could have driven up next to you in the parking lot of Ikea and you would not have looked twice.”⁵⁷⁶

Here as always the home (Your Home, for certain cultural values of both concepts) is most egregiously violated by the technologized sexual predator, and this violation is at its most shocking, unexpected, and undeserved because of the home’s (especially this discursively-loaded Home’s) claims to and expectations of inviolability, added to the technological-sexual monster’s facility with undetected penetration of the electronic holes in the walls. In the book’s various cautionary tales, the home, no matter how ideally culturally situated, is already contaminated, and the parents’ (old fashioned, untechnologized) abilities and attentions are pathetically insufficient:

Rick felt [his daughter’s] Internet use was harmless. Kacie was home and in the living room—what could happen? His fears were what might happen outside the house, not in it.⁵⁷⁷

“Parents think that if their kids are home, they are safe from these guys, but it’s an open-door policy. Every time they sign on to the computer, they walk someone into their home.”⁵⁷⁸

“You can’t point your fingers at the parents—the kid is in their own house; who in their right minds thinks something bad is going to happen in their own house? The doors are locked, the windows shut,

⁵⁷⁶ Hansen, 24.

⁵⁷⁷ Hansen, 33.

⁵⁷⁸ Detective Grizzard (Massillon, Ohio), quoted in Hansen, 186.

the air conditioner is on and the family dog is ready to pounce on the first person who comes through the door.”⁵⁷⁹

Despite Your Home’s “average middle-class”ness, comfortable suburb, loveliness, five bedrooms, new subdivision, nice neighborhood, guesthouse, or location on the beach, and despite doors, locks, living room, closed windows, the air conditioner, and the “family dog,” Your Child is always already under direct attack. Thanks to the omnipresent, omnipotent, and inherently unholy marriage of computer and electronic connections that makes up the Internet, the sexual predator is constantly coming from inside the house.

⁵⁷⁹ Detective Charles (Fairfax County, Virginia), quoted in Hansen, 132-133.

Conclusion

There were cell phones lying discarded in the roadway. Every few feet they passed another one, and none were whole. They had either been run over or stomped down to nothing but wire and splinters of plastic, like dangerous snakes that had been destroyed before they could bite again.⁵⁸⁰

“You were talking in your sleep. You were saying, ‘Don’t answer it, don’t answer it.’”

Nobody should have answered it,” Clay said. “We all would have been better off.”

“Ah, but who can resist a ringing phone?” Tom asked. “And there goes your ballgame.”⁵⁸¹

As its title suggests, the primary villain of Stephen King’s 2006 apocalyptic horror novel *Cell* is the cell phone itself, that dangerous snake of wire and plastic. Just a few pages into the story, the protagonist, Clay (who does not own a cell phone), sees several people around him in a sunny Boston park answer their cell phones only to suddenly become incoherent and monstrously violent. Civilization falls to pieces in short order, with the infected “phoners” turning on each other and on the few remaining “normies”. One of the survivors hypothesizes:

Someone—some terrorist outfit—rigs the cell phone signals somehow. If you make a call or take one, you get some kind of...what?...some kind of a subliminal message, I guess...that makes you crazy. Sounds like science fiction, but I suppose fifteen or twenty years

⁵⁸⁰ Stephen King, *Cell* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 79-80.

⁵⁸¹ King, 160.

ago, cell phones as they now exist would have seemed like science fiction to most people.⁵⁸²

But this theoretical “terrorist outfit” remains hazy—as the story continues, the survivors guess briefly at the source as “a terrorist organization” or “maybe even a tinpot government”⁵⁸³ or “maybe just a couple of inspired nutcases working in a garage,”⁵⁸⁴ but they never find any evidence or answers. And in fact the source of or reason for the infectious signal called “the Pulse” becomes less and less important until it is actually irrelevant. There are never any worries about, let alone signs of, an invasion or takeover of what is clearly an apocalyptically-leveled America. The only danger is from the phoners and their increasingly-powerful hive mind, striving to round up the last of the normies and expose them all to the cell signal. This signal is conceptualized as a computer program, a virus, a worm, wiping the “organic circuitry” of the brain⁵⁸⁵; but the desktop computer, or any other kind of domestic computer, is never pointed at in the story as something to fear. Nor, in fact, is the landline telephone. The conduit and delivery point for the evil, contaminating signal is specifically the mobile phone, a “rattlesnake”⁵⁸⁶ that bites through the ear and into the brain, injecting its venom deep. The worst of these mobile-phone monsters is the smartphone, a compact and portable device for communication and computing all in one, which was rising to prominence at the time of the novel’s

⁵⁸² King, 59.

⁵⁸³ King, 109.

⁵⁸⁴ King, 327.

⁵⁸⁵ King, 204.

