

## **Refrigerator Design and Masculinity in Postwar Media, 1946-1960**

Few actors can express a seizure of wild rage like Woody Harrelson, and few films provide such a peculiar object for his fury as the 1950s-era domestic period piece *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio* (2005). A chronicle of an alcoholic man and his wife who keeps her family from dissolution by scoring big on contests that pay off in appliances, Harrelson's character is plagued by a new "Deep Freeze" home freezer that his wife wins in a contest. In a scene soon after the appliance's installation, Harrelson trips over the freezer, framed by the film to resemble the towering obelisk of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). And like Stanley Kubrick's set-designed monument, the Deep Freeze generates a ferocious outburst. In a flash, Harrelson finds a skillet and bludgeons the offending appliance, sending his family scattering.

Dramatic embellishments to the contrary, *The Prize Winner's* retrospective depiction is historically evocative for several reasons. Domestic conveniences like refrigerators were reductively designed in this period "to sweep through resistance of all kinds," rather than get in the way (Smith 380, 379). And they were fashioned to be especially beneficial and invisible to men, a quality fully evident in many staged representations of domestic American life after World War II, like the Kitchen Debate of 1959. Pitting Vice-President Richard Nixon and a lemon-yellow firmament of General

Electric appliances against Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the debate positioned these products as tangible proof that men under a U.S. capitalist economy were the power brokers of a domestic, familial sphere run by their contented housewives (May 16-20). Popular documentation of the debate therefore separates Nixon, and American men in general, from the world of refrigerators. A particularly iconic black and white photograph from the front page of *The New York Times* on July 25, 1959 frames Nixon and Khrushchev standing cordoned off from the kitchen model by a metal fence. They gaze at this combination of architecture, engineering and design without actually inhabiting the space. The image likewise eschews the kitchen, catching only a sliver of a washing machine, a swatch of linoleum and a shadow of cabinetry. Like the ideal gender roles Nixon conjures during his conversation with Khrushchev, this space is entirely conceptual. The kitchen and its marvelous machines—the very crux of this atomic age dispute—are profoundly unseen and untouched.<sup>1</sup>

The omission of appliances, so important to the government's promotion of a patently American way of life, leaves many fascinating ellipses to consider. Is the modern American kitchen really so technologically advanced that it no longer requires human interaction? And is the separation of gender roles in this period truly so total that an appliance like the refrigerator is practically imperceptible in a man's life? Or, as *The Prize Winner* suggests, does the device harbor a more complex relationship with its owners, acting as an especial enemy to men?

Nixon's civilizing mission in Moscow may provide paltry evidence of what exactly constituted a government-approved suburban appliance, and where a man stood in relation to such a device. Yet an astonishing variety of television shows and Hollywood films, among other postwar documents, did imagine the types of American husbands and fathers that actually owned and lived with these appliances. Family melodramas and situational comedies that roved through urban and especially suburban households regularly proposed the ways this dazzling assortment of commodities might function socially and technologically in the spaces and tasks of everyday life. And the refrigerator, purring from its recessed kitchen alcove, was the appliance that played the most recurrent, active roles in these narratives.

Despite the wealth of evidence, virtually no research to date investigates the refrigerator's cultural representations in cinema, television, or other

media not directly created for advertising purposes. This cold white box is instead typically considered through its innovative ability to chill edible ephemera and add nutritionally precious foods to the daily diet (Friedberg 18-49). While attentive to manufacturers' basic technological aims for the refrigerator, such an approach fails to fully explain its multivalent resonance in United States culture. In this country, as Shelley Nickles points out, the appliance is in fact a site of considerable compromise among manufacturing corporations, advertising agencies, and consumers, as well as many other agents, who converse with one another in and through media (581-622). Mainstream film, television, and magazine opinion columns, therefore, reflect how these social actors wedded the refrigerator to ideological and cultural desires, and determined its influence upon gender in the American home and kitchen. In particular, as definitions of class, domestic harmony, and the identity of the successful family man became acutely dependent upon buying power and technological mastery, the refrigerator exposed those individuals who failed to live up to the promises, and strictures, of postwar modernity.

