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Lost in Space: Television as Science Fiction Icon

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LOST IN

Television as Science

Abstract: During the early decades of film, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, the popular perception of a competing media technology, television, was already beginning to take shape. Because the technology itself was still largely a futuristic fantasy, an icon often associated with science fiction, it frequently appears in science fiction films of the era and in a variety of roles, some positive but many others negative, even threatening. The author examines how television functions iconically in a number of science fiction films, including *Metropolis* (1926), *The Tunnel* (1935), *Murder by Television* (1935), *The Phantom Empire* (1935), and *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* (1939), to help understand these varied perceptions of the new technology and to place television in the context of an evolving mediated culture.

Key words: broadcasting; dystopia; Machine Age; Sarnoff, David; science fiction; technology; television

Paul Virilio notes how during World War II what he terms the "vision machine" rapidly emerged as a significant, perhaps even the most important weapon for all combatants, opening the way for the ongoing "cinematization" of the contemporary world. Yet this "new industrialization of vision" (*Vision* 59) was well underway prior to the war with early developments in television during the Machine Age. In fact, the popular perception of television was already taking shape, even as the technology itself remained essentially a futuristic fantasy, an icon often associated with science fiction. In this period, we find the popular imagination already conceptualizing television in various roles—optimistically, as a kind of ultimate com-

Image omitted per publisher.

SPACE

Fiction Icon

Image omitted per publisher.

The master of Metropolis sends orders to his foreman via picture-phone in *Metropolis* (1926).

munications technology but also more darkly, as a means of surveillance, a tool of deception, even a potentially deadly device. In this article, I examine that early conceptualization as it took shape in another component of the larger "vision machine," our popular films, especially those in the science fiction vein. By looking at how television functions iconically in such movies—works such as *Metropolis* (1926), *The Tunnel* (aka *Transatlantic Tunnel*, 1935), *Murder by Television* (1935), *The Phantom Empire* (1935), *The Invisible Ray* (1936), and *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* (1939)—we can better understand these varied perceptions. In isolating this point at which one type of fantasy glimpses another's arrival, we see reflected not only what Cecelia Tichi in her study of technology in the era describes as "the alternating attitudes" or mixed responses "of people whose culture is in rapid transition" (*Shifting* 29) but also signs of a deep-seated cultural resistance to the work of that emerging "vision machine" and, particularly, to its impact on our sense of public and private space.

This particular element of the larger "vision machine" was certainly very much in the headlines throughout the Machine Age, although it was hardly ready to take its eventual place as a competitor to the cinema. In the late nineteenth century, conditions were in place for the fusion of two constituent technologies—photography and the telephone—and by the turn of the century the term "television" had already been coined by the Russian Constantin Perskyi. The mid-1920s saw the appearance of two different primary television technologies, as Vladimir Zworykin and Philo Farnsworth demonstrated systems

based on the cathode ray tube and John Logie Baird exhibited his Televisor, a mechanical system based on rotating metal disks. Both systems made headlines in the late 1920s and early 1930s with a series of well-publicized firsts, mostly centered on the transmission of images over ever greater distances: broadcasting from one city to another, from one country to another, from one continent to another, and, in Baird's case, even from England to an ocean liner in the mid-Atlantic (Moseley and Chapple 17). The BBC had begun regular broadcasts early in the decade using the Baird equipment, and German, French, and American transmissions soon followed, although few sets were available in any of these countries to receive the broadcasts. By the time of that signal Machine Age event, the 1939 New York World's Fair, television had clearly entered into the popular consciousness if not popular use. As David Gelernter notes, "TV was all over the fair" (37), being featured in the Westinghouse, General Electric, Ford, RCA, and Crosley Appliance exhibits, in various demonstration kiosks that allowed fairgoers to see their own televised images, and in President Roosevelt's opening speech, beamed by NBC from atop another Machine Age icon, the Empire State Building. Yet, despite this showcasing of the new technology as an essential part of "The World of Tomorrow," a survey of fairgoers found fewer than one in seven "expressed an interest in buying a set in the near future" (Corn and Horrigan 27); even after World War II, *Fortune* magazine speculated that "television could conceivably turn into the biggest and costliest flop in US industrial history" (Miner 107). Apparently, people remained largely ambivalent about and reluctant to embrace this new technology, in part due to what William Boddy terms the "larger cultural ambivalence regarding [all] new communications technologies" (1).

