From the Light into the Dark: Understanding Transgressed Spatial Boundaries in Are You Afraid of the Dark?

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From the Light into the Dark: Understanding Transgressed Spatial Boundaries in *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*

by

Ethan Robles

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From the Light into the Dark: Understanding Transgressed Spatial Boundaries in Are You Afraid of the Dark?

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ABSTRACT

On October 31, 1990, the first episode of the children’s television series *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* aired on the Canadian station Youth Television (YTV). The series, which would be comprised of 91 episodes and 7 seasons, began with the phrase, “Submitted for the approval of the Midnight Society. I call this story…” (MacHale). The opening campfire scenes and the stories that followed strike at the heart of nostalgia for many horror fans. The series has maintained a sizeable cult following that continues to enjoy the show’s tales of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. Its influence and success precedes youth-oriented horror anthologies like *Tales from the Crypt Keeper* (1993), *The Nightmare Room* (2001), *Goosebumps* (1995), and *R.L. Stine’s The Haunting Hour* (2010). In this work, I begin a conversation regarding *Are You Afraid?* and the efficacy of young adult horror, in order to apply a critical lens to a series that targets a young, developing audience. Moreover, I argue the significance of spatial boundaries, the consequences of transgressing borders, and the importance of morally ambiguous messaging to a young audience. By addressing these elements, we can understand the didactic lessons of adolescent horror, address concerns regarding suitable content for developing viewers, and learn about young audience’s consumption of horrific material.
I. Introduction

On October 31, 1990, the first episode of the children’s television series Are You Afraid of the Dark? (Are You Afraid?) aired on the Canadian station Youth Television (YTV). The series, which would be comprised of seven seasons and ninety-one episodes, began with the phrase, “Submitted for the approval of the Midnight Society. I call this story…” (MacHale). The opening campfire scenes and the stories that follow strike at the heart of nostalgia for many horror fans. The series has maintained a sizeable cult following that continues to enjoy the show’s tales of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. Much like genre-based anthology series before it, Are You Afraid? covered similar territory to Outer Limits (1963) and The Twilight Zone (1959). Its influence and success precedes youth-oriented horror anthologies like Tales from the Crypt Keeper (1993), The Nightmare Room (2001), Goosebumps (1995), and R.L. Stine’s The Haunting Hour (2010). Yet, Are You Afraid? has not received scholarly attention or criticism, despite its dense catalog of material and origination of the adolescent horror anthology. Indeed Goosebumps, a similar series in narrative content and cult popularity, has been the subject of substantial criticism regarding its use of violence, its reception among certain populations, and its relationship to sexualized gender roles. In this work, I begin a conversation regarding Are You Afraid? and the efficacy of young adult horror, applying a critical lens to a series that targets a young, developing audience. I argue, moreover, for the significance within the show of spatial boundaries, the consequences of transgressing borders, and morally ambiguous messaging to a young audience. By addressing these

1 Mesmer, “Goosebumps.”
elements, we can understand the didactic intent of adolescent horror, address concerns regarding suitable content for maturing viewers, and learn about the young audience’s consumption of horrific material.

*Are You Afraid?*, in particular, provides an opportunity to work with an influential TV series to further expand the scope of horror studies and focus on a nascent horror audience. The importance of this type of work is self evident when considering the burgeoning of new youth-focused horror anthologies currently being produced (the beautifully realized *Creeped Out* (2018) being one of the most recent entries), as well as horror anthologies created for the broad audience (*Black Mirror* (2011) is perhaps the most mainstream example). This argument’s significance, however, does not stop with the addition of new critical material. Instead, youth-focused horror content establishes scholarly opportunity on two more distinct levels.

First, adolescent horror texts allow scholars an understanding of how developing minds react to the horrific and terrifying. Youth-based horror television and film must be deliberate in its portrayal of terrifying, gory, and horrific content. Stephen King, on speaking of the limitation of television as a medium for horror, writes, “television has really asked the impossible of its handful of horror programs – to terrify without really terrifying, to horrify without really horrifying, to sell audiences a lot of sizzle and no steak” (236). While King’s conception of televised horror is dated (his commentary is printed in 1981), he does effectively speak to restrictions placed on television. Unlike horror films, televised programming cannot enforce the R-rating, and the MPAA rating system will not restrict underage people from watching in their own home. *Are You Afraid?* received a TV-Y7 rating (meaning the content was suited for children age 7 and
above) at the time of its release, but the parameters of what makes television suitable for someone under or over the seven-years-old is ambiguous at best. Whether they were effective in managing their audience or not, the restrictions that we place on youth programming double down on the “sizzle” for horror series. However, these restrictions, more often than not, end up creating new and innovative ways to terrify a young audience. While *Are You Afraid?* does not provide gore or hyper violence, it innovates within strict limitations to frighten its audience.

Along with its ability to target the adolescent audience, a second way in which the series invites its young viewers to wrestle with ambiguous, unresolved endings. *Are You Afraid?* is unafraid to re-interpret moral and folk tales and to pay homage to influential horror shows and films. As one of the first of its kind, it was also willing to expose young audiences to unresolved, dark, and morally ambiguous endings. I argue that the stories that do not end happily are the most intriguing and the most important in understanding the efficacy of youth-oriented horror. These moral ambiguities offer an opportunity to think about concerns regarding suitable content and the fluctuating boundaries of childhood and maturity (Antunes 29). Certainly, *Are You Afraid?* is a treasure trove of untapped content. Yet, it is also a catalogue that allows scholars to question the myriad messages that these programs send in terms of gender, race, socio-economic status, abjection, monstrosity, etc. *Are You Afraid?* acts as a time capsule and invites us to think about a stripped down horror that must function within strict parameters, without gore or violence, and serve a heavily regulated audience.

The goal of this thesis is to engage with two specific episodes of *Are You Afraid?* and critically question the significance of spaces, boundaries, and transgression in
relation to adolescent protagonists. “The Tale of the Dark Music” (1992) and “The Tale of the Phone Police” (1994) offer two differing conceptions of boundary offenses and ask their viewers to think critically about what it means to enter into an unknown, dangerous space. “The Tale of the Dark Music” relies on physical and structural borders to generate a dichotomy between a safe and dangerous area of the home. Using the home as a physical space, the episode focuses on the dangerous basement (a traditionally horrific location) to challenge the safety and domesticity of the home’s first floor. In contrast, “The Tale of the Phone Police” questions the ability of safe, physical spaces to keep the danger at bay at all. This episode uses the household phone as a tool that allows free passage across physical borders, enabling protagonists to enter into hostile spaces, and antagonists to enter into domestic spaces, without transgressing physical boundaries. While these two episodes differ regarding their portrayal of spatial transgression, they are similar in their use of the unresolved or unhappy ending.

