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# Cool Moms & Cool Media: Returning to

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Cool Moms & Cool Media: Returning to *Poltergeist* through *Stranger Things*

by

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## ABSTRACT

I posit that contemporary fears about the effect electronic media has on us and our children is anything but new. Therefore, reminiscing about the “good ole days” and wanting to go back would not actually solve the problem. However, looking back to a time when there was also anxiety about electronic media and the shifting field of public and private may reveal new possibilities for relating to and with these media. Rather than flatly blame media as an apparently new cause of harm, it is essential to reveal media’s historical and political conditions, only in this way can we better assess its possibilities and limits.

I argue that the figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Stranger Things* (2016-) can be read as both a metaphor and model for media. The mother exhibits, what I call, active-passivity, which means that she does not amputate herself from her media use and its implications, but rather provides oversight and intervenes when necessary. I draw upon the work of media scholar Marshall McLuhan in order to read the figure of the mother as a cool medium that demonstrates and invites a high level of involvement. The figure of the mother’s method of media use is affirmed by the film and offered as not only a mode of media use but also a mode of politicization. In our present moment, we are constantly technologically extended into the world with our networked media. I contend that *Stranger Things* returns to the 1980s to reveal that even while using cool media, what is important is *how* one uses that media. I utilize the work of Svetlana Boym in my argument that not only can we learn something from media that is nostalgic, but we can learn something about our relationship with media through nostalgia.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

In an article published in *The Atlantic* in 2017, Jean Twenge advises teens to “put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen.”<sup>1</sup> She cites a survey called “Monitoring the Future”, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, that surveyed high school students since 1975. According to Twenge, “the results could not be clearer: Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.”<sup>2</sup> This article, as well as others with titles like “Smartphones are killing us – and destroying public life,” exhibit anxieties surrounding our use of electronic and networked media and how it affects our relationship with the world. Twenge asserts that social media makes teens feel lonelier and more disconnected, while others like Henry Grabar fear that we are so absorbed in our personal technologies that we no longer have public life.<sup>3</sup>

Part of this engrossing networked media is the streaming service *Netflix*, which has produced shows such as *Stranger Things* (2016-), created by The Duffer Brothers. Streaming services have allowed us to now binge-watch television series from any device – our smartphones, iPads, laptops, or smart TVs – and from anywhere at any time. Grabar suggests, “Essentially, smartphone users in public operate under the illusion that they are in private.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

<sup>2</sup> Twenge.

<sup>3</sup> Grabar, “Smartphones Are Killing Us — and Destroying Public Life.”

<sup>4</sup> Grabar.

Smartphone users are constantly looking down at their phone while sitting at a café, walking on the street, or riding on the bus. For Grabar, *Netflix* and *Stranger Things* would be part of the problem, for giving these smartphone users endless content to watch while in public.

*Stranger Things* is interesting in this context as it returns to an era of seemingly less electronic mediation. The first season of *Stranger Things* is set in the early 1980s. The story follows Joyce Byers, whose son Will has disappeared, and Will's friends Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, and Lucas Sinclair, as they try to rescue him from a strange netherworld called the Upside Down. Along the way, they meet and get help from a young girl named Eleven who is able to move objects with her mind as well as find and connect with people at a distance. In the second season of *Stranger Things*, Will is no longer physically in the Upside Down but he is still able to see it from time to time and often has trouble keeping the two separated. During one of the times that reality and the Upside Down are bleeding together for Will, he encounters a "Shadow Monster" that then extends its tentacles into Will.

At first glance, it would seem that *Stranger Things* plays out contemporary fears and anxieties surrounding networked media. The show depicts the group of young boys playing board games and outside riding their bikes – activities preferable to parents worried about their children having too much "screen time." However, it also uncovers, mainly through the figure of the mother, the ways in which media can bring about collectivity. Joyce uses electric light, telephones, and Eleven (a sort of medium herself) in order to communicate with Will at a distance while he is in the Upside Down. Through the Shadow Monster in the second season, the show reveals our current method of relating with media, which has blurred conceptions of public and private space as Grabar has suggested.

Joyce's communication through electronic media with her child that has been taken to another realm that seems supernatural as well as related to technology, necessitates a look back to *Poltergeist* (1982). Not only is *Poltergeist* a film that was released during the era in which *Stranger Things* is set, but it also tells a similar story. *Poltergeist*, directed by Tobe Hooper and produced by Steven Spielberg, depicts an average family, the Freelings, living in the suburbs. In the beginning, the Freeling family seem to be a cookie-cutter version of the 1980s American family: Steve, who works in real estate has some friends over to watch football, while Diane, a stay at home mom, cleans up around the house. However, we later learn that Steve and Diane still smoke marijuana and Diane was sixteen when she had their eldest daughter, Dana. Not to mention, the youngest daughter of the family, Carol Anne, communicates with ghosts through the television before being taken to another realm. We are made to feel that the father of the family is rather passive or impotent, as our first introduction to him has him sleeping in a recliner in front of the television. Carol Anne's disappearance seems to be blamed on the television and Steve's passiveness when, at the end of the film, Steve places the television set outside of their home. This would suggest that Steve has "saved" the family from any further threat from the television and alludes to the fact that people in the 1980s were also concerned about the effect of electronic media on everyone, but on children in particular. Yet, through focuses on the figure of the mother, it becomes evident that his real problem, which the film links to patriarchal neoliberalism more broadly, is his inability to recognize the entanglement of public and private spaces, that neoliberalism also misrecognizes.

Our contemporary fears, expressed above by Twenge, echo anxieties in the 1980s about the effect that television had on children, especially when coupled with conceptions of mothers working outside the home and higher divorce rates. Marie Winn, in an article titled "The Loss of

Childhood” published in *The New York Times* in 1983, fears that children are being treated like adults too early. She writes:

The new freedom and openness of the 1960’s and 1970’s allowed programs to grow more violent and sexually explicit – more adult, as they say. But soon parents made a troubling discovery: It was not easy to keep these programs out of the reach of their children; television was too hard to control. Parents consequently began to abandon some of their former protection of children – if only to prepare them to some degree for that they were bound to see on television anyway.<sup>5</sup>

She links her fear of children growing up too fast with changes in television programming and parental supervision. Additionally, she blames mothers who fought for equal rights during second wave feminism for giving their children too much independence. She writes: “As women became less emotionally dependent upon their husbands, they began, perhaps unconsciously at first, to encourage their children to be independent and assertive. It was as if mothers could not challenge an unequal relationship with their husbands and still demand subservience or deference from their kids. It didn't seem fair.”<sup>6</sup> Though it may have been unintentional, what Winn seems to actually be critiquing was not the form of television itself, nor mothers who work outside the home; instead she draws out concerns about the content of television programming and hands-off caretaking.

Moreover, Winn’s article reveals that contemporary fears about the effect electronic media has on us and our children is anything but new. Therefore, reminiscing about the “good ole days” and wanting to go back would not actually solve the problem. However, looking back to a time when there was also anxiety about electronic media and the shifting field of public and private may reveal new possibilities for relating to and with these media. Rather than flatly blame media as an apparently new cause of harm, it is essential to reveal media’s historical and

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<sup>5</sup> Winn, “THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD.”

<sup>6</sup> Winn.

political conditions, only in this way can we better assess its possibilities and limits.

Additionally, in doing so, we may expose a more pressing problem like the hands-off approach of caretaking exhibited by the father in *Poltergeist* and neoliberal patriarchy more generally.

Part of the problematic relationality of the father is his inability to properly recognize the entanglement of public and private spheres. The use of the words “public” and “private” has a long and contradictory history. Raymond Williams, in his book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* notes that private once meant “withdrawal” and “seclusion” but then came to mean “independence” and “intimacy.”<sup>7</sup> For Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is a space of discourse in which the needs of the people are discussed.<sup>8</sup> Newspapers and cafés were part of this public sphere.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, as Deborah Rotman points out, “under the cult of domesticity, the separation of gender roles was often inextricably linked with the separation of public and private spaces.”<sup>10</sup> For this project, the two major oppositions of public and private that are of my main concern are the business sphere compared to the domestic sphere and the government compared to everything else, including individuals and businesses. I argue that neoliberalism appears to try to separate public and private but actually collapses the distinction between the two.

During the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, there was a move towards deregulation and privatization, which affected many industries including media and real-estate. This put more power in the hands of media corporations rather than being subjected to oversight by the government and the FCC. Additionally, this deregulation allowed banks to give riskier

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, 242.

<sup>8</sup> Seiler, “Human Communication in the Critical Theory Tradition.”

<sup>9</sup> Soules, “Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere.”

<sup>10</sup> Rotman, “Separate Spheres?,” 666.

loans and increase speculative real estate lending. I argue that the government's devolution of responsibility to its citizens is problematic and points to its hands-off approach of caretaking.

I link neoliberal patriarchy to the father in *Poltergeist* who also not only demonstrates a hands-off approach but exculpates himself from his responsibilities. This self-exculpation is also exhibited in his media use in which – in Marshall McLuhan's terms – he amputates himself from the extension that the media allows.<sup>11</sup> This amputation is an active choice to remove oneself from responsibility and reveals, what I have termed, the father's passive-activity. This form of passivity is related to one definition of the word "oversight," which can mean "a mistake made because someone forgets or fails to notice something." I link this to the father because due to his amputation mistakes are made and things go unnoticed. The father seeks control and presence but without any responsibility. This is similar to neoliberal government that demands and promotes masculinity, while taking a laissez-faire approach.

The figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* is important given this context because she is able to responsibly navigate the entanglement of public and private spaces, which allows her to reveal an alternative mode of relating at a distance. The mother exhibits, what I call, active-passivity, which means that she does not amputate herself from her media use and its implications, but rather provides oversight and intervenes when necessary. The mother's passiveness is a perceptive waiting that I link to the other definition of oversight: "watchful and responsible care."<sup>12</sup> The figure of the mother's method of media use is affirmed by the film and offered as not only a mode of media use but also a mode of politicization.

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<sup>11</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 37.

<sup>12</sup> "Definition of Oversight."

In reading the mother as a figure for cool media, I utilize the different functions that figures have as well as draw upon the work of media scholar Marshall McLuhan. As a figure, the mother is both a metaphor as well as a model for media. She reveals a problematic form of media use while redeeming cool media as a force for collectivity. As a model for media use, she not only demonstrates the potentials of being an active-passive media user but also the possibilities of this method being used as a mode of politicization either in the 1980s or in our present moment. McLuhan argues that there are two types of media: cool media and hot media. He posits that cool media, like the television, involves a high level of participation from the audience due to its low resolution.<sup>13</sup> As a figure, the mother not only exhibits a high level of participation with her media use, but also requires this high level of participation and involvement from the audience.

In our present moment, we are constantly technologically extended into the world with our networked media. We have watches on our arms that connect us to our smartphones that connect us to other smartphones all over the world. This forcefully brings together public and private and work and domestic life. In appearance, we are all cool moms now. However, the promise of the figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* has not been realized and I argue that by returning to the 1980s once again, we can determine why. Additionally, by returning to the 1980s from our present context, we can look at passive-active neoliberalism in a new light since we now know the consequences of many of the acts of deregulation and privatization. Some argue that the causes of the recent Great Recession began during the Reagan era.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Krugman, "Opinion | Reagan Did It."

I contend that *Stranger Things* returns to the 1980s to reveal and redeem the cool mom mode of relating to and with media. While still critiquing the passive-activity of patriarchal neoliberalism, it cautions against extension as an expression of possession or control through Dr. Brenner and the Shadow Monster's use of cool media. It emphasizes that even while using cool media, what is important is *how* one uses that media. The show is full of references to movies from the 1980s like *Ghostbusters* (1984), *E.T.* (1982), and even *Poltergeist* – there is a flashback in the first episode of the first season in which Joyce presents Will with tickets to go see *Poltergeist* together – and some have accused the show of being flatly nostalgic.<sup>15</sup> However, I argue that not only can we learn something from media that is nostalgic, but we can learn something about our relationship with media through nostalgia.