Despite its being ballyhooed in repeated newspaper reports, showcased in national magazines like *Life*, and explained in specialized journals such as *Modern Mechanics*, *Television Today*, and *Radio and Television*,[1] television remained more a cultural idea than a practical appliance. Or rather, we might describe it as a *series* of ideas, as Joseph Corn and Brian Horrigan suggest: In the 1920s and 1930s, "the idea of television in our future heated the popular imagination as few technologies ever have," producing a wide spectrum of predictions that were also a bit "outlandish," even for this highly speculative era (24). In keeping with the aforementioned headlines, those who tried to shape the "idea of television" focused mainly on its ability to reshape our sense of distance and, thus, on one of the technology's key characteristics: as Boddy puts it, "the technical indifference of broadcast signals to national boundaries" (4). Speaking precisely to this spatial dimension, RCA's David Sarnoff envisioned how "physical limitation" would be "swept away" by television, leaving as humanity's only "boundaries . . . the limits of the earth itself," thereby helping to foster a new era of global understanding (16). On a more practical level, television's boosters suggested that doctors would abandon home visits in favor of diagnosing patients from their offices, the military would adopt it to watch our skies and borders to detect invaders while still far off, spouses would use it to keep track of each other, and parents would employ it like an electronic nanny to monitor their children's activities when they were away.[2] Like most new technologies, television was simply the subject of great speculation, although speculation that typically saw it in a science fictional context, like other popular speculations of the era: rocketships, death rays, machines to prolong life. Only over much time would it, like many other older icons of science fiction, become "annexed by the everyday" (173), as Gwyneth Jones nicely describes the process, and settle into the role that Tichi, responding to its later pervasiveness, would term the new "electronic hearth" (*Electronic*)—a metaphor reflecting not just television's domestication but also the shift from its early association with the conquest of distance to a new sense of intimacy.

Of course, today, many of these promises no longer seem quite as "outlandish" as they did then, as television has become not only ubiquitous but a technology whose influence on our sense of space, particularly its very real potential for intrusiveness and surveillance, has made it the subject of public debate and legislation, as well as the latest fashion in military acquisition. For better or worse, with its annexation "by the everyday," television has surrendered its iconic status to become part of the common cultural landscape. Yet Mark Crispin Miller has suggested that its very commonness disguises a lingering fantastic dimension of the technology, that in modern times television has "itself *become* the environment," an electronic atmosphere from which we seem to draw life. As he offers, television's aim is "to be *everywhere*: not just to clutter our surroundings, but to become them," in fact, to become the electronic "air we breathe" (8). This notion is akin to Virilio's, as he describes how the various technologies that have helped shape the con-

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Image omitted per publisher.

In *The Tunnel* (aka *Transatlantic Tunnel*, 1935), the television is used to measure personal and emotional distance.

temporary visual regime have delivered us to a *Matrix*-like world, "a realm of fictitious topology in which all the surfaces of the globe are directly present to one another." Replacing the older sense of distance—and our amazement, even unease, at how easily we traverse it—is "the imposture of immediacy" (*War* 46), a situation in which our sense of real space dissolves into a new experience of mediated space, into a cinematized world that holds itself out as intimately available to us, as film and then television have not just become our primary access to the world but insinuated themselves as the very world in which we live.