There is particular importance in a non-happy ending, as this storytelling strategy reveals the anxieties associated with childhood. More specifically, the unhappy ending signals a complex and morally ambiguous world and a message that mirrors Robin Wood’s take on the horror film as a representation of a “civilization condemning itself…to ultimate disintegration, and ambivalently…celebrating the fact” (Wood 94). Adolescent horror stories often have a moral or purpose and, like the repressed monsters of 1950s horror film, the worlds of adolescent horror often return to normalcy. Moreover, this return often signals a lesson to be learned or a particular mistake that must be avoided (Miskec 457). Yet, Are You Afraid? welcomes the unhappy and unresolved ending. More often than other adolescent horror programs, it traps its protagonists in the
horror of their own making and, in doing so, bucks the family-friendly content of children’s television. Scholars are, just now, beginning to see the blurred lines surrounding the concept of childhood and questioning the boundaries that we construct to shelter and protect the individuals we consider vulnerable due to their youth. Children’s television is often “concern[ed] with notions of suitability and the boundaries of childhood, not only in relation to adulthood but also within childhood itself” (Antunes 29). *Are You Afraid?* and the many shows that replicate its style frequently ignore the issue of suitability and engage the audience with a wide range of horrific content. While these shows lack the explicit nature of horror, they do not sacrifice or suppress the layered messages that horror continually exposes in our culture. They represent a new opportunity to engage in how horror affects a population that we often consider to be the most vulnerable in society.

II. *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* in Story and Frame

At its core, *Are You Afraid?* is a series that celebrates the convergence of horrific themes with childhood development. As stated earlier, the series does take traditional stories that are part of cultural memory (Ex. The Monkey’s Paw and The Hook) and retells them for a new audience. The series more often, however, creates original material that attempts to connect with the real world circumstances that adolescents may face. Economic hardships, self-consciousness, alienation, and bullying are covered in the span of the series because a young audience is readily able to identify with these issues and, like the horror film before it, *Are You Afraid?* critiques social constructions and cultural practices. Regarding horror fans, Robin Wood states, “Central to the effect and
fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere” (80). Wood wants his readers to understand that the horror film is a source of wish fulfillment. Engaging our terror allows us an opportunity to live vicariously through a rule-breaking and amoral horror film. Our wants, even if they are beyond the scope of what society may deem appropriate, can be played out before us on screen without consequences. Are You Afraid? renders this need to break free from oppression and packages it for an audience that is exceptionally vulnerable to moral conditioning. As a series, Are You Afraid? is unique because it allows a young audience to see relatable characters releasing themselves from societal norms. On a basic level, Are You Afraid? operates like any other children’s show. It presents young audiences with young protagonists, it offers solutions to the tried and true problems of adolescence (taking on responsibility, sibling rivalries, dealing with divorce), and it often ends with a happy ending. Are You Afraid? is most ambitious, however, when it dares to eschew the happy ending in favor of moral ambiguity and asks its viewer to see their “nightmare wish” untethered and unleashed.

While I argue that Are You Afraid? is an original and innovative horror anthology, it is important to state that the show does borrow generously from the series that have come before it. Like The Twilight Zone and Tales from the Crypt (1989), each episode of Are You Afraid? contains a frame narrative. Certainly, Rod Serling and the crypt keeper have become iconic in their tenure as the hosts of their respective shows. Are You Afraid?, however, frames each of its episodes by featuring a diverse and changing group
of teenagers who form the Midnight Society. In the first episode, the group is introduced with a pseudo-mission statement regarding the purpose of the society. Gary (Ross Hull), the de-facto leader, explains to the audience:

We’re called, the Midnight Society. Separately, we’re very different. We like different things. We go to different schools. And we have different friends. But one thing draws us together…the dark. Each week, we gather around this fire to share our fears and our strange and scary tales. It’s what got us together and it’s what keeps bringing us back. This is a warning to all who join us. You’re going to leave the comfort of the light and step into the world of the supernatural. (“The Tale of the Phantom Cab”)

By beginning the series with this monologue, Are You Afraid? introduces its readers to the premise of the series. Here, the viewer finds a group that coalesces around the idea of fear and scary tales. Horror fiction is often segmented in its own particular niche. Are You Afraid? is no different, except that it offers an opportunity for a potentially diverse group (including in terms of gender and in race) to come together around a fire to experience fear together. Moreover, this introduction does not differ greatly from Rod Serling’s repeated introductions in the many Twilight Zone episodes or the crypt keeper’s pun-laden warnings about the coming installment. However, the frame narrative applied to Are You Afraid? represents more than a witty host welcoming viewers. The Midnight Society is a contributing thematic factor in each episode’s narrative. These characters, unlike Serling and the keeper, grow, change, and evolve. Often, their shifting social situations contribute to the generation of their narratives. Furthermore, their stories and

4 “The Tale of the Phantom Cab.” Are You Afraid of the Dark?: The Complete First Season, written by Chloe Brown and D.J. McHale, directed by Ron Oliver, YTV, 1992
the circumstances that surround their presentations often represent a coping opportunity
and a means for the characters in the frame narrative to face harsh realities through the
act of storytelling.

*Are You Afraid?*’s dynamism comes from its ability to present a frame narrative
that effectively represents adolescent anxieties related to child and pre-teen development
through the trusted characters of the Midnight Society. Although their screen time is
short, the storytellers themselves become a part of the show’s fabric. For instance, Betty
Ann (Raine Pare-Coull), my personal favorite storyteller, garners a reputation from the
other members for telling oddly twisted stories throughout the seasons. Other storytellers
will incorporate specific characters that appear in their tales and, on one occasion, other
society members will even borrow those specific characters for their tale. Gary often uses
Sardo (a comical pseudo-magician who sells magical objects), and Frank (Jason
Alisharan) usually incorporates Dr. Vink (a would-be conjurer and dabbler in the dark
arts) to add a personalized touch to their story. Since these tertiary characters grow with
the show, the viewer has the opportunity to identify with them, generate investments in
their subplots, and find specific storytellers that tell their favorite type of story. Gary and
Kristen’s (Rachel Blanchard) romantic relationship, Tucker (Daniel DeSanto) and
Frank’s continued feuds, and David’s (Nathaniel Moreau) eventual move to another state
all displays the show’s interest in developing its peripheral characters. I identify with
Betty Ann because she is unafraid of twisting reality in surreal directions, and she never
shies away from social themes. When a Society member broaches beauty standards,
bullying, or economic hardship, that topic comes from a character that viewers might
identify with or understand more fully than a static, unchanging, and detached host. These developed characters mirror the adolescent anxieties that their viewers experience.

