Television Scales

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Five Keywords

Whereas each section of the prior chapter housed its own partial constellation, the five sections of this chapter are meant, themselves, to configure the stars of a five-part constellation—in order (among other effects) to recalibrate our sense of “the chapter” as a formal container, one that has a different scalar inflection. Redoubling that conceptual move, each section also focuses on a respective object that has a different scalar inflection from the other four main objects of the chapter. Working with a remainder from the final section of the prior chapter, regarding embodied consumption (or its refusal), Weight addresses a suite of performers in a range of programming focused variously on health, fitness, diet, cooking, or baking. Rule looks closely at a variety of interlocking audiovisual elements in just two installments of a proto-reality series, This Old House. Map homes in on a single graphic design element used in the reality television series House Hunters International. Interval engages a massive fan labor to transcribe the scripts of American daytime serials (and perversely mines a scholarly search tool designed to extract value from the resultant corpus) in order to identify the variable intervals that can be used for charting twenty-first-century language uses in said serials—and then to deform and reform the scales of those intervals. And, finally, Ladder, also furnishing a remainder about cults for the next chapter, traces
in Hulu’s *The Path* a tension between an overarching serialized narrative and a likewise overarching mythos about ladder-scaling, which obtains over the course of the series’s run. Though it would give too much weight, as it were, to the keyword *ladder,* as opposed to *weight,* *map,* and the like, for me to metaphorize each chapter section as a ladder’s rung (and, in the process, to suggest — misleadingly — a teleological trajectory from one section to the next), I do offer these progressive sections in their particular order with the invitation for you to read, across the cuts between them, a building intensification and a spiraling involution that depends in part on the sections’ ordering and that ordering’s way of connecting the sections partially to one another.

**Weight**

If the specters of addiction discourse and addiction spectatorship hang over this chapter as two of the Strathernian remainders from the prior one, then Jack LaLanne arrives just in time to offer a hangover cure. As he says in a paradigmatic, early 1960s-era installment of *The Jack LaLanne Show* — one of the easiest to hand because of its sharing on YouTube and its algorithmic rise to the top of a Google search — “What do I see? I see a lot of new students. And I see that these students are suffering from hangovers. Tsk, tsk, tsk. I guess you had kind of a rough weekend. I’m gonna show you what to do about that hangover! Get up on your feet, give me a big smile.”¹ Amusing as it is to watch LaLanne proceed, punning, to clarify that he actually has the cure not for over-intoxication but for the flabby flesh “hanging over” here and “hanging over” there, resultant from poor diet and lack of exercise, I am less interested in him for his fitness philosophy and its manifestation in embodied techniques — or even in *The Jack LaLanne Show* for its massive scale as the longest-running exercise program in American tel-

evision — than for the partial connection that prominent scholars (and others) have made between LaLanne and one of his storied television contemporaries, Julia Child. In a book focused on Child’s likewise long-running series, *The French Chef*, Dana Polan asserts that “[w]hile Julia Child needs to be situated in a history of cuisine in America, she also belongs to a history of television and, in particular, to that common brand of nonfictional hosted programs popular in the 1950s through the 1960s and peopled by names such as Jack LaLanne, Zachary, Officer Joe Bolton, Vampira, and so on.”2 Similarly, Laurie Ouellette links the two figures and, moreover, links them as exceptional in a period “when lifestyle experts may have achieved notoriety but were not treated as celebrities” and did not tend to “build their own brands around their TV personas”; by contrast, “especially charismatic figures like Jack LaLanne, of the exercise program *The Jack LaLanne Show* (1951–1985), and Julia Child, host of *The French Chef*, achieved […] fame and engaged in book publishing.”3 Even a casual blogger with no evident expertise in television history makes the partial connection when she writes summarily, “Julia Child taught us to cook by way of the TV, and Jack LaLanne taught us to exercise to keep the excess weight in bounds also by watching TV. Each of them appeared on morning TV for a half hour, and we learned how to make an omelet, and how to do deep squats afterward.”4 Though the topics respectively highlighted here — of period-specific television trends, of charisma’s relationship to branding, of the obversion of excessive consumption to athletic fortification or repair — are worthy of the exploration they receive, how else might we weigh the televisuality of Child and LaLanne with and against each other, and with what upshots for comprehending television scales?