We can trace some of the steps in this gradual shift—a shift by which contemporary existence has come to seem the stuff of science fiction and the icons of science fiction have been normalized—in these early cinematic visions of television, that is, as one component in that cinematizing process contemplates another. Certainly, even within the science fiction context, television was not always depicted as extraordinary. In fact, it was, with some prescience, often envisioned as a common appliance and thus just a part of the futuristic context in many of these narratives. *Just Imagine* (1930), for example, shows it used to monitor apartment doors, enabling those inside to quite literally "screen" visitors. In *Just Imagine*, *The Tunnel*, and *Things to Come* (1936), among other films, the television is also mated to the telephone as a device for personal communication. In addition, *Things to Come* shows the video screen, linked to a database of historical images, as a tool for providing instruction to children. And, perhaps most nearly anticipating contemporary use, all of the films I cite, as well as *Men Must Fight* (1932), and *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave*, depict television as one of the primary purveyors of news. But these rather commonplace applications were typically presented as part of a world still in the offing, a world that was finally *not* like our own, so even under a kind of domestic disguise television remained an icon of distance,[3] another trapping of the science fiction narrative.

The Tunnel, a film about technological efforts to conquer physical space, fittingly offers one of the more striking analyses of the effects built into this new medium that advertised itself as dissolving distance. The film's protagonist, the engineer McAllan who is spearheading the construction of a transatlantic tunnel, is repeatedly shown flying back and forth across the Atlantic to resolve political problems, secure additional funding, and maintain enthusiasm for his cross-ocean project. Throughout these flights, we see him resort to the videophone to connect to family and friends, explaining why he has, once again, missed his son's birthday or had to cancel an engagement with his wife, or asking a friend to stand in for him with his family. Through these calls, the device becomes an ironic measure of the great personal distances and strained relationships that his work is producing. In fact, television chronicles the gradual disintegration of his marriage for us, as his wife, in London, finds she can only keep track of her husband's activities through the news accounts of his appearances in New York society, where he is accompanied by the beautiful daughter of one of the tunnel's key backers, seeing images that suggest romantic connections, and assuming that the TV reports accurately measure the changes in his emotional life. While both television and videophone serve as electronic versions of the narrative's larger concern, with the transatlantic tunnel as a device for linking people over vast distances, they also inject a heavy irony into those technological efforts, suggesting how much of human relationships, of our most private connections, might become lost in space despite that technological capacity for telepresence or electronic intimacy.

Another and perhaps more immediately unsettling version of that effect shows up in the more frequent depiction of television as a component in a kind of panopticon culture. Joh Fredersen, the master of *Metropolis*' dystopian city, can readily summon the workers' foreman or watch as he hurries about his tasks by dialing him in on the monitor in his office overlook-

ing the city. However, that monitor simply underscores the point made by Fredersen's lofty positioning and the quickness with which he fires his assistant Josephat for not keeping proper surveillance on the workers' activities: Both his control and the workers' subjection are tied to his ability to see everywhere and everything. His own failure to understand or empathize with the workers, his own intellectual and emotional distance from them, is again ironically measured by his very intrusive surveillance.

The point is, of course, also made comically in Chaplin's *Modern Times* wherein we see the modern factory monitored at all key points by the factory president who can suddenly appear on a television screen even in the restroom, admonishing the little tramp to "get back to work." In this case, the television is simply presented as a quite logical extension of the modern factory system, serving to ensure the efficient operation of the assembly line by governing it—and the workers who become, in effect, components of the line—from a distance. But the possibility of television intruding a distant eye into our most intimate spaces, of turning the voyeuristic potential of television back on the viewer, was certainly one of the most common concerns that clustered around this icon.