While *Are You Afraid?* does re-tell classic narratives during its run, the vast majority of its content is original and is unafraid to take on complex contemporary problems facing a developing audience. In “The Tale of the Mystical Mirror,” Betty Ann tells the group, “I just don’t like the idea of changing your looks to fit somebody else’s idea of what beauty is…I think we all sometimes place too much importance on looks” (“The Tale of the Mystical Mirror”). Betty Ann signals two key pieces of information to the viewer before the episode enters into its central story. First, the moral understanding of beauty is reinforced, with the importance of valuing personal character over superficial appearances. Second and more important, Betty Ann reveals her personal discomfort with beauty standards and her unwillingness to conform to another individual’s conception of attractiveness. Her introduction is followed by a tale that focuses on the importance of understanding inner beauty. This is one example of how the dynamic characters in the Midnight Society act as stand-ins for its audience and enable a means of conveying specific messages to the viewer, which furthers the complexity of these episodes. Moreover, the society members can often signal a particular anxiety, fear, or experience that can contribute to reading the main narrative. In short, taking account of the frame narrative is crucial in order to best assess the efficacy of the *Are You Afraid?* series. By doing so, we link themes being discussed by the Midnight Society and those encountered by the story’s protagonist.
III. “The Tale of the Dark Music”

“The Tale of the Dark Music” begins with one of the most basic frame narratives in the series while also emphasizing one of the fundamental aspects of horror studies. Eric (Jacob Tierney) is the episode’s storyteller, and he begins his tale with the ominous and simple statement, “Well, everyone knows that there is nothing in the dark that can hurt you…most of the time.” While this introduction is an insult to one of his fellow Midnight Society members, Eric is also signaling the significance of the darkness as an unknown and foreboding space. Frank, his target of ridicule, is afraid of walking through the dark woods alone. Not only does the revelation of this fear shatter Frank’s tough guy persona, it also signals a prominent fear for adolescents. *Are You Afraid?* will often probe the possibilities of darkness and what is hiding out of sight--and with good reason.

The evolutionary nature of adolescence is a time of constant knowledge absorption and boundary testing, which makes it fertile ground for the exploration of horror themes and tropes. Teenage and adolescent years are thought to be a “period of preparation and self-definition, a period of indulgence and unfocused energy” (Hine 11). We are seeking, learning, and discovering as we develop. Our purpose in that preparation can be undefined and amorphous. However, this “unfocused energy” is crucial to the development of creativity and, more importantly, imagination. There are relatively few other times in life when our imagination will run as wildly as it does when we are young. It is this untamed nature of the adolescent mind that creates the perfect opportunity to confront horrific texts. When discussing the appeal of horror to a viewer, Stephen King states, “The imaginative person has a clearer fix on the fact of his/her fragility; the imaginative person realizes that *anything* can go disastrously wrong, at *any time*” (King
xii, author emphasis). By linking horror and imagination, King illustrates the significance of the open, unguarded mind. Through the wild, creative lens of horror, adolescent viewers can experience the mystery of the dark and, like Frank, find themselves afraid of what might be lurking out of sight. While darkness is a significant factor in understanding “The Tale of the Dark Music,” it is only one of the many elements at play in the episode.

Eric’s (Jacob Tierney) introduction provides specific details that assist in identifying the underlying challenges that the protagonist faces, as well as his entry into an unknown space. After he signals the importance of darkness in his tale, Erik begins the main narrative with this short soliloquy:

Andy Carr wasn’t doing so hot. His folks got divorced and his mom wasn’t making much money. He tried to help her as best as he could, like with his paper route. It gave him money to buy lunch at school. Things were pretty tough. Then one day it looked like his luck changed. His mom inherited a big, old house from some uncle she could hardly remember. Just like that. Didn’t cost her a dime. It was kind of old, but a lot better than the puny apartment they lived in. It really looked like the Carr’s luck was changing. Except there are two kinds of luck. And you don’t always get the kind you want. (“Tale of the Dark Music”)

Before we even enter into the action of the episode, the viewer is given intimate and significant details regarding Andy Carr’s (the protagonist) current situation. He is facing economic hardship, working a part-time job to contribute to his mother’s inadequate salary, and, on top of these considerable stresses, his family (minus the father) has moved their lives into an entirely new space. However, Andy seems to be taking the multiple
significant changes in his life rather well. Even in the face of a neighborhood bully, Andy continues assisting his mother and sister. However, it is the introduction of a new space that triggers his anxiety and also returns us to the narrative regarding a fear of the dark.

After the day has ended, the move is finished, and Andy and his family now inhabit a wholly new house, Andy begins questioning his new home. He asks his mother, “Mom…what was Uncle Niles like?” and she is unable to recall any details about him (“The Tale of the Dark Music”). Immediately following this brief exchange, she asks Andy to search the basement for a ladder. Although this conversation happens quickly, Andy’s response to her request is one of immediate uncertainty, anxiety, and potential fear. When his sister mocks him for his fear of the dark, Andy responds defensively, mirroring the situation in the frame narrative. As Andy apprehensively approaches the basement, we see the central conflict of this episode, but also the underlying importance of Are You Afraid?. Adolescent horror relies on defined boundaries that work to prohibit young protagonists from entering into unknown spaces. The protected space of the domestic sphere, the family unit, and the certainty of protection within that area are disrupted by trespassed boundaries from safety into danger or from the refuge of the light into the dark. The episode conceptualizes the different spaces well. The domestic area of the first floor is well lit and filled with the family. The basement, however, feels subterranean, dark, and damp. Moreover, the cinematography of the episode reinforces the difference, as seen in Figure 1.
The basement is loaded with established and accumulated meanings, and Andy’s journey into the basement is a radical moment of transgression, because he enters into a space that is unknown to him. When discussing the significance of haunted spaces, Aaron Smuts argues, “Places are experienced as qualitative – as fearful, depressing, nostalgic, alienating, and lonely – because they are invested with accumulated meanings” (Smuts). Smuts is speaking about the qualities of the haunted environment, but this explanation holds significance for the non-haunted environment as well. The protected space or the domestic space is also qualitative and can be filled with feeling of happiness, excitement, security, and community. It is in these two opposite qualitative zones that we find the dichotomy that Andy faces when he enters into the dark, cobwebbed cellar. He is leaving the light, warmth, and community of the protected space to enter into the unknown, lonely, and dark space of the basement. Moreover, he enters into a territory that he does not completely understand.

Both the protected and haunted space have history and relevance, yet it is often that characters enter into a potentially haunted space without knowing the full history associated with it. This trope is a recurring theme in horror stories. Often, protagonists will open the tomb, enter the house, or, in this case, walk down into the darkness without knowing the intricacies of a space’s history or narrative. To encounter and to inhabit a space is to enter into a territory that is governed by past personal relationships, experiences, and histories (Smuts). As previously stated, Andy tries early on in the episode to comprehend the history of the basement by seeking information about his unknown Uncle Niles. When Andy broaches the subject for the second time, the following exchange takes place:
Andy: “Mom, who was Uncle Niles? Like, what did he do?”