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An answer may begin to emerge from partially connecting the episode of LaLanne’s program cited above to the second episode of The French Chef, which comes to attention, among other reasons, for heading an A.V. Club list of ten representative installments of Child’s series. In these respective episodes, both LaLanne and Child use a discourse of weight to talk about their enterprises; and, not merely incidental or coincidental, when speaking of weight, both LaLanne and Child are speaking in the same breath about — and demonstrating the use of — simple tools (his hand on the back of his sole prop, a chair, her hand clasping a fine chef’s knife). For his part, LaLanne tells the home audience that even the “girls” who do not have a “weight problem” may wish to “shrink” a “hanging midsection” — which requires an exercise in “contract[ion]” that he models, using the chair for support. For hers, and enthusing about a wedge-shaped knife with an eleven-inch-long blade, Child shares that she likes it because it is “so heavy” that it “does most of the work for you” as you chop (for instance) pounds of onions. Then she proceeds to share a knife-sharpening demonstration and embroiders her earlier enthusiasm for the knife’s weight; when the knife is well-sharpened, having “take[n] the edge,” it can be laid, Child says, on a tomato, and “just the weight of the knife would cut through the tomato.” Better and more provocative yet, “if you laid it on your hand, and just drew it across, the weight would cut your hand right down to the bone.”

LaLanne and Child address their viewers in evidently different yet all the same related ways: both call attention to the changeability of the body, whether through sanguine fitness or grisly accident (and, likewise attuned to a version of fitness — for a task — Child later says that, with practice, one can chop onions very fast and not be likely to nick one’s thumb). As


they do so in moments that call attention to the sensuous contact of their hands to chair and knife, they may also recall for us language of Strathern’s, quoted earlier and worth quoting (partially) again, regarding the person-tool dyad: “At first sight, a ‘tool’ still suggests a possible encompassment by the maker and user who determines its use. Yet our theorists of culture already tell us that we perceive uses through the tools we have at our disposal. Organism and machine are not connected in a part/totality relationship, if the one cannot completely define the other.”

Weighted, as it were, with their different meanings and histories, and belonging clearly to different scales of being, LaLanne and the chair, on the one hand, and Child and the knife, on the other, enter into a dance with one another. The dance’s typical outcomes, however likely, cannot be determined or defined in advance by the human choreographers, to whom the tools become tantalizingly uncertain co-choreographers (though not as cheekily gruesome as Child, chair-using LaLanne does concede that one could misexecute a move, strain oneself, or fall during a fitness routine). At a small scale, then, these performers and their tools disclose something about “[o]rganism and machine […] connected in a […] relationship” that is applicable to myriad subjects engaged, as they are, with another machinic tool — television itself — whose co-creative motions with those subjects are properly understood as unpredictable, when examined in and for their complexity.

* * *

I cannot make a now-recognizable cut, signaled by asterisks, without in this instance thinking both of the onions upon onions cut by Child and of the signature crew-cut of Susan Powter, who catapulted to fame and, briefly, to fortune in the 1990s following the unpredictable, indeed runaway success of her 1993 infomercial Stop the Insanity and the various forms of merchan-

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dise that it enabled Powter and her collaborators to hawk. Positioning herself as an opponent of the diet and fitness industries to which she herself could be said to belong, Powter, who doubled in size after a painful divorce but appears thin and toned in her infomercial — and for whom, “Forget your scale!” is a mantra (her calipers will tell you the truth and set you free) — rails in particular against the sellers of specialized diet foods. Their own mantra — or, more nearly, their barely subtextual cue, in figuring out whole meals for their clients — is, Powter says, “Don’t think!” The moment in which Powter observes as much is perhaps the most meta-television of her infomercial. Television is like the diet industry in its manifold invitations to non-thinking and unthinking, yet also like this local moment, television more globally enfolds, in some of its efforts and appeals, an asking of us for our (re)thinking of the unthinking or non-thinking.

And yet, in a further turn of the screw, Powter herself emerges over the course of the half-hour video as a would-be, cultish guru (hence my invocation of the word mantra to describe both Powter’s language and the strategies of those whom she detracts). Like most gurus, she has a malignantly narcissistic belief in the power of her message, which she frames as the “most important […] on earth”; and also like most gurus thus messaging, what she has to share is a cliché stunning in its banality: “You gotta eat, you gotta breathe, you gotta move.” But the banality hardly matters, because what Powter is essentially selling — before, behind, and beyond her message or her branded products — is what Ouellette would call her charisma. It is a charisma predicated on frenetic, even frenzied, displays of energetic enthusiasm, as well as on joke-cracking that one might expect to find sooner in a standup routine than in a “lifestyle”-oriented infomercial; it is, moreover, a charisma that would be wildly off-putting to many, as the myriad, often savage, parodies of Powter’s self-fashioning and self-presentation attest (though ever a cunning marketer, Powter is happy to get in front of the

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8 Susan Powter, “Stop the Insanity,” USA NETWORK for syndication (original broadcast: 1993).
potential for takedown by embracing self-parodies gentler than those of her haters — say, in the form of her appearance in the pilot episode of Space Ghost Coast to Coast, which provides a perfect métier for acknowledging and celebrating her goofiness and eccentricities). As Powter cautions her audience against food weighted with fat, to which she contrasts high-volume eating of low-fat foods, she seeks, and succeeds in seeking, to wield her charisma to do a business likewise high-volume in scale, unweighted at last with rich meaning — but all the same saleable.

