

HAUNTED MEDIA
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Haunted Media

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Static and Stasis

The first "ghosts" of television, in other words, did not speak *through* the technology (as did the "spirits" of telegraphy and radio), but seemed to actually reside *within* the technology itself. Radio "broke through" to the land of spirits. Television (and the other visual media to follow) seemed capable of generating their own autonomous spirit worlds. Over the past half century, diverse accounts of television have frequently targeted the medium's paradoxes of visual presence, playing on the indeterminacy of the animate and inanimate, the real and the unreal, the "there" and the "not-there" to produce a new folklore of electronic media that continues to thrive in contemporary accounts of cyberspace and virtual reality. I would argue the dreams (and terrors) of virtual subjectivity that have so captured the imagination of both contemporary entertainment audiences and media critics have their foundations in these earlier, more humble tales of Grandfather Mackey, Uncle Phil, and their ghostly video brethren — the first beings to populate the *strange*, ambiguous electrical space of these visual media, manifestly present yet strangely absent, apparently "living" and yet something less than "alive." The following pages look at the early historical development of such mysteries around television, exploring the changing articulations of "presence" brought about by the medium's powers of electronic sight and its invocation of electronic worlds and beings.

The Eyes of Tomorrow

The occult powers ascribed to television developed as a dark underside to what many predicted, even at the turn of the century, would be the medium's most astonishing power: the illusion of live and instantaneous virtual teleportation to another time and place through sound *and* vision. As the development of television accelerated in the 1930s and the experimental technology became more widely known to the public, both scientifically "factual" predictions and wildly "fictional" prognostications of a future with television emphasized the new medium's astonishing qualities of visual presence in terms of electronic transportation. Television was to alternately transport viewers into another world and transport other worlds into the home. During this period of growing enthusiasm, commentators anticipated the medium's illusion of visual presence would far surpass even that of the cinema because television would provide a "living" link to distant vistas rather than a mere photographic record.

Even those earliest representations of the medium that successfully

predicted television would one day become a form of electronic theater still emphasized above all else the medium's fantastic ability to teleport the viewer to distant realities. Published in 1932, for example, mystery writer Harry Stephen Keeler's incomprehensibly odd tale of television, *The Box from Japan*, features a long lecture on the various technological principles (real and imagined) of the new medium as prelude to a demonstration of the wonder technology. Seated before an experimental television screen in Chicago, Keeler's protagonist witnesses the transmission of a theatrical scene telecast "live" from a London stage:

With eyes popping out of his head . . . so real was the illusion to him that he was simply seated in the front row of a big empty theater, Halsey continued to stare upward without word — like a man who dares not speak lest he interrupt a carefully acted-out performance of some sort. The myriad small sounds carried by the fine sound-reproducing apparatus, itself not anywhere in view, however, were so convincing in themselves, let alone in conjunction with the extremely real figures less than fifteen feet from him, apparently, that he reached down with a thumb and forefinger and pinched himself that he was not merely dreaming a dream that he was a spectator of such a super-perfect fantasmagoria as was this, much less that he was not in London itself.⁴

Films of the 1930s such as *Murder by Television* and *International House* also portrayed television as a medium of overwhelming vividness and even uncanny interactive possibilities. The television pioneer of *Murder by Television*, for example, takes a parlor of invited guests on a breathtaking tour of the world through his new invention (only moments before being mysteriously "murdered by television"), and in *International House*, a testy W. C. Fields becomes embroiled in an argument with the televised image of Rudy Vallee. Apparently unimpressed by the new technology, Fields then shoots the image of a navy destroyer on the screen, causing it to sink into the televised ocean. Playing less on the theme of teleportation, meanwhile, other early depictions of television portrayed the medium as a prosthetic extension of human sight. As of 1945, for example, television was to be "the eyes of tomorrow,"⁵ a living electronic extension of human vision that would enhance the audience's sphere of subjectivity and "extend our mastery of the world."⁶ Such themes would be taken up twenty years later in the writings of Marshall McLuhan, who

T as extension of human vision →

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Static and Stasis



Murder by Television and other early representations of the new technology emphasized the medium's capability for miraculous distant vision. (© 1932 Imperial-Cameo Productions)

would also describe the emerging media universe as an extension of humankind's senses.