Mrs. Carr: “Oh, he was a strange guy. He never left the house and somehow got filthy rich. No one knows where the money came from. From what I hear the neighbors didn’t like him too much. They thought he was kind of looney.”

Andy: “How did he die?”

Mrs. Carr: “He was old. He just stopped living. They found him in the basement at the bottom...” (“The Tale of the Dark Music”)

Again, Andy is confronted with multiple mysteries regarding his deceased family member. Uncle Niles’ economic situation, his relationship with the neighbors, and his isolation within the home all stand as potential unknowns for Andy and his family. Most importantly, we learn that Uncle Niles died in the basement, and we are never told exactly how or why his death took place. It is these enigmas that imbue the basement with its haunted history and create the separation between the protected area and the unknown. By leaping over these boundaries, Andy and the protagonists of Are You Afraid? find themselves in an enigmatic space where the rules of normality no longer apply and, more importantly, where these characters can be granted power and agency. More often, however, protagonists that have abandoned the protected space in favor of the unknown find themselves faced with steep consequences and harsh punishments for their transgressions.

In “The Tale of the Dark Music,” Andy continually moves between the protected space and the unknown, but the presence of music further complicates his mysterious position and contributes to boundary violation. Throughout the episode, Andy enters the
basement on four different occasions. In each scene, a monster, hidden behind a coal cellar door, attempts to capture Andy. The monster’s behavior is punishment for entering into an unknown area. The consequences of Andy’s boundary hopping are only ever revealed, however, when music is played. Andy learns about the relation between the appearance of the monster and audible music late in the episode. He says, “Music! It’s music!” as he narrowly avoids being consumed (“The Tale of the Dark Music”). Andy is not wrong in making this connection. In fact, he comes to the realization long after the viewer has solved this mystery. And while the door of the coal cellar does threaten to open with the introduction of music, the genre of music is significant in its triggering the monster. In each instance that music is played in the basement, the music itself is a form of rock and roll or, more specifically, heavy metal. This genre, in particular, has come under scrutiny for its tendency toward violent lyrics and occult-like influences and it redoubles what is already a transgression in an unknown space.

Because music is so integral to “The Tale of the Dark Music,” the episode clearly takes up not only spatial indiscretion but also the significance of music to adolescents and its potential effects on their behavior. The soundtrack of the episode is worth mentioning. Unlike other episodes in the series, “The Tale of the Dark Music” has a unified soundtrack of generic heavy metal guitar riffs. The genre selection is important when thinking about the emergence of Tipper Gore’s Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) in 1985 and its attempts to censor music deemed too violent or inappropriate for adolescent consumption. Heavy metal, in particular, came under scrutiny in the late 1980s and the early 1990s with Gore’s publication of “The Cult of Violence,” which asserted that heavy metal music “took an even darker turn [than other forms of music]
and explored subjects like devil worship and the occult, sadistic sex, murder, rape, and suicide” (Gore 49). Much like the themes of brutal horror films, the subject matter of heavy metal came under investigation because it explored areas, subjects, and actions that deviated from the norms of society. Along with the unknown space of the dark and the basement, heavy metal music signals a transgression from normality.

Gore argued that exposing adolescents to heavy metal’s potentially inappropriate content had significant ramifications for their development and growth. She writes, “The healthy mature personality may in fact be minimally affected by violent messages. But for many malleable teens and preteens who are searching for identity and who are beset by conflicts about authority, drugs, sex, religion, and education, a big dose of heavy metal messages like these can be extremely harmful” (56). Gore is trying to define the connective tissue between exposure to heavy metal and non-normative, potentially violent behavior in adolescents. For her the potential for nuclear action, international terrorism, and the continually growing influence of mass media do not compare to the impact of heavy metal music on non-normative adolescent behavior (48). In the following decades, Gore’s stance would crumble beneath research that would prove her theories incorrect. Are You Afraid? is produced in the wake of this counter argument to Gore’s crusade, and the creators use heavy metal themes throughout the episode. “The Tale of the Dark Music” takes on heavy metal as a summoning force and a characteristic of its main human villain, thus evoking the violence that Gore fears.

The episode’s chief antagonist, Koda, is portrayed as a consumer of heavy metal and his behavior mirrors the violence that Gore focuses on when she critiques the music’s messaging. Judging solely from Koda’s appearance, he takes on many of the cliché traits
associated with heavy metal fandom, including long hair. Gore cites W.A.S.P., Alice Cooper, Kiss, and Ozzy Osbourne in her study; each of these bands and artists sport long hair. Furthermore, Koda is only ever seen in black clothes and his t-shirts, particularly, feature images of skulls or snakes, which are often associated with the genre. Koda, it seems, is a heavy metal subject in his appearance and also in his behavior.

Throughout the episode, he displays a radical degree of violence. He steps on Andy while threatening him, chases him down, punches him twice, and throws Andy’s bike under a dump truck’s tires. Koda is a near-perfect example of the type of violent and uncontrollable adolescent that, according to Gore, is spawned from exposure to heavy metal music. The creators are explicit in tying Koda to this musical genre and using him as a representation of the worst potential consequences of heavy metal fandom. Listening to this type of music is, again, to step out of a protected space and to enter a place that glorifies the gruesome, violent, obscene, and occult. While entering the home’s unknown space is a deviation from normality, it is the presence of heavy metal music in the unknown space that signals the protagonist’s transgressive act and triggers the appearance of the monster as a regulatory force. However, “The Tale of the Dark Music” is not the only episode to feature a monster that acts as a regulating entity.

The monster in Are You Afraid? is tasked with punishing the protagonist’s misbehavior, deviation from normality, and unsupervised explorations. In “The Tale of
Apartment 214,” a young woman fails to live up to her promises and is subsequently haunted, while in “The Tale of the Quicksilver,” a young woman’s soul is imprisoned for trying to access the tools of the occult. When considering adolescent horror as a genre, I argue, like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen before me, that these monsters are used to police the borders of the possible (20). Cohen phrases his theory best when he writes, “From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes” (20). Cohen describes the monster as a regulatory figure that stands between the protagonist and their exploration of the unknown. When applying this idea to adolescent horror fiction, I extend Cohen’s point and emphasize that the adolescent protagonist is inherently an explorer of the unknown and continually probes the limits of knowledge in order to satiate their curiosity. The young protagonist is in a period of development. Since these characters are naturally curious about their surroundings, they have a need to understand histories and cultural constructs that have been put into place before and during their existence. Andy exemplifies this type of dangerous exploration and curiosity. His inquiries about his unknown uncle, continued descents into the basement, and interaction with heavy metal music represent the adolescent need to explore beyond protected spaces. Normally, monstrous regulatory beings warn the protagonist away from their exploration and, having served its purpose, the monster returns into hiding. Are You Afraid?, unlike many adolescent horror shows, does not always allow the endings to be that simple.