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In a blog post for BBC Good Food titled, “Mary Berry’s Top 10 Baking Tips,” Berry’s very first tip concerns the measured weights of a baker’s ingredients: “1. Weigh the ingredients carefully. You wouldn’t believe how much can go wrong just because ingredients have been weighed incorrectly. If you’re just a little bit out it can have a catastrophic effect on flavour and consistency, yet it’s one of the easiest things to get right. Just concentrate at the start because any errors will only be amplified going forward!” What if one were to apply Berry’s advice to The Great British Bake Off, the globally popular and enormously successful series in which she appeared as a judge of Britain’s amateur bakers from 2010 to 2016? Given the substantial overhaul of various elements of the series between its initial six-episode season and its next ten-episode season — taking the form, in that second season, into which the series would settle for its ongoing run — most viewers would likely be inclined to say that the “ingredients [were] weighed incorrectly […] at the start.” Indeed, Netflix executives wish so fully to distance the franchise from its origins that they have branded one of their 2018 offerings The Great British Baking Show: The Beginnings — and then begin

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9 Matthew Maiellaro, Andy Merrill, Khaki Jones, and Keith Crofford, “Spanish Translation,” Space Ghost Coast to Coast, Cartoon Network (original air date: April 15, 1994).

that set of episodes with the second season, recast on the Netflix site as the first. All the same, viewers can find easy routes, if less legal than watching via Netflix, to see those first six episodes, in which ten rather than twelve bakers “battle it out in locations across the country” (rather than in one setting, the storied bakers’ tent of the rest of the series), as the never-imaged male narrator — gone by the second season — tells us in voiceover early in the pilot. Also expunged from future seasons are interviews conducted by host Sue Perkins (or by Perkins with co-host Mel Giedroyc), which feature talking heads discussing the histories and evolutions of different baked goods. Coincidentally enough, a more constant factor in the packaging of the bake off and tied-in efforts is Berry’s advice about weighing ingredients — a version of which, very near, rhetorically, to the writing for the blog, is sounded as the first language that we hear from her in the series’s pilot.

Yet Berry herself would probably not wish for us to engage in this thought experiment and apply, across scale and form, advice about baking to the televised baking competition and thereby find the first season wanting. (After all, her look, much more glamorous in the second season and beyond, is one of the ingredients we would be weighing.) Indeed, the advice that immediately follows tip one in her blog post is to “[t]ake the recipe as a pretty full guide, but not an absolute blueprint.” She elaborates:

Sure, in terms of measuring out ingredients it should be uniform, but the way you knead cake dough, the instruments you use and particularly the strength of your oven will all have slightly differing effects on what you make. With that in mind, make your own comments on recipes so that you’ll know for next time how your process and equipment affects the final product.

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11 “Cakes,” The Great British Bake Off, BBC Two (original air date: August 17, 2010).
Here Berry captures well what a Strathernian interpreter might call the irreducible complexity of each baking occasion—as well, we could add, of each recording and broadcast of the baking occasions that populate Berry’s most famous series. Tracking that complexity effortfully would likely be at odds with a version of criticism as weighing, although composing the hypothetical game of criticism as weighing is a necessary step in its decomposition.

When the makers of *The Great British Bake Off* moved, chasing a more lucrative deal, from BBC to Channel 4 for the series’s eighth and subsequent seasons, Berry, about as beloved a television personality as one may imagine, declined to make the departure with them, a decision touted as manifesting her loyalty to the BBC. And steadfastness is indeed an element of the complex recipe through which her charisma, enabling her abundant success across forms and platforms, renders Berry a delight to her devotees. Some of them will no doubt boycott the Berry-less *Bake Off*, in a would-be mirroring of Berry’s perceived steadfastness. But loyalty has no place in the *Bake Off*’s own complex recipe (though it has, in its eighth season, made room once more for talking heads on such topics as pudding), a recipe that appears to be working quite well for Channel 4 and Netflix — and that will likely continue to do so at other, coming forms and scales of distribution.

Rule

Making partial connections through the rubric of the first of five keywords, weight, also enabled the unfolding of five key concepts: brand, charisma, salespersonship, complexity across maintained scales, and connectivity of beings across slipped scales. All of these television elements could be identified, too, as inputs and outputs of *This Old House*, a program featuring serialized house renovation projects that has been airing on PBS since 1979 and that is probably likeliest to conjure, for television’s memorialists, episodes from the 1980s portion of the series’s run, when Bob Vila served as its host.
Absent a paid subscription to the streaming services featured on *This Old House*’s website, one may not alight reliably on episodes of the series featuring Vila or his immediate successor as host, Steve Thomas. My own viewship of episodes from 1991, most of them showcasing part of Thomas’s and collaborators’ work on a project called, “The Wayland House,” was undertaken in a screening room at UCLA’s Film and Television Archive. I chose to view these episodes mostly for their free availability during a trip to the archive, motivated chiefly by other investigations but allowing this partial addition; in the end, I was glad that the episodes, as it were, chose me and that one of them in particular, partially connected to others, disclosed to me how to begin to compose (and decompose) a criticism of (mis)rule.