This sense of spatial (and at times biological) ambiguity in the new medium would remain a key feature in conceptualizing television even as it entered the home in the 1950s. Advertisers, networks, and audiences alike all celebrated television in its first decade as providing the unprecedented experience of being "in two places at one time."⁷ Early critics who promoted television as an artistic form emphasized the importance of "liveness" in the TV aesthetic, suggesting that such "liveness" was integral to the dramatic success of the medium.⁸ Others deemed television a "window on the world" that would allow viewers to travel the globe in search of new, exciting, and exotic vistas.⁹ As Lynn Spigel notes of this period, "Television at its most ideal promised to bring the audience not merely an illusion of reality as in the cinema, but a sense of 'being there,' a kind of *hyperrealism*."¹⁰ Cultivating this indeterminacy of real and elec-

→ screen not as window?



tronic space, the television industry itself consistently encouraged its earliest audiences to think in terms of an "ideology of liveness," and to regard the television as a portal into a dynamic, exciting, and perpetual present on the other side of the screen. Early production manuals for television, for example, often advised directors and producers to make use of this ambiguity of space and indeterminacy of time, citing the intersection of the real and the virtual as the medium's strongest feature. Outlining an aesthetic of "liveness," one handbook suggested that the medium, when used to its full potential, could elicit three types of viewer reactions based on its sense of presence:

- (1) The effect of "looking in" on the program from the sidelines, without actually taking part in it . . .
- (2) The effect of not only "looking in" on the program, wherever it may be, but of actually taking part in it . . .
- (3) The person or persons on the program seem to step into your living room and converse with you.¹¹

Examining this list, one finds a virtual continuum from (1) a flesh-and-blood human viewer with the access to survey directly some electrical elsewhere, to (2) an ambiguous interactive zone between real and electronic subjects, to (3) electronic subjects entering into the real space of the home (each effect, it should be noted, has served as a durable premise in science fiction). Even today, when most programming appears on film or videotape, television relies on the illusion of "liveness" to maintain audience viewership and program flow. Some would argue this is television's most insidious feature: the ability to provide the compelling illusion of "being there" as if one is participating in a public arena, when of course television actually transports its viewers no farther than the couch. Raymond Williams described this phenomenon as "mobile privatization": the illusion of mobility cloaked within the increasing privatization and thus isolation of the home.¹²

Although the presence of the TV set in the living room is something less than remarkable today, for a public that had long anticipated a device promoted for many years as capable of visually spanning time and space, the television sets that entered American homes in the 1950s no doubt bordered on the wonders of science fiction. Comfortable (or at least more familiar) with the phenomenon of transmitted voice, television's mysteries of form without substance, space without distance, vision without life

both window + door

"door" allowing you to go to special world of program

illusion of mobility allows people to become more sedentary.

Static and Stasis

made the medium a source of wonder and fascination. The ability of this box in the living room to "talk" and "see," moreover, made the medium something more than a merely inanimate technology. Television exuded a powerful presence in the household, serving in the active imagination as a fantastic portal to other worlds or even as a sentient entity brooding in the corner of the living room. Early television owners recognized that this medium had a qualitative "presence" that distinguished it from radio, a presence that made the medium even more fantastic and perhaps more sinister as well. Many reported a certain uneasiness around the new medium. In reporting on interviews conducted with television owners as early as the mid-1950s, for example, researcher Leo Bogart noted the strange phenomenon that "there is a feeling, never stated in so many words, that the set has a power of its own to control the destinies and viewing habits of the audience, and that what it 'does' to parents and children alike is somehow beyond the bounds of any individual set-owner's power of control."¹³ The presence of television was such that its demand to be seen could be stronger than the volition of the audience to look away.

