UNPLUGGING POPULAR CULTURE
RECONSIDERING MATERIALITY, ANALOG TECHNOLOGY, AND THE DIGITAL NATIVE

K. Shannon Howard
Unplugging Popular Culture showcases youth and young adult characters from film and television who defy the stereotype of the “digital native” who acts as an unquestioning devotee to screened technologies like the smartphone. In this study, unplugged tools, or non-digital tools, do not necessitate a ban on technology or a refusal to acknowledge its affordances but work instead to highlight the ability of fictional characters to move from high tech settings to low tech ones. By repurposing everyday materials, characters model the process of reusing and upcycling existing materials in innovative ways. In studying examples such as *Pitch Perfect*, *Supernatural*, *Stranger Things*, and *Get Out*, the book aims to make theories surrounding materiality apparent within popular culture and to help today’s readers reconsider stereotypes of the young people they encounter on a daily basis.

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Reconsidering Materiality, Analog Technology, and the Digital Native

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Introduction

“It Forces You to Play Differently”

This project is primarily about reconsidering the abilities of today’s young people and framing them within the cultural language of popular film and television narratives. Too often we associate today’s children and young adults, those born in the 1990s, with an addiction to screened technologies like smartphones and handheld computers. This book interrogates this portrayal and extends the definition of what it means to be one of these “digital natives.”

I question the supremacy of the digital in the world because material items like cassette tapes, walkie talkies, antique cars, and analog television still affect characters from these narratives in key ways. These are things that, as Timothy Morton says, “are not exhausted by our use, but rather persist beyond it” (190). In other words, the things featured in these shows and movies do not exist as mere props but as co-participants in constructing reality. For instance, the below photo illustrates how today’s

Figure 0.1 A Fan Dressed in Cosplay at Sakura Con in Seattle Pays Tribute to the VCR/TV Combo
Source: Author photo
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young people create beyond their screens. The VCR/TV combo on the girl’s head is not only a relic of an age past but a testament to this young woman’s knowledge of such technology and her talent for making objects part of her costume and persona. The creative powers of today’s young people continue to surprise those of us who believe they cannot and will not look up from their smartphone screens. For example, if we simply browse the social network Pinterest for the words “graduation cap,” we discover how graduating college and high school seniors, ones holding their smartphones and snapping selfies, also adorn their caps with glitter, ribbons, and quotations from their favorite stories or authors. These self-fashioned hats often represent their love for popular culture narratives like the ones featured in this book. Another example to consider is the trend of bullet journaling, where individuals painstakingly design notebooks with colored pens in order to keep personal lists or words and art that encourage them. Numerous Facebook groups exist inside which “bujo,” or bullet journal, practitioners post photos of their art, poetry, calendars, and mental or physical health inventories. These examples merely scratch the surface of what it means to be a young person who unplugs in a digital age.

I use the word unplugged in the book’s title partly because of the role music and soundscapes play in shaping some of the character’s journeys. Beca Mitchell in Pitch Perfect learns to create music both with and without traditional instruments and technology. Maeve and Marie in Supernatural stage a haunting a cappella rendition of “Carry On, Wayward Son” in the concluding scene of the show’s celebratory 200th episode. Jonathan Byers in Stranger Things introduces his younger brother to the Clash just as he offers some life-saving advice. In 13 Reasons Why, Clay remembers his most romantic moment with the deceased Hannah when his best friend gives him a cassette, not a series of mp3 files. This is all to say that part of reconsidering analog technology, materiality, and today’s digital natives involves thinking about the tools, formats, and spaces characters use to navigate their worlds, and most of the time these tools and formats transfer some kind of noise or music. Music, as Jonathan Sterne argues, is a part of the material world and the study of materiality (186).

The word unplugged refers specifically to a cable television experiment in the late 1980s and early 90s where simple, acoustic performances aired on Music Television, a channel where all the most recent rock videos—complete with elaborate settings, effects, and sounds—played continually on a loop. MTV Unplugged was successful because it showcased the versatility of its performers, those capable of navigating the recording studios and music video stage sets and the intimacy of smaller venues where acoustic instruments were common. Guitarist Mike McReady of
Pearl Jam once explained to *Rolling Stone* that “It forces you to play differently. You can’t rely on feedback. It forces you to use dynamics, and to look at each song in a different way. Some songs turned out good acoustically, and some just didn’t quite happen” (Greene). Musicians like McReady, while speaking about their craft, often reveal the very characteristics that today’s Generation Z characters on film and television require. They must play or create in different ways, some analog and some digital, in order to meet their personal needs as well as the needs of their communities. They sometimes fail and sometimes succeed in these endeavors; however, in both cases these characters act as what Claude Levi-Strauss would refer to as bricoleurs, people forced, like *MTW Unplugged* musicians, “to play differently” under a wide variety of circumstances.

Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* discusses the role of bricoleur as someone who takes the available resources of a given situation and is able to create something new from the limited supply. Put another way, the bricoleur does not anticipate or request tools that are absent but fulfills the objective of a given time and place with the objects and concepts already present. Levi-Strauss explains, “It might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the ‘bricoleur’ addresses himself [or herself] to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors” (19). She is able to “‘make do’ with ‘whatever is at hand,’” that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project” (17). Musicians like Pearl Jam’s McReady and others have all used unlikely materials to create something new.

