

“Maybe the Sky is Really Green, and we’re Just Colorblind”¹: On Zapping, Close Encounters an the Commercial Break

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ

She took it all in. She believed it all. Pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air.

DELILLO, D., *MAO II* (New York, Viking, 1991)

Remote Control

On Halloween 1938, channel zapping was partially responsible for inducing mass hysteria throughout the United States. Millions of Americans who had been listening to NBC’s Chase and Sanborn Hour with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, scanned channels at the commercial break and unwittingly tuned into Orson Welles’s CBS radiocast *The War of the Worlds*.² In doing so, they missed the crucial disclaimer introducing the programme as a fake. The zappers were caught up in a public hysteria as Martians were reported to be landing.³ At its climax, the broadcast described a 9/11esque New York being taken down by extraterrestrials: “poison smoke drifting over the city, people running and diving into the East River like rats, others falling like flies”. The New York Times headline the next morning ran: “RADIO LISTENERS IN PANIC TAKING WAR DRAMA AS FACT!”⁴

¹ Groening, M., *Bart Simpson’s Guide to Life: A Wee Handbook for the Perplexed* (London: Harper Collins, 1996)

² The adaptation of H.G. Wells’s novel *The War of the Worlds* was directed and narrated by Orson Welles. It aired on 30 October 1938 over the Columbia Broadcasting System network as the Halloween episode of the radio series *Mercury Theatre on the Air*.

³ Bellamy, R.V. & Walker, J.R., *Television and the Remote Control: Gazing on a Vast Wasteland* (New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1996), 16; Cantril, H., *The Invasion of Mars. A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

⁴ “Radio Listeners in Panic Taking War Drama as Fact”, in *The New York Times* (31 October 1938). See also, Hand, R.J., *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America, 1931-1952* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006).

Switching channels to avoid the ads was not solely responsible for the hysteria. *The War of the Worlds* also deliberately ran without commercial interruptions. This led credence to the show and compelled listeners to stay tuned. In their study of the remote control device, Robert Bellamy and James Walker identify zapping as a way to avoid advertising and other undesirable content, therefore better gratifying the viewer.⁵ In 1953 a precursor of the present-day television remote, appropriately called the Blab-Off, was marketed as a way of shutting up commercials. “This hand-held device featured 20-foot cord that was attached to a television loudspeaker. One click of the switch turned the sound off but left the picture on. Its inventor, an advertising executive, noted that the \$2.98 Blab-Off allowed ‘the TV fan to get away from the commercials he dislikes.’”⁶

In 1955, after research into push-button technology, the Zenith company introduced *Lazy Bones*, the very first TV remote designed to eliminate commercials. It was still attached to the TV by a cable that stretched across the living room, leading to consumers’ complaints of frequent tripping.⁷ In response, Zenith created the Flashmatic: the world’s first “wireless remote”, it activated photocells on the TV. However, this worked all too well on sunny days, causing the sunlight to flip channels. The next model used radio waves, but never made it onto the market as it inadvertently changed the neighbours’ channels as well. Zenith continued its research and in June 1956 introduced *Space Command*

Television. This time using high-frequency sound, the successful remote was advertised with the slogan: “Just a touch of the button to shut off the sound of long annoying commercials.”⁸

1950s: Something New in the Skies

By the 1950s, television had begun to replace radio as the dominant mass-communication medium. “Are You Ready for Television?” asked an early Dumont TV ad. Not quite yet. At first, the new family member was not that welcome. With its

⁵ Bellamy, R.V. & Walker, J.R., *The Remote Control Device: An Overlooked Technology*; and Bellamy, R.V., Walker, J.R. & Traudt, P.J., “Gratifications Derived from Remote Control Devices: A Survey of Adult RCD Use”, in *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television*, ed. R.V. Bellamy & J.R. Walker (Westport: Praeger, 1993).

⁶ Benjamin, L., “At the Touch of a Button: A Brief History of Remote Control Devices”, in *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television*, ed. R.V. Bellamy & J.R. Walker (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 15-22. See also, “Kill that commercial!”, *Newsweek* (20 November 1950), 95-6; Walker, C.L., “How to Stop Objectionable TV Commercials”, in *Reader’s Digest* (November 1953), 72.

⁷ “Remote Controls for Radio and TV”, in *Consumer Reports* (March 1956), 165—6.

⁸ Johnson, S., “Zap!”, in *Chicago Tribune* (27 August 1986), 1, 7.

signals beamed in from skies, it was regarded as a somewhat alien presence in the home, and so the television was often hidden away or disguised within its furniture. The Hillsborough, with its new Hideaway Styling, allowed the TV to be flipped back into a regular salon table, acting as if the new medium did not yet exist.⁹ Even, or perhaps especially, in Hollywood, the television was considered a hostile prop on film sets. Warner Brothers frowned on the appearance of a TV in the living rooms of its feature films, and would promptly order to have it removed. “The assumption,” Erik Barnouw writes, “seemed to be that if television could be banned from feature films, it could not survive.”¹⁰ But not for long: Warner signed a contract to produce Westerns for ABC Television and by 1958, there were thirty Western series programmed for prime-time TV. Soon the telly would re-imagine what the living room was all about. Leaving Hollywood for New York’s growing television bustle, Lucille Ball became the first film star to attain more fame as a TV sitcom-actress. I Love Lucy portrayed her as a woman permanently on the verge of escaping the family trap but failing delightfully—that was until the following week’s programme! In a January 1957 episode, on the occasion of her son’s birthday, she makes an attempt to conquer the domestic space recently lost to the telly. She dons a Superman costume and makes her entrance through the third-floor living-room window. Alas, “supermom” gets caught on the drain-pipe and the “real” Superman, played by George Reeves, has to make a special guest appearance to save Lucy from domestic disaster. Heroes of the small screen were here to stay.¹¹

The tube did not only zap superheroes into the home—the very first television signals beamed into the ether also attracted “foreign attention”. In January 1953 the media reported that two mysterious “Men in Black”, who were not from Earth, had landed with a saucer in the Mojave Desert, 200 miles east of Los Angeles. They claimed to have learned English by listening to TV broadcasts.¹² Already in 1947, civilian pilot Kenneth Arnold had observed nine elliptical, disc-shaped vehicles travelling in formation over Mount Rainier in Washington at extraordinary speed. He described the objects as resembling “a saucer skipping across the

⁹ See www.zapomatik.com: HILLSBOROUGH WITH NEW HIDEAWAY STYLING, Jam Handy Organization for RCA Victor, 1958, 2:30', USA (courtesy Prelinger Archives: www.prelinger.com).