Working with a remainder from the prior section on *Weight*, I am put back in mind, in the context of thinking about *This Old House*, of *The A.V. Club*’s thoughtful survey of *The French Chef*. That piece underlines how vividly Child’s series images, again and again, close shots of her hands as she toils in her kitchen — and I would, now, connect that observation to ones I made in real time in the archive as I watched *This Old House*; for that series is likewise relentless in its close-ups of hands, using a variety of instruments and materials in the laborious course of houses’ careful and caring renovations. Of the numerous such configurations and reconfigurations of the person/tool dyad that I noted while watching — in the process, configuring my own person/tool dyad with computer’s keyboard — I was struck most by one that opens an episode in which master carpenter Norm Abram is about to outfit a bathroom floor with vinyl tiles while Steve Thomas observes the process. As Abram explains that he wants to “fill the voids” created by knots in the wood before tiling, he strokes such a knot with his fingers and thumb, and the camera pushes in to image the motion closely for us; in this moment, he is connected, knotted, to the knot. Then, when he proceeds to enlist Thomas’s help and Thomas uses a tape measure — and follows Abram’s charge to be very precise — they (and we) enjoy this dialogic exchange: Thomas: “Boy, you’re really being fussy with those measurements, Norm.” Abram:
“Well, you have to be, Steve. […] If the room is out of square, you’re gonna start angling off.”

Taking a cue from this scene makes me wonder how to perform a television criticism that recognizes the value of the square yet also takes the risk of “angling off,” of letting the work go “out of square” — which could mean, among other effects, and as E. Patrick Johnson might have it, putting the quare back in square (or drawing the quare out of square). How to square with series like and including This Old House and also to share what is quare or queer in one’s experience of such series — and to avow, reflexively, that the latter aim is itself a queer one when the quare reading of a series is an acknowledged “misreading”? This challenge came for me vividly into view, as it were, when I watched the episode of This Old House in which Thomas visits the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities’ Conservation Center in Waltham, Massachusetts. The journey from Wayland to nearby Waltham is undertaken for a consultation with the center’s staff of conservationists, whose signal charge is the preservation of buildings on their site in Waltham but who consult ad hoc on other projects, like the restoration of the 1815 “Kirkland” house in Wayland showcased in the thirteenth season of This Old House. Yet before any of this information about the center or its personnel is plainly revealed, the teaser for the episode aims to draw us in more enigmatically and elliptically. Its close-up images yet another hand, this one pointing to an arrow on a television-like screen on which Thomas, an as-yet-unidentified man — and we — get a weirdly mediated view of some object (we won’t yet discern that it is a very small extract from a window shutter); then the camera dissolves to a more recognizable window installation. That dissolve suggests the close cor-

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12 “The New Orleans House,” This Old House, PBS (original air date: February 1, 1991).
14 “The Wayland House,” This Old House, PBS (original air date: November 30, 1991).
Television scales

respondence or connection between window and screen, as conceptualized by media theorists like Anne Friedberg. It may also invite us to slip registers and scales, as the dissolve itself does, in our engagement with the episode and the series.

If we do, one especially slippery leap we may take is to read queerly the presence of the second man, architectural conservator Greg Clancey, as we meet him more fully in his paint-splattered apron—and as we see him also as tie-wearing, lisping, and gentle in his demeanor. When I watched the walk-and-talk scene in which Clancey tells Thomas about the center’s work, I noted, “Clancey seems super-gay. It is taking this level of stealth gayness popping up onscreen for me to maintain interest in hour three of watching and taking notes on This Old House.” Was it my confinement to the beige screening room at UCLA, where the couch was just a little too comfortably plush and the oxygen deprivation just a little too mounting, that induced my minor fever dream of This Old Gay? And was the dream especially feverish—or was there actually something more plausible in my queer account—as the episode continued to unfold and when I proceeded to type the following note: “More hand close-ups! After Steve’s hand nearly touches Greg’s as the latter holds an old molding across the edge of which Steve runs his fingers, Steve says, ‘I’ll come to you next time I need a molding’ (!!!).” Reading for and through innuendo, euphemism, and allied forms of coded language is—justly—a cornerstone of queer theoretical practice. Yet having engaged in that practice for a long time, I ought to know how to measure when the practice is paradoxically “aslant enough” to yield a genuine and generative insight, when so aslant that the putative insight is off the mark. In this instance, I would not wish to defend my notetaking against the charge that it constituted a form of the latter errancy. I do, however, share the anecdote nonetheless because meditating on it—and because meditating further on This Old House as well—helps me to appreciate that, with time and space enough

to scale my viewing experience otherwise, watching more and more of the series, I would, I will warrant, encounter moments in which the slender, delicate erotics of men's shared labor are indeed obtaining as a homoerotics worthy of such a nomination.