Being a bricoleur, however, requires new circumstances and tools with which to experiment. It often involves taking someone out of their usual surroundings and challenging them to adapt to new places. Peter Sax in *The Revenge of Analog* shares a story of Camp Walden, where digital devices are confiscated so that summer campers may nurture face to face relationships. Although Sax is more heavy-handed in his critique of an increasingly digital world, his points about analog’s resurgence in different communities are hard to dismiss. In his epilogue, “The Revenge of Summer,” Sax reports on how the director believes a technology-free campus facilitates growth and interpersonal relationships. By leaving Instagram behind, campers are more likely to go outdoors, form lasting relationships, and “endure a little hardship.” He says, “[P]eople push you and help you to succeed, and you end up with friendships, confidence, and an inner fortitude that ends in a sense of belonging to a greater independent community” (Sax Epilogue). Sax agrees that this part of the human condition is often eclipsed by digital immersion in screens.
The example of summer camp brings to mind the natural world, one of the largest representations of unplugged life. Although nature remains unpredictable, youth in these narratives will find ways to make such untamed and unique settings work for them. Moonee, a six-year-old character from the film *The Florida Project*, makes the observation that her favorite tree is the one that is “tipped over” but “still growing.” This acceptance of nature’s imperfections is key to developing humility, particularly for adults who still subscribe to the Scientific Revolution’s view of humankind as superior to nature, a philosophy in which the “earth exists for humans” (Dobrin and Weisser 71–72). However, the good news is that part of what young people have in common with nature is nature’s ability to “acclimate,” or to “change and change again” when needed (Dobrin and Weisser 76). Since adults often become set in their ways, it is up to youth to interrogate and improve upon the anthropocentric views of nature as inferior to humans. Knowing how to shuttle effectively between analog and digital platforms also entails accepting nature as part of the analog sensibility.

However, beyond Nirvana’s soulful performance and the idyllic settings of the natural world, the word unplugged suggests a lack of power. If we pull the plug on something, we imagine dark screens or silent rooms, perhaps caused by storm fronts that cause citywide blackouts. The idea of an unplugged world makes us think of the Luddite who blames cell phones and texting for the pollution of the English language (Warnock 301–07). It may call to mind older generations who never adjusted or adapted to email or social networks. In *Cobra Kai*, a contemporary spinoff of the original *Karate Kid* films, Johnny, a fifty-year-old man down on his luck, has to ask his high school classmate, “What’s a Facebook?” He uses a flip phone and refers to most screen technologies as iComputers. His apartment shows a collection of CDs and tapes from the 1980s not because he is a bricoleur or a collector of vintage items, but because he is out of touch with contemporary society. Therefore, a teenager must show him how to set up a website for his business and adapt to marketing to a new generation.

This is not to say that the word never invokes positive connotations. People have often referred to going unplugged as taking a break from various stressors found on screens. This habit has become more frequently discussed with the advent of the Trump administration in the 2010s and the polarization between the right and left sides of the political spectrum. News often creates division in communities, and this way of life prompts people to ignore it in order to protect their mental stability. In this age self-help gurus also encourage people to take breaks from social media in order to allow their brains time to recharge and to allow themselves to experience boredom as a way to generate new ideas. Additionally, more prolonged periods of unplugged life are typical on hiking trails or on vacations where part of the appeal is to leave screen-mediated life behind. Many agree it can be salutary to balance the plugged and unplugged parts of daily living.
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Materiality

I define the term unplugged by connecting it to materiality, which acts as a positive force for consideration in popular culture, multimodal composing, pedagogy, and media studies. Materiality as a term may initially remind some of us of the classic 80s song “Material Girl” by Madonna. In this song Madonna mentions her desire for a mate who “saves his pennies” and has “cold hard cash.” “Mr. Right” is the man who not only provides for his partner but lavishes expensive gifts on her. This message echoed the materialistic themes of that particular decade, where only the rich would have the opportunities to succeed in business and in life (the yuppie being a central example of this). The 80s, therefore, provides a rather pejorative image of what materiality means.

In scholarly work researchers have reclaimed this word to mean something quite different: an attitude of respect toward our surroundings and the objects found in them. In this approach to the term, the human immersed in the physical world does not attempt to conquer or purchase the spaces and tools in her midst. The physical world instead becomes an agent in its own right, able to effect changes that humans cannot fully understand. In an ideal world, a focus on materiality keeps us humble rather than greedy, just as it does when we adapt to nature’s imperfections. Most chapters in this book will showcase materials and humans as co-participants and positive allies in creating reality, but Chapter 5 (and some of Chapter 3) will hearken back to Madonna’s message and the gift shop mentality of possessing things to amass wealth and status. It is important to show both sides of materiality in order to maintain a realistic view of how people may choose to colonize and control the physical world as much as some attempt to respect it.