¹⁰ Barnouw, E., *Tube of Plenty, The Evolution of American Television* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹¹ *Lucy and Superman*, episode 166 of I Love Lucy (first broadcast 14 January 1957, USA). See also, Mellencamp, P., *High Anxiety. Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

¹² Redfern, N., *The FBI Files, the FBI's UFO Top Secrets Exposed* (Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

water”. Newspapers baptized the unknown crafts after the household object, and thus “flying saucers” turned America’s gaze skywards. Something was definitely out there in the skies...

Terror from Outer Space

Cold War nerves had caused paranoia in the ranks of America’s Secret Service, always in fear of a commie Soviet plot. UFO contactee George Adamski fuelled their fears with his comment that the superior space people had “a communist-type government!”¹³ The CIA set up a panel of top scientists, headed by Dr. H.P. Robertson. It concluded that it would be strategically wise to debunk UFO reports, out of fear that the Soviet Union might use them to induce public hysteria in the US. Even The Wonderful World of Disney got involved in the television disinformation campaign. UFO groups were monitored for subversive activities, and contactees were branded as Soviet spies.¹⁴

In October 1957, Sputnik launched the Space Age. The very first satellite shot into orbit by the Soviets struck a serious blow to America’s self-esteem, causing a major media crisis. TV networks were flabbergasted that instead of staying glued to the tube, their usually captive audiences ran into backyards hoping to catch a glimpse of Sputnik beaming across the night sky. The press likened the launch of Sputnik to Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America. “Somehow, in some new way, the sky seemed almost alien,” wrote Senate majority leader L.B. Johnson, the soon-to-be-president.¹⁵

In response, the US attempted to blast off with the Vanguard I rocket, but the “Flopnik” or “Kaputnik”, as it was baptized, had hardly lifted four feet off the ground before an enormous explosion sent it crashing back down to Earth in front of a world-wide television audience. When the Soviets sent their dog into orbit, paranoia peaked within US ranks. After all, “Pupnik” Laika could potentially be carrying a hydrogen bomb! To America, the Soviet dog was a harbinger of war being waged from space. “What’s at stake is nothing less than our survival,” warned Senator Mike Mansfield, while Edward Teller, “father of the hydrogen bomb”, went on television to suggest

¹³ Adamski, G. & Adamski, L., *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (London: Werner Laurie, 1953).

¹⁴ Dean, J., *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 190—1. See also, Haines, G.K., “CIA’s Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947—90: A Die-Hard Issue”. Accessed 26 December 2010: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/97unclass/ufo.html>

¹⁵ Dickson, P., *Sputnik. The Shock of the Century* (New York: Walker & Company, 2001), 117—28.

that the future now belonged to the Russians.¹⁶ In the wake of Sputnik, a renewed saucer craze hit the American public. Newsrooms became overwhelmed with reports of sightings. “TOTAL TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE!” ran one caption in the trailer for the 1956 Hollywood production *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*.

The Fear Industry

During the Cold War, television was eagerly exploited to perpetuate a culture of fear in search of political gain. Live broadcasts in particular became ideal to shape political rhetoric, as was evident in the very first live televised summit that developed into a Cold War stand-off between Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice-President Richard Nixon. Notoriously dubbed “The Kitchen Debate”, the newly invented Ampex colour videotape recorded the historical event in a model kitchen at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow. During the statesmen’s rough-and-tumble debate—ranging from dishwashers, to nuclear arsenal, to the role of women—Nixon boasted that the wonder of television gave America the technological edge over the USSR. While Nixon bragged about 50 million TV sets for 46 million families in the US, the more feisty Khrushchev outsmarted Nixon with a quick retort, ironically displaying a true mastery of live television. With flamboyant disdain, showman Khrushchev declared that the Soviet space endeavors were far superior.

In June 1961 the Soviets successfully sent cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit, making him officially the first man in space. As the US space programme lingered behind, its media machine played on the communist scare of “The Red Planet Mars” attacking America.¹⁷ By now the world’s stockpile of nuclear weapons created a doomsday context that brought humanity to the brink of annihilation. The politically repressed subconscious haunted America in the form of an invisible power from a hostile universe invading the home. Superheroes and creatures from outer space colonized prime-time TV. Sci-fi programmes such as *The Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone* took control of transmission: “There Is Nothing Wrong With Your Television Set. Repeat: There Is Nothing Wrong With Your Television Set. You have crossed into the Twilight Zone!” But then, in September of that same year, reality

¹⁶ Edward Teller’s comments and similar commentary from US senators and journalists may be heard in the film *Sputnik Mania* (2007) by David Hoffman, as well as in the film *Double Take* (2009) by Johan Grimontprez. See also, Dickson, P., *Sputnik. The Shock of the Century* (New York: Walker & Company, 2001), 117–28.

