

# Remote control: on Zapping, Close Encounters and the Commercial Break<sup>1</sup>

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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 *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy* scanned channels at the commercial break and unwittingly tuned into Orson Welles' CBS radiocast *War of the Worlds*.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they missed the crucial disclaimer introducing the program as a fake. The zappers were caught up in a public hysteria as Martians were reported to be landing.<sup>3</sup> At its climax, the broadcast described a 9-11esque New York being taken down by extra-terrestrials: "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!"<sup>4</sup>

Channel changing away from the ad break was not solely responsible for the hysteria. *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.<sup>5</sup> In 1953 a precursor of

the present-day television remote, appropriately called the “Blab-Off,” was marketed as a way to shut commercials up. This hand-held device featured a 20-foot cord that was attached to the 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.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1955 the [Zenith](#)<sup>•</sup> company, after research into push-button technology, introduced “Lazy Bones,” a primitive television remote designed to eliminate commercials and promote the cable industry. Other manufacturers conceived rival remotes with promising names such as “Remot-O-Matic” or “Tun-O-Matic.” At this point they were all still attached to the TV with a bulky cable stretching across the living-room floor, leading to consumer complaints of frequent tripping. Furthermore, a high level of skill was required to keep from overshooting the desired channel.<sup>7</sup> Later that year Zenith created the “Flash-matic”: the world’s first “wireless remote.” A flashlight activated photocells positioned at the four corners of the TV screen. However, the ‘Flash-matic’ worked all too well on sunny days, causing sunlight to randomly flip channels. The next model worked with radio waves, but never made it onto the market as it was all too possible to change the neighbors’ channels as well. Zenith continued with its research to improve its wireless devices and in June 1956 they introduced the “Space Command Television.” This wireless remote used high-frequency sound, and functioned on a four-button operation: on/off, channel up, channel down, and a mute.

- Advertisement for new seven-function remote control for colour TV (produced by the Jam Handy Organization for RCA Victor), 1959, 5 min 47 sec, USA Courtesy of Prelinger Archives ([www.prelinger.com](http://www.prelinger.com))

“Space Command Television” was advertised with the slogan: “Just a touch of the button to shut off the sound of long annoying commercials.”<sup>8</sup>

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. At first the new family member was not that welcome. With its signals beamed in from the 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.<sup>9</sup> Even, or perhaps especially, in Hollywood, the television was considered a hostile prop on film sets. Warner Brothers frowned upon 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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 – until the following week’s episode that was!

- Advertisement for Zenith remote-control activated Space Screen, 1984, 30 sec, USA
- “Lucy and Superman”, Episode 166 of *I Love Lucy*, first broadcast by CBS on January 14, 1957

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, 'super-mom' 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> Already in 1947, civilian pilot Kenneth Arnold had observed nine elliptical, disc-shaped vehicles traveling in formation over Mount Adams at extraordinary speed. He described the objects as resembling "a saucer skipping across the water." Newspapers baptized the unknown crafts after the household object, turning America's gaze skyward. Something was definitely out there...

Cold War nerves had caused paranoia in the ranks of America's Secret Services, 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!"<sup>13</sup> The CIA set up a panel of top scientists, headed by Dr. H. P. Robertson. The panel 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 disinformation

campaign over the television. UFO groups were monitored for subversive activities and contactees were branded as Soviet spies.<sup>14</sup>

In the mean time, Sputnik launched the Space Age. The very first satellite shot into orbit by the Soviets in October 1957 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 usual 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 the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. "Somehow, in some new way, the sky seemed almost alien," wrote Senate majority leader L. B. Johnson, the soon-to-be president.<sup>15</sup>

In response, the US attempted to blast off with the *Vanguard I* rocket, but the "Flopnik" or "Kaputnik," as it was baptized, hardly lifted four feet off the ground before an enormous explosion sent it crashing back down in front of a worldwide 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, and Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, went on television to suggest that the future now belonged to the Russians.<sup>16</sup> 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 of the 1957 Hollywood production *Earth versus the Flying Saucers*.