When at long last we get a clarification of what the teaser imaged, we learn that Thomas has come to the center chiefly to share paint samples taken from the Kirkland house in Wayland. Thomas hopes that, when the samples are subject to scrutiny under a special microscope kept in a “clean environment” in old service quarters at the center’s main house, he, Clancy, and another conservator, Brian Powell (my notes call him, “another super-gay”), will be able to tell accurately what respective colors adorned the house’s exterior elements in 1888. The men embed the samples in epoxy ice cubes; when they are popped out, they are ground down with a wet sander and made into cross-sections to investigate under the microscope. When we get that view with the men, the teaser’s tease comes, as it were, into focus. One of the samples is under the microscope, and the attached monitor shows us cross sections, layers of paint and dirt particles from different periods. The arrow points to the key, late-nineteenth-century layer. Once more, a passage from my notes: “If you didn’t know what you were looking at, you might think what’s imaged onscreen in blue, green, and black is an extreme close-up of the inside of a small aquarium — or an extremely blurry distant view of a landscape with trees and flowing water.” Something less willfully perverse than my queerly misruled reading of the conservators’ sexuality may lodge in that if. If we follow the rule of the microscope — the instrument, in this episode, equivalent to the tape measure or ruler — we will aim for precision at the most infinitesimal scale, and we will be confident that we know what constitutes precision (and when and how to reject imprecision). Yet if instead we hold this perspective in tension with another — the one that stays with the dreamier logic of the teaser’s evocative ambiguity rather than aiming to supersede it — then we may enjoy the pleasurably unruly sensation that comes from an equally unruly impression: all manner of fish and trees may be there, in the ether, for the detecting.
Map

The annals of mapmaking’s history — and of mapmaking’s often sinister embeddedness in colonial and imperial projects of un-making and re-making the world — exists now at a scale that we might find staggering, bordering on overwhelming. Yet even a cursory glance at this history would bring starkly to the fore a sense of the map’s dogged insistence, against the often glaring evidence to the contrary, that it achieves its ends of accuracy, of scaled proportionality, of neutrality. It would take only a similarly cursory glance at the history of television to grasp the genealogical connectedness of a proto-reality series like *This Old House* to a variety of contemporary reality series focused on houses and homes, including the multistranded *House Hunters* franchise (and especially its inflection as *House Hunters Renovation*). In this context, I am interested less in offering a thicker and denser description of that connectedness than in partially connecting the foregoing sections of this chapter to one conspicuous visual in the now ninety-plus-season run of *House Hunters International*: the animated neighborhood map to which we cut, in every episode, between live-action performances of house hunting, and on which are imaged the locations of three prospective houses that could be rented or purchased, alongside other elements of graphic design.

Unlike most maps (and of course there are other, intriguing exceptions that prove the rule of how maps ask us to understand that they work, when we think that they work), these *House Hunters International* inserts are aggressively — yet playfully — cartoonish. Just as a house-hunting couple approaches a coveted destination in a city center, so too do the map’s two Gothic cathedrals approach the size of whole streets, crossing avenues. Or a homuncular cyclist dwarfs the route on which he makes his commute to the office, only to be dwarfed in turn by a leaf, signifying parkland. Or a tree is imaged at the same size as a cow or dog. And, time and again, enormous red thumbtacks drop thrice on each map to pin the “locations” (always hazily sketched) of prospective dwellings; in their outsized goofiness,
the tacks remind me of nothing so much as the giant helmet that campily crushes Conrad at the top of *The Castle of Otranto* (eventually — inevitably — some flush expatriate client will appear in *House Hunters International* to buy, with the intention of restoring, a crumbling Italian castle). [See Figure 5.]

In such a context, the town square may come to feel more like a town quare. And, alongside that effect and others, these (in both senses) fabulous inserts may present themselves as (mis) mapping how we ought to read the series of which they form an integral part. The animations flirt with the mapmaker’s pretensions to accuracy, proportion, and the like — only to depart fancifully and indeed giddily from such mapmaking norms, and to court our likewise, potentially giddy appreciation of the maneuver. In an analogous fashion, *House Hunters International* asks us at the top of every episode to assent to the fictions that serve as the series’s governing principles and premises. Yet it winkingly allows us in on those principles’ and premises’ “real” status as ruses or sleights of hand — so that, for instance, it does not take much discernment (or Googling) to appreciate that the “three” houses imaged onscreen are just a few of many prospective houses that are or could be shown to clients; or that the clients have in fact already bought a house and the notion that they have seen “three” before making a decision on one is ret-
rospectively manufactured; or that the difference in real estate preferences, manifesting as “conflict” in a couple formation, has been prepped, canned, and coached for the couple to perform and for their real estate agent to observe and navigate; or that the “real estate agent” showing that couple around a town or city is just a handsome actor paid to play a TV real estate agent; and on and on.