This surveillance mode is a particularly common element of the period's serials, as we see in such works as *The Phantom Empire*, *Undersea Kingdom* (1936), *Buck Rogers* (1939), and *The Phantom Creeps* (1939). *The Phantom Empire* is perhaps the most telling example, as every episode involves the use of a "Master Television" by Queen Tika, ruler of the futuristic underground empire of Murania. With this device, she maintains control over her realm and constantly wards off threats—from within and without—as its large circular screen, a kind of "Master Eye," allows her to see anywhere on Earth, even without the aid of a camera. When her chancellor Lord Argo is mysteriously absent and not even her secret police can locate him, she angrily questions one of her ministers, "Didn't you try the television screen? Nitwit!" Her expression of irritation not only underscores how easily television might be turned into a monitoring device but also suggests how commonplace that panopticon possibility might become, assumed as a fact of daily life in a futuristic, highly technological society like Murania, where there simply is no more intimate or private space, where the television eye is *everywhere*, empowering dictatorial rule and control.

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Although more murder mystery than science fiction film, the ominously titled *Murder by Television* amplifies the anxiety bound up in the introduction of this intrusive new technology. Set against a backdrop of the development and demonstration of the possibilities of international television broadcasting—which was, as we have noted, very much in the headlines during this period—the film quickly frames its key icon within a science fictional context, as it opens with a portentous epigraph, asserting that "television is the greatest step forward we have yet made in the preservation of humanity. It will make of this earth a paradise we have always envisioned but never seen." Pairing that need for "preservation" with the utopian promise of a future "paradise" not only speaks to the conflicted atmosphere of the Depression era but also establishes the supposed stakes for the action here, the importance of this new icon.

Underscoring this utopian hope, James Houghland, the inventor of the new television device, explains that he believes "television should be something more than just another form of amusement"—a form it takes in such nonscience fiction films of the era as *Elstree Calling* (1930) and *International House* (1933), which essentially use it as a device to introduce various vaudeville-type acts. In support of that contention, Houghland proposes a series of demonstration broadcasts to showcase how television, following David Sarnoff's assertion, might foster international relations, and in the first of these he shows images from Paris, China, and "Dear Old London," as he terms it. Yet, that very international emphasis betrays a dark side; thus, the equally divisive potential of the new technology, when the various intrigues to acquire Houghland's invention surface and he is mysteriously killed in the middle of another transmission. The suspects prove to be an international group of characters, including Houghland's Chinese houseboy, who confesses to being one of several spies his country has sent throughout the world to gather information on television development. In fact, all of the suspects are in various ways linked to efforts at obtaining the new invention for rival governments or concerns. Emphasizing this sense of conspiracy, as well as television's panoptic implications, the federal agent Arthur Perry notes, when he exposes the real murderer, that he has been under government surveillance for some time and that his "contacts

with foreign governments interested in television are known."

Yet the more significant development lies in the very way in which Houghland is killed—literally "by television." In the middle of his second demonstration of long-distance broadcasting, he suddenly collapses in pain and is, as one spectator notes, "killed by his own invention." With his death spectacularly broadcast on that invention and witnessed by many, the film insinuates a dangerous, even *deadly* potential within the new technology. Certainly, the eventual explanation is labored and a bit incredible, in keeping with the film's strained generic combination of murder mystery and science fiction. As Perry explains, the killer had planted a device in the television studio, which, when triggered by a telephone call, radiated waves that altered Houghland's television transmission: "They created an interstellar frequency, which is *the death ray*!" But early discussions of television, such as that of Moseley and Chapple, shed some light on this sort of sensationalistic suggestion: Even as they attempt to provide technical accounts of the workings of the new technology, they also lend a note of mystification, as they vaguely explain how the televised image is produced by "rays" and describe Baird's experimental efforts at transmitting night-time television signals "by flooding the 'sending' room by *infra* red rays" (6). As Boddy chronicles, this sort of mystification was quite common: Throughout this period, electronic communication, including television, retained "a long association with the magical and uncanny" (5), here evoked in television's supposed ability to kill at a distance.