¹⁷ Spiegel, L., “From Domestic Space to Outer Space: The 1960s Fantastic Family Sit-Com”; and Sobchack, V., “Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange”, in *Close Encounters. Film, Feminism and Science Fiction*, eds. C. Penley, et al. (Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

surpassed television: driving back through New Hampshire from a short vacation in Canada, the interracial couple Barney and Betty Hill were abducted by a flying saucer hovering above, which evidently had dropped in from the Zeta Reticuli star system.¹⁸ Officially the very first alien abduction case reported in the US, it opened Pandora’s box. Or was it a can of worms?

1960s: Stay Tuned

In the early 1960s, another Cold War was in full swing: that of television threatening to liquidate its older sibling. Cinema was losing out to the small screen as many local film-houses were forced to close their doors. While Hollywood struggled to redefine itself against the encroaching presence of the new medium, Alfred Hitchcock, as cinema’s delegate, took on the ambivalent challenge of the TV format. A displaced Englishman in Hollywood, Hitchcock readily donned the role of the double agent, sneaking into the American living room as a master of prime, only to deride it. His wry introductions to his TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-62) were peppered with domestic paranoia that mirrored a catastrophic culture in the making. The heightened tension of the US—USSR relationship and its induced fear of nuclear terror forever loomed on the horizon. So, when the master of the macabre, as Hitchcock came to be known, chose to cross over into television, he took every opportunity to mock this evil twin of cinema, one that had morphed into a “propaganda box”: “Television is like the American toaster,” he quipped, “you push the button, and the same thing pops up every time.” But Hitchcock’s real obsession lay with commercials that had infected the format of storytelling. After all, “the story may be unhip, but those crazy commercials are pure poetry,” he joked, adding that they “keep you from getting too engrossed in the story”. Much to the horror of his sponsors, Hitchcock loftily denounced the accursed ads, and with sardonic mischief urged the early TV viewer to zap away from “these deadly boring commercials: I don’t mind you leaving the room during the commercial, but I expect you to be in your seats for my parts of the program!”¹⁹ *Media and Marketing Decisions* magazine pointed out that the habit of physical zapping, running off to the toilet or grabbing a beer from the refrigerator during a commercial break, was practiced by 30-40 per cent of television viewers.²⁰ At one point Hitchcock had jokingly appealed for longer

¹⁸ Fuller, J.G., *The Interrupted Journey* (New York: Dial Press, 1966).

¹⁹ Grams, M. Jr. & Wikstrom, P., *The Alfred Hitchcock Presents Companion* (Maryland: OTR Publishing, 2001).

²⁰ Fountas, A., “Commercial Audiences: Measuring What We’re Buying”, in *Media and Marketing Decisions* (January 1985), 75—6.

commercials: “they are so short that one must be very agile to get to the kitchen and back!” But a handy solution was already in the making: adeptly tuned into the growing TV society, Swanson and Sons advertised their first TV Dinner in 1954.²¹ The story goes that executive Gerald Thomas didn’t know what to do with 270 tons of left-over Thanksgiving turkey. Inspired by the aluminum food trays used in the airline industry, he picked up on the idea of filling the trays with turkey and marketing them as a TV Dinner for 98 cents apiece. And so another new cultural icon zapped itself into the living room, transforming the eating habits of millions of Americans.²² With the convenience of a food tray, one could easily stay parked in front of the tube without the need to run off to the kitchen, and thus the art of dinner conversation was rapidly replaced with “sappy sitcoms” sprinkled with commercial interruptions.²³

An extra to the pre-packaged TV meals was the marvel of “canned laughter”. Live audiences did not always laugh at the right moment, or laughed either too long or too loudly. So the “Laff Box”, a backstage device with a variety of push-button laughs, was brought in as a substitute for live audiences to “sweeten” shows with pre-recorded laughter.²⁴ Similarly, the advertising industry was sugar-coating its image of a happy consumer to an emerging TV society.

1980s: An Advertising Industry in Panic

The remote control though, didn’t gain any real ground until the 1980s, as previously channel-hopping was limited to just a few networks. By the mid-1980s, however, the vast cable industry and the video recorder had made the remote control a necessity. Being used to targeting their television audiences, the advertising industry became alarmed by the zap-behaviour of TV viewers who were inaugurating a radically different pattern of television usage. Viewers, traditionally sold by the media

²¹ Phipps, R.G., *The Swanson story: when the chicken flew the coop* (Omaha: Carol and Caroline Swanson Foundation, 1977).

²² Shapiro, L., *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). See also, Mingo, J., “How TV dinners became tray chic”, in *How the Cadillac got its fins: and other tales from the annals of business and marketing* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1994), 197–200; Schwarz, F.D., “The epic of the TV dinner”, in *American Heritage of Invention and Technology*, vol. 9 (Spring 1994), 55.

²³ Research conducted in 2000 by Baylor College of Medicine (USA), showed that more than 42 per cent of dinners eaten at home involved TV watching. “The History of TV Dinners”, accessed 26 December 2010: <http://facts.trendstoday.info/food-and-drink/the-history-of-tv-dinners>

²⁴ Sacks, M., “Canned Laughter: A History Reconstructed. An Interview with Ben Glenn II, Television Historian and Expert on Canned Laughter”, in *The Paris Review Daily* (20 July 2010). Accessed 26 December 2010: www.mcsweeneys.net/links/sacks/5sacks.html

industry as only statistics for ad revenues, were now suddenly taking control by flipping away from commercials.²⁵

At this point the habit of zapping away from commercials was at epidemic levels, practiced by 80 per cent of television viewers. The threat of commercial devastation alarmed the advertising industry.²⁶ The trade press claimed that “advertising as a profession is very much in crisis”.²⁷ In panic, the industry called for “zap-proof” commercials to dampen the power of the serial clickers in avoiding their product.²⁸ Ad agencies clamored for new research angles to give them a quick handle on the ad avoiding epidemic.²⁹ Stay-tuned strategies emerged to eliminate channel flipping and hook viewers to the TV set in order to carry them through a commercial break. Ad spots were reduced from 30 seconds to 20 seconds. Time crunching led to “hot switching” to reduce programme breaks, which were moved from programme end to mid-programme. Opening themes were reduced or simply eliminated. Superstars like Michael Jackson and Madonna were recruited for cross-over appearances in ads. Spots masqueraded as regular programming, and product placement was integrated into actual programmes.