When speaking of materiality in this text, the term means the physical environs and properties of a given space as well as the objects and/or tools located inside those same spaces. This definition aligns with Christina Haas’s definition, where material consists of “having mass or matter and occupying physical space” (4). While this definition appeals to common sense, it will be used more specifically in this book to invoke the world of analog furniture and tools: cumbersome televisions, twisted cords on landline rotary phones, and clocks that still require winding either on our wrists or mounted on a wall. However, materiality as a concept moves beyond the idea of analog and digital. As Samantha Coole and Diana Frost describe,

At every turn we encounter physical objects fashioned by human design and endure natural forces whose imperatives structure our daily routes for survival. Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species,
on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions. . . . In light of this massive materiality, how could we be anything other than materialist?

Coole and Frost provide a necessary call here, but there may be one key way that we should not be materialist, and it involves the frequency of difficult terminology and dense prose to describe the mysteries of the world around us. Topics like materiality and the scholarship associated with it must be ideally made translatable to the public as well as the members of the academy. Some scholarship, especially the kind associated with materiality and its various theoretical framings, like new materialism, object oriented ontology, and even agential realism, becomes almost impossible to wade through, particularly for laypeople. An easy excuse is that topics like agential realism are not supposed to be portable or applicable outside a circle of scholars because they deal in philosophical concerns that only high theorists can appreciate. I respectfully disagree. Terms like agential realism and the like are fruitful for those involved in philosophical discussions about the nature of being in the world, but they do not necessarily facilitate a meaningful, daily relationship with the physical matter surrounding people.

For example, the term glitch is central to the analysis of *13 Reasons Why* in Chapter 4. Research, therefore, led me to a particular scholarly piece that addresses the phenomenon of glitch artwork and its relationship to rhetoric. The abstract explains glitch art with terms like “bi-stable oscillation,” “metastable orientation,” and “metastability.” While the author of this piece has an impressive record of scholarship on and about the topic(s) of new materialism and materiality, his terminology may alienate an audience composed of adults who choose not to specialize in the critical philosophy surrounding concepts like the glitch. Undoubtedly, these individuals are not his target audience here, and such scholarship does help advance knowledge so that we may better understand the intersections of humans and nonhumans (materials and creatures alike) to act persuasively. Still, I have seen glitch art as well as accidental glitches in pictures and on television, and terms like metastable orientation fail to do it justice. It is beautiful and confusing and bold, featuring splashes of color dripping across error messages or distorted pixels from a computer screen. The terminology above reinforces that the study of glitch art is off limits to a layperson, and this particular academic approach to studying the world around us creates limitations and boundaries rather than dwelling in possibilities.

A more direct and clear explanation is that the glitch, like the one featured in the example above, becomes a nonhuman agent suggestive of instability. It captures where stops and starts, or errors, happen frequently and cause inconvenience. Therefore, parts of glitch art as a genre cannot be easily dissected because they *embrace* error and mystery rather than shy away from it.
To be fair, a scholar like Timothy Morton, one who dwells in vernacular, pop cultural, *and* more esoteric discussions of philosophy, might remind today’s audiences that the job of philosophies like object oriented ontology (OOO) is to “reconfuse us” about the status of language “we take for granted” (154). Vocabulary used to explain the glitch, however clear or obtuse, reminds all audiences that so much of the world defies categorization or easy dissection in prose. As the image above illustrates, the glitch happens when technology remains plugged but frozen, stuck in a limbo between the efficient and sleek world of the digital and the heavier, less malleable world of the analog appliance. Because the glitch occurs somewhere between the world of plugged and unplugged machines, it both fascinates and frustrates laypeople and scholars alike.

**Analog and the Use of Parachronisms**

Most people use the word analog to refer to non-digital technology. Indeed, Sax applies this very concept to his own text *The Revenge of Analog*: he says that “analog, in the broadest sense of the term . . . is the opposite of digital.” His definition of digital guides most of this work: “[i]f something
is connected to the Internet, runs with the help of software, or is accessed by a computer, it is digital” (Introduction). The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms this distinction between analog and digital as one that is popular today. However, there is more involved. To think a bit more technically, we might add that analog technologies, as the *OED* also explains, “operate by the manipulation of continuously variable physical qualities,” which include “voltage, space, and time.” Nicholas Negroponte reminds us that analog processes use atoms while digital ones use bits; for example, “when you go through customs, you declare your atoms, not your bits” (4). Analog is embodied. To use middle school science in a reductive analogy here, analog is to a solid or a liquid what digital is to the invisible gas.

If most people imagine that the digital exists somewhat abstractly in the nebulous clouds, cyberspaces, or online environments of the world, they also associate analog with more pejorative concepts like unwieldy boxes, slowness in delivery, or regular glitches in performance. Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco explain the current analog revival in the music industry as a return to “knobs and wires” (317). They also say in their study of the musical synthesizer that those who use analog instruments “appreciate the subtle complexities that arise from things not quite working as they should” and embrace the mystery of how such instruments work (223, 294). Likewise, analog is often associated with older technologies, while digital, or newer, technologies often allow for “greater ease, efficiency, or beauty” as well as “increased speed” (Ronda 79).