I draw upon the work of Svetlana Boym, in order to determine if nostalgic media is harmful or productive, and what we can learn from it. Boym argues that there are two types of nostalgia: reflective and restorative. Restorative nostalgia focuses on returning to a home that probably never existed in the first place. However, reflective nostalgia focuses on the longing aspect on nostalgia and privileges instability and doubt, rather than certainty and control. I link the aims of reflective nostalgia to the productive ways that we can still use cool media today but caution against cool media that is used for control.

In my first chapter I look at the figure of the mother in *Poltergeist*, as both model and metaphor for media. In doing so, I uncover new possibilities for thinking about and relating to gender and media. I argue that the figure of the mother has active-passivity and recognizes her implicatedness in her media use. Her cool mode of relating at a distance is not only offered as a mode of spectatorship but also as a mode of politicization. This mode, necessarily, creates

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<sup>15</sup> Gilbey, “Stranger Things and It Share the Same Shallow Nostalgia”; Kunzelman, “‘Stranger Things’ Is Imprisoned by the Nostalgia That Inspired It.”

collectivity and an ethic of responsibility in the face of neoliberal privatization and the disintegration of the 1970s Women's Movement.

In my second chapter, I argue *Stranger Things* returns to the 1980s to revive the possibilities of cool media and active-passivity. However, it also reveals some of the possible dangers of cool media when it is used as a means of control. *Stranger Things* returns to the figure of the mother to explore the ways that neoliberal network society and work's intimacy have in a sense made us all like cool moms in appearance, but not in action. Through the nostalgic themes of *Stranger Things*, possibility is left for cool media use that focuses on collectivity, longing, and instability.

Ultimately, I affirm the figure of the mother's method of cool media use and its potential as a mode of politicization. By looking back from our present moment, the reflective possibilities of longing reveal how we still desire our media to be collectivizing and our government to have active-passivity. These possibilities include using social media for activist purposes like the #MeToo movement, as well as governmental programs that provide support and oversight rather than passive-activity.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### MOMS, METAPHORS, AND MODELS: ACTIVE-PASSIVITY IN *POLTERGEIST*

*Poltergeist* mysteriously begins with a black screen and the sound of the National Anthem. After the initial credits, the viewer is shown incredibly close up images of a television screen. The camera is so close to the television screen, that it is nearly impossible to make out what is being shown. Instead, we are asked to focus on the flickering pixels that seem to wave like a flag, and colors of red and white stick out and seem to form stripes. Finally, the camera zooms out and we are shown the iconic image of soldiers raising the flag on Iwo Jima. After the TV turns to static, we realize that we have just witnessed a patriotic sign-off, signaling the end of broadcasting for the night.

The picture that comes into focus on the television before it turns to static is Joe Rosenthal's *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* that was taken on February 23, 1945 following the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II. This is of special interest to me due to the fact that it is shown to the audience on a television in a film that is about networked mediation. It is also worth noting that the masculine, heroic, patriots lifting up the flag seem to be in contrast to the father of the family, Steve Freeling, in his reclined state. However, this picture has come to stand not only for patriotism, but also for political activism and critique. The photograph depicts six U.S. Marines raising the U.S. flag and according to an article written for the US Naval Institute News, it "is often cited as being the most reproduced photograph in history [and] it is probably the most

parodied image in the world.”<sup>16</sup> The image has been reproduced on everything from stamps and silver dollars to beer cans and album covers. In 1971, the cover of the book *The New Solider* by John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War resembles the iconic photograph. Since then, the image has been parodied for other political efforts like the 2008 *Time Magazine* cover which depicts soldiers raising a tree instead of a flag with the headline “How to Win The War on Global Warming.” By beginning this film with this photograph, the film reveals to the audience its interest in meetings of television and politics. Additionally, due to the photograph’s history of political activism and critique, I argue that rather than contrasting the perceived strong, masculine American government with the passive, impotent Steve, the film is actually pointing out how the two are not dissimilar.

After the film shows the image of Iwo Jima on the television, the TV turns to static and the camera zooms out to reveal the father of the Freeling family, Steve, asleep on the recliner. The family dog, E Buzz, takes a piece of food off Steve’s plate and goes upstairs to check on the rest of the family, as perhaps a protective father might do, and the camera follows. The film demonstrates how atomized this family is by showing them one by one, isolated in their beds. Husband and wife are not even sharing their bed. By having the dog check on the family instead of the father, the audience sees what the father in his reclined state is missing. For example, his teenage daughter, Dana, took junk food to bed, which is a precursor to her other activities that will go unnoticed by her father suggested by the appearance of hickeys on her neck. Carol Anne wakes up after the dog visits her and goes downstairs to talk to the spirits or “TV people” as she calls them.

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<sup>16</sup> US Naval Institute Staff, “Iwo Jima at 70.”

At first, it would seem that the film is suggesting that the problem of this family – and of the United States in general – is the dad’s impotence and passiveness mixed with suburban atomization and the influence of television. However, if we look to the mother figure, as I argue in my introduction, the problem becomes the collapse of public and private spheres. Rather than acknowledging their distinction and responsibly entangling them, neoliberal patriarchy appears to oppose public and private but actually makes the two indistinguishable from one another. The opposition of public and private can mean different things in different contexts, but the two major oppositions crucial to *Poltergeist* are the business sphere compared to the domestic sphere and the government compared to everything else, including individuals and businesses. The film expresses the shifting field of public and private and demonstrates the various ways that the domestic sphere and the business sphere are bound up in each other. For example, the father works for the company that builds and sells the homes that the Freelings also live in. Yet, by beginning the film with the National Anthem and the image of Iwo Jima, the film expresses its concern about the state devolving its responsibilities to the private sector. By showing the image of the passive father in his suburban home, the film shows the audience their fears that fathers are becoming weak and hands-off and by playing the National Anthem, it reveals the connection between the two. The Reagan administration is not different than Steve because it is masculine, like Hollywood’s action heroes, but rather is the same because it is also hands-off. I contend that through the figure of the mother, as both model and metaphor for media, the film affirms her active-passivity over the father’s (and the Reagan administration’s) passive-activity. This passive-activity in the Reagan administration often came in the form of deregulation, in which the administration makes an active decision to take a more passive role.

The 1980s saw increasing privatization and deregulation, in general, but with media in particular as well. Media scholar Jennifer Holt, in her book *Empires of Entertainment*, argues, “One of the more profound implications of deregulation from 1980 to 1996 was the convergence of media industries.”<sup>17</sup> Under the Reagan administration, laws and regulations were dramatically altered in order to place more power in the hands of media licensees rather than the FCC. Holt writes: “The unchecked corporate power that spread across industrial lines created a media environment that was beneficial to private, not public interests.”<sup>18</sup> This decrease in governmental oversight of media caused anxieties from the 1950s about the effect television had on family life to return and intensify. The Museum of Broadcast Communications writes: “Deregulatory proponents do not perceive station licensees as ‘public trustees’ of the public airwaves required to provide a wide variety of services to many different listening groups.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, deregulatory proponents believe that media companies should be thought of as private companies that are not beholden to government control over the information given to the public and that the government should not be held responsible for the programming. However, it also means that the government no longer enforces legislation like the Fairness Doctrine, which was dissolved in the late 1980s but was put in place so that the public would be given the whole picture on controversial issues, disallowing broadcast stations to put out biased content.<sup>20</sup>

While less government control of the media can leave room for more freedom and difference, that is often not the case, and ignoring the intertwining of the public and private has serious consequences. For example, the deregulation of children’s media allowed companies

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<sup>17</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Holt, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Sterling, “The Museum of Broadcast Communications - Encyclopedia of Television - Deregulation.”

<sup>20</sup> Limburg, “The Museum of Broadcast Communications - Encyclopedia of Television - Fairness Doctrine.”

to create advertisements for toys disguised as television programs.<sup>21</sup> Heather Hendershot points out that critics of product-based programming, “argue that toy companies use toys and their television tie-ins to brainwash children: first, the TV program encourages children to coerce their parents to buy them toys, and second, the show ‘programs’ children to play in certain ways with these new toys.”<sup>22</sup> It is the way that shows can potentially “program” children into thinking a certain way that concerns me, and Hendershot lays out some of the consequences of these programs. She points out that product-based cartoons generally fall into three categories: “muscled superheroes, mechanical transformers, and nurturing caretakers.”<sup>23</sup> These gendered television shows dictate to their child audiences that society expects boys to be hyper masculine like *He-Man* and girls to be maternal and nurturing. In fact, Hendershot argues that “characters for girls may have strength of resolve, but they do not have muscles and rarely change form. Rather, as static caretakers, they help bring about change in others.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, television programming for girls attempts to produce women whose self-worth lies in her success in motherhood. Additionally, Hendershot points to shows like *Strawberry Shortcake* that “narrativize eating disorders by showing characters who enjoy the appearance and smell of food without actually eating it.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, television programming after deregulation did not produce more freedom and difference but actually promoted singular categories for boys and girls to fit in to while benefiting the corporations who make both the shows and the toys. This media deregulation was made possible by the FCC chairman at the time, Mark Fowler, who was appointed by Reagan. Hendershot cites a speech by Fowler in which he criticizes past chairs of

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<sup>21</sup> Rhoads, “Exploiting Children One Commercial at a Time.”

<sup>22</sup> Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Hendershot, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Hendershot, 98.

<sup>25</sup> Hendershot, 116.

the FCC for being too regulatory, and she gets at the contradictory nature of neoliberal patriarchy when she writes, “Taking an authoritarian tone, Fowler paternalistically rejected paternalistic regulation.”<sup>26</sup> Her description reveals the ways that masculinity was not the problem – and thus shows like *He-Man*, not the solution – but rather the hands-off approach of the father and the government.

During the 1980s, anxiety and uncertainty about the shifting field of public and private proliferated in part due to the after effects of second-wave feminism and the recession of the early 1980s. The Equal Rights Amendment failed to become ratified in 1982, and this is often considered to be the end of second-wave feminism and furthered the fracturing of feminist movements.<sup>27</sup> What once thrived on the joining of public and private spheres through consciousness raising, now became focused on differences and one’s private individual identity. Identity politics, while in many ways preferable to the often naturalizing or monolithic conceptions of gender in second-wave feminism, does itself sit uncomfortably close, in some ways, to privatization. Additionally, the recession of the early 1980s saw the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression and changes in regulation like the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, which allowed for an increase in speculative real estate lending.<sup>28</sup> The high unemployment rates coupled with the backlash following second-wave feminism caused a push for women to be more situated in the domestic sphere rather than the business sector.

The figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* is important in this context because her facility with responsibly navigating the entanglement of public and private spaces allows her to reveal,

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<sup>26</sup> Hendershot, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> Sablik, “Recession of 1981–82”; Freund et al., “Commercial Real Estate and the Banking Crises of the 1980s and Early 1990s,” 137.

through her contrast with the father, a problematic form of media use and politicizing as well as model an alternative approach. As a metaphor, the figure of the mother reveals media's capacity for collectivity and the importance of oversight. As a model, she can provide a possible method for politicizing the shifting field of public and private. The mother demonstrates, what I call, active-passivity which means that she recognizes her implicatedness in her media use and has power to create action not only in spite of a perceived passiveness, but in fact, because of it. I return to the fact that this film that was released during a time when the field of public and private was being reorganized in order to uncover a desire for active-passivity from mothers, fathers, media users, activists, and the government. This active-passivity acknowledges its implicatedness and responsibility and is a mix between sight (or oversight) and action, rather than the passive-activity that I argue is exhibited by the father of the Freeling family and speaks to larger concerns about broader patriarchal neoliberal impulses.