Andy’s actions within the episode constitute a questionable and problematic example for adolescent audiences, but it is Andy’s escape from punishment that may be the most frightening aspect of the episode. Although Andy has a close call with the
monster in the coal cellar, he does not end up as the entity’s prime target. Instead, Andy uses the entity as a way to mitigate his problems. By luring, trapping, and attempting to scare Koda with the monster, Andy demonstrates his knowledge of the unknown space, the power of music, and the monster that polices the border. However, Andy does not have complete knowledge regarding the entity that he is invoking. After leaving Koda to the mercy of the being, he says, “You mess with me, I’ll do this to you again” (“The Tale of the Dark Music”). The dialog implies that Andy does not fully know what is going to happen in the basement when he summons the being. He expects Koda to be frightened as he had been. However, he does not take into account his fugue state, when the monster nearly draws him into its lair. Andy has gained knowledge of the unknown space, but that information is limited and it costs Koda his life.

Following this accidental murder, Andy is given fuller knowledge of the unknown and is able to use his understanding of the basement to his advantage. After Koda is drawn into the coal cellar, Andy is immediately gifted a new bike and the once menacing red glow behind the cellar door turns to a more approachable blue. Most importantly, the entity reveals its purpose and unlocks the mystery of Uncle Niles and the unknown space of the basement. The monster tells Andy, “I’ll give you anything you want. Just like I did for your uncle…Anything you want. You only have to do one thing…feed me” (“The Tale of the Dark Music”). This dialog clarifies the mystery surrounding Uncle Niles’ mysterious wealth and death. Moreover, Andy suddenly has radical knowledge about the rules and regulations of the unknown space. The darkness of the basement, for Andy, becomes a place where he can rid himself of complications and eliminate threats to his happiness. If he feeds the creature, the potential rewards are endless. Andy can preserve
the protected space, have knowledge of the unknown space, and benefit from that comprehension. To do so, he must keep what is lurking in behind the cellar door fed and it is this need to satiate the entity that complicates this episode and the information that it is sending to adolescent viewers.⁵

Young adult horror, often, ends in a place of normalcy and allows the protagonists and the viewers to return to reality safe, untouched, and having learned an important lesson regarding the unknown. *Are You Afraid?* is not immune to this impulse. Other episodes that deal with the radical boundaries between the protected and unknown space⁶ often eject the protagonist from an unknown space without their having gained knowledge of that place, leaving them aware that they are not to return. Indeed, young adult horror often hinges on allowing a developing audience to be able to process the horrific, terrific, abject, and grotesque. However, these interactions are policed by permitting the terror to recede by the end of the episode and the horrific themes, images, and stories then remain as components of a fantasy world that is manageable, empowering viewers to experience horror as pure imagination (McCort 14). Simply, the happy ending allows the viewer to see the horror as temporary and to know that these terrifying events are located outside the realm of reality. By keeping horror in the realm of pure fantasy, the narrative de-claws the terror and the audience can walk away.

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5 In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King makes an important point regarding the viewer's attraction to the horror film. For him, horror is a way to feed the darker side of our humanity. He calls it an alligator in the basement that must be fed or it will escape and begin terrorizing everything around it. While I think his theory is slightly tangential in this circumstance, it is important to point to King because Andy is literally left to feed the monster in the basement or to suffer the consequences.

6 “The Tale of the Lonely Ghost,” “The Tale of the Frozen Ghost,” “The Tale of Apartment 214,” and “The Tale of the Laughing in the Dark” all deal with different transgressed boundary crossings, but they allow the protagonists and the viewer to experience a happy ending and a return to normalcy.
knowing that terrifying events do not manifest in normality. “The Tale of the Dark Music,” however, does not present this type of messaging for its viewer.

By eschewing the happy ending and allowing a character to exist comfortably in an unknown and potentially harmful space, Are You Afraid? challenges the viewer to understand that horror exists in reality and can be found in all of us, even the protagonists. From the very beginning of the episode, we know that Andy has been having a hard time. As the episode continues, we see his struggle with a bully and we learn that he has been put in a position of responsibility that requires a degree of burdensome maturity and independence. Following an incident in the basement, Andy’s mother says, “I need you to be strong for me right now,” which indicates Mrs. Carr’s reliance on Andy (“The Tale of the Dark Music”). In a normal situation, Andy may be able to rid himself of the monster by expelling it or convincing his mother to move the family out of the house. Here, however, Andy is given an opportunity to benefit his family. If he feeds the creature, he can be rewarded like his uncle and fulfill the responsibilities that his mother has asked of him. Instead of acting as a regulatory force, the monster is a seductive lure to end a troubling situation, allowing him to reap rewards from horrific actions and compelling him to continue transgressing boundaries. The narrative cements this point when the episode ends and Andy smiles at the camera, while he considers feeding his sister to the monster.

Are You Afraid? and “The Tale of the Dark Music” use the morally ambiguous ending to impart significant lessons to an adolescent audience and to ingrain a deeper moral message regarding transgression. Robin Wood may interpret that this episode’s conclusion signifies “a spirit of negativity, an undifferentiated lust for destruction, that
seems to lie not far below the surface of the modern collective consciousness” (Wood 93). When writing the previous passage, Wood is referencing the R-rated *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Despite the difference in subject matter, the message is indeed the same. *Are You Afraid?* is purposefully exposing adolescents to protected and unknown spaces, unstable familial situations, unintentional and intentional violence, and boundary transgressions to show that horror does not exist in a world of pure fantasy and, more importantly, that offenses are not always regulated. When subjects like Andy Carr enter into the unknown, they have the ability to learn its history and to use that knowledge for their own gain, even if it means perpetrating horrific actions. Without consequences, the messages of adolescent horror become blurred. However, *Are You Afraid?* does not always allow boundaries to be broken freely. Quite often, the punishment is far more severe than what we might expect from young adult television.