In fact, a similar conflation occurs in another film released that year, *The Invisible Ray*. It opens with a planetarium-like show not of the stars in the sky but of our galaxy many thousands of years before and of an asteroid that once struck Earth, bringing with it a special form of radium. Scientist Janos Rukh has captured a beam of light from Andromeda—which he describes as a kind of natural broadcasting agent—that he feeds into a radium-driven television device that breaks down the beam into a visual record of the past and projects it onto the ceiling of his laboratory. After discovering a more powerful form of radium—the Radium X revealed by the light from Andromeda—however, Rukh harnesses it not to capture images or even to cure blindness, as his rival Dr. Benet does, but rather to emit rays that destroy from a distance, much like that "death ray" described in *Murder by Television*. Although hardly a film about television—in fact, Rukh never names his various devices—*The Invisible Ray* has clearly cobbled together its central technological attraction from the various conceptions that were constellating around television in this era, most notably its ability to send images across great distances (here, interstellar distances), the popular sense that this new technology depends on rather mysterious "rays," and the suspicion that, like so many other new technologies, a great danger is attached to it.

With [Houghland's] death spectacularly broadcast on [television] and witnessed by many, [*Murder by Television*] insinuates a dangerous, even *deadly* potential within the new technology.

Although bracketing off this uncanny or mysterious dimension of television, *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* further develops its dangerous potential and frames that effect within a similar sense of distance. In this instance, television has, in an unspecified near future, become part of the fabric of everyday life, supplanting radio as a primary conduit for national and international news. An early montage, for example, shows pedestrians gathered in front of a store window, café patrons dining, and a family at home, all watching the latest news. The narrative plays out this new function against the backdrop of a local election, as television's role in influencing public opinion—and thus deciding the political future—becomes the film's central focus. Its protagonist, Jeff Shannon, is a former newspaper reporter who has become a star of the new medium. As one of his admirers offers, "There's not another man like him. . . . He photographs his own stuff, projects it, and describes it." Anticipating the contemporary star status of the national news anchor, Shannon is also described as a potential molder of public opinion, even though he has pointedly avoided political issues and has concentrated his efforts on sensationalistic broadcasts—as one viewer casually notes, "we seem to have plenty of fires in the television newsreels today." Given the larger political issues in the world at the time and America's official isolationist attitude, this stance seems a clear comment on that public policy, while it also argues for the inevitable political consequences of a technology that knows no "national boundaries."

Mirroring that contemporary international situation and its impact on America, the narrative shows how Jeff is gradually dragged into the middle of an election to combat a corrupt candidate, who is supported by gangsters, as well as a rival television station. In fact, most of the narrative dramatizes his difficult decision, as his wife Laura puts it, to do "his duty as a private citizen"—a decision that involves exposing his wife, son, and another television celebrity, Uncle Dan, to the threats of the opposition, potentially

getting into "trouble with sponsors," and abandoning his comfortable apolitical stance.

After Jeff decides to become involved, we see him in a montage suggesting what we would today term "investigative journalism," as he energetically films scenes for his television show, documenting the illegal activities of the corrupt politician Clifford Farrow, with the avowed purpose, as Jeff says, of putting him "out of the race." But following threats to his family and a bombing at the television station, Jeff wavers in his resolve, withdraws his investigative programming, and substitutes innocuous reports on a local ladies' club, a ship launching, and a bicycle race. Only the death of Uncle Dan, who was preparing his own television report on Farrow's background, and injuries to his wife and son draw Jeff back to his civic duty and enable him to demonstrate the political power of the new medium with an election-day exposé.[4]

Yet troubling that progressive effort is another assertion of the medium's darker potential, as Jeff's broadcast indicting Farrow is followed by what seems to be another breaking news story, one that suggests how distant images might affect the local world. As a voice announces that a tidal wave is approaching the Atlantic coast, we see broadcast scenes of a storm, panic in the streets of New York and other cities, and massive destruction—including the collapse of the Empire State Building. In keeping with these apocalyptic images, the anonymous newscaster warns, "All states within one hundred miles of the Atlantic coastline, evacuate," and prods listeners into near hysteria with comments such as "Run for your lives" and "Men and women of America—this is the end!" The montage of panicked citizens we then see in the streets of Jeff's town, one that effectively replays the images glimpsed on television, dramatizes the reach and the power of television, as well as an unexpected *consequence* of a promise—or warning—articulated by Sarnoff in the same year, that "television will finally bring to people . . . instantaneous participation in the sights and sounds of the entire world" (42).