Although this early fascination with an uncanny sense of televisual presence is most explicit in science fiction and horror of the period, such anxiety was not limited to the purely speculative fantasies of narrative fiction. Accompanying this growing sense of uneasiness around the medium's incredible powers within the home, there emerges in the late 1950s and early 1960s (only a decade after television's initial invasion of the home) a significant rearticulation of the medium's apparent ability to "transport" viewers around the nation and globe. In these new discussions of television's uncanny "powers," the medium's distinctive "electronic elsewhere" became instead an "electronic nowhere." Rather than portray television as a magic means of teleportation, these more ominous portraits of the medium saw television as a zone of suspended animation, a form of oblivion from which viewers might not ever escape. These accounts of television essentially reversed and even negated its once most heralded powers, the mobile mysteries of electronic presence yielding to a logic that equated electronic static with cultural and even biological stasis.

Far removed from the pages of pulp science fiction, a 1959 conference on the mass media, sponsored by *Daedalus* and the *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, demonstrates the centrality of static metaphors in intellectual debates over the medium: Featuring panelists such as Edward Shils, Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, and Arthur Schle-

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singer Jr., this symposium ruminated on the fate of high culture and refined audiences confronted by the cultural void of television. In critiquing America's televisual life, panelists frequently discussed mass culture and especially television as producing a form of "suspension" for the audience, moving them away from more engaging, "authentic" forms of culture, both high and low, toward the electronic torpor of anonymous mass consumption. What had been an "active" arena of cultural practice became, with television, a "passive" mode of reception that left the audience in a form of cultural stasis transported and exiled away from real culture, real affect, the real world. Harvard Professor Oscar Handlin, for example, noted that the influx of mass electronic media had infused its audience with "a sense of apathy. The intense involvement of the masses with their culture at the turn of the century has given way to passive acquiescence."¹⁴ Ernst Van Den Haag painted a similarly depressing scenario, suggesting that media technologies such as television had isolated individuals through a form of triple alienation. "Excessive communication serves to isolate people from one another, from themselves, and from experience," he argued. "It extends bonds by weakening them. . . . The total effect of mass culture is to distract people from lives which are so boring that they generate obsession with escape."¹⁵ Finally, Irving Kristol lamented an entire generation lost to the media's seductive electronic whirlpool. "Where television and the mass media are corrupting is in dealing with youth, the teenagers. The most obnoxious aspects of all of these mass media are those that disorient youth, those that destroy their values and prevent them from achieving anything themselves. This is part of what seems to me at the moment to be a world-wide phenomenon . . . in which youths tend to secede from society and establish a community of their own."¹⁶ This "lost generation," exiled by television in a sort of "teen-limbo," posed a genuinely perplexing problem for Kristol. "How to reach them, I don't know," he said in closing his remarks to the panel, as if American youth were quite literally removed from the terrain of life and culture.

Informed by such logic, FCC chair Newton Minow's notorious indictment of television as a "vast wasteland" in 1961 can easily be seen as yet another metaphor for this electronic "nowhere," implying that the cultural, intellectual, and even bodily well-being of the nation was adrift, and that an irresponsible industry had doomed a fundamentally passive audience to wander endlessly through an electronically mediated void. Echoing the concerns of the *Daedalus* conference, such rhetoric was com-

tuals who had originally celebrated the intimacy of evening electronic contact with the masses. Such intellectual indictments of television provided the theoretical foundation for the more dystopic forms of science fiction that would follow. In the American home for less than a decade, television thus became, for both social science and science fiction, a zone of electronic suspension and at times even annihilation. So prominent and pervasive was this sense of static and stasis in television that by the early 1960s television itself would begin to play on these uncanny anxieties by integrating them into its own programming. New horror and science fiction programs in this era featured tales of the televisual fantastic that often offered quite self-reflexive meditations on the viewer's potentially dangerous relationship to this new technology and the phantom worlds it evoked. Nowhere was this theme more prominent than on two series of the early 1960s: *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*.