⁵⁸⁶ King, 321.

publication. One of the characters has hope for some time that her father may have survived, but eventually she gives him up for lost, admitting: "Him, too, oh yes, he had a brand-new cell phone, all the bells and whistles—video, autodial, Internet connection—he *loved* that puppy!"⁵⁸⁷

Released ten years before *Cell*—and quite early in the dissemination of the mobile phone into mainstream youth culture⁵⁸⁸—the 1996 meta-horror film *Scream* begins with a segment patterned on the trope of the Babysitter and the Man Upstairs: during the opening sequence, we have the familiar story of the young woman, home alone and unsupervised while her parents are out, who gets repeated phone calls from a stranger. Initially she's not worried at all, chatting and even flirting with him—"saying yes," in the parlance of caller hegemony. The first climactic moment of true surprise and horror comes when it is suddenly revealed that his contact with her is not just aural, but also visual: coy and relaxed, she asks, "Why do you want to know my name?" and he answers, "Because I want to know who I'm looking at." As in the similar moment from *Black Sabbath* discussed in chapter one, the male caller's visual penetration of the formerly-safe domestic space unnerves the female victim completely. She performs the discursively-typical ritual of hurriedly locking all the doors, trying to make the domestic space safe against intrusion. At first she seems potentially able to protect herself more effectively than

⁵⁸⁷ King, 131.

⁵⁸⁸ The existence of the cell phone in fact becomes a clue in itself: it's incriminating for one of the suspects to have a cell phone at all, because the killer is known to use one and cell phone ownership among the high school-aged characters is rare enough to be unusual.

the traditional victim in this legend, circling through the rooms of the house, aided by the flexibility of her own cordless phone; she can lock the doors all the while keeping the caller talking, which should mean he's being kept at an appropriate distance on the "other end" of the line.

However, the additional mobility of the killer's cell phone defeats her precautions, allowing him to always remain on her trail to see and describe her actions, no matter where she goes. And just as in the earlier articulations of the Babysitter and the Man Upstairs, it is when she has finally tried to flee the now-dangerous, invaded/contaminated space of the home that the killer bursts forth and attacks her. With a mobile phone, the Man doesn't even have to be Upstairs; he can hide anywhere or be many places at once, and any nominal freedom the Babysitter figure might gain from a "cordless" phone (implying a disconnection from the wire that is in reality only partial, as with the struggle over the concept of early radio as "wireless" discussed in chapter two) is dwarfed by the complete dislocation and mobilization provided to the male predator by the cell. Mobile telephone technology disconnects the telephone from the wire both literally and discursively, which has its effects on concepts of place. In utopian discourses (as often seen, for instance, within advertising and industrial texts), this unlinking from an installed wire has a positive effect on the user's safety; no matter where you are, you can call for help. But of course there are dystopian discourses as well, further reducing or even eliminating the technological distance between caller and called, and thus providing more possibilities for virtual presence to become actual presence. In the film *When a*

Stranger Calls, a police detective at first reassures the frightened babysitter: “Look, if he wanted to break in, he wouldn’t be calling you,” asserting the technologically-based view that someone who calls must be calling you from somewhere else. But with a mobile phone, the technology is clearly in place that would allow anyone to call you from anywhere—even right behind you.

The cell phone and its smartphone offspring are among the most recent iterations of widely-adopted mobile technologies that are increasingly taking over the functions—and, crucially, adopting and adapting the narratives—of their technological forebears, serving as the latest in a long line of the newest and somehow unprecedentedly dangerous devices, demonstrating another example of the discourse accretion under analysis in this project. Mobile technologies certainly have a role in the use and evolution of the discourse discussed in these chapters, serving as the touchstone for yet another version and heightening of the same narratives, with the same avoidance of historical context or linkages to previous discourses we have seen employed with their technological predecessors. The smartphone in particular often serves as a rich nexus for a great deal of dystopian anxiety, including the same type of gendered/sexually-predatory communication technology discourse we have seen revolving around the many previous systems already discussed: in chapter one, the discourses of proximity and presence, external threat to an internal victim, gender/sexuality/age, and the norms of caller hegemony that links all of these discourses in a structure of directional power and hierarchy; in chapter two, add the discourse of wirelessness providing

omnipresence and omnipotence, pervading and invading the body; in chapter three, now add the power of vision, and the gender/age-differentiated relations of power to seeing and being-seen; and in chapter four, to all of those add the evil intelligence of the computer and the reintroduction of the uncontrollable amateur.