During the Cold War television was eagerly exploited to perpetuate a culture of fear for 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 color videotape recorded the historical event in a model kitchen at the 1959 American fair in Moscow. During the statesmen’s rough-and-tumble debate ranging from dish-washers, to politics, to the role of women, Nixon boasted that the wonder of television gave America the technological edge over the USSR. With flamboyant disdain showman Khrushchev declared that the Soviet space endeavors were far superior. 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.

In June of 1961 the Soviets successfully sent cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit, officially the first man in space. As the US space program lingered behind, its media machine played on the communist scare of “The Red Planet Mars” attacking America.<sup>17</sup> 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 primetime TV. Sci-fi programs such as [\*The Outer Limits\*](#)<sup>•</sup> 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!” Then, in September of that same year, the first alien abduction

• Introduction to *The Outer Limits*, series broadcast by ABC from 1961 to 1965, 45 sec

case was reported in the US: whilst driving through New Hampshire from a short vacation in Canada, Barney Hill and his wife Betty, a mixed-race couple, were abducted by a flying saucer, apparently dropping in from the Zeta Reticuli star system, that was hovering above.<sup>18</sup>

In the early sixties 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 filmhouses 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 working with the TV format. A displaced Englishman in Hollywood, Hitchcock readily donned the role of a double agent sneaking into the American living room, both as a master of prime, while simultaneously deriding it. His wry introductions to his TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* were peppered with domestic paranoia, mirroring 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. 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 that had turned into a "propaganda-box": "Television is like the American toaster," he quipped. "You push the button, and the same thing pops up every time."

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, "to 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 he 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!”<sup>19</sup>

*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% of television viewers.<sup>20</sup> At one point Hitchcock had jokingly appealed for longer 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> With the convenience of a food tray one could easily stay parked in front of the tube, and thus the art of dinner conversation was rapidly replaced with ‘sappy sitcoms’ sprinkled with commercial interruptions.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> All the while the advertising

industry had its hands full pre-packaging its new image of the happy consumer to an emerging TV-society.

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-eighties however, the vast cable industry and the video-recorder had made the remote control a necessity. Being used to target their television audiences, the advertising industry became alarmed by the zap-behavior of TV viewers who were inaugurating a radically different pattern of television usage. Viewers, traditionally sold by the media industry as only statistics for ad revenues, were now suddenly taking control by flipping away from commercials.<sup>25</sup>

At this point the habit of zapping commercials was at epidemic levels, practiced by 80% of television viewers. The threat of commercial devastation alarmed the advertising industry.<sup>26</sup> The trade press claimed that "advertising as a profession is very much in crisis."<sup>27</sup> In panic, the industry called for "zap-proof" commercials to dampen the power of the serial clickers in avoiding their product.<sup>28</sup> Ad agencies clamored for new research angles to give them a quick handle on the ad-avoiding epidemic.<sup>29</sup> 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 to 15 seconds. Time crunching led to "hot switching" to reduce program breaks, which were moved from program end to mid-program. Opening themes were reduced or simply eliminated. Superstars like Michael Jackson and Madonna were recruited for crossover appearances in ads. Spots masqueraded as regular programming and product placement was integrated into actual programs. No need to zap anymore; the network did it for us.<sup>30</sup> Dense editing

à la MTV, with strong lead-ins and closing cliffhangers, made sure eyeballs 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 program without losing the thread of the show.<sup>31</sup> MTV tailored the new viewing habits into an animated series featuring two slackers, Beavis and Butthead, who were addicted to their zapper. 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 program did succeed in making MTV less prone to zapping and kept viewers glued to the "idiot box" (as it came to be called).<sup>32</sup> Ever savvy about influencing our perception of reality, the political arena followed suit. Case in point was the US invasion of Panama in December of 1989, which 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 anytime for a double dose of instant gratification.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, network executives began to substitute dramas for reality shows, reality for entertainment, and ultimately the viewer for the protagonist, beer still in hand. Whereas the media networks hijacked reality for entertainment,

the global political game engendered entertainment for reality. On September 21, 1987, in a speech before the United Nations General Assembly, former Hollywood actor turned US president, [Ronald Reagan](#)<sup>•</sup>, 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 as a rationale for governments to put aside their differences at the summit meeting with Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 in Geneva. Gorbachev’s aspiration was to quit the nuclear poker game, one that already had 1.5 million Hiroshima sized chips on the table. However, when he suggested the unprecedented move to liquidate all nuclear arsenals worldwide, Ronald 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 it was in fact a public cover for its real mission: attacking “hostile” starships.