My reading of the figure of the mother fills a gap in the research, as most scholars who examine this film, or familial horror in this time period in general, tend to focus primarily on the father. Specifically, scholars focus on masculinity and femininity through transformations of the father or monstrous representations of motherhood, understood in light of fatherhood. In doing so, however, the mother's significance in *Poltergeist* has been overlooked. Previous readings of the film do not reckon with the mother's ability to traverse perceived separations of public and private through media and through television in particular.

I develop my reading of the mother in *Poltergeist*, drawing upon Vivian Sobchack's and Amy Rust's use of figures and Marshall McLuhan's work on cool media, in order to describe the different functions the figure of the mother has for media: metaphor and model. As a metaphor for media the figure of the mother has the capacity to: "coalesce, condense, embody, enact, and

transform the trouble in the text, the narrative problematic.”<sup>29</sup> By focusing on the figure of the mother in this film, rather than the father, it becomes clear that the problem of this home is one’s relationship to public and private spaces. As a model, the figure of the mother demonstrates figures’ ability to make meaning both for the sociohistorical context of the film as well as stretching out and making meaning for the future. Rust writes: “[Figures] mediate space *and* time, retaining unfulfilled pasts (what *was*) and protending unpredictable futures (what *will be*). . . . [Figures] perhaps reveal and redeem realities that otherwise escape human historical consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> I argue that the figure of the mother points to the limits and possibilities of politicizing the shifting field of public and private and also reveals new meanings about our current relationship with media and public and private spaces. I mobilize the work of media scholar Marshall McLuhan by reading the figure of the mother as a cool medium. McLuhan theorizes that cool media is of low definition and thus requires a high level of participation on the part of the media user.<sup>31</sup> Cool media has the ability to extend one’s senses out into the world, and it is necessary for the media user to recognize this extension rather than amputate themselves from any responsibility to the outside world.<sup>32</sup> On why he chose the word “cool,” McLuhan writes: “It indicates a kind of commitment and participation in situations that involves all of one’s faculties.”<sup>33</sup> This is, in part, why I chose to call the figure of the mother, a cool mom, since she does act and participate in situations that she has the ability to, compared to the father (and the Reagan administration) that takes a more hands-off, laissez-faire approach.

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<sup>29</sup> Sobchack, “Bringing It All Back Home,” 147.

<sup>30</sup> Rust, “Introduction: The Technology of Film Violence, or, Figuring the Sense in Sensation,” 12.

<sup>31</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> McLuhan, 6.

<sup>33</sup> McLuhan, 8.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on the mother as a metaphor for media, in doing so, I uncover new possibilities for thinking about and relating to gender and media. I argue that the figure of the mother has active-passivity and, by extension, so does media. In the second section, I emphasize the figure of the mother as a model for media users. The figure of the mother responsibly navigates the entanglement of public and private while maintaining an understanding of her responsibility to both spheres. This cool mode of relating at a distance is offered as a method of politicizing the shifting field of public and private and calls for more participation and active-passive governmental oversight rather than the neoliberal passive-activity.

### **Mom As a Metaphor for Media**

Near the beginning of the film, a morning in the Freeling household is depicted in which Diane makes breakfast for the children and tries to stop them from fighting with each other. After they finish breakfast, we see Diane watching Dana through the window in the kitchen. Dana must pass by the construction workers that are beginning to dig up the ground for a pool. The construction workers begin harassing Dana, making kissing gestures at her and telling her that they love her. The film cuts back to inside the kitchen from behind Diane, demonstrating that Diane can see what is happening and can step in at any moment but is letting the situation play out to see how Dana will handle it on her own. This passivity, Diane exhibits, is not the typical, regressive, way that women are normally coded. Passiveness is conventionally defined by submissive accepting of whatever happens without an active response. The passiveness that Diane models is one of active waiting, she is ready to respond at any moment.

As I mentioned in my introduction, I want to link this form of passiveness to one definition of the word oversight, which can mean a “watchful and responsible care.”<sup>34</sup> The father Steve, however, in his passivity demonstrates the other meaning of oversight: “a mistake made because someone forgets or fails to notice something” earlier in this scene in which he tangles the phone cord and his tie while trying to get ready and talk on the phone at the same time.<sup>35</sup> Diane’s form of oversight helps define what I mean by active-passivity, whereas Steve’s is one of passive-activity.

The film critiques this neoliberal passive-active form of oversight through the scene in which Steve and his neighbor fight over which channel to play. While watching a football game with his friends, Steve’s television suddenly changes channels to *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*. Steve walks outside to his fence that, ineffectually, tries to separate his house from his neighbor’s. His neighbor has the same model of television as the Freelings, so their remotes change the channels of both the televisions. The two fathers stand on either side of their fence and helplessly fight to keep the other from having control over their TV, or fight to keep the public separate from the private. The fathers’ passivity is foregrounded over the activity of fighting because they are not actually accomplishing anything. Similarly, despite promoting masculinity assertiveness, the Reagan administration often devolved its responsibility to the citizens through deregulation and policies that allowed for more privatization and speculative real-estate lending. As Jennifer Holt points out, “It is important to understand deregulation in the Reagan era not as the mere absence of regulation but instead as the presence of a politicized and carefully crafted government stance of support for the ‘free market.’”<sup>36</sup> In other words, rather

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<sup>34</sup> “Definition of Oversight.”

<sup>35</sup> “Definition of Oversight.”

<sup>36</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 11.

than accidentally being passive, the Reagan administration made a choice to do nothing when they had the ability to do something. This is in contrast to the active-passivity figured by the mother that actively participates in situations in which she has the capacity to make a difference.

As a figure for media, Diane tries to disrupt Steve's form of oversight and passivity. Once he returns home from work she runs outside to meet him and then pulls him inside to show him what the "TV people" have been doing in the kitchen. She encourages him, as a viewer, to have an open mind and takes off his sunglasses in order to try to enhance his perceptive abilities and connect him with this other side of nature. She models, for Steve and for the film audience, how to react to something outside the home extending itself into their kitchen. After Steve sees Carol Anne pulled across the kitchen, Steve sits on the ground with his back against the wall. The film shows him in a medium close up, decentered in the frame. His jaw is slack and he seems incapable of reacting. By contrast, Diane jumps up and down when the chair gets pulled across the kitchen and then after Carol Anne is pulled, Diane tries to explain to Steve what it feels like, implying that Diane has also already been pulled across the kitchen. Diane is shown crouching on the ground in more of a wide shot that also shows Carol Anne in the background. Diane describes the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the encounter. She says that it is as if there is no air but that also she is able to breathe. Additionally, she describes it as a tickling that pulls you, but she actively allows this pulling to move her across the room.

This demonstrates the ways in which as a medium, in the Spiritualist sense, she allows something to take over control of her body. She actively allows the extension of the spirit into her body and passively lets it pull her across the room. Additionally, through her attempt to engage Steve, it also figures her as medium in McLuhan's sense in that she is trying to facilitate that extension of his sensorium. Since she is only able to describe what she is feeling, she is not

able to make him feel that way himself, Steve's experience is one of low definition and requires a high level of participation on his part since he must actively try to imagine the way she was feeling. In this way, not only is she acting as a medium for his experience, but she is also modeling for him how to relate at a distance like she has. Her figuration as media reveals the way that since cool media also has active-passivity, it could help in disrupting the neoliberal passive-activity.

My definition of active-passivity also comes from the way that the stay-at-home mother's work and leisure time are bound up in one another and this is often demonstrated through the mother's relationship to the television. Lynn Spigel theorizes that with the installation of TVs into suburban homes in the 1950s, the mother's work and leisure life became increasingly bound up in one another. The 1980s saw a regression to 1950s ideals, and anxieties about the television and mothers returned and intensified. One way the mother's work and leisure life became inextricable was that television programming was catered to stay-at-home moms working around the house and watching television at the same time.<sup>37</sup> Spigel points out that, "for the housewife, television was not represented as a passive activity; rather, it was incorporated into a pattern of everyday life where work is never done."<sup>38</sup> The presence of a small television in the kitchen of the Freeling home reveals *Poltergeist's* engagement with the idea that 1980s housewives should be like 1950s housewives. However, I also argue that the film is transvaluing this entanglement of work and leisure. Rather than affirming the 1950s housewife, I believe the film is affirming the mother's role in both the workplace and the home. Diane exhibits her ease with navigating the combination of her work and leisure time after Carol Anne first talks to the "TV People."

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<sup>37</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Spigel, 98.

While relaxing in their bedroom, Diane is shown sitting up in their bed reading a book on psychology and smoking marijuana, trying to come up with an explanation for this strange occurrence. Meanwhile, Steve is laying on his stomach and rolling a joint. As a stay at home mother, Diane's "work" is taking care of the children. So even while she is relaxing and smoking marijuana, she is reading a book on psychology and wondering if perhaps Carol Anne was sleep walking. Her facility with switching between work and leisure while in the domestic sphere reveals to the audience how work, home life, and leisure time are always already muddled together.

As a metaphor for media, the figure of the mother reveals the active-passivity of cool media and offers it as an alternative to the passive-activity of the neoliberal patriarchy of the period. The television is not just a piece of furniture, and mothers are not just unresisting and weak. Therefore, I argue for transvaluing passivity, and in doing so, I draw upon media scholar Jeffrey Sconce's description of mediums and the Spiritualist movement, which is of special importance to me since there is an actual medium, Tangina, in *Poltergeist*. He writes: "Spiritualism empowered women to speak out in public, often about very controversial issues facing the nation, but only because all understood that the women were not the ones actually speaking. ... Women could thus only assume such an 'active' role in Spiritualist thought and practice through their fundamentally 'passive' natures."<sup>39</sup> While the association of passivity with femininity has regressive connotations, the women in this film are active not in spite of a perceived passiveness, but in fact, because of it. Rather than passivity meaning submissiveness or weakness, the film redefines passivity as a perceptive waiting. This understanding of the mother's perceptive-waiting is important for valuing a mother's place both inside and outside the

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<sup>39</sup> Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 49.

home as well as demonstrates how media is future-oriented and can help its users be more progressive.

Active-passivity, is not only figured through Diane and the television, but also through the other women in the film, thus *Poltergeist* further links masculinity with the passive-activity of the early 1980s neoliberalism. The feminine active-passivity is especially on display in the scenes in which the parapsychologist Dr. Lesh, the mother, and the spiritualist medium, Tangina, are together. When Tangina arrives at the Freeling home, her expertise is foregrounded. A long shot is used in order to show the entire staircase as well as the full bodies of the parapsychologist, her cameraman, Tangina, Steve and Diane. Dr. Lesh's cameraman follows Tangina with his camera, modeling how the spectator should be focusing on her, but also demonstrating how the others have stepped back in order to foreground her expertise in this moment. After she goes up the stairs, Steve looks for another expert to try to explain what Tangina is doing and looks at Dr. Lesh. Perhaps, with her relationship to masculine science and logic, he feels more comfortable taking her advice. Later, when Diane is speaking with Carol Anne, she is much closer to the camera with Dr. Lesh and Tangina in the background, looking at Diane. While Tangina continues to give commands to Diane about what to say to Carol Anne, Diane's position as Carol Anne's mother is foregrounded as the expert in this scene. The three women demonstrate active-passivity in that they offer their expertise when necessary but step back and look to others when they believe someone else may be more adept. This is in contrast to the laissez-faire approach of Reagan's administration which ignores one's responsibility and commitment in favor of doing nothing and letting corporations act in their own private interests.

