Cinema and Cyberphobia

Internet Tropes in Film and Television

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Abstract: Despite the widespread embrace of the Internet and the second-nature way we each turn to Google for information, to social media to interact with our friends, to netporn and Netflix for recreation, film and television tells a very different story. On screen, a character dating online, gaming online or shopping online invariably serves as a clue that they're somewhat troubled: they may be a socially excluded nerd at one end of the spectrum, through to being a paedophile or homicidal maniac seeking prey at the other. On screen, the Internet is frequently presented as a clue, a risk factor and a rationale for a character's deviance or danger. While the Internet has come to play a significant role in screen narratives, an undercurrent in many depictions – in varying degrees of fervour – is that the Web is complicated, elusive and potentially even hazardous. This paper focuses on some of the persistent negative frames used in portrayals of the Internet and examines how, and why, they recur. This paper focuses on four technophobic frames including dehumanisation, the Internet as a badlands, the Web as possessing inherent vulnerabilities and the cyberbogeyman. Explanations for the popularity of these frames – notably as grounded in the mandates of filmmaking – are also proposed.

Introduction

Despite the widespread embrace of the Internet and the second-nature way we each turn to Google for information, to social media to interact with our friends, to netporn and Netflix for recreation (Katz & Rice 2002; Rosewarne 2016a; Rosewarne 2016b), film and television tells a very different story. On screen, showing a character dating online, gaming online or shopping online invariably serves as a clue that they're somewhat troubled: they may be a socially-excluded nerd at one end of the spectrum, through to being a paedophile or homicidal maniac seeking prey at the other. On screen, the Internet is frequently presented as a clue, a risk factor and a rationale for a character's deviance or danger. While the Internet has come to play a significant role in screen narratives, an undercurrent of many depictions

– in varying degrees of fervour – is that the Web is complicated, elusive and potentially even hazardous. This paper focuses on some of the persistent negative frames used in portrayals, examining why *fear* of the technology is such a common undercurrent.

More specific than technophobia and its general fear and loathing of all things new, *cyberphobia* zeroes in on the Internet, as the economist Joel Mokyr explains:

> "Cyberphobia" is in part based on the futuristic fear that impersonal and inhuman machines could eventually govern society, and that the differences between people and machines would eventually become hazy ([Mokyr 2002](): p. 247).

On a cursory level, cyberphobia is effortlessly identifiable in titles where a film – before the narrative even unfolds – links the Web with fear, for example *Killer Net* (1998), *The Cyberstalking* (1999), *FearDotCom* (2002), *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* (2005), *Dot.Kill* (2005), *Murder Dot Com* (2008), *Satsujin Douga Sit* (*Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show*) (2010), *The Craigslist Killer* (2011), *Cyberbully* (2011), *Cyberstalker* (2012), *UWantMe2KillHim?* (2013) and *Cyberbully* (2015). As these examples indicate, ominous titles are not something exclusively timed with the earliest days of the Web – when the technology was new and perhaps predictably scary – but they continue to haunt modern tech-themed storylines too. While titles alluding to a dark side of technology provide an easy hint to cyberphobia, this idea is more commonly conveyed through narrative: through storylines that default to some well-worn tropes of technology being the harbinger of doom. In the sections that follow, four frames common in negative portrayals of the Internet are explored including dehumanisation, the Internet as a badlands, the Web as possessing inherent vulnerabilities and the foreboding caricature of the cyberbogeyman. Explanations for the popularity of these frames – notably as grounded in the mandates of filmmaking – are also proposed.

Technology and Dehumanisation

In the sci-fi drama *Transcendence* (2014), protagonist Will's (Johnny Depp) consciousness is uploaded to a server allowing him to continue "interacting" after his death. Discussing Will's new existence, his colleague Max (Paul Bettany) remarks, "Maybe it was all inevitable. An unavoidable collision between mankind and technology." The same uploaded-consciousness idea was used over a decade earlier in the television sci-fi film *Netforce* (1999), and is a theme common in contemporary artificial intelligence narratives like *Ex-Machina* (2015). While occasionally an uploaded-consciousness story is presented positively, as in the animated *Big Hero 6* (2014), but more commonly, the presentation is linked to questions about what it means to be human. The idea that technology can compromise humanity is key

in both techno-and cyberphobia definitions (like Mokyr's) and notably in screen depictions. A relatively subtle way that dehumanisation enters a narrative is by the framing of Internet users as somehow different from "normal" people and as too closely connected to technology. While sometimes this transpires with characters being spoken of as being different – for example the hacker Lisbeth (Mara Rooney) is described as "different . . . in every way" by her employer in the drama *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) – more commonly the Internet dehumanises characters by framing them as too closely aligned with computers and suffering socially, if not also psychologically, as a result. In a scene from the pilot of the sitcom *Betas* (2013–2014), a bar is populated by male computer programmers. One of the programmers, Trey (Joe Dinicol), approaches an attractive woman, Lisa (Margo Harshman). He tries to make an advance but is quickly stopped:

> **Lisa:** I thought putting my bag on the stool would be a pretty clear sign I'm not looking to get hit on by every Aspy in the joint. Oh, but that's the thing about you guys, isn't it, you're not exactly aces when it comes to reading people.