**IV. “The Tale of the Phone Police”**

While “The Tale of the Dark Music” is a basic narrative of spatial dichotomies, *Are You Afraid?* offers a catalog that is far more nuanced in its portrayal of spatiality and boundary transgression. In multiple episodes, protagonists are completely separated from defined spaces and put into situations that differ greatly from the domestic and unknown. “The Tale of the Midnight Madness” presents the audience with a film (a version of the 1922 *Nosferatu*) that gives the reimagined Count Orlok the ability to break free from the screen and hunt a group of theater workers. “The Tale of the Dead Man’s Float” finds two high school students entering into an abandoned and forgotten high school pool, only to find that it still harbors a creature from the past. While these episodes have much to
say about boundaries, none wade into the conversation regarding the murky borders created by emerging technologies developed for the home. “The Tale of the Phone Police” premiered in the United States in 1994 and raises important questions regarding the inclusion of new devices in protected space. In particular, this episode grapples with the advent of the ubiquitous household phone before the outbreak of mobile devices. Moreover, the episode asks us to consider what a phone means to the boundaries that we create between the protected space and the unknown, as well as how easily subjects can transgress borders when the barriers between spaces become porous.

Like “The Tale of the Dark Music,” the frame narrative of “The Tale of the Phone Police” contributes to the episode’s plot and asks us to consider faceless technology’s mysterious and, perhaps, untrustworthy nature. In one of the most creative narrative devices, Tucker (this episode’s storyteller) calls into the Midnight Society meeting using a cell phone and tells the entirety of his tale from speakerphone. He addresses this oddity by framing his story through the following speech:

Okay. I’m telling my story this way, because if you think about it a telephone is probably the scariest thing in your house…you might feel safe with your doors and windows locked, but all someone has to do is dial your number. You answer the phone and bingo they’re inside…when you pick up that phone you’ve made a connection and it might be to a place that you don’t want to be connected to. (“Tale of the Phone Police”)

Tucker’s introduction and use of the phone as a means of invasion allows forms of spatiality to exist outside of the dichotomy of protected and unknown space. Plainly, the phone provides passage between these two areas, changes the physical conception of
space, and permits unregulated entry into the unknown without having to breach physical boundaries. Tucker addresses the notion of protected space almost immediately in his story. By referencing the locked doors and windows, he implies the significance of the house/home as a place with defined barriers that are constructed to keep the inhabitants safe. As shown with Andy’s house in “The Tale of the Dark Music,” the protected space is often synonymous with domesticity. Young adult horror, in particular, benefits from the establishment of the domestic space as protected, because the adolescent viewers are likely to identify family and home as symbols of safety. Tucker focuses on a non-physical definition of spatiality to immediately disrupt the viewer’s conception of protected space as well as introduce the telephone as a dangerous entity that allows the unknown to enter into the protected space.

The telephone’s ability to allow unknown entry deconstructs the boundaries between spaces, and the anonymity of the caller furthers anxieties about who or what is gaining access. When introducing his tale, Tucker conceptualizes the voice on the other end of the line as a physical entity. He does not refer to this voice as coming from another place or even entering into the mind of the listener. Instead, he sees the anonymous caller as entering the protected space. He tells us that when we answer, the voice on the other end of the line is allowed inside of the locked and secured space. Even when one of the other Society member attempts to rebuke him by stating, “But it’s just their voice,” he is quick to emphasize the significance of the relationship that develops between the caller and listener (“The Tale of the Phone Police”). That connection is a gateway or a passage from the protected space into the radically unknown and anonymous space. By referring to the potential that the phone could create a link, Tucker manufactures fluidity between
the protected and unknown that does not exist when these spaces are presented as a
dichotomy. It is this fluidity and unregulated entry that continually disrupts the protected
space in “The Tale of the Phone Police” and triggers eventual boundary transgression and
punishment.

The main narrative of the episode
concerns Jake O’Brien (Marcus Turner) and
Chris (Ryan Kent) and their current hobby of
making prank calls to unsuspecting victims.

The plot of the episode is initially simple, and
the cinematography immediately draws distinct lines between the protected space and the
unknown. Chris is the first of the boys to try to make a prank call and when he picks up
the phone, the shot immediately shifts to a perspective from outside of the house looking
in through Jake’s bedroom window. The episode’s cinematography suggests that the
phone call causes the gaze. Indeed, as the calls continue, the camera takes on a
disembodied view and this stare gets closer and closer to the window. These shots
shorten the gaze’s distance, and emphasize the barrier between the protected space and
the unknown.7 The walls, the windows, and the door all evoke the point of the opening
monologue and the importance of the barrier between protected and unknown space.
Moreover, when Chris makes a longer prank call, the disembodied stare enters into the
house, fully breaking down any borders that separated the outside from the inside. The

7 Carol Clover mentions the significance of the cinematic gaze as a male entity in
*Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. She and other scholars see this gaze as a male
fetishization of the female body. In this instance, the gaze is female and watches two
males. Moreover, the disembodied gaze of the female eventually ends up inciting
punishment for boundary transgression, which is an interesting swap of gender
roles for an adolescent television series.
gaze is eventually revealed to be Jake’s sister Annie (Marlowe Dawn). While Annie does not pose a threat to the boys, her invasion into the home does illustrate the causal connection between prank phone calls and the permeability of the protected space. By using the phone, Jake and Chris tempt the possibility of a connection with the unknown and also themselves act as the unknown to their prank call victims. The complex layers of spatial invasion complicates this scene and puts the boys at risk of engaging with the unknown or invading someone else’s protected space. If these connections should happen, the physical boundaries of the protected space would not be able to keep the unknown at bay. Annie provides the boys with a warning regarding the ability of the phone to be an entry into transgression and the unknown.

After scaring Jake and Chris, Annie reveals the significance of the phone as a potential gateway to the unknown space by trying to regulate her brother’s behavior with the device. She tries to halt the prank calling by offhandedly mentioning the phone police. When Jake and Chris say they are unaware of this concept, she outlines this alleged policing agency by stating:

Well, the phone has certain rules of operation. You don’t leave it off the hook. You don’t let it ring too long. And you don’t make stupid calls like my blunt little brother…Keep messing with the phone and you’ll end up like the Baxter kid…Billy Baxter. Happened a long time ago. He was making prank calls. The phone police got him…It’s true. They never saw him again…Everyone knows about the Baxter kid, except you my vacant sibling. You mess with the phone. You answer to the phone police. Want to make a call? (“The Tale of the Phone Police”)
By revealing the mythology surrounding the phone police, Annie acts a warden who attempts to enforce spatial boundaries. She has the ability to move between these two areas in the form of a disembodied gaze, but she also works to protect the boys from further transgression by warning them of the potential consequences. Her focus on the phone is significant, because she is not policing a physical border. Her advice would not keep Andy out of the basement in “The Tale of the Dark Music.” She is focused on an object that itself dissolves structural borders and allows the unknown to enter into a domestic space without physically forcing the protagonist into an unknown space. Chris and Jake’s disobedient interactions with the phone violate regulations created around a device capable of permeation. Annie’s warning both informs the two boys about their potential transgression and also attempts to advise them of potential regulatory action should they continue to err.