There Is Nothing Wrong with Your Television Set

In this era of increasing interest in the uncanny powers of television, what is immediately striking about *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* is the manner in which each series used its title and credit sequence to partition off an avowedly occult space within television itself. As Rod Serling informed his viewers each week, *The Twilight Zone* was that realm "as vast as space and timeless as infinity . . . the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition . . . between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge." To be in "the twilight zone" is now, of course, a part of American folklore, describing any place or situation marked by the weird and uncanny. That original "twilight" space, however, was television itself. The exact wording of Serling's opening introduction changed over the course of the series, but never abandoned the attempt to evoke a sense of suspension, a "betwixt and between" liminality that cast the program (and its viewers) as occupying an "elsewhere," or even a "nowhere." The credit sequence's familiar camera tilt through a field of stars simulated a physical movement into this

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monplace among America's intelligentsia, many of whom believed that television had deteriorated into a medium that betrayed its original promise. The gradual extinction of critically esteemed "golden age" programming and the national uproar over the quiz show scandals, in particular, left television a suspect and bankrupt cultural form, even for those intellectuals who had originally celebrated the medium's possibilities of enlightening electronic contact with the masses. Such intellectual indictments of television provided the theoretical foundation for the more dystopic forms of science fiction that would follow. In the American home for less than a decade, television thus became, for both social science and science fiction, a zone of electronic suspension and at times even annihilation. So prominent and pervasive was this sense of static and stasis in television that by the early 1960s television itself would begin to play on these uncanny anxieties by integrating them into its own programming. New horror and science fiction programs in this era featured tales of the televisual fantastic that often offered quite self-reflexive meditations on the viewer's potentially dangerous relationship to this new technology and the phantom worlds it evoked. Nowhere was this theme more prominent than on two series of the early 1960s: *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*.

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The Twilight Zone: an occult space within the world of television. (© 1963 CBS Television)

indeterminate “zone” where viewers would be “lost” for a half-hour. Quite deliberately, *The Twilight Zone* served as the often disturbing, at times humorous, but always perverse “unconscious” of television. It was a self-described “zone” within the usually mundane procession of the broadcast schedules where the boundaries of televisual reality were the most ambiguous and where the typically cheerful world of television frequently found its ironic negation.

Writers for *The Twilight Zone* often evoked the uncanny aspects of their medium simply by turning to the past and dramatizing the cultural memory of previous haunted technologies. During its five-year network run, the series frequently turned to the haunted telecommunications story as a stock plot taken from television’s occult prehistory. In “Long Distance Call” (1961), an elderly grandmother gives her grandson a toy telephone just before she dies. In the weeks that follow, the young boy claims that



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his grandmother talks to him on the phone and wants him to come join her. The parents of the boy finally realize he is telling the truth after he tries to kill himself and they hear breathing on the other end of the toy phone. In "Static," aired a week later, an older man disgusted by television retrieves his old radio set from the basement, only to find that it broadcasts transmissions from forty years earlier. "Night Call" (1964) told the story of a woman receiving mysterious phone calls at night, which turn out to originate from a fallen phone line on the grave of her long-dead fiancé. Finally, in "What's in the Box" (1964), a TV repairman, angered by a rude customer, fixes the set to pick up transmissions from the customer's own future, which leads the customer to a fight with his wife that results in her death.