The father, Steve, figures this neoliberal passive-activity in that his activity is actually just more passivity. My earlier description of the scene with Steve, his neighbor, and the remote

is an example of this passivity-activity. I discovered that my reading of Steve does not fit into the molds created by scholars working on gender and genre during this time period. Susan Jeffords in her book, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, argues that fathers in action films in the 1980s undergo an increased masculinization as a result of the perceived weakness of President Jimmy Carter combined with President Ronald Reagan's portrayal and promotion of masculine qualities like toughness and assertiveness. However, while *Poltergeist* did come out in the 1980s and does point to a decreased masculinity of the father, I do not think the film is suggesting that an increase in masculinity is the answer. While trying to communicate with Carol Anne, Steve yells at Carol Anne and threatens to spank her in order to persuade her to respond. This threat of spanking may be read as an increase in masculinity and activity; however, he only yelled at Carol Anne because the medium Tangina ordered him to do so. Therefore, his apparent activity is actually just more passivity. Thus, the film critiques the Reagan era's devolution of public responsibility into private hands while nevertheless passively structuring social, media, and gendered relations.

Additionally, Steve complies with Tangina's order of what to say, despite announcing that since he has never spanked the children, it goes against his parenting practices. Rather than recognizing and using his expertise as Carol Anne's father, he defaults to Tangina, who while an expert at communicating with the dead, is not an expert at communicating specifically with Carol Anne. This is in accordance with neoliberal patriarchy's failed mode of media communication, in which the deregulation allowed "media industries to merge and converge on ... an unprecedented scale."<sup>40</sup> Horizontal integration in the media industry allowed for children's programming to be used as a way to market toys, as I mentioned earlier. Such programming

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<sup>40</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 11.

promoted singularizing roles for both girls and boys and unhealthy habits, including eating disorders.<sup>41</sup>

While Jeffords argues that men become more masculine in action films, Carol Clover argues that men open up to more femininity in horror films. In Clover's groundbreaking book on gender in the horror film, she argues that men in horror films undergo a metaphorical "opening up" to femininity which mirrors the literal, grotesque, opening up of the female characters. However, I argue that Steve remains relatively unchanged at the film's end. He is not even present during the final showdown with the spirits. He shows up at the end and drives the getaway car, and he can barely do that. He is unable to get his keys out of his pocket and then has trouble starting the car, both suggesting his sustained impotence rather than a transformation to either masculinity or femininity.

*E.T.* was released one week after *Poltergeist* and was the film that Steven Spielberg was directing that prevented him from officially directing *Poltergeist*; instead, he was a producer but his style and influence is evident. *E.T.* also reveals this period's fascination and anxiety surrounding shifting gender relations and the entanglement of public and private spaces. The father in *E.T.* is absent, and therefore, the mother has adopted both roles. Her costumes are one way of demonstrating this combination of masculinity and femininity. In the scene in which Eliot first finds E.T., she is shown in a silky pink robe and her passivity is showcased when her older son and his friends ignore her commands to not order pizza or pick up knives. Later, she is shown wearing a suit jacket over a white button-down with a high neck after she has returned home from working and while she is investigating the noises coming from Eliot's room. This active investigating is thus associated with work and masculinity. While these separations of

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<sup>41</sup> Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors*, 116.

activity and passivity are more regressive than the entanglement the mother in *Poltergeist* demonstrates, I believe it points to way that the field between masculinity and femininity, as well as activity and passivity, was not settled but rather up for grabs. The figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* reveals an alternative to criticizing men or women for either being too active or too passive and instead embraces active-passivity.

As a metaphor for media, the figure of the mother demonstrates how TV has active-passivity too. The television is not just a passive piece of furniture, it has agency in our lives. This agency may take the form of a dangerous entity, like the TV people in *Poltergeist*, but it also may be used to connect people. By connecting the spirits that haunt the house in the film to the TV, the anxiety about the dangerous aspects of television are exhibited. The tree outside of Robbie's room bursts through his window and pulls him outside. Carol Anne is taken by these spirits to another realm. Within this realm, the bad spirits appear to Carol Anne as a child despite being something more sinister. This displays fears about what kind of effect the programming children in being exposed to on TV due to the lack of governmental oversight.

The active-passivity of the television is affirmed as a force that despite, if not owing to, its dangers can bring the family together. After Carol Anne has been taken by the spirits, the Freeling family gathers around the hearth of the television playing static. Rather than isolated in their separate rooms and separate beds like they were in the opening of the film, the Freelings are all bundled close together waiting to hear if Carol Anne talks to them. The TV is figured as a uniting force, not only bringing together the spectators of Dr. Lesh and her team crowded in front of the TV while Diane talks to Carol Anne. But also, the TV unites the two realms and allows Diane to speak to Carol Anne. While we hear Carol Anne's voice, the camera zooms in on the TV playing static, demonstrating the extending of our senses.

The film, through its portrayal of the figure of the mother as a metaphor for cool media, affirms active-passivity. This active-passivity is offered as an alternative to pushing mothers into the domestic sphere and demanding fathers be more active. While the film may seem to comply with neoliberal patriarchy by embracing the mother as a private actor in a private domestic sphere using privatized media, the film's insistence upon her active-passivity reveals the political entanglements of public and private that through Steve's passive-activity we see the Reagan era denying. It allows the mother's space to be both in the home and at the office. As a cool medium, the TV has active-passivity because it actively extends one's senses but is also a passive object in the house. Through drawing together cool and hot media, the film also shows how media users should have active-passivity, which I will explore in more depth in the next section.

### **Modeling Active-Passivity and Relating at a Distance**

Near the end of the film, the Freeling's, with the help of Tangina and Dr. Lesh, rescue Carol Anne. Diane is to be the one that crosses over into the dimension in order to retrieve her daughter. In this scene, Diane's figuration as a media user, then as a political actor becomes evident. After Tangina throws two tennis balls through the entrance to the other dimension as a test, she invites Diane to come forward. The film shows Diane from behind and moves forward with her as she walks toward Tangina. Diane must literally reach out and connect with the medium / Tangina. Then Diane, while connected to a rope that Steve holds on to, extends herself into the other dimension. This dimension is the middle ground between the living and the dead, and thus a medium as well. Her extension into the medium is active-passive, as she walks towards the opening and yet is held by the rope. This method of engagement with the medium is also one highly dependent on others. Tangina coaches Diane through this process, Steve holds

onto one end of the rope, and Ryan and Dr. Lesh hold onto the other end which maintains Diane's connection to the living world, which neoliberal patriarchy disavows.

The figure of the mother, as a model for cool media, provides a method for relating to and with cool media. This method of relating at a distance is can be used as a mode of spectatorship as well as a mode of politicization against the media regime of neoliberal patriarchy. Similar to how the TV in *Poltergeist* allows the Freeling and company to see the spirits, this model allows other previously unnoticed elements, like the immoral practices of Steve's real estate company and Diane's power, to come to light. This can be used to bring forth concerns for underrepresented groups but it also brings the government's responsibility to have active-passive oversight for its citizens to light.

Through the horror in *Poltergeist*, the period's fear that women will not go back into the home but remain working outside the home comes to light. For Sigmund Freud in "The Uncanny," horror is the return of the repressed. He traces the meaning of the word uncanny through its German equivalent, "unheimlich," which he writes is the opposite of "heimlich." Since "heimlich" can mean familiar and known, one interpretation of the word "unheimlich" could be unfamiliar or unknown. However, Freud presses this further because he does not think that what is frightening about the uncanny is that it is simply unfamiliar. He notes another definition of "heimlich" which means belonging to the house or family or concealed from sight or withheld from others. For this definition, "unheimlich" does not mean the opposite of "heimlich," it actually means the same thing. He writes: the "uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression...the uncanny [is] something which ought to have

remained hidden but has come to light.”<sup>42</sup> This definition can refer to childhood fears and beliefs such as thinking that monsters live under your bed and toys come to life. In this film, these fears are realized for the children, the parents, and the audience. But not only are childhood fears a repressed that is returning but also what precedes and exceeds the constitution of the nuclear family and paternal authority and the film maps one onto the other.

Freud’s theory of the return of the repressed can help us interpret a scene near the end of the film when the clown attacks Robbie. The audience is made to anticipate this attack and the attack on the mother Diane. Robbie throws his jacket on top of the clown sitting in the chair, and the film cuts to close ups of all the clown’s body parts moving from being hit by the jacket, suggesting that perhaps this inanimate object has animus and exhibiting a lingering fear that mothers will not return to passivity after second wave feminism, they will remain active. The scene is also very quiet so the sound of the clown’s bells moving is very noticeable, preparing the audience for the upcoming shock. After Robbie gets back into bed, Carol Anne is shown moving the dislocated head from her doll back onto its body. As she closes her eyes and hugs the doll, it’s head turns and then falls off again, perhaps suggesting that these toys have a mind of their own. In this way, the film points to other forces that will not remain hemmed in like mothers who have branched out from the private home.

This fear of the repressed returning, reveals how tenuous and unstable the move back towards traditional gendered relations in the home is during this time. The film then cuts to the mother in the bathtub, relaxed and vulnerable. The camera is moving slowly to the left while she has her eyes closed. The movement can cause the viewer to feel that even though the Freulings believe “the house is clean” and free of ghosts, something is still unsettled. The steam coming off

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<sup>42</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241.

from the bath also looks similar to what we have seen the ghosts look like earlier in the film. The red lighting of the bathroom and the close up of the dog looking at something contributes to the feeling of anxiety on the part of the audience. These elements make the audience feel like they need to prepare for something but are unsure what they are preparing for since they have been led to believe that the ghosts have left the Freeling home. This state of preparation is akin to the traditional idea of a mother's intuition. In this way, the audience performs another facet of the mother's active-passivity.

The mother models her active-passivity through her relationship to the return of the repressed and unnoticed elements coming to light. The audience is asked to perform active-passivity as a spectator while waiting for an unknown element. Additionally, after second wave feminism, there was a push from mainstream Reagan America to move back to traditional gendered relations, looking to the perceived simpler times of the 1950s for inspiration. This film displays that while mainstream America may try to push women back into the home and return to traditional gendered relations, these other possibilities for women do not remain clamped down. Alternative possibilities for gender roles in the home appear in the form of the return of the repressed. Additionally, the film affirms not only the mother's active-passivity in the home, but also suggests it as a mode of spectatorship. As media users, we must affirm our active-passivity, which not only includes a state of preparation for horror films but also a recognition that we are implicated in what we are shown in the media and the media has implications in our lives.

The film jokes about the effect media and the violence has on children's lives by pointing to concerns about "ruining their eyes." Carol Anne is shown watching TV on the small TV in their kitchen while sitting very close to the screen. She is only watching the static on the screen,

and Diane states that she fears it will ruin her eyes, and changes the channel to some violent scene. This may be expressing an anxiety about the effect the increase in violent scenes being shown on TVs across the United States had on children's development. However, it also demonstrates that the mother is more concerned with the form of mediation rather than the content. The active-passivity of the cool mom Cool media requires active spectatorship due to its low definition. McLuhan writes: "In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the form of TV requires high audience involvement and makes amputating oneself from the issues and violences on the screen difficult. Therefore, the content of TV need not be the main concern. If media, media users, and media creators have active-passivity, then all would recognize their responsibility and implicatedness in what was being shown. For example, a media user would recognize their implicatedness through their desire for the violence in media.