Crushing military expenditures had brought the crumbling Soviet superpower to the brink of bankruptcy. In similar fashion the militarization of the American economy, that nearly doubled under the Reagan administration, had left the US with “ram-shackle 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.”<sup>34</sup> Symptomatic of this context was the waning US space program:

• Speech of U.S. President Ronald Reagan before the United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 1987.

NASA's space shuttle fleet remained grounded in the wake of the January 1986 Challenger disaster. Instead of exploring outer space, outer space was now colonizing us.<sup>35</sup> Steven Spielberg's ET had already nestled himself comfortably in an American suburb, getting drunk and zapping UFO flicks on the telly. Meanwhile waves of alien abductions invaded the American bedroom. Contactees now became abductees who were zapped into UFOs, the intimacy of their bodies breached. Fascinated with the human reproductive system, the ETs had their hands full harvesting ova and sperm to create a hybrid race in space.<sup>36</sup> In May 1987, a couple of months before Reagan's infamous speech at the UN, the alien investigation *Communion: A True Story* by alien abductee experiencer and author Whitley Strieber reached number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list.<sup>37</sup> The cover with the image of a bug-eyed "Gray" alien was now suddenly catapulted into the mainstream. "Abductees evoke a nostalgia for a future we seem to have abandoned," writes Jodi Dean, "As the return of the repressed dimensions of astronaut heroics. Outer space was now alien space."<sup>38</sup> The abductee narratives mirrored the alienation to an ever-increasing complex and uncertain reality of a corporate techno-culture taking over the globe.

Geller and Williams concluded that by the 1990s there were more American homes with a TV than homes with a refrigerator.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently some people missed out on the act of grabbing a beer from the fridge during commercial break. But no urgent need for "physical zapping," 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.<sup>40</sup>

*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.”<sup>41</sup> 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.”<sup>42</sup>

As the nineties powered-on, the global village became ever more privatized. Although the world grew into a smaller place, it became more gullible as a media society. News corporations grabbed control with ever-bigger hands that were now capable of selling global audiences to their advertisers. Worldwide players like Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corporation and 20th Century Fox, who controlled thousands of publishing houses and radio stations worldwide, came to embody the global power of the media, but also the danger of manipulating politics, and the public’s perception of history and reality alike. War was staged as a reality TV show when the bombing of Baghdad hit CNN live in January 1991. Special effects were no longer the monopoly of Hollywood, and videogaming turned real as smart missiles zoomed in on their targets. Join-the-Navy advertisements were cancelled as the news itself provided a 24-hour commercial for the armed forces. “Surgical war” seemed almost prepackaged by the news as a commodity hyped around smart-missile technology. Spectacle replaced critical distance and obscured the reality of the war being waged in the Gulf. News networks were implicated as tools of combat, disseminating strategic disinformation. Suddenly the news industry had transformed itself into a surreal shopping zone: apart from television’s claim to reality, what the media was

selling was history itself. Soon reality would be mistaken for a commercial break.