Here, Lisa verbalises the popular screen connection between computer programmers and personality quirks, and more specifically, Asperger's Syndrome. In his book *American Nerd*, Ben Nugent observed: "if you line up the traits of people and fictional characters who are nerds with the traits that comprise Asperger's, the overlap is hard to ignore" (Nugent 2008: p. 124). In literary scholar Jordynn Jack's discussion of autism, she made a similar point, identifying that Asperger's characters "are usually depicted as a professionally successful yet socially inept geek or nerd" (Jack 2014: p. 29). On screen, there is a common coupling of Internet users with Asperger's-like qualities. I use *Asperger's-like* here because while the screen does sometimes portray *formally* diagnosed characters – for example Max Braverman (Max Burkholder) in the drama *Parenthood* (2010–2014) or Jerry Espenson (Christian Clemenson) in the legal-drama *Boston Legal* (2004–2008) – more common are socially awkward, obsessive, and often machine-like characters who are left *undiagnosed* and whom the audience is left to analyse.[1] Such Asperger's-speculation is also commonly conducted by commentators and academics. Many characters, for example, have been informally diagnosed by academics and commentators as having Asperger's, even when the narrative completely eschews the label, for example, the aforementioned Lisbeth in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (Schell 2011; Burstein et al 2011; Martin & Simms 2012; Thompson 2013), the physicist Sheldon (Jim Parsons) in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–) (Hardman et al 2011; Beahm 2011; Clifton 2012; Jack 2014), the IT worker Maurice (Richard Ayoade) in the sitcom *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013) (Burns 2013), Facebook pioneer Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) in the biopic *The Social Network* (2010) (Kiss 2010), the

hacker Jesse (Ashley Zukerman) in the crime-drama series *The Code* (2014–) ([Blundell 2014](#)), Noah (Josh Gad) in the comedy-drama *Wish I Was Here* (2014) ([Kozak 2014](#)) and Elliot (Rami Malek) in the drama *Mr. Robot* (2015–) ([Zetter 2015](#)).

The link between Asperger's, computer use and dehumanisation is a topic specifically addressed by Nugent:

> The form of social awkwardness that Asperger's engenders is machinelike... it means that their social awkwardness is created by difficulty in reading the kind of human communication that machines also find difficult to read (facial expression, eyes, tone of voice) ([Nugent 2008](#): p. 145).

While an assumed lack of emotions is a common screen hint to Asperger's – in "The Proton Transmogrification" episode of *The Big Bang Theory* for example, Howard (Simon Helberg) says to Sheldon, following the death of Sheldon's mentor, "You're being so quiet. Are you upset or are you just rebooting?" – more commonly this idea is presented via a lack of emotionality in speech. In research on the syndrome, often mentioned is vocal flat-affect ([Attwood 1998](#)). A computer user on screen often *sounds* different, sounds monotonous, to those around them: speech patterns are a way to establish that a character is different while also framing them as specifically *machinelike*, or even *computerlike*, thus at least partly *dehumanised*. In other narratives, dehumanisation is taken to more extreme ends. Mary Shelley's 1818 book *Frankenstein* is often considered the reference point for technology-out-of-control narratives; the book in fact, gets name-checked in modern Internet era narratives including *The Cyberstalking* and *Ex-Machina* to hint to the danger apparent when humans and technology blurs. The thriller *Virtuosity* (1995) for example, imagined a dystopia where personality attributes – notably those of *serial killers* – could be uploaded into cyberspace and then get downloaded into a single, real-life homicidal maniac. Virtual reality presentations provide another means for the man-machine blur to play out. In *The Cyberstalking* for example, the software begins to adapt and write its own code leading to physical crimes playing out in cyberspace. In the much earlier narrative, *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), via the use of virtual reality software, a rape is facilitated within the "game": seemingly, people act differently – and, notably, more *criminally* – when the technology enables it.