The film's fascination and affirmation of cool media is interesting when one considers the film's own designation as hot media. According to McLuhan, film, because of its high definition, requires low audience participation.<sup>44</sup> This audience passivity is demonstrated by the "Spielberg Face" that the audience is asked to mimic in response to the sublime aesthetics of the New Hollywood Blockbuster.<sup>45</sup> Actors are shown in close-ups with an expression of childlike awe while often staring in to blinding lights, called "God Lights" by Spielberg.<sup>46</sup> This mode of spectatorship that is being allegorized for the viewers in the theater is one of passivity and open-

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<sup>43</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> McLuhan, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, 091. *The Spielberg Face*.

<sup>46</sup> Wasser, *Steven Spielberg's America*, 82.

mouthed wonder. I contend that *Poltergeist* attempts to teach its audience something about its relationship with cool media via the aesthetics of hot media. This synthesis combines the activity of cool media spectatorship with the passivity of hot media spectatorship, in order to affirm the birth of a new media user with active-passivity.

The film makes the birth of a new relationship to media quite literal through the scene in which Diane and Carol Anne return from the other realm. Diane and Carol Anne, covered in red goo, fall from the ceiling through an opening between the realms. Steve picks them up and puts them in the water in the bathtub, pleading with them to breathe like a doctor might try to coax a first breath out of a newborn. The fleshy red goo could be read as an abject representation of motherhood. Barbara Creed argues: “The horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, horror films, through their representations of monstrous or disgusting women, reaffirm the social order that subdues women in favor of men. So, this scene could be thought of as serving a reestablishment of active fathers who save passive mothers who faint. However, the mother was truly the one that saved Carol Anne by physically crossing into the other realm to retrieve her while Steve stayed back and held the rope to anchor them. Therefore, I argue that this birth scene is not a redrawing of boundaries but rather a rebirth of the mother that crystallizes her active-passivity.

Ultimately, a spectator with active-passivity perceptively waits for opportunities for action, demonstrated by the relationship of the three women and also by the mother’s intuition that something is awry. Additionally, the media user with active-passivity recognizes the entanglement of public and private and understands that by using media, their senses are

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<sup>47</sup> Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 46.

extended out into the world and the world is extended into them. With this understanding, an ethic of responsibility for what is being shown on the screen emerges.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the mode of spectatorship that has active-passivity and that is modeled by the figure of the mother, I posit, can be used as a mode of politicization. Activists, like feminists during second-wave feminism, can use this mode and the government should use the mode. This mode, necessarily, creates collectivity and an ethic of responsibility.

The same year *Poltergeist* was released, the Equal Rights Amendment failed to become ratified. This is often considered to be the end of second-wave feminism as efforts became more fractured and privatized, focusing on one's individual identity whereas the consciousness raising movement in the early 1970s "made the personal collective and political," or, in other words, recognized and capitalized on the entanglement of private and public.<sup>48</sup> While I do not think focusing on difference and drawing out certain problems that pertain to the individual is a bad thing, I wonder if in this process, the collectivity of entangling the public and private got left behind. By infusing our method of political contestation with lessons from the figure of the mother, not only would we be able to fully realize the potential of media for political activism, but also realize the potential of collectively embracing the entanglement of public and private and relating at a distance. Rather than conflating the public and private and losing individual difference, embracing the entanglement allows for those differences to stand and for those who are not directly affected to feel a responsibility to help the cause.

I argue that *Poltergeist* also demands this mode of politicization from our government. By opening the film with the National Anthem and the image of Iwo Jima, the film announces

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<sup>48</sup> Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 148.

that not only is the government part of the problems affecting the Freeling family but is, in fact, central to them. The government, through deregulation in 1980s, devolved its responsibility for its citizens to private media companies and banks. This allowed for increased real-estate speculative lending which ultimately led to the subprime mortgage crisis in 2007, contributing to the Great Recession. It also allowed for media companies to replace educational television for children with advertisements for toys. The mode of politicization modeled by the figure of the mother requires participation and responsibility, thereby disallowing the government to deny its obligation to its people. It also demands activity when it is possible. For example, the unemployment rate was incredibly high during the early 1980s, rather than allowing this to contribute to the push to get women out of the workforce and back into the domestic sphere, a government with active-passivity could use its position to create more jobs.

I return to this moment of a shifting field of public and private in order to uncover a different possibility of relating at a distance through the figure of the mother in *Poltergeist*. I believe the mode of politicization modeled by the figure of the mother can be used in our present time politically and through our networked media. Next, I will explore how *Stranger Things* also returns to this moment in the early 1980s in order to do something similar.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**LONGING FOR NEW MEDIA POSSIBILITIES: NOSTALGIA AND COLLECTIVITY**  
**IN *STRANGER THINGS***

The first episode of the first season of *Stranger Things* begins with the words “November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1983, Hawkins Indiana” on a mostly black screen with tiny stars in the background. The camera then pans down to a long shot of a building, which another set of text on the screen tells the viewer is the “Hawkins National Laboratory U.S. Department of Energy.” In a similar way that *Poltergeist* begins with the national anthem, *Stranger Things* begins with a shot of a national building and thus also announces that its problem is a national one. Additionally, the text on the screen offers the viewer a sense of comfort and stability in knowing where and when they are being placed. The show cuts to inside the building while the camera begins pushing forward. It is mostly dark inside the building save for some flickering lights. The flickering of the lights is reminiscent of the flickering pixels of the TV in *Poltergeist*, but now it is our medium that is flickering instead of the medium on the screen. Instead of moving further and further out like in *Poltergeist*, we push further and further in. The constant movement of the camera – either panning down or pushing in – begins to disrupt the stability that was initially offered from the text on the screen.

The audience’s comfort is then further disrupted when the door that the camera has been pushing into bursts open with a loud sound that coincides with the start of an alarm. The employee that emerges from the door starts running down the halls of the laboratory and the show begins cutting much more rapidly with the shots coming from a variety of angles. In most

of the shots, the camera either stays the same distance away from him or he gets closer to the camera. However, in one of the last shots of him running before he gets to the elevator, the camera pulls further away from him while he is also running away from the camera. This creates a disorienting feeling for the viewer in which the hallway the employee is in seems to stretch. He is taken by the monster. Then, the elevator doors shut like a television screen being shut off and the show cuts to the rhythmic stuttering of the sprinkler. This not only reminds us of the stuttering of the static at the end of broadcasting in *Poltergeist* but also lets the viewer know that we have moved to a domestic suburban place of well-watered green grasses. Once we cut inside the house, we see a close up of Mike Wheeler's face and hear him say that something is coming. We later learn that it's the Demogorgon in their Dungeons and Dragons game, however "the Demogorgon" is also the name that they later give to the actual monster that just took the laboratory employee. This transition serves to link the problems of the national laboratory to the domestic problems of the boys.

I contend that *Stranger Things* initially seems to exhibit contemporary fears about media and its influence on children by returning to yesteryear in which boys played board games with their friends instead of playing on an iPad or texting all day. Indeed, within the domestic space, the boys are shown playing Dungeons and Dragons, a game that involves imagination, high levels of participation (it took them weeks to prepare and ten hours to play), and no form of electronic media. However, it later goes on to show the collectivity, which media can foster and the Wheeler family seems to need. I argue that *Stranger Things* returns to the 1980s – and to *Poltergeist*, in particular – to reveal and redeem an alternative mode of relating to and with media through the figure of the mother. While still critiquing the passive-activity of patriarchal

neoliberalism, *Stranger Things* cautions against the use of cool media in a hot way. Even while using cool media, what is important is *how* one uses that media.

After the boys are told to stop playing the game by Mike's mom, we are shown the disjointedness of Mike's family, similar to the atomization of the Freeling family in *Poltergeist*. Mike was downstairs playing the game all day mostly unbeknownst to his mom, similar to how Eleven will begin living in the basement without Mike's parents' knowledge. The youngest of the family, Holly is already asleep. Nancy is upstairs talking on the phone and doesn't want anything to do with Mike's friend, Dustin. Meanwhile, Mike's father is trying to watch TV and is not paying attention to the rest of his family. This would seem to reinforce the initial idea that media is bad and atomizing, however I argue that is the *way* that they're using media that is the problem rather than the media use in general. After all, Mike's father is actually unable to get a clear picture on his television, which perhaps suggests that not only is he disconnected from his family, but also from networked media. After Will Byers is taken by the Demogorgon, his mother Joyce becomes a model for media use that is similar to the "cool mom" of *Poltergeist* and most of the other characters in *Stranger Things* adopt this mode of relating to and with media in order to rescue Will and defeat the Demogorgon.

Before determining what *Stranger Things* is revealing about our present moment, it is important to lay out what in our present moment occasions a look back to the early 1980s. Our media technology has changed greatly, not only are our televisions no longer low resolution but we also have them in more places than just the living room. *Poltergeist*, in fact, points to the beginnings of this shift towards more privatized media as not only is there a TV in their living room, but also one in the kitchen and the parent's bedroom. Additionally, in 1991, the World Wide Web was created, allowing for a revolution in the way that information was shared and

people were connected. In 1983, the first commercially available mobile phone was released but it was large and cost \$4000, so it was not easily accessible to the public. In the early 1990s, mobile phones with digital cellular technology emerged and so did text messaging and the ability to access and download media content. Now, we have mobile “smart” phones that have technology that allows for streaming media at faster and faster rates. With the ability to stream everywhere and at all times, our media content has become even more privatized. Netflix was created in 1997 as a DVD rental company, but in 2007, they began streaming content online and in 2013 they released their first original content. No longer do we need to sit in front of a television at eight o’clock on a Tuesday night in order to watch the same television program as everyone else in the United States. Media users can binge watch a Netflix or Hulu show that specifically interests them on their phone while riding on train in the middle of the day. We now consume media in an all-absorbing way as we watch episode after episode all in a row, while also in a more distracted manner as we are often doing other things or using other media at the same time. We are all like the figure of the cool mom now since we are constantly confronted with electronic mediation in every aspect of our lives.

Additionally, our current president’s cries to “make America great again” calls for a look back to what “greatness” he is referring to, especially considering the effect that Reagan-era deregulation continues to have on our lives. An article written for *The New York Times* in 2009 points to deregulation under Reagan, like the Garn-St. Germain Depository Institutions Act, as the starting point for the economic crisis that occurred in 2008 when the housing bubble burst.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the Trump administration has continued this spirit of deregulation, as it looks to pass legislation that would revise the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act, which .... An article from *The New York*

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<sup>49</sup> Krugman, “Opinion | Reagan Did It.”

*Times* published in January 2018 suggests that the new bill “would allow hundreds of smaller banks to avoid certain elements of federal oversight, including stress tests, which measure a bank’s ability to withstand a severe economic downturn.”<sup>50</sup> There has also been deregulation with respect to media with the recent repeal of the net neutrality rules by the FCC.<sup>51</sup> This repeal of the net neutrality rules seems to parallel the FCC’s dissolution of the Fairness Doctrine under Reagan.<sup>52</sup> This passive-active oversight of the Trump administration can reveal why we would desire a look back to a similar moment in order to reveal the unrealized possibility for active-passive oversight.

Our desire to look back through television series like *Stranger Things* may also suggest a desire to return to a simpler form of media that gave the appearance of distinguishing public from private. However, as I previously argued, neoliberal patriarchy was already conflating the two in the 1980s. Melissa Gregg and her book titled *Work’s Intimacy* helps me examine how our use of media technology has made the public and private spheres even less distinguishable from one another. Gregg details the effects that work has on our relationship with networked media and how networked media affects our relationship with work. She argues there has become a “presence bleed” between one’s personal and professional identities due to the ease and necessity of working from home caused by online technologies.<sup>53</sup> This presence bleed is especially problematic for mothers, since “for working mothers with childcare duties, online technology is there a seductive convenience.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, because our society is still organized around the idea that mothers belong in the domestic sphere, networked media has seemingly made some

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<sup>50</sup> Rappeport, “Democrats Add Momentum to G.O.P. Push to Loosen Banking Rules.”