A smartphone can be understood (and catastrophized) as not just an untethered phone, but also a radio, a television, and a computer always connected to the Internet, along with the amplifyingly troublesome computer peripherals of the webcam and real-time messaging. Every previous electric communication system is now tucked into one pocket-sized package widely available among younger and younger people, providing a rich site for the discourses of technology, privacy, sexuality, gender, and age to be combined and recombined, elaborated, and put to work in societal arenas from entertainment to policy. And despite the existence of much-older mobile forms of each of the previous technologies—including some, like the transistor radio, with enormous traction and popularity within youth culture—this mobility and bodily connection is posited as a new feature and a new threat. In the case of handheld mobile technological systems like the smartphone, we continue to see the discursive process by which newer features of the system's design and access become the nucleus for a claim of unprecedentedness and thus an ahistorical danger. The smartphone is not just mobile, but small and kept close to the person, and its position in the discourse is mapped onto its hypothetical position in the pocket: up against the skin, in proximity to the most private and discursively charged parts of the body. The concept of mobility has removed the “domestic”

descriptor from the model I have been discussing—or, rather, it has replaced domestic space with something even closer and more intimate, and thus more vulnerable. The individual body (especially the young body, and most particularly the young female body) is now the citadel directly under attack by the predatory technology, with no walls or social construct of the “home” (with accompanying parental figures) to even theoretically stand between the originator and the victim of the contaminating signal.

Further examination and analysis of the discourse of sexually-predatory communication technology could be fruitful, directed at the newer crop of popular mobile platforms and the “new” anxiety narratives in which they star. Looking at these technological systems through the lens of this sort of analysis shows many of the same narratives being deployed in similar ways: for instance, beyond entertainment properties such as *Scream* and *Cell* (and many others), we can see the same structures enacted in cultural anxieties around “sexting” (a term for “the act of sending racy messages or photos by cellphone” coined in the early 2000s and added to the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* in the summer of 2012⁵⁸⁹). Exposés of sexting rely on many of the axes discussed in this project, especially the intersection of visibility (naked photographs), wirelessness (a perennially-open conduit), age (a special threat to the young), and the directional gender/power roles embedded in

⁵⁸⁹ Rene Lynch, “‘F-bomb,’ ‘sexting’ among new Merriam-Webster dictionary words,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Aug 2012: <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/14/nation/la-na-nn-f-bomb-dictionary-20120814>.

caller hegemony (a boy sending naked pictures to a girl is a predatory assault on a vulnerable target; a girl sending naked pictures to a boy is a victim providing material for exploitation and blackmail to her predator)⁵⁹⁰. And yet despite these links to discourses common with earlier technologies, because it is specifically defined and framed in terms of the inherencies of the mobile phone, sexting becomes its own uniquely-modern threat.

Similarly, consider the discourse involved in the enactment and revision of legislation such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. COPPA was first passed by the U.S. Congress in 1998, and in 2012 the Federal Trade Commission (the enforcing agency of the law) proposed and passed a revision of their COPPA Rule with amendments and additions. Discussion around the revision, while ostensibly focused on deceptive trade practices, has also regularly evoked the characters we have seen in arguments around the telephone and dial-a-porn, or radio and the legal concept of indecency, or television and the hypnotic abduction, or the Internet and a world seething with digitally-empowered molesters. However, with the more recent discussion taking place in a world of smartphones, unlike at the law's inception, mobile technology is specifically brought to the forefront and is easily granted the villain's role. The motivational figure of COPPA is again the perennially sexually-at-risk child, but now with "a computer in his pocket" that

⁵⁹⁰ As for instance in Cathy Newman, "Sexting: Girls think it's harmless flirting – sex ed is missing the target," *The Telegraph*, 11 Dec 2012: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/9736750/Sexting-Girls-think-its-harmless-flirting-sex-ed-is-missing-the-target.html> .

makes him vulnerable to “[a]nyone with an Internet connection” who can now “check out hundreds of photos of young children, a few of whom were pictured in pajamas in their bedrooms”⁵⁹¹.

At the intersection of the smartphone, the child, and the body, are told many of the old stories, spiced up with a digital novelty. Familiar narratives crop up around these topics, used for familiar strategies, all the while relying on familiar claims of unprecedented danger rising from an inherent nature claimed for the technology’s mobility. The narrative of sexually-predatory communication technology is ever-flexible for this kind of deployment, conjuring up the figures of the Babysitter and the Man Upstairs, plugging them into the gendered power structure of caller hegemony, and claiming the powerful and ahistorical position of novelty, in order to put the entire edifice to work in struggles over technology, meaning, and power.

In the discourse under examination here, patterns are repeated and elaborated, not only from technology to technology, but across the decades and even the centuries. They have a deep structure and a persistence, beneath surface elaborations that allege novelty, specificity, and inherence; but this structure is perennially denied and erased through the process of not-naming and not-linking, avoiding admissions of both the history and the breadth of the discourse. Given that

⁵⁹¹ Natasha Singer, “U.S. Is Tightening Web Privacy Rule to Shield Young,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2012: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/technology/ftc-moves-to-tighten-online-privacy-protections-for-children.html> .

this discourse repeatedly provides the basis for specific deployments of power, as well as the basis for general understandings of and interactions with the technological systems themselves, it is important to complicate the tendency to assume its existence outside of historical and social continuities. The technological artifact changes, but the stories being told--and their uses--remain much the same.

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