No need to zap any more; the network did it for us.³⁰ Dense editing à la MTV, with strong lead-ins and closing cliff-hangers, made sure eyeballs were kept glued to the screen. Comedy Central’s *Short Attention Span Theater* tacitly encouraged viewers to flip over to other channels, knowing they could rejoin the programme without losing the thread of the show.³¹ MTV tailored the new viewing habits into an animated series featuring two slackers who were addicted to their zapper: Beavis and Butt-head.

²⁵ Meehan, E., “Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blind Spot Debate” in *Illuminating the Blind Spots: Essays Honouring Dallas W. Smythe*, eds. J. Wasko, V. Mosco & M. Pendakur (Norwood: Albex, 1993) 105-16

²⁶ Kostyra, R., “Zapping—a modest proposal”, in *Media and Marketing Decisions* (March 1985), 94–5.

²⁷ Stewart, D.W., “Speculations on the future of advertising research”, in *Journal of Advertising*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1992), 1-18.

²⁸ Bellamy, R.V. & Walker, J.R., “Zapped into Action. Advertising Industry Response to RCD Diffusion”, in *Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland*, eds. R.V. Bellamy & J.R. Walker (New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1996), 49–69.

²⁹ Advertising Age (30 July 1984).

³⁰ Gleick, J., “Prest-O! Change-O!”, in *Living in the Information Age* (2005), 147; “Advertisers Are Getting Worried”, in *Rolling Stone* (28 February 1985); Ferguson, D.A., “Channel Repertoire in the Presence of Remote Control Devices, VCRs, and Cable Television”, in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (Winter 1992).

³¹ Eastman, S.T. & Neal-Lunsford, J., “The RCD’s Impact on Television Programming and Promotion”, in *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television*, ed. R.V. Bellamy & J.R. Walker (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993): 189-209.

Obsessively on the hunt for videos that didn't suck, they satirized the very act of flipping channels. Critics claimed it was "Sesame Street for psychopaths", but the programme did succeed in making MTV less prone to zapping by keeping viewers glued to the "idiot box", as it came to be called.³² Ever savvy about influencing our perception of reality, the political arena followed suit. Case in point was the US invasion of Panama in December 1989: it was carefully planned to occur during *The Super Bowl*, a "low-zapping event", assuring that the war would be consumed without much public outcry.

Incongruously, reality itself was about to turn into a zapping zone. Viewers' zapping behavior also forced the TV industry to refashion newscasts into accelerated MTV-style info-bits. News broadcasts got structured along the lines of the home shopping channel, with one video programmed after another in a constant rotating flow. CNN adopted similar strategies by repeating newsworthy morsels of infotainment 24/7, so viewers wouldn't miss anything on their channel-hopping tour. The "drop-in" style allowed zappers to grab a beer from the fridge any time for a double dose of instant gratification.³³ Moreover, television turned public space inside out: network executives began to substitute dramas for reality shows, reality for entertainment, and ultimately the viewer for the protagonist, beer still in hand. Reality was literally zapped...

An Alien Force Among Us

Whereas the media networks hijacked reality for entertainment, the global political game entertained a fear factor for reality. On 21 September 1987, in a speech before the United Nations General

Assembly, former Hollywood actor turned US president, Ronald Reagan hinted at the possibilities of a hostile extra-terrestrial threat to Earth: "Perhaps we need some outside universal threat. Our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask you: is not an alien force already among us?" He had used the same analogy in 1985 as a rationale for

³² Gleick, J., "Prest-O! Change-O!", in *Living in the Information Age: A New Media Reader*, E.P. Bucy (Florence: Wadsworth Publishing, 2004), 147. See also, Young, C.M., "Meet the Beavis! The Last Word From America's Phenomenal Pop Combo", in *Rolling Stone* (24 March 1994); Hulktrans, A., "MTV Rules (For a Bunch of Wussies)", in *Artforum* (February 1994). The series was created by Mike Judge for the MTV Channel and aired from 1993 to 1997.

³³ Eastman, S.T. & Neal-Lunsford, J., "The RCD's Impact on Television Programming and Promotion", in *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television*, ed. R.V. Bellamy & J.R. Walker (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993): 189-209.

governments to put aside their differences at the Geneva summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet president. Gorbachev's aspiration, though, was to quit the nuclear poker game, one, which already had 1.5 million Hiroshima-sized chips on the table. However, when he suggested the unprecedented move to liquidate all nuclear arsenals worldwide, Reagan bluntly counter-proposed with his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). "Star Wars", as it was dubbed by the media, was publicized as a "planetary defense shield" against incoming Soviet ballistic missiles, but many UFO researchers claimed differently. In fact Star Wars was only a public cover for its real mission: shooting star-ships out of the heavens in order to retro-engineer its foreign technology.³⁴