<sup>51</sup> Fung, “The FCC Just Voted to Repeal Its Net Neutrality Rules, in a Sweeping Act of Deregulation.”

<sup>52</sup> Limburg, “The Museum of Broadcast Communications - Encyclopedia of Television - Fairness Doctrine.”

<sup>53</sup> Gregg, *Work’s Intimacy*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Gregg, 54.

matters – like staying home with a sick child – easier because the mother is able to just work from home.

In my first chapter I mostly only looked at the medium of the television. However, Joyce's communication with Will through lights and the telephone requires a deeper look at McLuhan's work. In his first chapter of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he uses the example of electric light to explain how the medium is the message. He writes: "The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the 'content' of a medium is always another medium."<sup>55</sup> In other words, the medium of electric light is a special cool medium, since it especially emphasizes the fact that the medium is the message. He counters arguments that would say that electric light is not a communication media because it does not have any "content" by suggesting that it is actually pure information. By having no content, it allows those who study it, to truly focus on the characteristics of the medium rather than its content.

As I explore more deeply in my first chapter, McLuhan argues that media are extensions of our senses and we must recognize them as such. He designates certain media as cool media and the television and the telephone are among examples that he gives of cool media. He writes, "telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. ... [O]n the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience."<sup>56</sup> Joyce's use of lights and the telephone to

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<sup>55</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> McLuhan, 23.

communicate with Will when he is in the Upside Down are methods of low definition and high participation on her part, as she is left having to fill in many blanks as well as extend herself emotionally through these apparatuses in order to try to connect with him.

Since *Stranger Things* is looking back to the 1980s from our present moment, I examine the nostalgia both surrounding *Stranger Things* as well as inside it in the hopes of uncovering something about our relationship to media. Scholars, such as Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz, have looked that the medium of television as a site of nostalgia through its themes as well as through its serialized nature.<sup>57</sup> They argue that “a nostalgic series is very often the object of its audience’s longing.”<sup>58</sup> However, I build off of this current work because I not only look at media as a site of nostalgia, but I look to nostalgia to uncover something about our relationship to media. In Svetlana Boym’s book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, she writes: “In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is no less a global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheaval.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, despite having technology that extends us all into the world and the world into us – seeming to create McLuhan’s ideal global village – we still long for continuity, community, and collectivity. I argue, this is because the promise of the cool mom from *Poltergeist* was not fulfilled. We do not recognize the potential of cool media and therefore use it in hot ways. For Boym, nostalgia can be harmful, but it can also be productive. By using the roots of the word (*nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing), she separates nostalgia into two types: restorative and reflective.<sup>60</sup> She

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<sup>57</sup> Niemeyer and Wentz, “Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series.”

<sup>58</sup> Niemeyer and Wentz, 130.

<sup>59</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XIV.

<sup>60</sup> Boym, XIII.

writes: “Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming.” In this sense, “[R]estorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.”<sup>61</sup> Some, such as Ryan Gilbey with the *NewStatesman* and Cameron Kunzelman with *Vice*, have critiqued *Stranger Things* for being plainly nostalgic, however with Boym’s distinction between the types of nostalgia, I read the show’s nostalgia differently to offer a more complex reading of its possibilities and limits.<sup>62</sup> Through the restorative nostalgia present in *Stranger Things*, it shows the dangers of using this cool media as means of control. Yet, through the reflective nostalgia and the focus on longing rather than control, I argue there is possibility left for our use of cool media to be collectivizing.

In my first section, I explore how *Stranger Things* returns to a mother character that is also a figure for media and revives the potential of active-passivity for media, media users, and government. Through Dr. Brenner, I argue that *Stranger Things* continues a critique of passive-activity and highlights the problem of amputation with cool media use that is prevalent in our present time. While in my first chapter I fully affirmed active-passivity and cool media, in the second section of this chapter, I reveal the possible harmful effects of active-passivity gone too far and cool media that is used as a means of control. Through the nostalgic themes of *Stranger Things*, I ultimately affirm cool media use that focuses on collectivity, longing, and instability.

### **How *Stranger Things* Returns to Active-Passivity and its Possibilities**

Near the end of the second episode of the first season of *Stranger Things*, Joyce is shown sleeping in a recliner next to the telephone. It is an interesting contrast to the opening scene of

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<sup>61</sup> Boym, XIII.

<sup>62</sup> Gilbey, “Stranger Things and It Share the Same Shallow Nostalgia”; Kunzelman, “‘Stranger Things’ Is Imprisoned by the Nostalgia That Inspired It.”

*Poltergeist* in which the father, Steve, is quite passively asleep on the recliner in front of the television, as well as to our first introduction to Chief Hopper in the first episode of *Stranger Things*. Hopper is first shown asleep in front of the TV, but we see him wake up and get ready for work while smoking, drinking, and taking some pills. Once he gets to work, he tries to make his assistant stop talking to him since “mornings are for coffee and contemplation” or in other words, passivity.

By contrast, Joyce is not just passively asleep – she is actively waiting for Will to call her on the phone. In the first episode, after Will goes missing, Joyce gets a phone call and only hears breathing on the other end and then the phone shocks her, ending the phone call. Joyce states that she believes it was Will calling her, despite not having a lot of information other than a mother’s intuition. The low resolution of the medium of the telephone, coupled with the lack of information provided by the other person on telephone, requires that Joyce strain to determine if anything is being said and what it could mean. According to McLuhan, “If the medium is of low intensity, the participation is high. Perhaps this is why lovers mumble so.”<sup>63</sup> He compares the relationship between lovers to the relationship audiences have with cool media. He posits that when lovers mumble rather than speak more clearly, an intimacy is established through the involvement of the other person trying to determine what is being said and what it means. Joyce reveals her status as a cool medium, or cool mom, through her active-waiting for a phone call that may or may not happen again and will likely not contain any more information than the first one. Thus her level of participation is very high and the level of clarity from the medium is very low.

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<sup>63</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 222.

While she is sleeping in the recliner, the phone does ring and she is shown quickly waking up and answering the phone call since she was ready and actively waiting. The camera also exhibits its active-passivity by getting closer and closer to Joyce, while she is on the phone, as if we are leaning towards Joyce in order to determine what is being said. After she tries to extend herself through the phone to Will by pleading with him to answer and reassuring him that he is speaking with his mom, her active-passivity pays off: the person on the other end of the phone says, “Mom?” She uses her emotions as a way to connect with him at a distance. We also extend our emotions through a medium, since we experience the scene through Joyce and empathize with her and mimic her emotions. We are also upset when the phone shocks Joyce and ends the interaction, since we are left wanting to know more. At the same time that the phone shocks Joyce, the television show also shocks the audience by cutting abruptly to a longer shot of Joyce after it had been pushing closer and closer in to a close up of her face. After the phone call ends, Joyce is shown in alternating close ups and medium shots crying and shouting, “No!” until the lights above her begin to flicker. She stands up and walks closer to the light that is flickering and then the camera points towards the next light that will flicker, showing a path for her, and us, to follow. The camera alternates between being behind Joyce like we are following her and in front of her in order to show her face and her emotions. This camera action extends the audience’s sensorium and allows us to physically move with Joyce and be emotionally moved by her. Additionally, when the music begins playing in Jonathan’s bedroom and scares Joyce, it also scares the audience. The show involves us in Joyce’s experience of this event. We extend our senses through her, as a medium, to experience this scene and another off-screen scene with Will, which we feel but cannot immediately see.

The way we, as an audience, react not only to the medium of the screen in that scene, but also the figure of the mother as a cool medium, demonstrates our capacity for active-passivity. I read this scene as one that underscores reaction over action. McLuhan writes about a study that was done by attaching cameras onto children's heads to follow their eye movement while they were watching TV westerns. The study found that children's eyes remained focused on the faces of the actors. He writes: "Even during physical violence their eyes remain concentrated on the facial *reactions*, rather than on the eruptive *action*. . . . TV is not so much an action, as a re-action, medium."<sup>64</sup> This builds on my earlier quote from him about the intimacy of the relationship between audience and the TV caused by the need for interpretation and involvement. Rather than just focusing on the action of what is occurring on the screen, the children focus on how the characters are reacting to this action. This demonstrates the active-passivity that I argue the figure of the mother models as a method of relating to and with media. Additionally, TV as a re-action medium is of special interest to me for how it relates to nostalgia. I find it interesting that it was not written as "reaction"; rather, McLuhan spilt up the "re" from the "action." To me, this suggests a return to a previous action but with new interpretations. Understanding that these re-actions are in part made by interpretation, means that they are not stable, but rather returns that are infused with instability, doubt, and intimacy.

In contradistinction, the scientists at Hawkins National Laboratory, led by Dr. Brenner, use cool media in a harmful way that denies any responsibility or instability. Eleven, through her ability to reach out and connect with people across the globe is similar to Tangina in *Poltergeist* in that she is a more literal representation of media than the figure of the mother. Dr. Brenner, who Eleven calls Papa, uses Eleven in order to reach out across the globe and spy on the Soviets.

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<sup>64</sup> McLuhan, 222.

He is benefitting from her cool media abilities; however, he amputates himself from any responsibility to her. He only cares about the content that she produces, not her as the medium. His amputation from his medium is made visually apparent in the flashback scene in which he has her go into “the Bath” in Season One, Episode Five. The light is bright, cold, and sterile like a hospital. She walks up the stairs to the water tank in between two laboratory employees that are an equal distance apart from her, which both emphasizes their coldness to her and her status as middle, or medium. The show cuts to a low angle shot from below the grates on which she is walking that makes her look trapped behind bars, telling the audience – as if it was not already clear – that she is not doing this of her volition. As she walks up to the man that puts her wired headset on her, she is shown in a medium shot that is shot from her height. Since she is child, the heads off all the male laboratory workers are cut off, which further highlights their disconnect from and coldness to her. The man that puts the headset on her does bend down to fasten the headset, which puts his face in frame, but he maintains a straight face and keeps his eyes fixed on the wires on the headset rather than her face. The show cuts to below the tank and shows Dr. Brenner from behind while he is looking at the tank and then pans back up to the top of the tank where Eleven is preparing to enter. Once she is inside the tank, she briefly sees Dr. Brenner who holds up a hand to wave to her, and she places her hand on the glass, reaching out to him and seeking comfort and reassurance. He does not move closer and the cover on the tank wipes across the screen, leaving her in complete darkness and demonstrating Dr. Brenner’s closing off of emotion towards her. This also allegorizes the ways in which current online technologies allow many people to act anonymously without having to look someone in the face while they cause them harm and thus, people can amputate themselves from having to feel responsible for such actions. A study published in the Archives of Suicide Research found that cyberbullying

victims were 1.9 times more likely to have attempted suicide than those who had not experienced cyberbullying.<sup>65</sup> Thus, this amputation from and anonymity with cool media has serious consequences.

Even though Dr. Brenner walks with her and holds her hand in the second flashback she has to going into the bath in season one episode six, he still uses her emotional connection to him as a means of getting her to do what he wants. She is clearly frightened and yet she wants to appease him, so when he tells her to continue even when she gets scared, she complies. By holding her hand and emphasizing physical connection, he convinced her to reach out and touch the Demogorgon, which caused The Gate to open between the real world and the Upside Down. Dr. Brenner's connection to fatherhood and the national revives the critique from *Poltergeist* of the passive-active impulses of the Reagan Administration and neoliberal patriarchy more generally, which amputated itself from its responsibility to its citizens, leaving them open to harmful consequences.