Does this lesson in (mis)mapping have a more global purchase beyond the local reading of *House Hunters International*—and at what scales or their slippage? Answering this question may allow a more explicit occasioning of the “building intensification and [...] spiraling involution” announced in this chapter’s introduction, then worked for the most part implicitly over the course of its prior sections. By contrast, we could now map a playful, composite picture—provisional, and potentially ready for its own decomposing—and populate it with images, figures, and conceits otherwise encountered in the chapter...yet (re)scaled here to (mis)match the relative proportion or weight that each one of the images, figures, or conceits enjoyed before. At the center of the picture, place a mountain made of onions, and in adjacency, render a chef’s knife and hands yet larger, looming over the mountain. In some corner, tuck a homuncular aerobicist, too large for the room in which he exercises—yet too small before the gigantic television screen whose fitness imperatives he follows. People some old house with rulers, oversized so that they fill the hallways they would usually measure, and landscape the house’s yard with flowers yet bigger than the oversized rulers. Look at the picture not under a microscope but through a kaleidoscope, where the sizes and shapes of the picture’s elements twist and morph and slide away. Call it *television*.

**Interval**

“And now,” as *Monty Python* would have it, “for something completely different” (or will it turn out only to be partially so), I give you the Corpus of American Soap Operas, first as it is...
framed and described by linguist Mark Davies at his website, BYU Corpora:

The soap corpus contains 100 million words of data from 22,000 transcripts of American soap operas from the early 2000s, and it serves as a great resource to look at very informal language.

The corpus is related to many other corpora of English that we have created, which offer unparalleled insight into variation in English.

Click on any of the links in the search form to the left for context-sensitive help, and to see the range of queries that the corpus offers. You might pay special attention to the (new) virtual corpora, which allow you to create personalized collections of texts related to a particular area of interest.¹⁶

Recognizing and appreciating the labor of Davies and his colleagues to create such a searchable corpus, I wish all the same that they had done more, in this framing and description, to recognize in turn the amount and kind of labor that preceded their own: namely, the anonymous work of numerous fans who created 22,000 complete transcripts of scripted dialogue, for every day’s broadcast of over ten years’ worth of all the then-airing serials in the American daytime programming bloc. When one clicks on the link that underscores the words, “22,000 transcripts,” one lands on a chart of cumulative word counts headed with the neutral declaration, “The corpus is composed of 100,000,000 words in scripts from ten soap operas from 2001 [to] 2012.” Only by then clicking on the link that underscores the word “scripts” does one arrive at the fan-curated and fan-maintained website — very different in look, tone, and feel — called, “Daytime Soap Transcripts from the TV MegaSite” (a title cap-

In some way and to some extent, TV is my life, too; and though dwelling more closely and less partially with the MegaSite would prove fascinating, I will linger rather with the searchable corpus in order to take up its makers’ invitation to cultivate “a particular area of interest.” Searching for the word *scale*, I learn that it was used 303 times across the database’s ten serials for the covered twelve-year period. Even a quick scan of the more detailed results, which quote the contexts in which the word uses appear, makes plain that the overwhelming majority of *scales* inhabit the common phrase *scale of 1 to 10* or some more (and less) clever variants thereof. (As an aside, I find after my many viewings of *Family Feud*, to which I alluded earlier, that beginning a survey question with the phrase *on a scale of 1 to 10* is both one of the series’ most common ways to frame a survey and easily its most common deployment of the word *scale*; the allied outcome in the serial, a form intimately connected historically to the game show, is not a surprising one.)

Playing further with this data opens onto ways of creating and undoing differently scaled intervals. First I give in to the