Analog technology also provides multiple opportunities to demonstrate how nonhuman agents and human agents work together in unpredictable ways. For example, Aden Evens describes musicians as having particularly complex relationships with their instruments, ones that must include a “friction” that humbles rather than empowers the musician when honing her craft. He explains,

> Defined by its resistance, the instrument does not just yield passively to the desire of the musician. It is not a blank slate waiting for an inscription. Likewise, the musician does not just turn the instrument to his own ends, bending it to his will against whatever resistance it offers. Rather musician and instrument meet, each drawing the other out of its native territory. The instrument itself has a potential, a matter-to-be-determined, and its use is always in relation to its own character as well as the desire of the musician.

(160.1)

This relationship to the instrument holds special significance to those who champion the analog over the digital in music. Evens uses the following adjectives to characterize how some musicians view the digital—as “sterile, dry, or cold” and “lacking detail” or “spirit” (10.1). Those who
prefer albums over CDs feel that “though the right notes are all there in the right places, the music does not move and so does not gather up the listener into its motion.” Evens calls such fears of CD music “misapprehensions” rather than valid critiques: it is not that the digital is inferior in quality but that it is coded and arranged differently (10.1). If taken too far, such romantic notions of analog technology can be obstacles to this argument, which is that the characters in these narratives are able to shuttle between the analog and digital in some ways that previous generations did not. Part of analog’s beauty in the narratives discussed here is that objects become actors, just like the cast members in these stories do.

Analog descriptions remain a fixture in our culture, if only in the form of dead metaphors, where the present and the past fuse in linguistic expression. For example, I still tell people to “dial” my number even though the smartphone has no physical dial. I still answer the smartphone with “Hello?” as if I have not yet been informed who the caller is (and I have). These habits recall wall mounted phones or even rotary devices before them where the finger moved in circles to enter numbers. I might also tell people to “flip” the channel on my television even though large knobs that used to do this trick rarely present themselves today. Rather than simply dismiss them as dead metaphors, people may find this lingering analog terminology may function in a different way—through parachronism. Originally defined as an “error in chronology,” the parachronism is similar to the anachronism but works retroactively instead of forwardly. If an anachronism is a clock of standardized time in a Shakespeare play, a thing too futuristic to belong in a narrative set in medieval Scotland (see Macbeth), the parachronism works in the opposite direction, by using a dated reference to amplify the present situation (Howard). The winding and flipping suggest that parachronism is most effective when stressing its use of material objects, some of which seem displaced in the present. In other words, a parachronism often occurs as a thing or as a reference to a thing rather than as an abstract phenomenon.

In the discussion of 13 Reasons Why, parachronism works as a descriptor for Hannah Baker’s choice of recording a suicide note on cassette tapes. Her choice is one not born out of nostalgia for an earlier time; indeed, her reasoning for making the decorated tapes (she paints them with blue nail polish), wrapping them in a box, and including a paper map with marker has present day implications. Hannah Baker explains on the first tape (Tape 1, Side A) that cassette tapes are more valuable as a tool for recording her suicide note because “it’s not supposed to be easy, or I would have emailed you an mp3.” For Hannah the tapes carry a physical (but also emotional) weight that digital media does not possess. In the absence of her own body, destroyed by suicide, the tapes are embodied. The thirteen tapes, all messages to those whom she blames for her death, are meant to be handled and weighed, physically and emotionally, as
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they pass from student to student. While Hannah’s tapes are the dividing marks between episodes, the Netflix streaming service launches each episode without a single command from us, the viewers. While streaming the show, Hannah in the fictional realm is urging her peers to slow down, confront the possibility of glitches, and do more work.

What the parachronism also does is subvert expectations: rather than reflect the exact “cultural moment in which the films [and television narratives] were made,” according to Bronwyn Williams and Amy Zenger (6), a narrative may exist beyond the confines of periodization and the trap of becoming “dated.” All narratives are still in some way a product of the “ideological truths and values” (6) of a given time, but the parachronism works to dissolve any lines existing between one era and the next by changing the shape and context of the materials. Margaret Ronda cites Walter Benjamin’s focus on “wish images,” or images in which the “new is permeated with the old,” as one frame through which to study the act of obsolescing technologies (86). She further stresses that certain physical objects meant for retirement (e.g. phone booths) exist in a place that straddles past and present partly because they linger with us in “undead” form, unable to decompose (Ronda 76–77, 81). It could be suggested that the authors or directors indulge in “wish images” as well, allowing their readers and viewers to move beyond epochal specificity and into the realm of the universal.

With the juxtaposition of ancient life forms and contemporary ones, the *Jurassic Park* franchise engages in parachronism regularly. In most cases, the action displays an irreverence for time’s past and present constraints since the goal of the scientists is often to make the past seem “present” in more ways than one. While doing so, these same scientists and entrepreneurs are regularly betting on new technology and its effect on their children’s futures. This matters because constant manipulation of time remains central to understanding how generations adapt different world views. In the case of *Jurassic World*, the younger generations show more respect for nature’s unpredictability, but such respect does not make them immune to the joy associated with scientific discovery and the entertainment it might bring.