By contrast, Joyce's active-passive relationship with Eleven highlights the potential for cool media use that demands care, responsibility, and collectivity. In season one episode seven, all the main characters gather around Eleven while she tries to connect with Will using a radio. The shot is from behind Eleven's head so everyone else is facing towards the camera but looking slightly down towards Eleven's face. Up until this point, most of the characters' efforts to find Will and Barbara had been fairly disjointed. They were often in smaller groups or pairs, but finally, with the help of Eleven, they all join up and are able to rely on each other's strengths and knowledge. The way that they cluster around Eleven and stare at her is reminiscent of the Freeling family in *Poltergeist* gathering around the TV to try to talk to Carol Anne. Through

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<sup>65</sup> Hinduja and Patchin, "Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Suicide," 216.

Eleven's ability to act as a medium, we are able to see the potential of media to be collectivizing. Later in the same episode, Eleven suggests they create a bath similar to the one in the laboratory so that she will have a better connection with Will.

Before she goes into the bath, she is shown having a conversation with Joyce in which Joyce demonstrates her maternal feelings of care and concern towards Eleven. They are in a classroom with warm light and sitting so that they are at eye level with each other, which allows neither one to be in a position of dominance. They are also shown in a medium shot together when Joyce reaches out and holds Eleven's hand, further emphasizing their equal power. Joyce reassures Eleven that she will be there with her the whole time and that if it ever gets too scary for Eleven, just to tell Joyce and they can stop. Despite desperately wanting to find her son, Joyce does not let the end justify the means like Dr. Brenner. She does not solely focus on the content that Eleven as a medium may produce but also knows that she is responsible for her media use. While Eleven is in the homemade sensory deprivation tank, the main characters are all gathered around her again, rather than blocked off and disconnected by the steel cover for the tank in the laboratory. The passive-active Dr. Brenner amputated himself from any responsibility to Eleven or what she did while in the Upside Down, but Joyce in her active-passivity realizes that Eleven needs comfort while in the Upside Down. She reaches out and holds her hand. Additionally, Eleven was able to hear Joyce's maternal reassurances while still in the Upside Down. She tells Eleven that she is right there with her and thus also crosses the boundary between the real world and the Upside Down.

After Will returns from the Upside Down at the end of season one, he struggles with being able to distinguish any boundary between the real world and the Upside Down. In the final episode of season one, we see him leave the table with his mom and go into the bathroom to look

at himself in the mirror. We see him in shots that alternate between a medium shot from the side in which we see him looking into the mirror and a closer shot from behind his shoulder that shows his reflection in the mirror. The Christmas music in the background seems to become distorted as he coughs up a slug into the sink. Afterwards, it appears as though the lights flicker but then we realize, it the scene was actually flickering between the real world and the Upside Down. Like myriad other scenes involving telephones, Christmas lights, and televisions, this moment connects the Upside Down expressly to electronic media. We no longer hear the background Christmas music at all, just an ominous almost synth-like score in which the notes seem to have no beginning or end, they just drag on.

This collapsing of the real world and the Upside Down continues to be a problem for Will during season two and speaks, I think, to some of the possible dangers of using cool media but treating it as if it is hot media. As I mentioned earlier, Melissa Gregg, in the introduction to her book, *Work's Intimacy*, argues that due to digitally connected network society and the ability to easily work from home, a “presence bleed” occurs between one’s professional and personal time and identity.<sup>66</sup> I posit that Will’s inability to keep the two worlds separate reveals this anxiety about the collapsing of any distinction between public and private spheres. This presence bleed between work and home life is also especially evident for Joyce. In the second season, we see Joyce’s new boyfriend, Bob, visit her at work multiple times and they kiss in the storage closet. This intimate moment at work reveals how Joyce’s personal and professional selves are indistinguishable from one another. Gregg also points out that presence bleed “not only explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours, but also captures the feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending

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<sup>66</sup> Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, 2.

schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled – especially since there are not enough workers to carry the load.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, not only does this presence bleed allow employers to take advantage of these online technologies as a way of having their employees always on hand, but also allows them to hire less employees. This is active-passivity gone too far, employees constantly are anticipating needing to work since they have their work email on their phones and thus on their person at all times. While I affirmed the ability of the figure of the mother in *Poltergeist* for being able to navigate the entanglement of public and private, work and leisure, it is important to not collapse the distinction between the two. As I previously mentioned, this presence bleed is especially felt by working mothers who try to squeeze in time to work at any time of the day. While Joyce does not work from home, the way that she tries to balance her time between work and home is still felt by the way that she is not home the night that Will goes missing and is in a rush to leave for work the following morning. Especially as a single mother, it is clear that she would benefit from affordable childcare. Stephanie Coontz points out that “work, school, and medical care in America are still organized around the 1950s myth that every household has a full-time mother at home, available to chauffeur children to doctor and dentist appointments in the middle of the day, pick up elementary school children on early dismissal days, and stay home when a child has the flu.”<sup>68</sup> Yet such problems can be remedied with government oversight that helps prevent employees from being exploited as well as policies and programs for parental leave and affordable child care so that parents are not forced to take their work home with them if they do not want to.

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<sup>67</sup> Gregg, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 286.

I argue that season one returns to the 1980s in order to redeem the possibilities of active-passive cool media use and reveal the start of the problems of the passive-active impulses of neoliberalism that still continue today. It is a reminder of the potential for collectivity of cool media as well as a way of highlighting the problems and failures of passive-active governments. Additionally, through Dr. Brenner's amputation from his media, there is a further critique of laissez-faire governments that leave their citizens open to possible danger, as well as a new critique of the anonymity that online technologies can provide. My reading also opens up the show's reflective nostalgia in the way that it focuses on instability and doubt through Joyce's phone calls with Will.

### **The Dangers of Treating Cool Media Like it is Hot**

The second season of *Stranger Things* begins with a similar shot to the first episode of the first season, a mostly black screen with tiny stars. The camera also mimics its early movement by panning down to the city. However, once the camera pans down we are plunged into an unfamiliar city setting, which the text on the screen then tells us is "Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania." The unfamiliarity continues as some of the first shots we get of people's faces are covered by masks. Once the characters take their masks off we realize, we still do not know who these people are. A car chases ensues which initially seems to have nothing to do with the Upside Down, Eleven, or Mike and his friends. The show curiously thwarts audience expectations and desires to return home.

The first season was released on Netflix on July 15, 2016 and the second season was not released until October 27, 2017. This is different than the normal format of broadcast or cable TV, in which one episode airs once a week until the season ends. For shows on broadcast networks like ABC, this often means a season runs from September to May; therefore, only

leaving audiences waiting for a new season for about three months. However, with Netflix's model, the audience was able to get instant gratification of watching the whole season at once but then had to wait fifteen months for a new season. Once the audience finally got to begin watching season two, they were confronted with unfamiliarity and their longing to find out what happened with their familiar characters like Eleven or Will was prolonged.

Why have the second season start this way and with these unfamiliar characters? Perhaps it was just to introduce them so that there could be a "filler" episode later in the season as many critics of season two episode seven called it. The creators of the show, the Duffer Brothers, said in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that they included the "bottle" episode in order to continue to experiment and because they felt like it was important for Eleven's story line to "to go off on her own and learn something about herself."<sup>69</sup> The beginning of the first episode introduced us to Kali, who has a number eight on her arm just like Eleven's tattoo. In the seventh episode we learn that she and Eleven grew up together and were both experimented on by Dr. Brenner and his scientists. From this trip and her quest to find "home," I contend, the audience learns through Eleven that it is not possible to restore a home that never really existed. We see in a flashback in season two episode three that she calls the house that Hopper brings her to and fixes up "home." Then later in episode five she calls the house that her mom and aunt live at, "home." Then in episode seven she calls Kali's hideout "home" but by the end of the episode she says that she is "going home," referring to Hawkins. This both emphasizes that "home" can be multiple and unstable but also that trying to return to and restore a home that probably never existed can be counterproductive. However, reflective nostalgia, with its instability and uncertainty, can reveal new possibilities and futures. Whatever the intention, the effect of the

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<sup>69</sup> Stack, "'Stranger Things 2' Creators Defend Polarizing Eleven Episode."

opening sequence of season two, for me, was that it prolonged the longing and created a new space for unfamiliarity and instability and the later “bottle” episode allowed for a revelation of the harmful way that cool media can be treated as hot.

Kali is older than Eleven and wants revenge on everyone involved with the experimentation at Hawkins Laboratory and she uses her medium-like powers, as well as Eleven’s, in order to achieve this. Kali has the ability to reach out into other people’s sensorium and make them believe that something is occurring that, in reality, is not. She convinces Eleven to use her own powers in order to find people that have been keeping a low profile and then they travel to this man’s house in order to kill him. Kali’s power is very one-sided and the way that she uses it and wants to use Eleven’s powers seeks the same kind of control that Dr. Brenner sought. Eleven ultimately cannot go through with killing this man, but the destructive and harmful effects of failing to embrace cool media are still displayed when one uses them as a means of control.

The monster of season two, the Mind Flayer or Shadow Monster, also reveals the dangers of cool media as a means of control, even when amputation is not involved. Dr. Brenner and his scientists used Eleven for purposes of control and certainty, but he also amputated himself from any responsibility to the media apparatus (Eleven) or effects caused by the media. The Shadow Monster, on the other hand, thrives on fully extending itself into Will and the “Demodogs.” At the end of the third episode of season two, we see the shadow monster extend its tentacles into his mouth, eyes, and nostrils. From that point on, Will’s sensorium is connected with the Shadow Monster’s. He is able to feel that the Shadow Monster would prefer a cold temperature and see the tentacles reach out all over town in underground tunnels like buried cable lines. Since he is able to see the tunnels that the tentacles are exploring, he draws a map that ends up covering the

entirety of the inside of his house of where the tunnels are, which brings the public inside the private home. Will, Joyce, Mike, and Bob, use this map in episode five to find Hopper that has gone missing. Joyce and Bob find him being suffocated and pulled into a pile of vines by the extensions of the Shadow Monster. This, as well as the threat to Will by the Shadow Monster, seems to be playing out an anxiety that cool media has become too involving and too enrapturing that it is a danger to us and especially to our children. The Shadow Monster is able to make Will lead the scientists into a trap in the tunnels so that the “Demodogs” can eat them. Therefore, his mother and Mike sedate him since they feel they cannot trust him not to spy on them anymore on behalf of the Shadow Monster. However, what makes the Shadow Monster and his figuration as media and media user different from the figure of the mother is that he uses media to get and maintain control. He controls Will and he controls the “Demodogs” and it is not until Joyce, Nancy, and Jonathan perform an exorcism of sorts on Will by increasing Will’s body temperature until the Shadow Monster no longer wanted to feel what Will was feeling and thus amputated himself and retreated. We began to see inklings of the way this desire for control and stability can be problematic near the beginning of season one when Joyce tries to communicate with Will while he is in the Upside Down. Additionally, we see the way that cool media is not being used as presence at a distance but rather presence at a *presence*. The Shadow Monster’s possession of Will is all-consuming and closes down any distance between the two of them.

There is a tension between *Stranger Things*’ desire to separate work and domestic spheres, on the one hand, and its critique of control on the other. The Upside Down’s extensions into the ordinary world can be read as expressing the possibilities, limits, and ambivalence of these issues. We might say that this extension and takeover of the private domestic sphere is like neoliberal networked labor, but we also might say that it is an affirmation of collective

connection that might be otherwise organized. The ambivalence seems to come through then through the terror and wonder the show conjures with respect to the Upside Down. We see the difference between these in the relationality that is forged by the extension.