Image omitted per publisher.

Professor Zorka (Bela Lugosi) tunes his television surveillance device in *The Phantom Creeps* (1939).

In this instance, that promise is twisted for political ends, as the film demonstrates how easily the "instantaneous participation" Sarnoff describes might be manipulated. Jeff discovers that Farrow's campaign has arranged for the rival television station to broadcast scenes of a disaster film, accompanied by the voice of a live announcer, so as to disrupt the election. The station manager's subsequent excuse, that "we forgot to announce it was a film transcription"[5] and Farrow's apology, in which he notes that "it was intended as a harmless amusement. We didn't anticipate anybody would take it seriously," obviously stirred echoes of the most famous media hoax of the era, Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* broadcast in the previous year. As Farrow's subsequent defeat suggests, those disingenuous explanations do no better than Welles's public apology to placate a deceived public. Moreover, they hardly mask a string of dangers revealed here: of political forces eager to control the new medium of television, a medium already aware of the reach and power of its voice, the ease with which television might manipulate and even panic the citizenry, and our own quick transformation into the sort of fully "cinematized" culture Virilio would later describe.

Of course, like many other B-films of the era, *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* sounds these warnings in a rather exaggerated manner that invariably paints television in like colors. But coming as it does at the close of the Machine Age and linking the looming force of television to the sort of media manipulation recently experienced in the Welles broadcast, it helps us better see some of the cultural perceptions of this new technology that were coming into focus. Like all of the other films considered here, it pointedly identifies television's real province not as entertainment but as news and public service presentations—areas that the film industry might well have been willing to cede to this potential competition. And with its parallel editing of "televised" scenes of panic in New York and other seaboard cities with the similar "live" images in Jeff's city, it underscores not only the perceived power of this new medium but also its ability to collapse space, that is, the way its distant dealing with subjects can also become locally intrusive, reaching even into the individual human psyche. In fact, this latter effect finds an added comic punctuation in the film's conclusion when Jeff's assistant Peaches tells his girlfriend Mable, "Now that we're alone, how about a little kiss?" only to find that their kiss is inadvertently broadcast

over television. Although that translation of private space into the public arena is presented as a kind of accidental practical joke, it further underscores how television might itself become a kind of cultural practical joker, potentially everywhere, as Miller suggests, always ready—unsettlingly—to share with the world our most intimate moments, as it becomes the very "air we breathe."

As Gwyneth Jones reminds, the icons of science fiction—like television in the films discussed here—are ultimately more than just contextual components; they "warn . . . that this is a different world; and at the same time constitute that difference" (163). In these Machine Age films, television was clearly helping to "constitute" a rather different sort of world, a science fictional realm marked not so much by futuristic cities or rocket travel, but by a new sense of space and by technologies that foreground that sense of space. On a note of optimism, these films suggest a kind of optical expansion of our personal world that television might usher in. More of that world and its people could be seen—whether they wished it or not—and instantaneously. Yet, these films also locate a darker possibility as well, finding in that seeing an uncomfortable collapse of space. Even if the prying eye of television could not quite reach everywhere, as *The Phantom Empire*, *Undersea Kingdom*, *The Invisible Ray*, and other works that play fast and loose with the technological facts would suggest, it was certainly seen as compromising our most intimate spaces, as Peaches and Mabel in *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* find out. It is an icon, then, that might help us not only to better gauge the level of uncertainty or anxiety surrounding technological developments in this era but also to more accurately measure the extent to which the Machine Age, in its early fascination with televisual technologies, was already invested in that "cinematized" world Virilio has described and that we now obviously inhabit.