The introduction of MTV in the early nineties on Moscow network slots was hailed as the greatest event in Russia since the 1917 October Revolution. Vertov and Eisenstein, forefathers of documentary theory and the revolutionary potential of montage, were now being reconsidered as Muscovites studied the addictive zapping behavior and farting contests of MTV buddies Beavis and Butthead. In 1993, CNN went global, broadcasting live to 200 countries. CNN's most watched chat show *Larry King Live*, was hosting presidents and alien abductees alike. One episode invited David Jacobs, an alien abductee researcher, Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion*, and an incognito alien abductee to discuss the phenomenon. Larry King provoked: "Why don't they come here right now [on CNN?]; my God, what a move that would be!"<sup>43</sup>

As George Bush Senior's ratings fell after the first Gulf War, he decided to appear on *Larry King Live* in order to boost his up-coming presidential campaign against Bill Clinton. 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 nineties' Gallup poll performed by the *Center for UFO Studies Journal* found that UFO believers outnumbered the voters who placed Reagan, Bush Senior, and Clinton in office.<sup>44</sup> Politics seemed suddenly to be been taken over by aliens as suggested by the cover story that ran in the tabloid *Weekly World News* of June 7, 1994: "12 U.S. senators are space aliens!"<sup>45</sup> A month later the Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day* zapped The White House to smithereens.<sup>46</sup>

Re-runs of *The Twilight Zone* sci-fi classics were competing

for airtime with the monster-hit *The X-Files*,<sup>47</sup> which rapidly began an appetite for conspiracy theory within the mainstream. Conspiracy culture blossomed-across the political spectrum, disrupting the official narratives of truth, authority, and reality. UFO communities were now convinced that the powers-that-be were covering up all evidence of aliens.<sup>48</sup> And worse still, the government was actually in league with the alien powers, so could not be trusted to protect its citizens from being space-napped right out of their bedrooms. A Roper poll claimed that at least one in fifty Americans, whether conscious of it or not, had been abducted by aliens.<sup>49</sup>

As the Cold War gave way to the Gulf War and the New World Order, America found itself refashioning its imaginary “other.” With the collapse of the Soviet Union, America’s war industry was running out of villains<sup>50</sup> 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 aliens and infowar.<sup>51</sup> No longer was it the James Bond-versus-Russia scenario: dysfunctional families and alien abductees came out of the closet to populate small-screen talk shows. The Simpsons family-paradigm reigned. The metatextual gags of the TV-series zapped across the entire media landscape. In “The Springfield Files,”<sup>52</sup> *X-Files* agents Scully and Mulder pull up in Springfield to investigate Homer Simpson’s UFO encounter and find him jogging on a treadmill in his underwear. Another script saw coach-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 the join the next mission, which turns into a Nielsen rating hit<sup>53</sup>. But during

‘[Deep Space Homer](#)’<sup>54</sup> our accidental hero loses control of his potato chips and crash-lands to earth – boldly going where everybody had been before: Springfield, the one and only town exempt from dystopian anxiety.<sup>55</sup> The real NASA actually loved the episode, and astronaut Edward Lu asked for a DVD-copy to be sent on a supply ship to the Inter-national Space Station, where astronauts were now enjoying Homer’s calamities.<sup>56</sup>

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 13-year-old honor student plunged a butcher knife into her 52-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 Eagles versus The Cowboys. She wanted to watch the news. A seven-year-old boy watching *Robocop* 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 21-year-old mental patient whom he thought had pointed a gun at him. It was a remote for the video recorder.<sup>57</sup>

Then ET returned with a new face, If anything, on that fateful morning of September 11th, Hollywood’s imagination came back to haunt America’s political unconscious, and symptom (flying saucers beaming out of nowhere) met reality (the dark underside of repressed world politics striking back at the symbolic center of its economic power). But this time there was no Hollywood redemption. Even zapping became useless, as all channels were beaming the very same images of the collapsing “Towering Infernos.” Navigating the Net has not only redefined, but also magnified

● “Deep Space Homer”, 15th episode of the 5th season of *The Simpsons*, first broadcast by FOX network on February 24, 1994 (Matt Groening & James L. Brooks)

our addiction to channel surfing. With [YouTube](#)<sup>●</sup> and Google we now surf a reality zone defined in ‘buffering-time’ and where images of Abu Grahib, 9-11, or the swine flu compose the new contemporary sublime. Meanwhile the political debate has shrunk into mere fear management. No longer happy innocent consumers of a bygone TV-era, we are now avid consumers of fear. Paranoia suddenly seems the normal condition of being in this world. It’s easier to ponder the end of the world, than to imagine political alternatives. Finally, *we* had become the “alien.”