Crushing military expenditures had brought the crumbling Soviet superpower to the brink of bankruptcy. In similar fashion, the militarization of the American economy, which nearly doubled under the Reagan administration, had left the US with "ramshackle cities, broken bridges, failing schools, entrenched poverty, impeded life expectancy, and a menacing and secretive national-security state that held the entire human world hostage".³⁵ Symptomatic of this context was the waning US space programme: NASA's space shuttle fleet remained grounded in the wake of the January 1986 Challenger disaster. Instead of exploring outer space, outer space was suddenly colonizing us.³⁶ Steven Spielberg's *ET (ET: The Extra-Terrestrial, 1982)* had already nestled himself comfortably in an American suburb, checking out the fridge, getting drunk as he was channel-surfing UFO flicks on the telly. Meanwhile, waves of alien abductions invaded the American bedroom. The media now portrayed the contactees as abductees zapped inside the UFOs, their bodies' intimacy breached. Obsessed with the human reproductive system, the ETs had their hands full harvesting ova and sperm to create a hybrid race in space.³⁷ In May 1987, a couple of months before Reagan's infamous speech at the UN, the alien account Communion by abductee "experiencer" and author Whitley Strieber reached number one on *The New York Times* best-seller list.³⁸ The cover with the image of a bug-eyed "Grey" alien was suddenly catapulted into the mainstream. "Abductees evoke a nostalgia for a future we seem to have abandoned," writes Jodi Dean, "as the

³⁴ Corso, P.J. & Birnes, W.J., *The day after Roswell* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997). See also, www.drboylan.com/ as well as www.disclosureproject.org

³⁵ Rhodes, R., *Arsenals of Folly. The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Random House, 2007), 308.

³⁶ Penley, C., et al., *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism and Science Fiction* (Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³⁷ Hopkins, B., *Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).

³⁸ Strieber, W., *Communion, A True Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1987).

dark underside of official space, as a return of the repressed dimensions of astronaut heroics. They point to the shift from outerspace to cyberspace, and the widespread crisis of truth as we begin dealing with the virtual realities of the information age.”

The abductee narratives seemed to mirror the alienation felt towards an ever-increasing complex and uncertain reality of a corporate techno-culture taking over the world. “They bear witness to a lack of control, insecurity, and violation, to a lack of response from those who are supposed to protect and care.”³⁹

Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack, who co-chaired with physicist David E. Pritchard the 1992 Abduction Study Conference⁴⁰ at MIT, observed that the restrictive epistemology of a prevailing scientific paradigm was perhaps not adequate and incomplete to account for what was happening. At the core of the abduction phenomenon “experiencers” were coping with an “ontological shock”⁴¹ that fundamentally challenged the “consensus reality” of a western scientific worldview. Both traumatic and transformative, the abductees recounted a narrative of radical ecology connected to the fate of this Earth that had been ravaged by rational materialism and greed. In a post-conference interview Mack called for a “politics of ontology”⁴² to acquire a shift in worldview that can expand our understanding of reality—or rather, realities, in plural. An exploration into the possibilities of human consciousness ought to reconnect to “profound questions about how we experience the world around us and how as a society we decide what is real”.⁴³ The abductees’ narratives of ecological redemption sounded light-years away from Reagan’s plea for a Star Wars build-up. Reality itself was now at stake, and with it a planet in peril.

1990s: Couch Potato Politics

Geller and Williams concluded that by the 1990s there were more American homes with a TV than homes with a refrigerator.⁴⁴ Subsequently some people must have

³⁹ Dean, J., *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 100-3, 122-3.

⁴⁰ See Pritchard, A., et al., *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴¹ Mack, J.E., *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 12, 52.

⁴² “Post-conference Interview with John E. Mack, M.D.” in *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs and the Conference at MIT*, C.D.B. Bryan (New York: Knopf, 1995), 254—78.

⁴³ Mack, J.E., *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 46—50.

⁴⁴ Geller, M. & Williams, R. (eds.), *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 7.

missed out on grabbing a beer from the fridge during commercial break. But no urgent need for “physical zapping” any more as the remote control was by now largely sold as a standard feature with every TV set. Zapping devices became so omnipresent that households confused their video remote for the stereo remote, and the stereo remote for the television remote. Next usability became unwieldy: the lack of accepted interface guidelines guaranteed that the amount of buttons kept multiplying. Remote control anarchy reigned.⁴⁵ TV-Guide noted that the zapper had also entered couch potato politics as “the most avidly used and fought over device in the electronic cottage”.⁴⁶ Howard Markman, head of the University of Denver’s Center for Marital Studies, identified channel-surfing as “one of two major marital issues of the ’90s, the other being the scarcity of time together”.⁴⁷

As the nineties powered on, the global village was bargained off to a corporate media society. Worldwide players like Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corporation and! the Century Fox, gobbled up thousands of publishing houses and radio stations. Now able to sell global audiences to their advertisers, they spiced up the political spectacle, serving their economic greed, and entertaining with it the public’s perception of history and manipulation of reality alike. War turned into a staged reality TV show when in January 1991 the bombing of Baghdad hit CNN live. Special effects were no longer the monopoly of Hollywood. The real became a bad-taste parody of the video game, as smart missiles zoomed in on their targets. “Join the Navy” advertisements were cancelled as the news itself provided a twenty-four-hour commercial for the armed forces. “Surgical war” seemed almost pre-packaged by the news as a commodity hyped around smartmissile technology. Spectacle replaced critical distance and obscured the reality of the war being waged in the Gulf. Suddenly the news industry had transformed itself into a surreal shopping zone serving a corporate world in the interest of a global war industry: apart from television’s claim to reality, what the media was selling was history itself. Soon reality would be mistaken for a commercial break.

By 1993, CNN live was now a zapping option in 200 countries, its most watched catch show Larry King Live beamed around the world, hosting presidents

⁴⁵ “Jakob Nielsen’s Alertbox June 7, 2004: Remote Control Anarchy”. Accessed 3 January 2011: www.useit.com/alertbox/20040670.html

⁴⁶ Arrington, C., “The zapper: All about the remote control”, in TV-Guide (15 August 1992), 8—13.