The fear of dehumanisation is a paranoia that has haunted each new technology – from production lines ([Jordan 1968](#)) and television ([Mittell 2010](#)) through to supermarket self check-outs ([Stephens 2013](#)) – the moment they get launched. While dehumanisation is a concern in portrayals of the Internet because it muddies understandings and enthusiasm about new technologies and helps to perpetuate unflattering stereotypes of users ([Rosewarne 2016a](#)), the *why* of the endurance of this fear is worth examining. For a narrative to be scary,

a threat needs to exist, commonly a threat to personhood. While the action, thriller, horror and crime genres put the body in peril constantly, to do so in a technology-themed narrative is often more challenging given that PCs alone aren't generally particularly frightening. While, as discussed in this paper, personhood can indeed be threatened by forces connected to, or merely assumed as connected to the Internet, dehumanisation provides a very specific kind of threat useful in a narrative. By presenting technology as able to somehow fuse with humanity, two plausible threats are created: one, that in becoming less human, we lose our rights, our authority and our status thus potentially become a subordinate species; and two, that humans may becoming threated by a *new* species that is smarter and stronger than us. All narratives make use of well-established storytelling devices. For those with the Internet as a key theme, the Internet has to be shaped as creating some kind of believable threat: connecting it to dehumanisation in one example.

Another way cyberphobia plays out on screen is via the framing of the Internet as both a geographic place and, notably, a badlands.

The Badlands of the Internet

In the romantic-comedy *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998), a brief exchange transpires between two teenage nerds, Geoff (Joel Michaely) and Murphy (Jay Paulson):

> **Geoff:** Isn't this the weekend that you're supposed to meet your girlfriend from the Internet?
>
> **Murphy:** Yeah, but she has some photo shoot in Fiji . . . for a catalog or something.
>
> **Geoff:** Oh, man. That sucks.
>
> **Murphy:** Yeah. I guess that's just the price you pay for dating Christie Turlington.

Here, the notion of a person being *from the Internet* is verbalised, an idea that gets repeated widely on screen. In the "Hammerhead Sharks" episode of the legal-drama *The Practice* (1997–2004), the sister (Dreya Weber) of a murder victim remarks, "Well, I can't believe she would go off and meet up with some stranger from the Internet." In the "Four to Tango" episode of the drama series *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), a teacher (Gloria Crist) quipped, "You know, I dated a guy from the Internet once. Hideous." In the opening scene of *NetForce*, the "cybercop" Steve Day (Kris Kristofferson), sought a warrant from a judge: "He's in there," Steve said, referring to the Internet. In the gay-themed comedy *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat* (2009), Zack (Chris Salvatore) introduces his new acquaintance: "this is Ryan from the Internet." In a scene from *The Social Network*, Sean (Justin Timberlake)

loftily pronounced, "We lived on farms and then we lived in cities and now we're going to live on the Internet." In the "Amen" episode of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014), MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) alleged that her colleague Neal (Dev Patel), "live[s] on the Internet." In each of these examples, the Internet is framed as a location where somebody could be *from* or a place where they can *go*. While such remarks can simply be construed as shorthand for describing a relationship initiated or carried out online, as related to this discussion these comments also hint to the Internet being conceived of as a place; an idea discussed by digital ethics researcher Annette Markham:

> Many users and researchers conceptualize the Internet as a place as well as a tool. From this perspective, the Internet describes not only the network that structures interactions but also the cultural spaces in which meaningful human interactions occur… (Markham 2011: p. 99).

Long before Markham's work of course, spatial metaphors have been popular in computer science discussions: in writings on software, for example, metaphors of *cathedrals* and *bazaars* were presented, as in Eric Raymond's (1999) work; equally, the *walled garden* persists as a *spatial* way to think about efforts by companies like AOL in the 1990s and more recently by Apple and Facebook to keep online use conducted within their structured, finite and mediated spaces (Quiggin 2013). The endurance of William Gibson's term *cyberspace* decades on from its first use in the novel *Neuromancer* (1984), continues to reflect our enthusiasm to make the technology more mentally manageable.

More than just being *any* place, on screen the Internet continues to be framed as a site where people are more likely to be different, creepy or completely dangerous. Just as thinking about the Internet as a place is not new, neither is thinking of it – or framing it on screen – as dangerous. Since the earliest days of the Web, discussions have used the metaphor of the "Wild West" (Rosewarne 2016a). While this idea can describe a new and exciting electronic "frontier", more commonly the metaphor is deployed to reference lawlessness. In his 1990 essay on cyberspace for example, John Perry Barlow described a world that would later constitute a popular screen portrayal: "the actual natives [of cyberspace] are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is of course a perfect breeding ground for outlaws and new ideas about liberty" (Barlow 1990: p. 45). In 1997, cultural theorists John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt went so far as to identify a series of parallels between the Internet and the actual Wild West, including, "In the Wild West almost anything could occur. There was no one to enforce overall law and order, only isolated packets of local law. The same is true in cyberspace" (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 1997: p. 242). The Wild West metaphor of the Internet frequently plays out on screen: the technology is presented as a place that breeds cyberpredators as well as a *where* that victims are found.