Other episodes of *The Twilight Zone* addressed the interstitial, "twilight" quality of television most directly, dwelling on both comic and horrific accounts of the disintegrating boundaries dividing the real world and television's ambiguous electronic space. In the comic "Showdown with Rance McGrew" (1962), for example, a TV cowboy star finds himself transported to a real saloon of the old West, where cowboys and outlaws of the past protest their representation on his TV show (it is unclear how the cowboys have actually had an opportunity to ever see the show). Before a shoot-out with Jesse James, the actor pleads to be spared at any cost. Transported back to his own world of Hollywood, he finds that the real Jesse James is now his agent. In "A World of Difference" (1960), a man working in his office discovers his phone is dead and then hears someone yell "Cut!" He finds himself on a soundstage where everyone believes he is actually a drunk and declining actor. In this world he cannot find his real wife and children to prove his identity. His identity crisis causes everyone to think that the drunken actor has finally gone insane, so the show is canceled. At the last second the man runs back to the office set just before it is taken down, pleads with a higher force for redemption, and then returns to his real office and his previous "nondiegetic" existence.

As explicit as *The Twilight Zone* was in its attempts to carve an occult space within television, however, the program's efforts were eclipsed by a slightly less famous but entirely more bleak and apocalyptic generic cousin. More than any other series of the era, *The Outer Limits* consistently recast television's "window on the world" as a terrifying window on the "otherworldly." Elaborating on period accounts of television's ghostly presence and incorporating period critiques of television's alienat-

ing "nowhere," the series presented the medium's most compelling critique of television's own powers of annihilation, frequently dwelling on an electronic presence that manifested itself as a form of "oblivion" or "electro-limbo." Indeed, "oblivion" was the only recurring monster in this horror anthology, and it took a variety of forms over the forty-eight-episode run of the series. Regardless of its shape or dimension, however, oblivion in *The Outer Limits* was almost always mediated by some form of paranormal electronic technology and centered most immediately on the American family, a scenario that offered repeated parables about the audience's own relationship to the TV set, and the set's relationship, in turn, to a vast electronic nowhere. Whether faced with new beings, mysterious powers, or strange technologies, the characters in these stories (and the viewer at home) had to struggle against uncanny and frequently electronic forces that threatened not just to kill them, but to dissolve them into nothingness.

This assault on the viewer's autonomy began in the opening images of the program, which, like *The Twilight Zone*, used its credit sequence to remove the program from the terrain of "normal" television. In a medium already renowned for its intrusive presence in the American home, few television shows have featured opening credit sequences as calculatedly invasive as that of *The Outer Limits*. A narrational entity known only as the "control voice" opened each week's episode with these unnerving words of assurance:

There is nothing wrong with your television set.

Their attention suddenly focused on the set, viewers became the targets of an increasingly ominous series of commands and assertions:

Do not attempt to adjust the picture.

We are controlling transmission.

We will control the horizontal.

We will control the vertical.

We can change the focus to a soft blur, or sharpen it to crystal clarity.

On-screen, the control voice demonstrated its power by taking command of the picture tube to program a display of warbling sine waves, vertical rolls, and other forms of electronic choreography. Having now completely gained possession of the family console, the control voice issued its final command and warning:

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For the next hour, sit quietly, and we will control all that you see and hear. You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery that reaches from the inner mind to The Outer Limits.

intro to twilight zone
= verbalization of TV (paradoxes)

↑
maybe diff word?

At this cue the theme music would swell for the opening credits, after which the control voice relinquished command, at least momentarily, to the "true" masters of the screen — the commercial advertisers. The voice would come back at the end of each week's episode to "return control" of the television to its temporarily dispossessed owner.

Significantly, the original title planned for the series had been *Please Stand By*, the familiar invocation of panicked broadcasters when confronting social or technological disaster. As evident in the "panic" broadcast of 1938, such interruptions in the routine flow of commercial broadcasting always give viewers pause as they consider the possibility of an impending catastrophe. Such alarm was especially pronounced during the cold war years of the early 1960s, when the intrusion of a network "special report" could signify imminent nuclear annihilation. The very design of the show, then, linked television's unnerving presence to a larger social world of crisis and impending destruction. Debuting in the months immediately preceding the assassination of President Kennedy and vanishing at the threshold of the nation's growing civil unrest at mid-decade, *The Outer Limits* presented a signature moment of unmitigated doom on American television, often suggesting that the sciences, technologies, and citizens of the "New Frontier" were on a collision course with oblivion.