⁴⁷ Valeriano, L.L., “Channel Surfers Beware: There’s a Channel-Surfer Zapper Afoot”, in *The Wall Street Journal* (24 November 1993). See also, “How to Wrest Control of Your Set”, in *The Chicago Tribune* (19 December 1993) 8; “How Americans Watch TV: A Nation of Grazers”, in *Channels Magazine* (New York: C.C. Publishing, 1989).

and alien abductees alike. One episode invited alien abductee researcher David Jacobs together with Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion*, to discuss the phenomenon. “Why don’t they come here right now; my God, what a move that would be!” stirred Larry King.⁴⁸ As George Bush Sr.’s ratings fell after the first Gulf War and faced with his up-coming presidential campaign against Bill Clinton, he too decided to appear on Larry King Live. By now the public’s trust in the powers-that-be had drastically waned. Apparently, more people believed in aliens than in the president: an early 1990s Gallup poll performed by the Center for UFO Studies Journal found that UFO believers outnumbered the voters who placed Reagan, Bush Senior and Clinton into office.⁴⁹ Politics suddenly appeared to have been taken over by aliens, suggested by the cover story that ran in the tabloid *Weekly World News* of 7 June 1994: “12 US SENATORS ARE SPACE ALIENS!”⁵⁰ A month later the Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day* zapped the White House to smithereens.⁵¹

A New Fear Factor

When re-runs of the popular sci-fi classic *The Twilight Zone* were programmed in the early nineties, they had to compete for airtime with the monster-hit *The X-Files*,⁵² the show that propelled conspiracy theory into mainstream. Challenging the authority of official truth and reality that kept a lid on corporate frauds and governmental lies, conspiracy culture simply mirrored the political inadequacies of a system that failed to offer alternatives to a world that was being bargained off by greed. UFO communities were now convinced that the powers-that-be were covering up all evidence of aliens.⁵³ And, worse still, as governments were in league

⁴⁸ See: <http://larrykinglive.blogs.cnn.com>

⁴⁹ Cousineau, P., *UFOs: A Manual for the Millennium* (New York: Harper-Collins West, 1995). In *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Jodi Dean makes reference to a 1994 discussion of American disillusionment: “People talk as though our political system had been taken over by alien beings See “Antipolitics ‘94”, in *The New York Times Magazine* (16 October 1994), 37.

⁵⁰ Dean, J., *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 156-7.

⁵¹ *The Simpsons* episode *Radio Bart* stages a broadcast to the Springfield locales where Bart pretends to be the leader of a Martian invasion who has eaten the US president. Obviously a spoof on Orson Welles’s famous broadcast *The War of the Worlds*, it causes his dad to burst into a panic attack (Matt Groening and James L. Brooks).

⁵² *The X-Files*: a science-fiction series running on FOX network from 10 September 1993 to 19 May 2002.

⁵³ “Is the Government Hiding Facts On UFOs & Extraterrestrial Life?; New Roper Poll Reveals that More Than Two-Thirds of Americans Think So”, in *Business Wire*. Accessed 8 August 2010: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moEIN/is_2002_Oct_15/ai_92843602/

with alien powers, they couldn’t be trusted to protect their citizens from being spacenapped right out of their beds. A Roper Poll claimed that at least one in fifty Americans, whether conscious of it or not, had been abducted by aliens.⁵⁴

As the Cold War gave way to the Gulf War and the New World Order, America found itself refashioning its imaginary “other”. With the fall of the iron curtain and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, America’s war industry was running out of villains⁵⁵ and had to look elsewhere to cast a next fear factor. The political unknown and the insecurities around big-brother technology and the imaginary other had yielded infowar⁵⁶ and the image of the hostile alien. No longer was it the

James Bond-versus-Russia scenario, but Mickey Mouse versus an evil ET. Nevertheless, the US government was already speculating to sell its ideology on an interplanetary level as a National

Security Agency (NSA) Report on Alien Contact suggested: “What if someone from another world demanded to be taken to our planet’s leader? That leader, the report insisted, must be the President of the US. There are economic concerns. Suppose the US purchased, on an exclusive basis, say, antimatter fuel from the alien trade representatives—in return, to neatly tally up the intergalactic balance of payments, we might cut them a deal. All the Pepsi they can drink, all the Big Macs they can eat. From the first moment of contact, the report recommended that the US government exclusively supervise, monitor and control all communication with other planets.”⁵⁷

Yet, on a micro-political level alien abductees came out of the closet to populate small-screen talk shows. Quickly ridiculed as tabloid sensation, they were readily debunked by a society that underscored a fear of the unknown. The “ontological consensus” had to be held in check. In a 1999 study John E. Mack remarked that

⁵⁴ Hopkins, B., “The Roper Poll on Unusual Personal Experiences”, in Pritchard et al., *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference Held at M.I.T.* Cambridge, Ma., A. Pritchard et al. (Cambridge: North Cambridge Press, 1995), 215—16.

⁵⁵ Colin Powell was quoted as saying at the time: “I’m running out of demons... I’m running out of villains. I’m down to Castro and Kim Il Sung”, in *Arsenals of Folly. The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race*, R. Rhodes (New York: Random House, 2007), 292—3.

⁵⁶ Denning, D.E., *Information, Warfare and Security* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1999); Stocker, G. & Schöpf, C. (eds.), *InfoWar, Ars Electronica* (Vienna/New York: Springer, 1998). See also, Sobchack, V., “Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange”, in *Close Encounters*. Film, Feminism and Science Fiction, eds. C. Penley, et al. (Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁵⁷ Blum, H., *Out There: The Government’s Secret Quest for Extraterrestrials* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 150—1.

our western society is perhaps as “reality deprived” as the main character of the Hollywood movie *The Truman Show* (1998). Trapped inside a seamless bubble, Truman’s life is scripted by television corporate executives who profit from the limitation of his horizon. “Abductee experiencers might be thought of as ontological pioneers, who not unlike Truman, break out of the bubble of a constricting world-view.”⁵⁸ Mack cited physicist Michio Kaku, who described our universe like a bubble, created within a “multiverse” of bubbles. Perhaps someday we may leave the bubble of this universe to enter other universes, where the laws of physics could be quite different, not unlike Alice stepping through the looking-glass or Truman pricking through his bubble.⁵⁹