### **Refrigerators and Visibility in the 1950s**

The appliance's sudden prominence across such a diverse media environment during this period belies the reality that mechanical refrigeration technology had been marketed to United States consumers since the late 1910s. Despite the ravages of the Great Depression, refrigerators dotted 50% of American households by 1940 (Friedberg 44-45). And in spite of World War II rationing of the technology, a surprising 85% of homes boasted a unit in 1944 (Covert 315-342). However, the postwar period, roughly spanning 1945 to 1960, truly marked the appliance's arrival in popular media. Its unprecedented appearance occurred precisely at this time for a complex set of reasons. In the early to mid-1940s, since television did not yet exist as a public medium, and Hollywood examinations of domestic commodities and spaces were relatively infrequent compared to their postwar output, representations of refrigerators were almost wholly restricted to print advertising. And during the war, few of these outlets were openly boasting about any domestic privilege. Refrigerators therefore underwent

a curious discursive process of invisibility, reflecting their manufacturers' temporary deference to more pressing national matters.<sup>2</sup>

Such diminished status was a far cry from the refrigerator's role in the cultural landscape that roared to life after American soldiers returned. As Lizabeth Cohen argues, private institutions and the federal government campaigned aggressively to reorganize the nation's economy and its populace towards a new ideal: the "purchaser as citizen," an individual "who simultaneously fulfilled personal desire and civic obligation by consuming" (119, 136-137). *Life* as well as labor publications like the Congress of Industrial Organization's *Economic Outlook* now assured readers that buying items like refrigerators would keep the wheels of industrial production spinning. Their consumption would guarantee a high rate of employment and increased purchasing power on a national level ("Family Status Must Improve" 32-33; "Economics to Keep the Peace" 6-9; Cohen 112, 118).

Subsequently, both manufacturers and the entertainment industry actively packaged preexisting accoutrements of the American household, like the refrigerator, as pioneering elements of a new and promising future. Images of the appliance returned to the forefront across media. The emergence of television as a medium and the stratospheric rise of the suburban sitcom in the mid-to-late 1950s presaged Nixon's idea of a model family, and reiterated utopian advertising copy that prominently featured a homemaker with her cold storage while absenting her husband (Liebman 6-9). In *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), the refrigerator served as an icon of family health and middle-class privilege through the presentation of an endless chilled feast of food. Design was emphasized over any mechanical capabilities, refurbishing an approach that Roland Marchand argues first appeared in advertising during the 1920s and 1930s (269-272). In this regard, television sitcoms also correlated to ads from late 1945 and 1946 that depicted soldiers coming home triumphant to a wondrous domestic bubble, replete with a brand new refrigerator, a convenience radiating unity, impervious to any familial or cultural hiccups.<sup>3</sup>

Embodying the myths of leisure outlined in these ads, the titular housewife of *Donna Reed*, for instance, owns a gargantuan, well-stocked, perpetually spotless refrigerator that contains a glass of orange juice already poured or a meal entirely prepared beforehand, needing only to be served.

Aligned with the selective framing in the photograph of the Kitchen Debate, Donna's refrigerator visually vacillates between foreground and background for viewers. When open, it showcases a demure design and attractive storage of any imaginable, immediately consumable foodstuff. It then sinks into unobtrusive obscurity once the door closes. Donna is also the only character in her family who touches the device. Her husband never retrieves ice cubes or proffers a cool snack to his children. Television series such as *Donna Reed* thereby enumerated and championed the strictly demarcated roles to be played by husband and wife as they basked in the virtues of this appliance.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the device's prevalence in so many media narratives, in the postwar era more than any before, signaled that refrigerators were becoming increasingly imbricated into the visual index of what daily American life looked like, or should look like. So while the technology began entering homes many years before World War II ended, it was the likes of *Donna Reed* in the 1950s that made this appliance ubiquitous in reflections of lived domestic experience. As a result, these programs revealed television and cinema, in addition to print media, as important sites where the refrigerator's identity could now largely be determined.

### A Sinister Edge

Given this greatly amplified context, representations of refrigerators, glittering from a corner of a TV show's kitchen set, are not always uniformly euphoric. In fact, a body of postwar media repeatedly marshaled this modern servant—in all its multitudinous shapes, sizes, brands, and designs—into signifying widespread financial, familial, and gendered malaise. The discourse of disenchantment that surrounds refrigerators is well articulated in Hollywood cinema and television and also appears in major mainstream magazine essays. Each of these texts focuses upon white families who exist within a broad working- to lower-middle-class milieu, usually owning a suburban house. Echoing advertising's long-running treatment of refrigerators as gendered objects, male and female characters maintain distinctly different relationships with the devices. But they do not uphold the claims made by Nixon and *Donna Reed* that men merely purchase appliances and leave the rest to their wives. As *The Prize Winner* implies, many fictional

husbands and fathers exist who are intimately engaged with their refrigerators.