The definitions of analog and digital will often be used colloquially in this text rather than scientifically. In other words, the book is dealing with the public, mass perceptions of such terms rather than the jargon-specific way of looking at analog and digital. If the glitch as an event is accompanied by an “awareness” of the medium in which something is composed (Betancourt), I would then say that analog technology, too, involves an awareness of medium, but it also involves an awareness of the physicality of things. Florian Cramer, who attempts to unravel the implications of a term like “post-digital,” reminds her audience that terms like analog and digital are frequently slippery rather than understood universally. She reminds us from a purist’s perspective that “[s]omething can very well be
‘digital’ without being electronic, and without involving binary zeroes and ones. It does not even have to be related in any way to electronic computers or any other kind of computational device.” She goes on further to explain that analog “does not necessarily mean non-computational or precomputational. There are also analog computers. Using water and two measuring cups to compute additions and subtractions—of quantities that can’t be counted exactly—is a simple example of analog computing.”

While this book deals primarily with public perceptions rather than purist definitions, Cramer’s notes will be important when dissecting the use of technology in a narrative like *Stranger Things*, where Morse code, an arguably non-digital practice, actually involves what Cramer refers to as the “discrete, countable units” of something. It will also come in handy when analyzing the use of genetic engineering in *Jurassic World*, an act that involves both discrete splicing and insertions of matter while also making room for unpredictable outcomes. Cramer might argue that these acts are, in fact, digital, perhaps even more so if we consider that digits, even fingers called digits, are making the communication or creation of something possible to begin with. In sum, I take Cramer and others into account but put forth a more colloquial perception of analog and digital since the narratives in this project appeal to a wide range of viewers who are often more interested in the fictional characters than the nuanced treatment of any one vocabulary term. This interest leads naturally, then, to an explanation of how today’s digital natives, or Generation Z characters, become significant.

**The World of Generation Z**

If we slow down and observe the young people around us, we might find it surprising how often they rely on analog as well as digital tools, even as we insist on labeling them digital natives. While students today may text and take notes on a smartphone, they also write in Moleskine notebooks and read hard copies of magazines. Although students love capturing moments on their smartphone camera, the Polaroid camera has made a comeback in recent years, perhaps due to the immediate physicality of a printed image (I remember how surprised I was to see my own niece photographing a sunset on the water with her Polaroid camera a few years ago). Also, record shops frequently sell LPs to this generation’s mp3 collectors, and live music still reigns supreme on college campuses (see Sax Introduction, ch1, ch3, ch6).

Adults refer to today’s youth not only as digital natives but by other titles: “Generation Z,” “the Homeland Generation,” and occasionally, but poignantly, “the Post 9/11 Generation” (see Horovitz; Strauss and Howe). Also, the term millennial (and occasionally post-millennial) often acts as a parachronistic description of this cohort since we have used the term for two decades—millennial may refer to a 30-year-old
adult and also describe a high school teen in 2017. However, this teen group is especially associated with a time of great financial unease, terrorist threats, and “iCulture.” Generation Z in this book consists mainly of those characters born in the mid-1990s (some flexibility exists since Beca in *Pitch Perfect* and Chris in *Get Out* might straddle the cultural divide of millennials and Generation Z). Generation Z is also more clearly defined by the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and subsequent mental and emotional processing of that traumatic event. While representations of children in the twentieth century (and earlier) also include traumatic moments, years since the terrorist attack of 2001 have seen a proliferation of narratives reacting to and reflecting on an unstable world. The past two decades have also seen an increase in domestic terror threats with mass shootings in schools and at public events, the most recent being the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida.

In the midst of this instability, characters from Generation Z distinguish themselves by embracing both analog and digital tools. To be forthright, their habit of doing so has certainly raised some eyebrows and provoked memes of young people “using their typewriters in the park” only to promote their own uniqueness or “hipster” image (Cramer). Additionally, older generations often call such habits, common to people of various ages, an attempt at engaging in retro or nostalgic behaviors rather than genuine ones. In fiction, however, Generation Z students frequently use analog and digital materials in order to prepare for all possible outcomes in their future, particularly outcomes that are negative. Therefore, knowing how to use a bow and arrow to find food in a dystopian landscape, like Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, becomes just as important as knowing how to avoid cyberbullying on social networks. Knowing how to make earplugs out of cotton like the character Chris in *Get Out* is just as important as knowing ways to use earbuds or headphones in a crowded space where one seeks privacy.