Of course, it might well be argued that the film industry was simply casting into a negative light a potential competitor, and that television as we have long known it—along with its suspicious brother the cinema—is already a bit out of date, on the verge of being absorbed into the digital world of multimedia and virtual reality. Indeed, current developments have rendered many of the early cinematic visions of television irrelevant, making those video dreams no longer so outlandish, no longer science fictional, simply ordinary—at least with one key exception. That strange relation to space that we find in these early visions of television and the impact of that relation on our sense of self still evoke something of the authentic atmosphere of science fiction. Virilio has described a modern malady that he terms "technological vertigo or purely cinematic derealization, which affects our sense of spatial dimension" (*War* 85). Perhaps in these early visions of television we are seeing some symptoms of this malady, as space is beginning to slip from our control, to become not something we have technologically mastered but something that might even master us. That fantastic ability to see across oceans and continents, into outer space or through time, in fact, to position the prying eye anywhere our desires might wish,[6] finally leaves the figures of these Machine Age films, not unlike audiences today, strangely unanchored, lost in space, and even threatened because of its correlative implications for our most intimate spaces. For this reason, these films still merit our attention as what Jones terms "warnings," as they forecast our own science fictional fate as inhabitants of that "fictitious topology" that Virilio sees as the product of a relentless process of cinematization.

Even if the prying eye of television could not quite reach everywhere, it was certainly seen as compromising our most intimate spaces.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting that Hugo Gernsback, one of the key figures of early science fiction, edited a variety of journals that took the new medium of television as their primary focus. Among them, we might note *Radio and Television*, *Television*, and *Television News*. Not only a key figure in the growth of science fiction, Gernsback was also one of those most responsible for bringing the very term "television" into popular usage. In one of his earlier magazines, *Modern Electrics*, he published both articles on early television and stories in which this new technology played a central role, including his own serialized novel *Ralph 124C41+*. Often described as a gadget story, *Ralph 124C41+* depicts the distant future of 2660, an era largely transformed by the triumphs of science and technology, especially television.

2. For a litany of these popular conceptions of television's role, see Corn and Horrigan's account in *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, especially 24–27, as well as David Sarnoff's predictions in *Pioneering in Television*, 48–50.

3. In my study *A Distant Technology*, I offer an extended discussion of the metaphor of distance across a wide range of Machine Age science fiction films. It is a trope that runs through the films of many nations in this era and speaks to that cultural reconfiguration of private and public space implicated in the new broadcast technologies.

4. Caught in the quandary between doing his duty and exposing his family and friends to harm, Jeff Shannon winds up trying to avoid his problems by drinking them away in the aptly named "Looneyville Bar." The implication that trying to retreat from the political realities of the day is simply "looney" seems one of the film's more intriguing commentaries, particularly in light of the film industry's own general tendency in this era to avoid much direct commentary on the world situation—its own Shannon-like attitude.

5. This comment gains resonance because *S.O.S.—Tidal Wave* is essentially working its own variation on this television strategy as it has lifted this fairly convincing disaster footage from a combination of newsreels and other feature films. Most notably, the scenes of New York's destruction are taken from another Machine Age science fiction film, RKO's 1933 release *Deluge*.

6. The notion that the eye of television could see anywhere, and without the aid of a camera, is a rather common conception in films of this era. As *The Invisible Ray* rather exaggeratedly suggests, some believed that television was essentially a device for focusing rays of light from remote locations. The conclusion of the serial *The Phantom Empire* turns precisely on this notion, as the protagonist Gene Autry is cleared of murder charges when the real killer's confession is caught on an experimental television receiver that is simply "tuned in" to his geographical location.

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