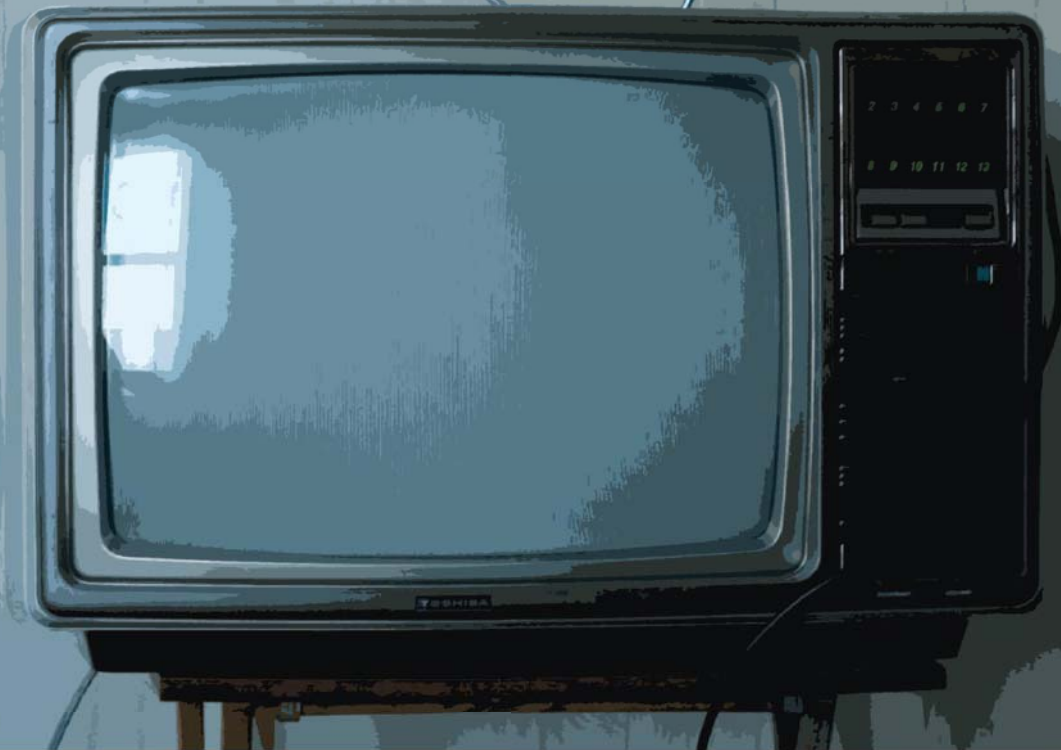


OPEN INVITATIONS

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For the majority of his early childhood the boy would lay on his back under the covers of his bed after he was sent off to sleep each night, listening to screaming and crashing and wishing for silence. The screams could be assigned ownership because they belonged to either his mother or his father. The crashings required speculation, elimination of possibility, imagination, guessing as to which hurled object possessed which impacted sound. There were most likely some evenings of the week when there was no screaming and no crashing, but weekends were never devoid of it.

Sunday night through Thursday night the boy would lay awake and listen to the screaming and the crashing until the home became dark and soundless. Then, he would be able to finally will himself to sleep in those few hours of silence before the screaming and crashing resumed in the morning. But on Friday and Saturday nights of his early boyhood, he would wait for the screaming and crashing to cease. Eventually, he would rise, put on his bathrobe and slippers and, ever so gently, open his bedroom door to the carpeted hallway. He would walk carefully by his mother and father's closed bedroom door and enter the front room of the home. If he saw either his mother or his father asleep on the couch, he would immediately return to his bedroom. But on the Friday and Saturday nights that the couch was not occupied, he would go to the kitchen and pour himself a tall glass of milk and butter a slice of challah bread. He would then tiptoe down the basement stairs, pausing at the intervals of tiny creaks.

The basement was where the family television was kept and where, on Friday and Saturday nights that allowed, the boy replaced the screaming and crashing in his life with laughter and smiles. All he had to do was see that it was past midnight, flick on the television, and turn the knob to local Channel 5.

And the boy would then leave the world of screaming and crashing to places of laughter and smiles with a tall glass of milk and buttered challah bread as supporting comfort. The boy's early childhood preceded every suburban home possessing a VCR and eventually a DVD player. It preceded monthly cable packages. It preceded the Worldwide Web. It preceded being able to bring anything of his liking into his personal world with a tap of his finger to a cellular phone.

It was instead, the last age of late night visitation. And during his early childhood, it saved the boy every Friday and Saturday night that it could be accommodated. He was saved by the now forgotten joy of After Midnight Television Programming.

On those Friday and Saturday nights of his early childhood, the boy was offered open invitations to visitors of a colorless yet kinder world. The boy was visited by Mary Pickford in a wheelchair. He was visited by Rudolph Valentino dancing the tango. He was visited by Gloria Swanson being a rebellious convent girl. He was visited by Bela Lugosi embodying the world's most famous blood-sucking myth. He was visited by Douglas Fairbanks taking money from the well-to-do and giving it to the needy. These visitors from a silent era became the boy's silent saviors.

And in those Friday and Saturday nights when the boy escaped the screaming and the crashing of his home in exchange for laughter and smiles, he became...

For the few hours he was visited by his silent saviors, he was invited into worlds where

he could become Charlie Chaplin moving as a dehumanized component of machinery. He could become Harold Lloyd dangling from a giant clock. He could become Buster Keaton attempting to prevent the woman he loved from marrying another man. He could become...no, he could feel...Boris Karloff's alienation and isolation as the abandoned, unnatural creation of a misguided scientist.

Sometimes the boy's buttered challah bread would go untouched, because he had forgotten about it as he never wanted to leave those inviting silent worlds that were the temporary sanctuary to the screaming and crashing of his own world. But he would always finish his tall glass of milk.

On some of these Friday and Saturday nights—no, early mornings really—the boy would hear his parents' bedroom door creak open and he would quickly turn the television sound down, frightened, wondering if he had remembered to close his own bedroom door as to not arouse their suspicions. He would listen as the hallway bathroom toilet flushed and would wait for many moments. Then, he would turn the sound back up again to continue along with the adventures of his silent saviors.

When the visitations of the weekend ended, the boy would turn off the television after making sure to watch the credits all the way through. He would finish his tall glass of milk and his buttered challah bread if not already consumed. And he would carefully tiptoe back up the creaking basement stairs and walk carefully along the carpeted hallway passing the closed door his mother and father were behind to his bedroom where he would sleep for the few hours of silence before the screaming and crashing resumed in the morning.

And for the remainder of the week the boy would remind himself, that if he once again made it through five more days until the next weekend, the open invitations of his visiting silent saviors could remind him that laughter and smiles really did exist. Even if they only did so from silent black white images in a television screen.