What is unexpected is the depth to which men's ambivalent relationship to refrigeration is represented. Postwar American film and television only occasionally include housewives who express discontentment through their interaction with this appliance, seen in the 1952 episode of *I Love Lucy* entitled "The Freezer," and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957), an anarchic skewering of the Madison Avenue advertising world. Much more often, these appliances notate a specifically male ennui. A mere year after World War II ended, the Hollywood paragon of fatherhood, George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart), in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) voiced his insecurities about providing for his nuclear family by screaming, "We might as well be living in a refrigerator!" And through the next two decades, the big and small screen were peppered with images of urban and especially suburban men battling this appliance, equally spanning sitcoms on television (*Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home*, 1954-1958) and family melodramas in film (*Bigger Than Life*, 1956). Their plight was explored within Robert Yoder's 1949 essay, "Are Gadgets Replacing the Housewife?" in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

As these examples attest, and as is retrospectively echoed by Woody Harrelson's character in *The Prize Winner*, the men affected suffer a precarious financial position. Despite their ownership of a house outfitted with the latest model appliances, which masks their economic limitations, they illustrate a popular character type featured in sharply critical early 1950s sitcoms like *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), *The Life of Riley* (1949-1958), or *Mama* (1949-1957), which aired before the likes of *Donna Reed* buried interpretations of domesticity under a shellac of conservative gloss. Like the men on these shows, those struggling against refrigerators lack a personal sense of middle-class dignity, if not purchasing power. And they share their urban brethren's coping strategies. George Lipsitz argues that these men, unable to provide their families with the commodities they desire, mitigate their "incompetent behavior as consumers" by lashing out when an appliance is finally introduced into their home by their children or wives (363, 367-368). To be sure, men in *Les Paul & Mary Ford*, *Bigger Than Life*, and "Are Gadgets Replacing the Housewife" are nothing if not

wrathful about the Frigidaires and Kelvinators that appear completely benign to the rest of their families.

Narratives about refrigerators are unique among portrayals of troubled masculinity, though, since they emphasize that men are displaced not by their wives and rebellious children, or workplace supervisors. They are rather challenged by American industry itself, whose enigmatic nature is reflected in the refrigerator's complicated mechanical workings. In this regard, they are somewhat unlike the "masked man" that Steven Cohan locates in 1950s cinema, whose "crisis" of identity arose from their attempts to live out a narrowly defined, aggressive brand of heterosexuality, social conservatism, and financial solvency. The appliance instead takes aim at men unable to keep pace with what Fred Turner calls an increasingly "mechanistic," automated America, in which a wide range of factory-based labor traditionally performed by men was rapidly taken over by machines (Cohan x-xi, Turner 5-6, 8-9).<sup>5</sup> Refrigerators channel such a world of profound technological inscrutability into the home, making it spatially confrontational. Films, television shows and magazine articles of the era illustrate that the device's placement in the kitchen strengthens its unsettling presence. Considered the arena of wives and mothers by this set of texts, the room consistently serves as a stage for male incompetence, refracting and intensifying the challenges the appliance poses to male intelligence, class, and strength.

### **Frozen Politics**

Media focused on refrigerators in domestic spaces complicates the purely economic or political weight often given these appliances during this period. A veritable cottage industry of social critics in the 1950s and '60s bemoaned the alienation suburban men felt due to the merchandise that invaded their homes after World War II. Emblematic of the whole, Vance Packard believed the twin titans of advertising and mass production encouraged women, the presumed money-managers of the American home, to badger their husbands into providing them with the utmost in household amenities, refrigerators key among them (17-22).

Once these items surrounded men in the intimate spaces of domesticity, they apparently wreaked strange and terrible havoc on their ability to

help shape a dynamic society. Pinpointing objects he felt replaced men's intellect, morality, and sociopolitical conscience, Lawrence Wittner sneered, "Now people no longer have any opinions, they have refrigerators" (120). His polemic harshly countered the ideal "purchaser as citizen" Nixon outlined in the Kitchen Debate, who voted with their dollars and altered the course and experience of everyday life by consuming. Instead, ownership of a refrigerator did not automatically prove that Americans had freedom of choice and the privilege of technology in their country (Cohen 126). Nor did the appliance magically usher men into active, integral roles in the nation's internal and global decision-making processes, or even allow them to influence an industrial designer's concept for next year's Frigidaire model. For men, according to Wittner, a fridge or freezer might signal nothing more than their acquiescence to the demands of the corporations and ad agencies that built and sold these big white boxes.

Refrigerators not only functioned as shorthand for political and cultural stagnation. The materials the appliance consumed on a large scale also caused alarm. In a 1956 *New York Times* op-ed, William Benton, a former Democratic senator from Connecticut, unwittingly undermined Nixon's declaration a few years later that a kitchen rather than a missile could win the Cold War. Benton argued that a surfeit of appliances in America constituted a grave hazard to national security. He stated, "Soviet steel goes into armaments and heavy industry; it isn't diverted to the more joyous and pleasurable outlets," refrigerators being his prime example (68). His screed subsequently implored readers to reconsider a United States industry dangerously interested in producing only the most nonessential of items with its resources. In the eyes of this social commentator, the family man in this period was thus beset at home and on the international stage by the specter of a refrigerator that not only emptied his wallet, but also weakened his country in the fight against communism.