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17 “Daytime Soap Transcripts from the TV MegaSite,” *The TV MegaSite*, http://tvmegasite.net/day/transcripts.shtml.
temptation to work meta-discursively and use a scale of 1 to 10 to count scales of 1 to 10: that is, I consult the first thirty entries in the — alphabetically organized — list of 303 search results for scale to see how many of them (twelve) or what percentage of them (40%) are scales of 1 to 10 plus allied variants. To see what a sample covering a different interval may tell me, I count the same way just within and across the results for the year 2011 — and the percentage of scales that are also scales of 1 to 10 (11 of 28 uses) is very strikingly close at 39%. This outcome may suggest the consistency of writing staffs’ recourse to the common phrase, and it may invite further speculation about why this cliché has more of a grip on those industrial agents’ imaginations than, say, on a grand scale, on an international scale, on the Richter scale, (getting) on the (bathroom) scale, scale back, sliding scale, and scale a building (constructions that also populate the list of search results enough times to be noticeable but not statistically noteworthy). Yet one could also adjust one’s intervals of calculation and produce more statistical deviation than closeness in differentially reckoned uses of scale of 1 to 10. One version of that calculation that occurred to me involved counting all the uses of the phrase and variants first in the ABC serial All My Children and then in the serial General Hospital, likewise part of the ABC stable; in part, I made that move because, assessed in aesthetic,
industrial, and historical registers, these two programs have arguably the most in common among the ten transcribed serials, and perhaps one could hypothesize that those commonalities extend to a facet of their construction scaled as small as one repeated phrasal unit. As it happens, they do not. Across the decade-plus of episodes, *All My Children* features 28 *scales of 1 to 10* out of 70 *scale* uses — coming in, by the bye, at exactly the 40% mark that was measured at other intervals. As for *General Hospital*, its 15 of 47 uses (about 32%) could be understood as constituting a significant statistical difference — as could the gap between *All My Children’s* versus *General Hospital’s* total uses of the word *scale* (23% versus about 15-and-a-half%).

If you made it to the end of the preceding paragraph without having your eyes glaze over, you deserve a cookie, a medal, or both. Hardly at this point in *Television Scales* will you be surprised to know that I am agnostic about the recent trend in the humanities to mine data in the service of textual and cultural analysis. Indeed, so micro-scaled do I regard the interval between the first two, consonantly according versions of number-crunching that I performed and the third, “disturbance”-yielding one, that the performance leaves me craving a more wholesale derangement or short-circuiting of such an effort. And then I wonder whether that more perverse move could retain, if to deform, some sense of scale as interval rather than simply set it aside. Whatever value it yields, perhaps pleasure would come from the move if it were enacted as a collaging together of *scale*-featuring dialogues from the transcripts, in a way that would make a found poem — one that not only offers up a flavor or intimation of how twenty-first-century daytime *sounded* for a spell but that also stitches its words together in scaled intervals of citation.

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*There’s an enormous difference in scale between infidelity and murder.*
Yeah, but on the life scale, there aren’t very many “things like this.” So if you do want to talk,

be honest. How angry are you with me for not telling you about Griffin, on a scale from one to punching my lights out? I’m not angry. Okay? I understand why you didn’t tell me. It’s all good. Hey, you helped keep my brother alive. Yes, you did. Thank you.

I just need to know how you overcome the unforgivable. Is there some forgivability scale that I missed out on? Like, say, you sleeping with your stepfather would be a 4 out of — Hey, that is not how it works. Well, then tell me how it works. Please. Please, if you could just tell me how you convinced Jason to forgive you, well, then maybe I can figure out a way for Lucky to forgive me, too. Oh, okay. Um,

use water from the Snyder pond as the primary source of irrigation. Now while a pond may be adequate for the maintenance of a family farm, how do you propose to scale it for multiple unit usage? Well, that’s a

blending together, a little bit, and I honestly don’t know where I land on that scale. Of good and bad,

you are very good at this. Mm-hmm. On a scale.

Ladder

As has been well-documented (and lamented), the years in which fans transcribed daytime serial dialogue were twilight ones for the genre; of the ten serials populating the database described above, only four continue to air, and many suspect that the days of those final four are numbered. Yet over the course of the same period that witnessed the waning of daytime serials’ popularity and the cancellation of most of them, the melodramatizing and serializing of just about every other form of narrative storytell-
ing in American television — an intensification and extension of a process begun in the late 1970s and early 1980s — diffused and suffused on a massive scale those serials’ influence (however oblique) and legacy (however under-acknowledged, especially in the realm of so-called “quality” television). One paradigmatic locus of the seep of melodrama and seriality into a manifold number of formal containers is also the object of this chapter’s final section: the three-season Hulu Original series, *The Path*. The series also capitalizes on a trend, begun in premium cable in the 1990s and then extended exponentially in basic cable and beyond, to continue to foreground narrative television’s obsession with the nuclear family — yet to ring a change on that obsession by representing the family’s dark and messy imbrication with worlds of organized crime (*The Sopranos, Ozark*), drug dealing (*Weeds, Breaking Bad, Claws*), secret polygamist sects of unofficial Mormonism (*Big Love*), and more.