Akin to the endurance of dehumanisation as a narrative theme, the idea of the Internet as a geographic badlands helps fuel misunderstandings about technology and encourages stereotyping of the industry and its users. Perhaps more interesting however, is the why of the endurance of scary spatial metaphors. Most obviously, such metaphors help to make abstract concepts more comprehensible, something discussed by Alexander Tokar in his book *Metaphors of the Web 2.0*:

> [M]etaphorical pluralism often emerges when, as a consequence of a technological innovation, language users need to verbalize (i.e., find expressions that can be used to refer to) a new, highly complex concrete concept such as, for example, the Internet… [T]he Internet is also often refereed to as *agora*, *electronic frontier*, *cyberspace*, *global village*, *empyrean realm*, *information superhighway*, *ocean of information*, *container*, *prosthesis for the senses* or *limbs*, *city* etc (Tokar 2009: p. 1).

In film, the Internet can be presented as a physical space through dialogue (as in the examples discussed earlier), or visually as a physical site as in *The Matrix* (1999) or *The Cyberstalking*. Given, as discussed elsewhere (Rosewarne 2016a), that *showing* a computer activity like hacking in film is notoriously difficult – and often is depicted particularly farcically as in the fellatio/hack scene in *Swordfish* (2001), or the two colleagues typing on the one keyboard to stop the hack in the "The Bone Yard" episode of the crime-drama NCIS (2003–) – film is a visual medium and portraying the Internet on screen is something significantly aided by metaphors with a visual (and spatial) component; an idea discussed by Tokar, who draws on the work of Eva Gehring (2004): "the Internet is a space because the Internet is not a space. That is, the Internet lacks space, but since the concept of space is so important for language users, spatial metaphors linguistically compensate the lack of space" (Tokar 2009: p. 19). Depicting the Internet as a place a person can be from, or go to, helps give a something *without* space a physical form, an essential component in filmmaking. Of course, more than just *any* place, the place is commonly depicted as notably scary and unknowable, in turn creating necessary threat and tension in a narrative.

A third negative frame common in portrayals of the Internet is that the technology makes its users vulnerable; that the nature of Internet use makes it a dangerous place.

The Inherent Vulnerabilities

Another kind of geographic presentation of the Internet is the technology somehow existing exclusively inside a computer or cell phone, alternatively that predatory behaviour transpires exclusively "in there" and thus can be *contained* there; something depicted widely on screen through dialogue and in action. In the romantic-comedy *You've Got Mail* (1998) for example,

when "NY152"/Joe (Tom Hanks) first suggested via email to "Shopgirl"/Kathleen (Meg Ryan) that they meet up in person, Kathleen quickly closed the lid of her laptop: by doing so, seemingly, her new online relationship – one which she already felt was bordering on infidelity – could be "contained". In the "A League of their Own" episode of the sitcom *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010), while on an online dating site, Christina (Ashley Jensen) "bumped into" her husband. She quickly shut her laptop as though doing so could *shut down* her discomfort. In the final scene of the drama *Cyberbully* (2015), the teen protagonist Casey (Maisie Williams), asked the anonymous cyberbully who had been harassing her throughout the narrative: "What are you when I stop talking to you?" Casey then closed the lid of her laptop before waiting for an answer. In the thriller *Copycat* (1995), Helen (Sigourney Weaver) received a photo via email of a serial killer's new victim. In response, she frantically unplugged her computer: "It's an open window. He can crawl in anytime he likes." In the mini-series *Killer Net*, after an online stalking game leads to a real-life murder, Scott (Tam Williams) hurls his computer out the window. In each of these examples, characters attempt to physically manage a threatening world by treating online interactions as something that can be contained within a fixed geographic space and through controlling one single piece of hardware.