Of course, even as vast and seemingly boundless a concept as "oblivion" exists within some degree of historical specificity. Surveying the ubiquity of this motif across the run of the series and across other forms of television discourse in the early 1960s, one is left to question why the invocation of televisual nothingness should have such resonance within this historical period. Answers to such complex representational questions must remain imprecise, of course, but three looming and often interrelated "oblivions" of the "New Frontier" era would seem key in producing these electronically mediated visions of the void — the infinite depths of outer space, the emotional "limbo" of suburban domesticity, and the specter of absolute nuclear annihilation. Both in the social reality of the audience and the science-fictional "unreality" of the series, television figured as the crucial bridge between these three realms, casting the medium

as the pivotal technology in the “new frontier’s” melding of space, science, and suburbia. The atom, the universe, and the suburbs all portended oblivion in one form or another, and all three realms had a privileged relationship to television.

The Outer Limits can be considered within the same cultural moment described by Lynn Spigel as informing the “fantastic family sit-com,” a cycle of programs in the 1960s she identifies as engaging in a critique of the narrative and social conventions of domestic comedy from the 1950s. Spigel argues that the fantastic sitcom, like much of the popular culture of this new frontier era, developed in response to a series of disappointments in American life during this era, chief among these being the homogenizing conformity demanded by suburban living and the seeming vulnerability of American technology in the wake of *Sputnik*. “This historical conjuncture of disappointments provided the impetus for a new utopian future — one based on the rhetoric of Kennedy’s New Frontier and fortified with the discourse of science and technology.”¹⁷ As with the programs discussed by Spigel (*Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *My Favorite Martian*), *The Outer Limits* also exploited the era’s emerging fascination with space and science to interrogate the bland “ideology of domesticity” cultivated during the Eisenhower years. Under attack, or at least under reconsideration, were a set of normative gender roles and stultifying narrative conventions most prominently expressed in family sitcoms such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. As Spigel writes of the fantastic sitcoms, “Their . . . space-age imagery made the familial strange; it made people pause, if only to laugh, at what had once seemed natural and everyday. This unlikely collision of genres gave audiences the chance to reflect on their own expectations — not only about the sitcom’s narrative conventions — but also about the social conventions by which they lived their lives” (228). Born of the same disillusionment with suburbia that informed the fantastic sitcom, *The Outer Limits* also recontextualized TV families within paranormal and supernatural scenarios, producing a defamiliarized account of domesticity that accommodated often trenchant social commentary.

Although *The Outer Limits* shared the same cultural project of the fantastic sitcom in reexamining American family life, differences in terms of genre (horror rather than comedy) and format (anthology drama rather than episodic series) often pushed *The Outer Limits* into territory far more disturbing and apocalyptic. Whereas critiques of domesticity in the fantas-

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tic sitcom encountered a series of "safety valves" such as "laugh tracks, harmonious resolutions, and other structures of denial."¹⁸ *The Outer Limits*, unencumbered by the burden of continuing characters and a consistent "situation," had the occasional license to destroy the centerpiece of both postwar life and episodic television—the nuclear family. The program's weekly promise to present "the awe and mystery that reaches from the inner mind to the outer limits" was not so much a validation of the New Frontier's enthusiastic call to explore space as it was a threat to expose, through the fundamentally uncanny medium of television, the terrors awaiting the nation in the profound mysteries of the human mind, the hollow conventions of family life, and the vast emptiness of the universe. From episode to episode, there was the persistent subtext that America's intense investment in space, science, and domesticity masked an immense abyss, an anomic nothingness lurking at the core of the nation's identity. Acknowledging the "awe and mystery" of these new territories of scientific exploration, *The Outer Limits* also suggested that America might find the New Frontier itself to be a terrifying vacuum, an annihilating and discorporative void accessed through television.