Boldly Going Where Everybody Had Been Before

Bart Simpson’s Guide to Life had already warned us: “Maybe the sky is really green, and we’re just colourblind!” The Simpsons’ family paradigm reigned from the mid-nineties onwards. The metatextual gags played out in the TV series zapped across the entire media landscape. One episode, *The Springfield Files*,⁶⁰ featured X-Files agents Scully and Mulder as special guests. The team pulls up in Springfield to investigate Homer Simpson’s ET encounter and finds him jogging on a treadmill in his underwear. Another script saw couch-potato Homer, avid addict of the television remote, beer in hand, calling NASA to complain about the boring space coverage on television. NASA, frustrated over its drop in TV ratings, invites him to join the next mission, which turns into a Nielsen rating hit.⁶¹ But during his *Deep Space Homer*⁶² our accidental hero loses control of his potato chips and crash-lands—boldly going where everybody had been before: Springfield, the one and only town exempt from dystopian anxiety.⁶³ The real NASA actually loved the episode, and

⁵⁸ Mack, J.E., *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 36—7, 60. See also Chiten, L., *Touched* (65min/colour, 2003), a documentary about John Mack’s work.

⁵⁹ Kaku, M., *Parallel Worlds: A Journey Through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

⁶⁰ Groening, M. & Brooks, J.L., *The Springfield Files*, 8th episode of the 8th season of *The Simpsons* (originally aired on FOX networks, 12 January 1997).

⁶¹ Nielsen ratings are audience measurement tools developed by Nielsen Media Research in the US.

⁶² Groening, M. & Brooks, J.L., *Deep Space Homer*, 15th episode of the 5th season of *The Simpsons* (originally aired on FOX networks, 24 February 1994).

⁶³ Springfield, in reality, can be found in thirty-four states throughout the United States in a way that suggests a reflection of common society, as we know it to be. See Brown, A.S. & Logan, C. (eds.), *The Psychology of The Simpsons: D’oh!* (Dallas, BenBella Books, 2006).

sent a DVD copy on a supply ship to the International Space Station, where astronauts are now enjoying Homer’s calamities.⁶⁴ Homer Simpson was not the only zapping calamity. In 1997 wrestling control over the zapper started getting really out of hand. In downstate Illinois a thirteen-year-old honors student plunged a butcher knife into her fifty-two-year-old step-grandfather’s chest after he switched channels. In October a woman in Florida shot her husband when he switched channels to watch *The Philadelphia Eagles* versus *The Dallas Cowboys*. She wanted to watch the news. A seven-year-old boy watching *RoboCop* (1987) shot and killed the family maid when she switched channels in order to watch *Young Love, Sweet Love*. In November, an off-duty Detroit officer shot and killed a twenty-one-year-old mental patient who he thought had pointed a gun at him. It was a remote for the video recorder.⁶⁵

But 1997 was also a busy year for ufologists: Roswell, New Mexico, celebrated its 50th Anniversary of Ufology, to mark the infamous saucer crash of July 1947 nearby. Already on 13 March, earlier that year, the Phoenix Lights were widely sighted in the skies over Arizona and Nevada by thousands of people. Former Arizona Governor Fife Symington III, after initial denial, confirmed he too had witnessed a “craft of unknown origin”.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, smash hit *Men in Black*, released in July, showed a New York teeming with resident aliens. And that same month, when Jodie Foster’s character deciphers a signal from outer space in the movie *Contact*,⁶⁷ CNN host Larry King makes an appearance as none other than CNN host Larry King.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, people from the military, intelligence and science communities stepped forward to expose the UFO secret. In 1999 a high-level French study committee of experts, including General Bernard Norlain, retired commander of the French Tactical Air Force and military counselor to former Prime Minister Mitterand, and Andre Lebeau, former head of the National Center for Space Studies, the French equivalent of NASA, published the COMETA Report. In it, they criticized the US for its policy of disinformation and military regulations prohibiting public disclosure of UFO sightings. In May 2001 the Disclosure Project convened a conference of witnesses to the National Press Club in Washington, DC, with the aim of persuading the US Congress to disclose the UFO cover-up.

⁶⁴ D. Mirkin on the *The Simpsons*, season 5: DVD commentary for the episode *Deep Space Homer*, Twenty Century Fox, 2004. See also, Turner, C., *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Documented an Era and Defined a Generation* (New York: Random House, 2004).

⁶⁵ The Village Voice, 1997, at www.villagevoice.com/

⁶⁶ Kitei, L., *The Phoenix Lights... We Are Not Alone* (84min/colour, 2008), based on the book of the same name.

⁶⁷ Zemeckis, R., *Contact* (150min/colour, 1997), adapted from Carl Sagan’s novel of the same name.

2001: The Unknown Unknowns⁶⁸

Then ET returned with a new face. If anything, on that fateful morning of 11 September 2001, Hollywood's imagination came back to haunt America's political unconscious: symptom (flying saucers beaming out of nowhere) met with reality (the dark underside of repressed world politics striking back at the symbolic center of its economic power).⁶⁹ But this time there was no Hollywood redemption. Zapping became useless as all channels were beaming the very same images of the collapsing "Towering Infernos", over and over again. No longer did the media have to keep up with reality, but rather reality was now keeping up with the media. Directly after the attacks, the alien morphed into the "Arab terrorist" while politics spun a web of lies to sell war in the name of democracy. Hollywood, on the other hand, felt implicated in the acts of 9/11. "Within days, studios were re-calling, re-cutting, and cancelling movies."⁷⁰ Symbolic of this twist of events, at the behest of the US Army in October 2002, government intelligence specialists met with top Hollywood filmmakers and writers at the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California. Their mission: to imagine possible terrorist scenarios. Finally, the story of *The War of the Worlds* had come full circle. The new disaster movie was re-imagining the 9/11 event, Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) deliberately evoking the collective trauma.