While in some screen examples attempts are made to somehow physically limit a digital problem, in others there is a spoken recognition that the Internet actually makes doing so impossible. Helen in *Copycat* noted that predators can use the Internet to "crawl in anytime", and this is an idea verbalised in numerous examples. In the "P911" episode of the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–), the profiler Katie Cole (Mary Page Keller) discussed cyberpaedophiles and remarked, "All the security in the world can't stop them coming through our doors." In the "Chat Room" episode of the crime-drama *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), Detective Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) and his wife, Kathy (Isabel Gillies) discussed this same idea:

Kathy:	It scares me.
Elliot:	Honey, it scares me too. But I can't just walk into a room a restrain the guy.
Kathy:	Why not?
Elliot:	I mean, these predators. You tell me where they are. I can't hear them, I can't see them.
Kathy:	But they're out there.
Elliot:	Honey, they're in here <gestures to the computer>

Later in the episode Elliot tells his daughter, "You know how I lock up all the doors and windows? Now they're coming in through there"; again he points to the computer. In the made-for-television drama *The Craigslist Killer*, Detective Bennett (William Baldwin) verbalises a similar concern, "Used to be able to see who the bad guys were, right? Now it's all text and emails and websites. Creeps are hiding in our houses and we don't even know who they are."

A key element that enables the Internet to be perceived as possessing inherent vulnerabilities is anonymity: that the possibility of deception makes crime online unique. In one of the final scenes of the thriller *Perfect Stranger* (2007), the journalist Rowena (Halle Berry) wrote in an article, "[The Internet] is a world, you think, where actions have no consequences, where guilt is cloaked by anonymity, where there are no fingerprints." While in some narratives, as discussed earlier, the Internet is presented as though it's a definable geographic place, in others however, the portrayal is as a kind of unreal space where an individual doesn't always feel the same level of connection to, ownership of, accountability for, or even embarrassment over their interactions. This idea has been extensively analysed by psychologist Sherry Turkle in realms such as gaming (Turkle 1984; Turkle 1995), as well as by a range of psychologists in the context of cyberbullying: as Robin Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia Agatston identified, "Without the threat of punishment or disapproval, people may carry their actions much further than they normally would" (Kowalski et al 2012: p. 86).

Framing the Internet on screen as dangerous is primarily a way to ratchet up tension. Crime has long had an important role in screen fiction (Miller 2012) and for filmmakers, the Internet is just another place/space for crime stories to be set. The production of the television series *CSI: Cyber* (2015–), is a particularly good illustration of this. The series' predecessors *CSI* (2000–2015), *CSI: NY* (2004–2013) and *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012) were each set around physical crimes like rape and murder transpiring in physical cities including Las Vegas, New York and Miami. *CSI: Cyber* makes the physical city much less important than *cyberspace*: in this series the location and nature of crime is completely reconceptualised.

The badlands of the Internet and the inherent vulnerabilities within commonly lead to the screen inclusion of a speculative foreboding figure that I dub the *cyberbogeyman* (Rosewarne 2016a): the fourth and final frame examined in this paper.

The Cyberbogeyman

Bogeyman commonly conjures thoughts of a nightmarish figure that frightens children. In the context of cyberspace however, this imaginary creature can just as readily terrify adults.

The bogeyman personifies fears of the unknown and serves as an embodiment of transgression and punishment.

During the earliest days of the Web the technology was scarcely understood and thus the Internet itself was popularly conceived as a generalised kind of bogeyman (Rosewarne 2016a). In Internet-themed screen narratives this idea is identifiable in numerous films produced in the 1990s. A classic example is the thriller *The Net* (1995), which centred on the efforts of computer programmer Angela (Sandra Bullock) to untangle herself from a cyberconspiracy involving hacking and identity theft. In his discussion of the film, cultural theorist Aaron Tucker identified: "Even the title *The Net* recalls monster films such as *The Blob* [1958] . . . and *The Fly* [1958] . . . with creatures and transformations that produced grotesque and inexplicable consequences" (Tucker 2014: p. 43). Tucker spotlights how early narratives portrayed the Internet not merely as a dangerous *place* but more so as a kind of autonomous *thing* – if not an autonomous *creature* – with, presumably, nefarious intent.

By its very nature, the bogeyman is imaginary, and thus, within narratives the cyberbogeyman exists as a primarily *dreamt up* threat. While sometimes Internet-themed crime is indeed portrayed, much more common is the verbalised *presumption* of it. A typical take on this transpires in the "Juliet Takes a Luvvah" episode of the comedy-crime series *Psych* (2006–2014) in a scene where Shawn (James Roday) walked in on his colleague Gus (Dulé Hill) taking selfies:

> **Shawn:** Uh, what are you doing?
>
> **Gus:** Look, it's not what it looks like. I'm just taking additional photos for my soulmateconnect.com online dating profile.
>
> **Shawn:** Phew. I thought there was something truly embarrassing going on in here.
>
> **Gus:** Look, I need to be in love, Shawn. Everyone I've gone after over the last year has either been a killer or dating a killer.
>
> **Shawn:** Oh, well, by all means, let's scour the Internet, the place where everyone knows it's just decent, normal, sane people looking for true love.