In the case of *The Path*, the nuclear family are Eddie and Sarah Lane and their children, and the dark world to which they belong is the cult of Meyerism, whose main compound and central headquarters are adjacent to the sleepy town in upstate New York where the Lanes reside. Precisely because *The Path* participates in a television tradition of serialized storytelling, it discloses information about how the cult works (or fails to work) and how pernicious it is (or not) in gradual, punctual, accretive ways. Starting with the pilot, we learn that the two organizing metaphors for Meyerism are The Light and The Ladder. Meyerists feel the love, warmth, and radiance of The Light ever more richly and intensely through an ascent of The Ladder, a set of teachings and experiences whose rungs indicate spiritual growth and development.18 Except — as this narrative centers on a cult, after all, and as we come to understand incrementally and over time — the Meyerists take the metaphors literally and believe that their hand-burning founder climbed a ladder made of fire to reach The Light; that The Light will shine permanently.

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in The Garden that exists beyond the earthly realm; that tending the diminished version of The Garden in the here and now is a rehearsal for an eventual, full ascent of The Ladder, which the enlightened will undertake when non-Meyerists’ evil and corruption become so overwhelming that they initiate an apocalypse; and on and on.

As viewers come to understand this structuring mythos with more and more seeming completion—chiefly through flashback and through dialogue that informs us about the cult’s founding and initial efflorescence—they may sense that they are also scaling a kind of parallel ladder and feel the concomitant satisfaction of acquiring narrative knowledge (in this metamelodramatic instance, knowledge that is—reflexively—sentimentalized and sensationalized). Yet they may also feel knocked off the ladder, or at least knocked down a few rungs, as the retrospective tendency of the series collides jarringly, and deliberately, with its forward-driving narrative momentum and propulsions. Indeed, the more time passes and the more we experience of “what happens” to the Lanes and company, we also discover that “what happened” to create and cement the existence of the cult in the 1970s and 80s forms no stable backstory to be nostalgically invoked by the cult’s champions; rather, it is composed of and as an irreducibly complex agon played out among a variety of likewise complex actors, and that agon is increasingly, intensively subject to contestation and revisionary reframing. In other words—and, in this way, the borrowings from daytime serials and their earliest primetime imitators are acute—“what happened” was always already an up-and-down version of “what happens” now and what will happen in the future; or, to borrow Ien Ang’s classic formulation, open-ended television melodrama like and including The Path is fundamentally “characterized by an endless fluctuation between happiness and unhappiness,” which positions “life [as] a question of falling down and getting up again.”

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cess in scaling the ladder vividly and repeatedly, conveying both its ongoing power as a motor of fantasy and pleasure and its ongoing incommensurability for understanding “falling down and getting up again,” by which I mean (partially) understanding the connections among families, communities, and their discontents; among past, present, and future.

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Scaling down and back from a synoptic overview of The Path to a closer look at its component parts, I find heuristic value in one of television studies’ oft-repeated truisms: namely, that the second episode of a series will tell and show one much more about its repeatable premises, ethos, and mechanics than the pilot, which aims to accomplish the different goal of launching (and selling) the work. I also find, in re-viewing the second episode of The Path, that it televises with an astonishing uncanniness (should I subscribe, after all, to The Light?) the animating concepts and concerns of this chapter of Television Scales and the foregoing one.20 Ashley’s account of feeling “burdened — like, weighted down” previews the myriad ways in which the Meyerists cultivate techniques for what they call, by contrast, “unburdening.” Believed to have had an extramarital affair, unruly Eddie is ruled by his spiritual guide in “the movement” to submit to a period of solitary reflection, measured precisely (on the basis of ongoing Meyerist experimentation and tweaking) to last for fourteen days. Cal pursues ambitions, including an appearance in a local television news segment, to get Meyerism more fully “on the map,” that is, to map the movement more broadly and thus expand the scale of its success and profitability. Intervals of time — the time between Eddie’s trip to Peru and his meeting of a “Former” (Meyerist jargon for abandoners of the cult), the time between the Former’s husband’s passing and the conclusion of her cross-country drive to see grandparents

from whom the cult estranged her, her sixteen-year time in the cult — invite our speculation about how they calibrate (or not) with each other.

Simultaneously, and for the most part, no one is successfully scaling ladders in this episode. Teenaged Hawk is flopping in his navigation of the path between home life in the cult and sociality at high school. Sarah is flipping out about Eddie’s untrustworthiness. Mary purges elements of her abusive past — en route to a joint binge of banal Meyerist aphorisms and of sex with Cal. Meanwhile, Cal is in the throes of a bad ego trip and of an errant plan for Meyerism, whereas Eddie becomes turned on to what truth looks like beyond the cult’s watchful eye, literalized in the giant eye-shaped icons that pervade the spaces of Meyerism. When Cal promises — or threatens — to multiply the number and reach of these eyes, and as that forecast coincides nearly and neatly with his proselytizing “on” the local news, *The Path* begets a question, a remainder for further installments of the series as well as for this chapter: when and how is television watching us?