Due partly to the pressures and dangers unique to this generation, suicide rates for young people have increased in recent years, as seen in *13 Reasons*. Yet materiality not only exposes human mortality but the entropy surrounding us. Popular culture and even casual observations of the cities in which we live often point toward a new preoccupation with decay and ruin. This focus has led photographers, explorers, and scholars across various disciplines to document the physical changes in our world: structures like former indoor malls, vacant downtown shops, and foreclosed homes form a new landscape that reveals the nature of a precarious time. Appreciation for materiality cannot help but address what Matthew Christopher calls “an age of consequences.” By “age of consequences,” Christopher explains what his work as a photographer of abandoned places has revealed to him: that such places are not “anomalies” but ubiquitous reminders of “our current culture and the losses
and failures that we are now sustaining” (4). These examples often point toward some anxiety about entropy and destruction on a more global scale. Environmental philosopher Timothy Morton, in his description of what he terms “ecological thought,” explains that changing perspective through attention to the physical world is vital to understanding how to live responsibly: “It isn’t like thinking about where your toilet waste goes. It is thinking about where your toilet waste goes” (127). Scholars like Morton and others see the things of our world and the humans in it as participants in a large network of forces, as both are caught up in what Morton describes throughout his work as a “mesh” of existence. Jane Bennett views the “starting point of ethics” to be “recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality” (14), and she uses the word “linger” to characterize what we should be doing when encountering the material world (17). She further observes how the habits of consumerism veil the wondrous surprises of our material surroundings: “It hit me then in a visceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is antimateriality. The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter” (5). As people consider where and how they throw things away and replace them with new ones, their relationship with the physical world changes considerably.

While some young people today favor LPs and cassette tapes over new technology because “before was always better,” as Tony says using his tape player in his car in 13 Reasons Why, their reasons for operating such devices go deeper than a desire to show off vintage collections of things. Experience with college students in my own classrooms has led me to question whether the digital natives actually enjoyed the virtual lives we assume they lead. On my campus, students carry and use their smartphones, but most do not enjoy the oversaturation of technology that has some teachers excited. One group of freshmen I taught even explicitly commented on my evaluations that they were tired of “remembering passwords” and “making social media accounts” for class activities; what they wanted was simplicity in course requirements and a positive relationship with the teacher.

The generation after millennials has been born with screens and Internet use as a fact of life, but if this is so, then we might ask how much they regularly embrace the meaning such an existence. Phill Alexander describes the problems inherent in assuming that students today are “natives” of such a terrain:

We have to work against the fatalistic generalization that the young understand technology and the old do not. Digital is not a place. You are not native to it, nor do you need to apply for residence on its shores. You’re not too old, nor are you so young that you’ll
have magic powers that cause you to innately understand everything digital.

Inhabiting the digital world requires understanding of rhetorical choices that users make, but rarely do people slow down to examine why analog or digital constraints exist in any given situation. For example, in most college classrooms a hybrid of analog and digital tools exists. A whiteboard or dry erase board accompanies the digital display of an overhead projector. Rarely does a teacher wish to use one without the other as an option. Instructors find themselves displaying text on both, and it is important to tease out the reasons we love colored markers and handwritten notes just as it is important to teach the nuances of digital platforms and their limitations. When the whiteboard leaves traces of a class discussion behind, ghosts of ideas linger on the walls rather than disappear with the stroke of a delete button. This act of ghosting, which is, in fact, the technical term for stained whiteboards whose age prevents complete erasure of markings, suggests a physical reminder of communication in ways that a delete button cannot. A joke left on the board in faint blue ink, or a definition underlined in black, remains behind to prompt curiosity of what happened in the room just prior to the next group’s arrival.

Why Film and Television? Why Pop Culture?

If school classrooms offer artifacts that could easily articulate this argument, and neighborhoods remain peppered with abandoned buildings that serve as evidence of materiality’s encroachment upon a digital world, why look to fiction to reveal iterations of the analog alongside the digital? First, the primary data in popular culture is accessible to the reader of this text who need only rent or stream the examples discussed here. Such data is meant to appeal to a wide audience rather than a particular community that only my neighbors and me can access and describe. Data in popular culture is also plentiful. In terms of analog tools like a whiteboard, we do not have to look far for examples of what is commonly known as the “big board trope” in popular culture. One poignant example occurs in the series *Battlestar Galactica* in the 2000s. In the pilot episode, set in outer space, the main cast seeks refuge from their enemies, the Cylons. Camera shots often feature ticking clocks on the walls because the enemy launches an attack every “33 Minutes” (name of episode) and tests the combat flight crew’s ability to forsake sleep for days on end. Indeed, many pilots are given stimulants as a way to survive the ongoing attacks. During the repeated losses of their men and women, the humans keep track of how many survivors remain. Because the human race has almost been wiped out, the number dwindles, and each time the Cylons come, their leader must change the ongoing tally of survivors on a whiteboard
with her markers. The characters, surrounded by all the accoutrements of sci-fi technology, use one small board to document the shrinking number of surviving humans. Meredith Woerner remarks specifically on this one object as being “the exact moment when *Battlestar Galactica* won our hearts”: she says, “I’m not sure if any post apocalyptic or survivor series (since BSG) has been able to recapture the simple weightiness of the whiteboard. We’ve seen spaceships blast Earth to bits, but I’ve yet to witness a series where the stakes were this clear and this important. It shows that sometimes the simplest devices hold the most power. . . .”