Shawn's comments reflect a commonly deployed, and often humorous speculation that if a person chooses to go online, notably for dating, they will encounter people who are anything *but* decent, normal, or sane; a theme widely apparent across genres. In the opening of the comedy *EuroTrip* (2004) for example, Scotty (Scott Mechlowicz) was e-mailing his German

pen pal. Watching on, Scotty's friend, Cooper (Jacob Pitts), outlined the perils of meeting people online:

> You met a [quote] cool guy [quote] on the [quote] Internet [quote], okay. This is how these sexual predators work. Next thing you know he's going to want to [quote] arrange a meeting [quote] where he will gas you and stuff you in the back of his van and make a wind chime out of your genitals.

In the romance *Meet Prince Charming* (2002), Samantha (Tia Carrere) typed a message to her secret online admirer, Jack (David Charvet), confessing, "I'm a little nervous. What if you're a psycho killer?" In the drama *On_Line* (2002), Moira (Isabel Gillies) told her friend, Ed (Eric Millegan), about her upcoming online date; Ed, concernedly, asked, "What if he turns out to be a complete psycho or something?" In an unnamed episode of the gay-themed series *Lip Service* (2010–2012), Tess (Fiona Button) was uninterested in Frankie's (Ruta Gedmintas) suggestion of online dating: "No, absolutely not, I'm not that desperate; it's for skanks and psychos." The "Two Bodies in the Lab" episode of the crime-drama series *Bones* (2005–) opened with the protagonist, Temperance (Emily Deschanel), communicating on SensiblePartners.com. Her colleague, Agent Booth (David Boreanaz), asked her, "So what if your computer date's psycho?" In the "Three Men and a Boubier" episode of the sitcom *Super Fun Night* (2013–2014), Kimmie (Rebel Wilson) suggested that she and her roommates sign up for online dating to which Helen-Alice (Liza Lapira), cautioned, "I don't know, Kimmie. There are too many weirdos online." In the *Catfish* (2010) documentary, a waitress provided Nev, the protagonist, her thoughts on online dating, "I know my friend, she actually just met a guy the other day off the Internet and he was a total weirdo." In the "I'm Moving On" episode of the drama *Hart of Dixie* (2011–2015), after Zoe (Rachel Bilson) decided to start dating online, her friend, Wade (Wilson Bethel), warned her, "Gotta be careful. Lots of freaks and weirdos online." In the comedy *Da Kath and Kim Code* (2005), unlucky-in-love Sharon (Magda Szubanski) began Internet dating and her friend Kath (Jane Turner) remarked worriedly, "Gee, Internet dating. I hope Sharon's careful. There's a lot of loonies out there." In the romantic-comedy *Because I Said So* (2007), Daphne (Diane Keaton) used the Internet to search for a partner for her daughter, Milly (Mandy Moore). Daphne's online ad attempted to exclude those she assumed populated cyberspace: "Let me preface this ad by saying if you're a nut job, pervert, or fruit cake, move on." In the "Online Dating" episode of the sitcom *Hot Properties* (2005), Ava (Gail O'Grady) referred to online dating as a "wonderfully efficient way for perverts around the world to check you out." In the comedy-drama *Dogging: A Love Story* (2009), while in a chat room, Laura (Kate Heppell) asked Dan (Luke Treadaway) what he was thinking and he responded, "I was thinking, are you an old pervert?" In each of these examples, assumptions – undoubtedly fuelled, at least

in part, by the screen's persistently negative framing of the Internet – position "Internet people" as somehow inherently different.

The "natural" extension of fears of weirdos, psychos, and perverts is the assumption that people encountered online might actually be *criminals*. In the comedy *Ten Inch Hero* (2007), Jen (Clea DuVall) was falling in love with her online correspondent "Fuzzy22." Fearing disaster, her colleague, Piper (Elisabeth Harnois) cautioned, "So basically he could be Charles Manson with a laptop?" In the "A League of Their Own" episode of *Ugly Betty*, in the aftermath of Betty's (America Ferrera) break-up, she discussed her predicament with Christina, in turn revealing her own cyberbogeyman fears:

> **Christina:** Okay, executive decision – I'm gonna put your profile on Bachelocity.com.
>
> **Betty:** Internet Dating? There are freaks online. Why don't you just chop me into pieces yourself, and we can cut out the middleman?