YouTube Me and I Tube You

Just over a year after the first video was uploaded onto YouTube in April 2005, the number of uploads was growing at a rate of 65,000 a day.⁷¹ Facebook, whose approximately 500 million members totaled 7.6 per cent of the human race, became the online emblem of the virtual society at the dawn of the twenty-first century. More

⁶⁸ In reference to US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's news briefing of 12 February 2002 at NATO headquarters in Brussels: "... there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know."

See www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636 (accessed 5 January 2011).

⁶⁹ This is paradoxical given that the number of victims from 9/11—tragic as it may be—totally eclipses the far greater number of deaths in Iraq since the invasion, let alone the total number of victims from the direct and indirect involvement of the US in the overthrow of " " countries, as well as the attack of 50 countries since World War II. See Kealy, S., "Maneuvering in the Shadows of Absolute War", in *Signals of the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War* (Toronto: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery & Blackwood Gallery, 2008), 61.

⁷⁰ Hoberman, J., "The New Disaster Movie", in *The Village Voice* (17–23 May 2006), 62–4.

⁷¹ Lovink, G. & Niederer, S. (eds.), *Video Vortex Reader, Responses to YouTube* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 34.

than 3 billion mobile phones—one for every other person on the planet—foreshadowed the convergence of media into one portable device.⁷² With this new remote control, we were perpetually online, connected and multi-tasking, living in a world suffering from ADHD and devoid of sleep. Firmly placed at the center of the network, the individual could now "tap", "pinch" and "flick" touch-pads, navigating and skipping through their personalized prime-time of other people's lives. If the launch of MTV in 1981 sang that "Video Killed the Radio Star",⁷³ then the YouTubes and Facebooks were transforming who or what the "video star" was. Set within logics of consumerism, these websites promoted the idea of user-generated content, only to gobble it all up for themselves under outdated copyright laws. Trapped within private databases, reality was now defined by search engines and tags, connectivity and buffering-times.

Navigating the Net not only redefined, but also magnified our addiction to channel surfing, where the ubiquity of pushbutton technology enabled endless clicking and ceaseless popups. A perpetual distraction, this illusion of abundance staged by techno-magic hid the ugly face of an info-dystopia. Images of Abu Ghraib, 9/11, swine flu, the BP Gulf oil spill and the economic crisis composed our new contemporary sublime. Political debate had shrunk into mere fear management. No longer happy innocent consumers of a bygone TV era, we were now both avid consumers of fear⁷⁴ and the protagonists of an increasing ubiquity of systems of surveillance.

Replacing our "consensus reality" with a surplus reality, the virtual was surpassed. The world and life within it was already being genetically modified and photoshopped. Corporations were abducting our very essence. DNA, life's building blocks, were becoming their property, patented and privatized for profit. With its genetically modified variant, food became alien.⁷⁵ From what we digested, to what we ingested, Big Pharma invaded the intimacy of our bodies with a vested interest in the propagation of the swine flu epidemic; immune systems offered the promise of a multimillion-dollar market. From biological viruses to digital viruses, advertisers were now looking at the possibility of digimericals, by which viruses would disseminate logos into the electronic environment.⁷⁶ Where will this take us? Case in point:

⁷² Jenkins, H., *Convergence Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷³ MTV was launched on 1 August 1981, with the video clip "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the band The Buggles.

⁷⁴ Klein, N., *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

⁷⁵ Smith, J.M., *Seeds of Deception: Exposing Industry and Government Lies About the Safety of the Genetically Engineered Foods You're Eating* (Darlington: Green Books, 2003).

⁷⁶ Schrage, M., et al., "Is Advertising Really Dead? Part II: Advertisers, digimericals, and memgraphics: The future of advertising is the future of media," in *Wired* (February 1994), 71–4.

twenty-five-year-old Matthew Nagle, a quadriplegic permanently paralyzed from the neck down, had a 4-millimetre-wide silicon chip placed on the part of his brain that co-ordinates motor activity. Using only the power of his mind, Nagle took a day to learn entirely new computerized skills, such as zapping his TV channel, adjusting the volume, moving a computer cursor, playing a video game, and even reading his email.⁷⁷ Add some recombinant DNA cortex rewiring on a nano-level and, instead of mistaking reality for a commercial break, life will literally become an advertisement, the ultimate commodity. In his novel *Nymphomation*, Jeff Noon speaks of genetically modified flies, programmed to transmit commercial slogans in their flight paths.⁷⁸ When this happens, zapping will be pointless.

Close Encounter?

The contemporary condition of what it is to be human calls into question the relevance of politics and reality, one that has collapsed under the weight of an information overload and mass deception. Paranoia suddenly seems the only sensible state of being, where it is easier to ponder the end of the world than to imagine viable political alternatives. J. Allen Hynek—the person who coined the term “close encounters”—has pointed out that from the vantage point of the thirtieth century, our knowledge of the universe may appear quite different: “We suffer, perhaps, from temporal provincialism, a form of arrogance that has always irritated posterity.”⁷⁹ The question then should not be “is there intelligent life out there?” but rather “is there intelligent life on

Earth?” After all, wouldn’t it be us who are actually the aliens.

January 2011

⁷⁷ Called the “BrainGate”, the chip was pioneered by John Donoghue, a neuroscientist at Brown University. See Kaku, M., *Physics of the Impossible* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 95–6.

⁷⁸ Noon, J., *Nymphomation* (London: Corgi Books, 1997).

⁷⁹ Hynek, J.A., *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1972).