Likewise, this project will focus primarily on pop culture examples of fictional characters as its main data source because characters offer different perspectives for us to explore, and these characters have the potential to act as models for different ways of living within certain contexts and conjunctures. Storytellers and filmmakers also believe these points to be true, or they would not traffic in ideas and the dissemination of them with such joy and possibility. If, as Jonathan Sterne says, “the work of cultural studies is to redescribe context, to analyze conjunctures, [and] to attend to the relations of people, power, and practices built into any phenomenon or problem” (29), then storytelling allows for ample contexts and conjunctures of what could be. It poses what Jerome Bruner calls a number of “possible worlds.” In Stephen King’s memoir *On Writing*, he recalls the moment when someone first told him to “make up his own story.” He says,

> I remember an immense feeling of possibility at the idea, as if I had been ushered into a vast building filled with closed doors and had been given leave to open any I liked. There were more doors than one person could ever open in a lifetime, I thought (and still think).  
> (King 28)

In other words, storytellers do not offer a fictional view of the world just for transitory entertainment purposes. They also offer countless possible ways of experiencing and reimagining life, and this approach is central to how we create with the materials available to us.

In doing so, narratives like the ones studied in this book, Laura Briggs and Jodi Kelber-Kaye argue “less optimistically,” ones “that become consumable by a large popular audience” like *Jurassic World* and *Pitch Perfect*, do “offer rather familiar re-workings of stories that the culture can assent to, consume, and enjoy” (93). Yet this project is not a literary one but a rhetorical one, which means that the narratives involved in this study are studied in connection with audience responses and audience habits in a twenty-first century world. The concern over the schism between high art and popular blockbusters need not halt the forward trajectory of the argument. In rhetoric, “familiar re-workings” help the author or director behind each franchise create characters that reflect
the existing public just as the public, in turn, identifies with them. Easy identification and consumption are necessary for a message to resonate with others.

As mentioned before, environmental crises, terrorism abroad and at home, and collapse of the economy provide ample evidence of why Generation Z might not just imagine but expect the end of the world to occur within their lifetime. However, analog devices may be used to suggest innocence and joy. The protagonist of Guardians of the Galaxy listens to a song on his Walkman in the opening scene of the film franchise’s sequel. Star-Lord (Chris Pratt) uses this tool to remind him of his childhood before his mother was killed. As Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow describes, we see the character “dancing spunkily through a cavernous extraterrestrial landscape. The Walkman is his prized possession. When a prison guard confiscates it and Peter sees him wearing the headphones, he cries, ‘That song belongs to me!’” As Tuhus-Dubrow further explains, the analog tool “is thus portrayed alternately as a source of comfort, thrills, and enchantment,” and she reports that this scene inspired purchases of Walkmans on eBay, where “[they] sold for up to $820” (see Chapter 3). This example, while rooted in nostalgia for the character’s past, has material implications for today’s consumers who also wish to capture the thrills and enchantment of analog music—not just to be a part of a retro trend, but to feel as elated as Star-Lord does as he dances in outer space. Perhaps, they may even escape, via their bulky sound-canceling headphones, the negative news they hear every day on television and the Internet. Tuhus-Dubrow would remind us that the Walkman both increases auditory pleasure and insulates the listener from the outside world. This very fact serves as a reminder that even analog materials separate humans from their communities; smartphones alone are not to blame.

Moving forward, this book includes many examples of creativity made in unplugged circumstances. Such circumstances often result in the character’s ability to create something new; and, like the original MTV Unplugged, the use of simpler instruments showcases the adaptability of creators rather than a disdain for technology. Romanticizing unplugged composing or creating is not productive even if Chris Pratt’s character Star-Lord finds it so: every tool has its affordances and limitations, including the ballpoint pen. Nor should we privilege low tech activity over high tech activity. The goal here is something less stratifying: to celebrate the creative ways characters use tools that exist beside, behind, between, above, below, and among the screens we use. Therefore, this book is a celebration of and an investigation into material spaces and objects that have not been previously explored as parts of Generation Z culture. The range of examples supplied in this text will vary from positive to negative as some characters confront obstacles related to the overuse of digital devices. While Beca in Chapter 2 becomes a respected bricoleur capable of navigating various spaces and tools, Chris in Chapter 5 finds
that materials are used to trap him into servitude. This set of examples is meant to offer a range of perspectives on how living an unplugged life affects the quality of young people’s lives.

In Chapter 1, “Fan Fiction,” the television show *Supernatural*’s 200th episode and self-proclaimed tribute to its most steadfast fans, explores the excitement and creativity of high school students as they transform (via a very “meta” narrative) *Supernatural* into a musical for their community. Unlike later chapters of this book, where trauma often accompanies the unplugged world, this section celebrates the joy two teenagers experience when they bring one of their favorite stories to life through a combination of digital tools and material props. Additionally, the episode “Fan Fiction” reflects on the main characters’ own preoccupation with material items like the 1967 Chevy Impala the two brothers Sam and Dean drive, and it reminds the audience that the characters of this particular narrative continually struggle with the lack of agency or free will that accompanies a rich material world that operates on macro and micro scales of being.