In the biopic *One Chance* (2013), Paul (James Corden) was on his first date with his Internet girlfriend, Julz (Alexandra Roach), when Julz got a telephone call: "Oh, it's just my mum," she explained, "making sure that I'm still alive and you haven't murdered me." In the "In the Mix, on the Books, and in the Freezer" episode of the sitcom *Manhattan Love Story* (2014), Dana (Analeigh Tipton) was worried about her upcoming Tinder date: "Hoping he's not a serial killer," she mused. In "The Fall" episode of the comedy-drama series *Grace and Frankie* (2015–), Grace (Jane Fonda) stated her objection to online dating: "I choose not to be murdered by a stranger that I met online." In the "Do You Wanna Dance?" episode of the legal-drama *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), the title character (Calista Flockhart) began online dating and her roommate, Renee (Lisa Nicole Carson), cautioned, "You realise this guy's probably got two heads and a criminal record." In the television thriller *The Girl He Met Online* (2014), while scanning through profile photos, Gillian (Yvonne Zima) gave a running commentary, "Momma's boy, no thank you, uggh, you're like a hundred years old, red neck trailer trash, too young . . . serial killer." Each of these examples echoes audience suspicions about the *kinds* of people presumed to be populating cyberspace: that they are different and scarier than "normal" people, even if, in most of these examples, the idea is only ever mere speculation.

Another screen presentation of the cyberbogeyman is via scenes where online activity is presumed – in the context of an investigation storyline – to have a role in crime but, as above, exists purely as madcap imaginings. In "The Friendly Skies" episode of the crime-drama *Without a Trace* (2002–2009), for example, the murder at the centre of the narrative

was assumed to be linked to the victim's online dating. The explosion in the "Two Bodies in the Lab" episode of *Bones* was quickly assumed to involve the man whom Temperance had met online. In the "Generation of Vipers" episode of the crime-drama *Lewis* (2007–), online dating was assumed to be relevant to a professor's murder. The "New Evidence" and "Hammerhead Sharks" episodes of *The Practice* centred on a murder victim who had been exchanging erotic e-mails with Dennis (Ted Marcoux) prior to her death; Dennis was thus instantly suspected of murder. The title and most of the plot of *Murder Dot Com* explicitly implied that a website had something to do with the crime at the centre of the narrative. In the "Paranoia" episode of crime-drama *Law & Order* (1990–2010), when a girl was found stabbed to death, detectives immediately began pursuing "some kinkoid in cyberspace" who had participated in explicit online discussions. In the "Babes" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, a pregnant teenage girl, Fidelia (Jessica Varley), appeared to have committed suicide after being cyberbullied. Similar speculation played out in the "Knuckle Up" episode of crime-drama *Cold Case* (2003–2010), when an online video of a fight was assumed to be evidence of cyberbullying. In each of these examples, the crimes, in fact, ended up having *nothing* to do with the Internet whatsoever. Each example however, highlighted the simple *assumption* that the Internet is evil and reflected an audience's willingness to believe that cyberbogeymen lurk on every corner.

A central underpinning of the screen's cyberbogeyman is its entrenched existence in social mythology: that film and television reflect the anxieties of our culture. A survey, for example, conducted by the Pew Research Center, found that 66 percent of Internet users thought that online dating was dangerous and, of those who had actually tried it, 43 percent claimed they believed it was risky (Madden & Lenhart 2006). In sexual health researchers Danielle Couch, Pranee Liamputtong, and Marian Pitts' study on online dating, the authors quoted several participants who articulated their own cyberbogeymen fears: "Estelle," for example, noted, "i think your also hopeing that the person isn't like some serial killer" [sic], while "Tommy" claimed, "you never know if you're going to meet an axe murderer." "Clarissa" in the same study said, "I think dating sites are extremely dangerous. They are Psychopaths playgrounds" (in Couch et al 2012: p. 708). The sociologist John Bridges quoted "Joyce" in his book *The Illusion of Intimacy*: the woman had once been a former Match.com user and described her experiences: "They just feed on women and men who are hurting and all they do is provide a tool for perverts" (Bridges 2012: p. 40).

The fears of the bogeyman are part of the long history of concerns about "bad men" and, more specifically, fears of suitors met through anonymous channels. Unlike personal ads and blind dating however, online dating is an enormous industry whereby participation has now become mainstream – so much so, in fact, that as Bridges notes, this method has replaced

many others and is often conceived of as "the only game in town" ([Bridges 2012](): p. 43). In turn, with more people involved, a greater number of users are feeling apprehensive about meeting a psycho and thus their fears gets normalised. While in the pre-Internet dating age, the idea of meeting a psycho or a pervert through anonymous channels was still a concern, the Internet – both in reality and through its popular media depiction – is the catalyst for epidemic fears of *what if*. In the romance *A Cinderella Story* (2004) for example, during one of Sam (Hilary Duff) and Austin's (Chad Michael Murray) first in-person meetings they had the following exchange:

> **Austin:**   You do actually go to North Valley high school, right?
>
> **Sam:**   Of course.
>
> **Austin:**   Well, I'm just checking, you never know with the Internet.