Despite Annie’s warning, Jake refuses to believe her and immediately infringes on the guidelines placed on the telephone. Jake’s disbelief regarding the phone police is evident in his facial expressions and he states, “Chris you don’t believe that stuff do you? ...Chris! Phone police. Yeah, right. Stupid” (“The Tale of the Phone Police”). Jake’s reaction is not uncommon for a pre-teen child who has been admonished by his older sister. In this instance, however, Jake’s disbelief leads him to disregard Annie’s warnings completely and to prove her wrong by grabbing a phone book from a nearby shelf and immediately searching for the aforementioned Billy Baxter. Jake’s does find the number, which he notices is an incomplete phone number listing, and he makes the call. By

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8 In the episode, Jake notices that the number is only comprised of 6 digits. The other numbers are listed with seven digits, which would be a complete phone number before the use of area codes was required to make a call.
dialing a number that is incomplete, unknown, and tied directly to Annie’s warning of regulatory action, Jake invites the unknown into the protected space through the permeable border created by the telephone. Perhaps the worst consequence of this transgression is that Jake hears another voice at the end of the line, and, now that it has been allowed to breach the protected space, that voice cannot be silenced.

In this episode, the phone is a new factor in understanding spatial transgression and changes how we understand spatiality in adolescent horror, but also horror in general. When thinking about the spatial rules of a horror film, Stephen Prince understands breached boundaries as a violation of a defined spatialized social system (Prince 125). However, he also states that these social systems are upended when “What is outside comes in, formless invades form, rupturing and destroying…socially ordered community” (125). This episode figures as an extension of Prince’s understanding of spatial transgression. When Billy Baxter answers, he is an unknown, formless entity that invades through the telephone. Moreover, Billy’s entry into the narrative radically shifts the ability of the protected space to remain safe from the unknown. Billy’s repeated calls demonstrate a broken boundary, and the unknown infiltrates the protected space. Even when the phone is unplugged, Billy continues to call, signaling his unnatural capacity to enter a rational and supposedly ordered space. The phone and Billy’s entry, then, disrupts the structural borders of space. When the phone rings, the doors, windows, and locks no longer matter. Spatial transgression now exists beyond physical boundaries and unknown entities can penetrate via technological tools.

Billy Baxter’s capability to pass from the unknown into the protected space generates an unforgivable transgression that demands a harsh form of regulation. The
majority of Baxter’s calls come during the night and perhaps there is an argument to be made that the protected space is most vulnerable in the dark. However, Jake also receives a call outside of the home from a random telephone booth on a street corner. This call prompts Baxter’s continued presence in the phone and continued wrongdoing, even though Jake and Chris have stopped prank calling. Moreover, it is this call that introduces the episode’s regulatory entity into the narrative. Striving to end Baxter’s intrusion, Jake and Chris try to seek out the source of the number and attempt to put an end to Baxter’s incursions. Their endeavor is doomed to fail, because Baxter’s continued intrusion signals the need for regulatory action. Contrary to Andy’s monstrous interaction, Jake does not benefit from the regulatory entity. His continued misuse of technology and his dabbling in the unknown leads him to become part of the unknown. “The Tale of the Dark Music” presents a monster that needs an accomplice to feed, which implicates Andy in its murders. Andy is not punished because he actively works with the monster. Jake, on the other hand, finds himself at the mercy of an entire organization dedicated to preserving the telephone’s rules. He must be punished to reaffirm the regulatory entity’s power and his penalty dooms him to become part of the unknown, his ties with protected space severed.

The phone police are an organization created for the sole purpose of punishing transgression, and this singular purpose is evident in the design of the phone company and the police themselves. When Jake and Chris enter the phone police headquarters, they ride an escalator up into a deserted and sterile corporate building. The sole occupant is an uninterested receptionist. Despite its emptiness, the phone company does take on the feeling of power and unlimited regulatory ability. These suspicions of intelligence and
power are proven when two phone policemen take Jake away. As he is being taken into custody, one of the policemen states, “Jake O’Brien. Phone police,” before he is grabbed, gagged, and carried off into an unseen area of the phone company (“The Tale of the Phone Police”). This brief moment of action reveals that the phone company and their police force have already gathered information about Jake and his transgressions with the phone. He does not give his name to Baxter, the receptionist, or the clerk who approaches him before his arrest. We are left to assume, then, that Jake’s information was found through other means and that Billy’s continued calls alerted a regulatory entity to Jake’s misuse of the phone. However, the phone police’s ability to identify Jake is only one aspect of their power.

By capturing Jake, the phone police alter reality and Jake, seemingly, takes Billy’s place as a representative of the unknown. Frightened by his friend’s arrest, Chris runs back to find help from the source of the phone police legend. Annie, however, no longer has a brother, does not know Chris, and tells a different version of her original story. When asked about the phone police and Billy Baxter, she says, “Yeah, I know [the story of the phone police]. Except the way I heard it, they got a kid named O’Brien. Jake O’Brien” (“The Tale of the Phone Police”). Annie remains the keeper of this cautionary tale, but now Jake takes Billy’s place and becomes a dissuasive figure associated with transgression. Jake is not only put under arrest and placed in solitary confinement, but his entire existence is rewritten. Like Richard Matheson’s Robert Neville, from I Am Legend, Jake’s punishment is to become legend and to act as a warning for other adolescents who may choose to engage with the telephone. In fact, it seems the only way for him to escape is for another person to misuse the phone and call him, which may or may not allow him
the opportunity to elude his captors. Unlike “The Tale of the Dark Music,” this episode does not end on an unresolved note and Jake is allowed to escape from the phone police, but not without learning the consequences of boundary transgression.

Chris and Jake’s elaborate and exciting escape plan allows the boys to be free of the phone police and it also reifies the importance of the protected space as a safe haven from the unknown. When Chris is able to free Jake, they are unable to escape from the regulating authority of the phone police until they re-enter a protected space. When running through the halls of the police’s jail, they find themselves consistently boxed in by barred exit after barred exit. Even when they eventually find a way out of the subterranean web work of hallways, they are chased through the streets by a fleet of phone police vehicles. Their only escape from this authority is their entry into Jake’s house, which seems to have reclaimed its domesticity and ability to protect the boys from the unknown. Annie now recognizes her brother and she laughs off the idea of the phone police as a joke. Indeed, when Jake and Chris stand in fear of a visitor at their front door, the phone police have disappeared and been replaced by a pizza deliveryman who has accidently arrived at the wrong address. Despite the questionable existence of the phone police, this moment signifies a reformed protected space where the phone can no longer penetrate structural boundaries. The questions inherent in the ending, however,
also point to the specific lessons learned by the protagonists at the hands of a regulatory authority.