Chapter 2 will demonstrate that tech-savvy characters, like those in *Pitch Perfect*, are the people who are most likely to surprise us by manipulating tools and spaces that require no electric power. Beca Mitchell, female protagonist of the film, performs in unlikely settings (and with unlikely props) and inspires others to do the same. In this narrative characters are just as likely to stack CDs as they are to digitally mix tracks on a laptop. The low fidelity world of a capella music in both the first film and its sequel *Pitch Perfect 2* features empty swimming pools, shower stalls, plastic cups, campfires, and candles as co-participants in musical performances. Beca becomes a leader of the Barden Bellas, an a capella group, because she effectively navigates both worlds with attention to audience needs. She works with both material and digital artifacts to show her talent: one key scene is her manipulation of a plastic cup to create rhythm on the stage floor. In the film’s sequel, Beca and her teammates confront high tech performances by European performers. Going unplugged helps these young female artists “find their sound” even as they compete against the most sophisticated singing group in the world.

Chapter 3 addresses the characterization of youth in the *Jurassic Park* franchise, starting with the original film based on Michael Crichton’s novel and ending with the recent summer blockbuster *Fallen Kingdom*, a sequel to the 2010s reboot *Jurassic World*. From its inception the mythos surrounding this story of genetically engineered dinosaurs has featured children abandoned or neglected by their parents during times when survival is uncertain. Likewise, the films unveil a problematic desire for hybridizing analog and digital tools for financial gain, and such hybridizing is accompanied by every glitch imaginable. These movies find creative ways to link the problems of abandoned children to the de-extinct animals whose welfare remains secondary to humankind’s need for entertainment.
The use of time manipulation to muddy the lines among the past, present, and future also heightens the challenges faced by characters of all ages.

In Chapter 4, about *13 Reasons Why*, protagonist Hannah Baker uses cassette tapes to compose a lengthy suicide note to her peers. While the cassettes are the most tangible example of unplugged, or analog, technology, other examples serve as catalysts in the plot, such as a classmate’s 1990s style zine magazine, Moleskine notebooks for poetry, and the graffiti written on bathroom walls. Hannah composes on old technology to make statements about the limitations and dangers of screen technologies, especially as they are used in cyberbullying and transmission of photographs via smartphones. Most importantly, however, Hannah’s use of analog technology acts as a form of embodiment that speaks directly to the horrors of suicide and the disembodiment caused by violence to the self.

In Chapter 5’s analysis of *Get Out*, a film whose reviews were unanimously full of praise, the central conflict exists between a white upper middle class family and a young African American man named Chris, whose first visit to his white girlfriend’s childhood home becomes a fight for survival. Throughout Chris’s visit, the audience views the house itself as a place where the father collects souvenirs in order to “experience another person’s culture.” In a more sinister moment, the audience realizes that the Armitages are also in the business of collecting African American bodies to fulfill dreams of athletic and artistic genius. Chris’s encounters with the material world remain dangerous ones; indeed, this narrative showcases the repeated unplugging of a smartphone so that Chris may not call for help. *Get Out* serves as a counterpoint to earlier chapters because the Armitage family as a unit has made a life out of dominating the material world and rendering it helpless. The triumph occurs only when Chris is able to repurpose the Armitage family’s heirlooms and escape the house.

Chapter 6, which addresses *Stranger Things*, reveals that analog sensibilities, not just its tools, define childhood in the 1980s. In this series a boy named Will Byer’s disappearance triggers a series of supernatural events in a small town, and the boy’s best friends find creative ways to locate him, using existing technologies like short-wave radio. However, once Will returns, the trouble continues because holes now exist between different realities that threaten to annihilate all life. Will’s own artistic talents demonstrate how children, even at their most powerless, find ways to save their families and friends from destruction. This chapter finally demonstrates how children born in every generation, not just Generation Z, have used older forms of technology to outsmart the more contemporary tools of their adult counterparts.

The conclusion then reminds readers that this generation’s use of both digital and analog technologies makes for rich storytelling because characters become stewards of the physical world while also developing complex relationships with humans. In sum characters from these narratives look
to the physical world for both inspiration and survival in desperate circumstances, and such lessons may be applicable to our own encounters with Generation Z. I offer two final examples that have implications for future study: the web-based television series *Cobra Kai* and the independent movie *The Florida Project*. The characters from both of these narratives have little financial stability on which to lean, and this scarcity of resources prompts them to engage in “rasquache,” a technique that involves not only bricolage but a form of resistance to typical capitalist structures and conventions. Such a technique may signal the way forward for Generation Z and the generations than follow them.

These encounters with characters will be made richer by a refusal to accept digital native as the main descriptor of their lifestyle. While young people continue to use screens, adult readers here will benefit from taking careful note of their interest in the physical world as well. We then recognize, through engagement with popular culture, how the use of materiality in narrative might inspire viewers to engage in their own acts of bricolage and their own efforts to conserve and sustain resources in the world around them.

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Introduction


My Charade Is the Event of the Season


Analog Dinosaurs and Abandoned Kids in Jurassic World


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Don’t Adjust Whatever Device You’re Hearing This On


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Conclusion


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