The instability, doubt, and intimacy in the initial encounters Joyce has with Will, like with the telephone that I mentioned earlier and later with Christmas lights, emphasizes the *algia* part of the word nostalgia, her longing. In the third episode of the first season, Joyce strings up Christmas lights all over her house because after her previously mentioned phone call with Will, she believes he is using the lights to also try to communicate with her. Near the end of the episode, Joyce is shown in a close up, smoking when we see the Christmas lights in the slightly out-of-focus background begin to light up. Since the background is slightly out-of-focus and more low definition, we strain to see what is occurring. The show cuts to a long shot of Joyce, from the point of view of the lights, so we can see her face but no longer can see the lights, and we hear the dog bark, alerting her to what is happening with the lights. She walks closer to the lights (and the camera) and we are able to get a closer look at her inquisitive facial reaction. The show then cuts to a shot behind her, so we can see the lights lighting up one by one. The camera imitates her walking closer to the lights by moving closer to her from behind. The camera is also shaky, so we feel involved in the process of walking closer to Joyce and the lights. The camera continues to follow her from behind as she follows the path created by the pattern of the lights lighting up one by one. The path leads her, and us, to a small cupboard behind a shelf. She pushes the shelf out of the way and gets inside the cupboard with a pile of Christmas lights.

Her conversation with Will in the cupboard highlights the intimacy and instability of this use of cool media. This form of communication also involves a very high level of participation and interpretation. She asks him yes or no questions and tells him to “blink once for yes and

twice for no.” The intimacy of this interaction is made visually apparent through the small cupboard it is occurring in. The camera is initially inside the cupboard with Joyce, looking out, so when the pile of lights are off she is in a shadow. However, when the light up, we are able to more clearly see her facial expression. After her first question, the show cuts to a longer shot from outside of the cupboard, it demonstrates how curled up and close Joyce is with the lights in order to fit inside the small cupboard. After Will responds “no” to her question, “Are you safe?,” she becomes increasingly frustrated with not being able to get any more information from this form of communication. She tries asking him where he is, but he is unable to respond to that question only using “yes” or “no.” Her high level of participation, intimacy, and doubt reveal the way that this form of cool media use is focusing on the *algia*, the longing. She is grasping onto the lights for any kind of hope that her son might still be alive and longs to be close to him.

Out of her frustration with not being able to find where he is and bring him home, she gives up on asking yes or no questions and we begin to see the way in which this cool media is treated like hot media. She creates a Quija board of sorts by painting the alphabet on her wall and stringing up a corresponding light over each letter. Here, she begins mixing the cool medium of electric light with the hot medium of typography. During this scene, the lighting is much darker and less hopeful. She first asks, “Where are you,” and he responds by spelling out, “Right here.” She is still unsatisfied with this answer, despite getting much more of a response than she has up to this point. Additionally, she is frustrated with the ambiguous spatiality at play. Will is “right here,” but he is only “right here” at an ambiguous remove that is electronically mediated. She seeks stability and certainty, wanting to know what he means and how he can return home. She asks him a series of questions in a row about what she should do and how she can find him and he responds by spelling out “run.” The show cuts to a close up of her face and deep, loud music

begins to play that sounds like a Tyrannosaurus Rex is slowing stomping closer. In the background of her close up, we see something pushing on her wall from the inside, trying to get out. Through her focus on Will's return home, the *nostos*, she becomes increasingly focused on controlling the situation and the medium of communication, and according to Boym, "unreflective nostalgia breeds monsters."<sup>70</sup> Thus, the Demogorgon, the monster, breaks through from the Upside Down and into her living room. The episode ends with the police, with the help of the scientists at the Hawkins National Laboratory, "finding" Will's body in the quarry, trying to use the same method of certainty and control to stamp out any questions about where he is and if he is still alive.

While season two may seem to initially reflect concerns about the effect that online technologies and media can have generally and more specifically on children, I argue that ultimately *Stranger Things* affirms the potential for active-passivity and cool media. It critiques the use of cool media for purposes of gaining or maintaining control and nostalgia that just attempts to restore a home that probably never existed. However, it affirms reflective nostalgia and cool media use that leaves room for other possibilities. Eleven's use of her powers throughout season two to check on Mike because she misses him, emphasizes her longing for him and for collectivity. This longing for collectivity is what is left as the potential for our networked media. It also reveals to the audience that the promise of the cool mom in *Poltergeist* has not been fulfilled. We are all cool moms in appearance but not in action because we treat cool media like its hot.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>70</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVI.

I believe *Stranger Things* nostalgically returns to the 1980s in order to demonstrate a longing for a different method of relating to and with media. While this may not have been the way people in the 1980s actually interacted with media, our nostalgia allows us to look back and revive unrealized possibilities. If we may now realize the possibilities of our media as a mode of politicization, we may be able to embrace the collectivity of our media use rather than condemn it as isolating. The desire for Mike's family to come together that is felt in the first episode, is realized but not through getting rid of media, but by using it to connect with each other. Additionally, while *Poltergeist* is dealing more with the figure of motherhood as medium in the aftermath of the Women's Movement and the rise of neoliberal privatization, *Stranger Things* returns to this figure to explore the ways that neoliberal network society and work's intimacy have in a sense made us all more like Joyce. We are all all-pervaded by the Upside Down of electronic mediation across public, work, and domestic domains. However, since we only look like cool moms but do not act like them, it is crucial that we return to her conception and revive this lesson. Rather than using cool media to create presence at a distance, we use it to create presence at a presence like the Shadow Monster. Our use of cool media is not only high involvement but also high intensity. Our longing for the cool mom and the collectivity she brings about redeems cool media and reveals the way that it still has potential.

This potential for collectivity and political action through media has been demonstrated recently through the use of social media to spread awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment through the use of #MeToo. The #MeToo movement encouraged victims of sexual assault and harassment to share their story on social media so that friends and family may understand how widespread these acts of violence are as well as to help victims feel as though they are not alone. This viral movement is reminiscent of the consciousness raising

movements during second wave feminism which I mentioned in my first chapter. These movements involved women publically telling personal stories and a collectivity was formed through shared experiences and support from each other. The #MeToo movement had a similar effect of creating a space in which more people felt comfortable coming forward with their experience of sexual assault or harassment which contributed to the exposure of many public figures, especially in the entertainment industry, as perpetrators of these sexual violences. A survey published by NBC News found that “51 percent of respondents said that they believe reports about sexual assault have helped address the gender gap.”<sup>71</sup> While there is still much to be done to address the inequities many face, I think the #MeToo movement and *Stranger Things* reveals that there is possibility for networked media to be a tool in these efforts. It also reveals how our government remains passive-active through continued deregulation and inaction but that active-passive media use may be a way of creating political change.

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<sup>71</sup> Shabad and Perry, “Poll.”

## EPILOGUE

*Black Mirror* is an anthology television series that originally aired in Britain for the first two seasons, but the third and fourth seasons were produced by and released on Netflix. The show often focuses on our relationship to media technologies through standalone episodes set either a near distant future or an alternative present. *Arkangel* is the second episode of the fourth season that was released in December 2017. It is set in an alternative present and follows a single mother, Marie, and her child, Sara, from Sara's birth until her mid-teens. In one of the first scenes, in which Sara is a toddler, Marie takes her to the park but becomes engaged in a conversation with another mother and she does not see that Sara has followed a cat away from the playground. With the help of others in the neighborhood, Marie finds Sara shortly afterward unharmed, but Marie is traumatized by the incident. Marie decides to participate in a trial version of a child-monitoring system, Arkangel, in which a neural implant is placed in the child's brain. The implant is connected to a tablet that allows the parent to know their child's location at all times, see what their child is seeing, monitor their vitals, and put "parental controls" on what their child sees and hears in the world.

This figure of the mother and the media that she represents, exhibits a new form of oversight: *oversight*. It takes the active-passive oversight of the cool mom to the extreme. This *oversight* continues the work of my thesis because while it does focus on longing, it emphasizes presence at a presence. The technology is the embodiment of the helicopter mom that is always

hovering and always ready to step in at a moment's notice. It also echoes current fears about the NSA monitoring our media use.

When Sara goes missing from the playground, we follow Marie from behind as she walks towards the playground equipment, involving us in the investigation of where she went. Once she realizes that Sara is no longer on the playground, Marie turns around and walks back towards the camera. The camera also pushes in until we are at a close up of Marie's panicked face. The screen cuts to black, robbing us from our vision of the scene just as Marie is unable to see Sara. When our vision returns, it mirrors Marie's panicked state with its rapid cuts and shaky movement. Even though the show cuts, we are only shown Marie from different angles and only from either medium or close up shots. Not only are we forced to experience this scene with her by not being able to see anything else, but we also feel her desire to look for Sara, though we cannot since our vision is restricted. This scene comes right before Marie decides to get Sara the implant and through our experience of this scene with her, we are better able to understand the panic that led her to this decision.

The episode then goes on to show that the technology was ultimately harmful for Sara and her relationship with Marie. Sara is emotionally stunted from the way that the technology has censored her experience of the world. Since she has been blocked from seeing any violence, she is unable to determine when it's actually happening. When she is elementary-aged, she becomes interested in learning about violence but is unable to see the video that a boy shows her nor hear when he explains what happens in the video. Later, when she is at home, she tries to draw a picture of someone bleeding and even her own drawing is pixelated and blurred from her vision. She makes herself bleed and her own blood is pixelated as well. The tablet alerts Marie that Sara is in danger and when her mom comes and tries to figure out what she is doing, Sara

slaps her. Marie takes Sara to a child psychologist and we learn that Sara is unable to determine that two people in a photograph are being violent towards one another; she thinks they are just having a conversation.

This demonstrates concerns that helicopter parenting or too many parental controls prevent a child from growing up and becoming an adult. This is the reverse of an argument from a piece in the *New York Times* in 1983 in which Marie Winn argues that television and lax parenting makes children grow up too fast.<sup>72</sup> However, an article from 2017 in *The Atlantic*, argues that smartphones have caused the loss of adolescence with childhood now extending into high school.<sup>73</sup> Jean Twenge argues that this is because teens leave the house less frequently and instead spend time in their room, alone and on their phone. She connects this to lower rates teens who drive, have sex, and have a job. Ultimately Twenge, sees this loss of adolescence as a bad thing because she also argues that the rate of depression is higher among teens who spend more time online. From the anti-helicopter parenting point of view, a child should be able to fall down and skin their knee in order to learn from their mistakes and be able to prevent something similar from happening in the future. Indeed, it was detrimental to Sara to not be able to see her own blood which led to her not fully understanding the consequences of her actions like when she slapped her mom, or near the end of the episode when she beat her until she was unconscious with the tablet. Additionally, when the censoring was turned off, we see that she was able to conquer her fear of the dog next door rather than just being blocked off from seeing it.

Yet, I wonder if this is where I may break my connection between what I affirm for the figure of the mother and her mode of media use with what I affirm for a mode of politicization.

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<sup>72</sup> Winn, "THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD."

<sup>73</sup> Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?"

Some may argue that a helicopter government that provides welfare programs and employment for its citizens prevents the citizens from being able to fend for themselves. However, I disagree and continue to affirm active-passivity for our government.

Lastly, *Black Mirror*'s episode *Arkangel*, reveals the way surveillance has the potential to be used for care and yet still be harmful. Some technological oversight like, body cameras on police officers, keeps people responsible for their actions and helps keep people safe. However, the one-sided nature of Marie's monitoring of Sara is similar to the one-sided nature of the NSA's surveillance of citizens. Sara does not have any input in what her mom censors from her, nor does she have any say in whether or not her mom watches what she is doing. Similarly, we are not made aware of what kind of information the NSA gathers on us and what that information is then used for. While the NSA, and Marie, may think that they are doing this out of care, the imbalance of power may have dangerous consequences.

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