The *you never know with the Internet* idea was similarly alluded to in the "Body of Evidence" episode of the crime-drama *New Tricks* (2003–), when the police department's IT expert, Xander (Andy Rush), explained how difficult it is to gauge identity online: "This is the Internet. The cloak of anonymity. Nobody knows who anybody is." Austin and Xander both reference anonymity. While the exploitation of anonymity is not unique to the Internet ([Harrington 2009]()), the technology makes it easier, if not even normalising it.

On screen, the cyberbogeyman possibilities grounded in anonymous encounters are readily identifiable. In the comedy-drama *Burn After Reading* (2008), Linda (Frances McDormand) discussed her online dating experiences with her colleague Ted (Richard Jenkins). Two of Ted's cautionary remarks included, "Linda, what do you really know about this guy?" and – in line with the psycho and pervert fears alluded to earlier – "You know, he could be one of these guys who cruises the Internet." A similar comment was made in the "Pilgrimage" episode of the comedy-drama series *Nurse Jackie* (2009–): Dr. Cooper (Peter Facinelli) had started online dating and his colleague, Dr. Roman (Betty Gilpin), cautioned, "Do you have any idea what kind of women troll those sites?" On one hand, anonymity can simply be construed as a fact of the Internet: that unless one *actively* chooses to divulge identity or to provide accurate photos, the physical separation of individuals means that they are, by default, communicating anonymously. On the surface anonymity isn't necessarily good or bad, and certainly on screen the concealment of identity boasts positive *and* negative attributes. In terms of positives, as Dr. Hobson (Clare Holman) commented in the "Generation of Vipers" episode of *Lewis*, "Online you can reveal yourself relatively painlessly." In an early scene in the "Two Bodies in the Lab" episode of *Bones*, when Temperance's online match suggested an offline meeting, she was initially reluctant: "I'm enjoying the anonymity," she confessed. More commonly however, the possibility of

anonymity – of *duplicity* – feeds bogeyman fears. (Paradoxically of course: as Nick Paumgarten reminds us in his *New Yorker* article about online dating, "Bars don't do background checks, either" [Paumgarten 2011]).

Just as turning the abstract concept of the Internet into a spatial metaphor, the cyberbogeyman functions similarly: to give form – to give *figure* – to generalised fears of the bad men of cyberspace. While in the examples discussed in this chapter, form centres on vague fears of murderers or rapists, the mythology of Slenderman is a popular real-life attempt to give actually physical form – and actual physical descriptions – to the cyberbogeyman (Dewey 2014; Rosewarne 2016a).

Conclusion

Ubiquitous Internet use off-screen is a reality largely absent from the screen (Rosewarne 2016a; Rosewarne 2016b). Instead, film and television tell a tale of the Internet as a thing, a place, a tool, worth fearing; of Internet users as somehow more strange, nefarious and duplicitous than everyone else. While the picture is bleak, I'm not sure we should be too surprised. Fears of new technology have a very long history and more specifically, fears of new things are culturally well-entrenched. With an even longer history than fears of the Internet leading to social decay is the fear that new things are scary things. Such fears are hinged upon ideas that machines change, if not sometimes even *replacing*, the ways things have always been done and thus threaten our concepts of what it means to be human. For those of us from non-tech backgrounds, such technology also exposes our intellectual shortcomings and thus we fear it because it is changing our lives so rapidly and yet our understanding of precisely how is limited. Equally, to justify the inclusion of something as mundane as ordinary Internet use in a screen narrative it needs to lead somewhere: to move a plot forward or, at the very least, to reveal something about a character. The representations of the Internet as discussed throughout this paper are thus skewed towards fear, danger and perversion because such scenes make for much more interesting – more *dramatic* – viewing than an online search for a restaurant location or cheap price on shampoo.

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[1] Such a situation, presumably, means that filmmakers aren't beholden to an "accurate" or "faithful" portrayal of the syndrome, and thus can pick and choose which aspects they utilise for humour. Oktay Ege Kozak discusses this issue in his review of *Wish I Was Here*: "Adding to all of this conflict is a supposedly genius brother (Josh Gad) who seems to have a case of Movie Asperger's (All of the comedic quirks, half of the painful emotional problems), who refuses to see his judgmental father in his deathbed" (Kozak 2014).