Before concluding, the episode provides us specific details regarding the existence of the phone police and their effectiveness at regulating transgressive behavior in adolescents. Although Jake and Chris question whether or not the experience even happened, the phone police are a real entity. Before the main narrative ends, the camera pans to the pizza deliveryman’s car, and he reveals the phone police emblem hidden under a pull-away pizza sign (pictured in Figure 4). This image affirms the existence of the phone police as a regulatory entity and further certifies their supernatural ability to alter reality. While this agency has a great deal of control over Chris and Jake’s surroundings, I argue that all of these points are peripheral when we see the regulatory power of the phone police. As the episode leaves the main narrative and reenters the frame narrative, Tucker concludes his story by stating, “Jake and Chris never made another prank call. Because they were never sure if the phone police were really real. Or if they could believe anything else that they ever saw again” (“Tale of the Phone Police”). Through this explanation, Tucker clarifies that the punishment Jake endured was severe enough to end his transgressive behavior and ensure he respected the boundary separating protected and unknown spaces. The phone police, then, were effective in their regulation. However, the more troubling aspect of Tucker’s ending is the fact that Jake and Chris end up perpetually unsure of reality. Certainly, they will never make another prank call, but they will also never know what is and what is not real.
V. Conclusion

The differences between “The Tale of the Dark Music” and “The Tale of the Phone Police” are myriad and they present two very distinct arguments regarding boundary transgression. However, they both leave their protagonists and their viewers in a space that is questionable and undefined. At this point, it is clear that adolescent programming has both hidden and overt missives targeted toward adolescent viewers (McCort 5). This messaging often comes in the form of a happy ending, a reunification of the family, or the re-establishment of expected standards. Shows created for kids will often leave their viewers feeling like the protagonists are safe and happy. This reliance on the fully-resolved ending is not without its problems. Opening a chapter about happy endings and unrealism, James MacDowell argues that “When the term ‘happy ending’ is spoken in Hollywood movies, it is usually being debunked for promulgating idealism in the face of life’s true hardships” (MacDowell 98). While MacDowell is discussing blockbuster films, the argument applies to television shows and adolescent horror series. In the horror genre, happy endings are a signal of returned repression, the enforcement of the white heterosexual couple, and the reunification of family. Ambiguous, questionable, and downright bad endings, however, are a much deeper look at harsh reality. Both of these episodes deviate from the norm by offering a counter argument that everything is not okay. Breaking the rules could make you an unwitting murderer or leave you questioning the very nature of reality. These conclusions lack the black and white morality typical of children’s television and beg viewers to consider the larger consequences of behavior.
Horror is and may always be a niche market, even if it continues to produce critically and commercially successful content. Telling people that horror studies is my academic focus has garnered me enough questioning looks, skeptical interrogations, and lectures about important material over junk media to convince me of the genre’s peripheral place among scholarly circles. This bias is present in children, as well. McCort says it best, “Not every child likes horror. In fact, some run from it as fast as their legs will carry them” (McCort 4). Her statement is painfully accurate. It is the audiences that run away from horror films that question the choice to study horrific material. It is this line between horror fans and non-horror fans that intrigues me. Because horror is a niche and a genre that can inspire division, the adolescents who choose to continue watching are the subjects at the heart of this study. For the adolescent horror fan, these unresolved or ambiguous endings illuminate terrifying lessons regarding the developing person and their understanding of their culture, perspective, and experience.

At its most didactic, the adolescent horror program and Are You Afraid? are meant to teach their viewers lessons using horror tropes. The episodes discussed previously take up the importance of understanding the danger of unknown spaces. However, there are many more arguments to be made regarding the theory behind these episodes. “The Tale of Watcher’s Woods,” “The Tale of the Manaha,” and “The Tale of the Phantom Cab,” for instance, each asks viewers to think more deeply about the wilderness and its dangers. Their protagonists encounter ancient histories and solve odd puzzles. More importantly, they each threaten their protagonist’s lives if they cannot accrue a lost knowledge. “The Tale of the Dream Girl,” “The Tale of the Prom Queen,” and “The Tale of the Long Ago Locket” raise questions about commitment, love, and
heterosexual unions. “The Tale of the Water Demons” questions colonialism and the taking of native artifacts. With ninety-one episodes available, the series is brimming with potential for further study. However, the adolescent horror genre tells us much more about the audience than the horrific material that they are consuming.

To understand the efficacy of Are You Afraid?, we must look back toward the audience and to see what it means to be a consumer of terror. As previously stated, the horror genre is niche. Due to its divisive nature, we can understand specific details about the small audiences that enjoy horror fandom. Thinking about horror consumers, King writes, “We take refuge in make-believe terrors so the real ones don’t overwhelm us, freezing us in place and making it impossible for us to function in our day-to-day lives. We go into the darkness of a movie theater hoping to dream badly, because the world of our normal lives looks ever so much better when the bad dream ends” (King xiii author emphasis). In attempting to understand horror fans, King argues that we need something to offset the terrifying realities that we encounter on a daily basis. The horrors that we could experience are numerous and the horror film is a reminder that life is always, somehow, more endurable than fiction. The horror fan, then, may be more attuned to these daily terrors, as well as more affected by them, which is why they continually seek out horror material. In the simplest terms, the horror fan may be more open and aware of the terrifying potential of the mundane. After all, it is the everyday that spawns a stream of horrors and rarely allows for the resolved, happy ending. The horror fan finds a way to cope by continually returning to twisted, haunted, and terrifying environments. Are You Afraid? reveals that there is no set age group for horror fandom and, more importantly,
that adolescent horror fans are far more likely to understand the harsh landscape of the mundane and to know how to cope with it.

While King makes a valid point regarding horror as a means to manage a sometimes terrifying world, the genre also offers an opportunity for adolescents to understand the varying consequences of choice. “The Tale of the Dark Music” and “The Tale of the Phone Police,” while complex episodes, are, at their core, based on a set of choices by young protagonists. Each of these characters faces the consequences of their choices. Both “Dark Music” and “Phone Police” present us with a regulatory entity that either has its own goals or enforces rules and laws. Creatures in coal cellars and government organizations differ greatly, but both have been conceived as monstrous. Of course, monsters refer us back to monstrum and monere and the Latin meaning for these words, to warn (Blake 2). Adolescents face entities and agencies that constantly warn. Parents, teachers, schools, doctors, babysitters, and older siblings each impart different experiences on a developing child’s mind. Adolescent horror is another source of warning. However, these shows differ because they provide viewers with an opportunity to see and experience the harsh consequences of choices. Whether it is the penetration of protected spaces or using technology to let in an unknown entity, the efficacy of young adult horror is inherent in the warnings that it shows to its viewers. And it is our job to interpret the complex warnings that adolescents absorb in the horror genre.
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Vita:

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