● Evolution of TV, 2007, 1 min. Courtesy of Telenor.

1. Part 1 of this essay is an elaboration of an initial research on the history of the remote control device carried out at the Edith Russ Site for New Media Residency (Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst) in Oldenburg, Germany. The result was a web-based project viewable at [www.zapomatic.com](http://www.zapomatic.com), and first shown September 14 through to October 20, 2002 at the Edith Russ Site.
2. The radiocast was an adaptation of H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* and was directed and narrated by Orson Welles. It was aired on October 30, 1938 over the Columbia Broadcasting System network as the Halloween episode of the radio series *Mercury Theatre on the Air*.
3. Cited in: R. V. Bellamy and J. R. Walker, *Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland*. New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1996, p. 16. See also: H. Cantril, *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," *New York Times*, October 31, 1938. See also: Richard J. Hand, *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America, 1931-1952*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Macfarland & Company, 2006.
5. Robert V. Bellamy and James R. Walker, "The Remote Control Device: An Overlooked Technology," and Robert V. Bellamy, James R. Walker, and Paul J. Traudt, "Gratifications Derived from Remote Control Devices: A Survey of Adult RCD Use," in Bellamy and Walker (eds.), *The Remote Control in the New Age of Television*. Praeger: Westport, Conn., 1993.
6. Louise Benjamin, "At the Touch of a Button: A Brief History of Remote Control Devices." Ibid. Bellamy and Walker, pp. 1-22. See also: "Kill that commercial!" *Newsweek*, November 20, 1950, pp. 95-96; and C. L. Walker, "How to Stop Objectionable TV Commercials," *Reader's Digest*, November 1953, p. 72.
7. "Remote Controls for Radio and TV," *Consumer Reports*, March 1956, pp. 165-66.
8. S. Johnson, "Zap!" *Chicago Tribune*, August 27, 1986 (Tempo Section), pp. 1,7.
9. See: [www.zapomatic.com](http://www.zapomatic.com): *Hillsborough with New Hideaway Styling*, Jam Handy Organization for RCA Victor, 1959, 2 min 30 sec, USA. Courtesy: Prelinger Archives; [www.prelinger.com](http://www.prelinger.com).
10. Erik Barnouw, *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 January 14, 1957, USA. See also: Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety. Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1990.
12. Nick Redfern, *The FBI Files, the FBI's UFO Top Secrets Exposed*. Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
13. Leslie and George Adamski, *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, Werner Laurie, 1953.
14. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 190-91. See also: Gerald K. Haines, *CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90; A Die-Hard Issue* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-ufo/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/97unclass/ufo.html>).
15. "The 'New Republic,'" and Lyndon B. Johnson's memoir, "The Vantage Point," quoted in Paul Dickson, *Sputnik. The Shock of the Century*. Walker & Company: New York, 2001, pp. 117-28.
16. Eduard Teller's comments and similar commentary from US Senators and Journalists may be heard in the film *Sputnik* (2007) by David Hoffman, as well as in the film *Double Take* (2009) by Johan Grimonprez. See also: Paul Dickson, *ibid.*, pp. 117-28.
17. L. Spigel, "From Domestic Space to Outer Space: The 1960s Fantastic Family Sit-Com," and Vivian Sobchack, "Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange," in Constance P. Penley, E. Lyon, L. Spigel, and J. Bergstrom (eds.), *Close Encounters. Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
18. John G. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey*. New York: Dial Press, 1966.
19. Martin Grams Jr. and Patrik Wikström, *The Alfred Hitchcock Presents Companion*. Maryland: OTR Publishing, 2001.
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  47. *The X-Files*: a science fiction series running on FOX network from September 10, 1993 to May 19, 2002.
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  53. Nielsen ratings are audience measurement tools developed by Nielsen Media Research in the US.
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