Benton's fear that the steel paneling on a Coldspot might mean the loss of another defense missile is not a concern echoed in many films, television shows or other media. Still, dialogues that pit refrigerators against men do implicitly support Benton's intimation that American industry has run amok and operates outside the knowledge and power of the typical suburban male, foisting wholly unnecessary products upon them. Yet while media representations channel oppressive institutional symbolism into dis-

tinctly tangible terms, the connection between the refrigerator and a tyrannical American establishment is usually not as explicit onscreen as it is within these critics' arguments. Working-class husbands and fathers may detest a refrigerator because it evidences the dominant institutions that remain wholly beyond their command. But they also clash with these appliances because they are technologically and kinesthetically unsettling. To the men in these films, TV shows and magazine articles, the device is simply in the way.

### **Kitchens, Class, and Quantum Mechanics**

The refrigerator's multilayered domestic disruption is largely determined by how each male character categorizes his intellect and class. In Robert Yoder's *Saturday Evening Post* article, "Are Gadgets Replacing the Housewife?", an unnamed narrator, self-identified as lower class, derides anything potentially progressive or elitist, including women's intelligence and extravagant foreign recipes. His disdain puts him in league with the "blustering chowderheads" that postwar TV critics argued populated early television sitcoms, as Mary Beth Haralovich observes (115). Hatred of "the good life" masks these characters' own domestic and economic fumbling, as well as their technological illiteracy—veiling their unsteady rule of the household. Yoder's man complains that he can never find his socks, has difficulty combing his hair and confesses, "I am not one of those men who can cook," detailing his inability to bake a potato or even make coffee (36). Clearly, the article implies, a man with these difficulties does not need, or cannot appreciate, a modern innovation like a refrigerator.

Lack of cooking skills not only denotes class, but also suggests that unlike an ideal middle-class family, less moneyed men were forced to interact with domestic spaces considered feminine since they could not afford a home large enough to provide a separate space. As Dolores Hayden argues, postwar architects and government entities like the Federal Housing Administration laid out the American suburban house as gendered architecture, with the kitchen expressly created for women to operate as "skillful domestic servants" (17).<sup>6</sup> Haralovich adds that this idealization pervaded the solidly middle-class sets on contemporary television, such as *Leave it to Beaver*. The kitchen and its appliances on these programs function under

the purview of mothers and wives, severed from the dens and offices where their husbands and sons work and play (Haralovich 114-115, 132). Depictions of such a division of labor and space not only reigned on television. Merrill Schleier observes that this household layout pollinated postwar Hollywood cinema as well. Films like *Executive Suite* (1955) sealed women in the kitchen while providing men with private dens and studies reflective of their purportedly advanced intellect (201). As lower-class individuals, none of the men like Yoder's narrator who face off against a refrigerator enjoy such spatial luxury. Their extended, awkward interactions imply that they are unable to provide for a larger house that might provide a personal space away from the kitchen and its devices. Such a layout would ostensibly allow them to overlook the appliance altogether.

The feminization of the kitchen does not provide an electric icebox with its sole intimidating quality, however. Its technological engineering also elicits unease. Yoder's narrator, for example, feels that the appliance is nearly autonomous in its complexity, symbolizing a mechanized, corporatized household beyond the understanding and control of a certain class of men. As Lipsitz notes, such feelings of helplessness in relation to the products filling the spaces of domesticity evidenced postwar patriarchy as a "...collapsing infrastructure no longer capable of wielding authority in an increasingly administered and institutionalized society" (367). Thus, Yoder's narrator views his refrigerator as a highly contradictory entity. An object intertwined with the personal space of the home, it is intimately involved in sustaining his life. Yet the refrigerator also simultaneously signifies the intrusiveness of a much larger system of commodity production and consumption that actually creates and manages domesticity, and by extension, the family.

The narrator of "Are Gadgets Replacing the Housewife?" therefore admits that like many other male owners, he cannot master his refrigerator. Inhabiting a nebulous position between "a soulless collection of machinery" and a being leading its own private life (Yoder 36), the contraption is created by a higher class of industrial designers at "MIT," rendering the refrigerator recondite to working class, less educated owners. He therefore finds no comfort in knowing that at least the refrigerator is "man-made." Since he did not construct the appliance, its propensity to turn against its owner is immeasurably heightened, reflected in its design which disavows a

handcrafted, human touch.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Yoder's narrator eventually goes as far as to believe the refrigerator is staging a "mutiny" against "the master of the house"—himself (36, 146).

Effectively subverting household patriarchs, the refrigerator's superiority turns men's lack of technical expertise into a challenge to their masculinity. The narrator, for instance, mutters that he feels like a child simply being in the refrigerator's presence, believing that if it "could speak, there isn't the slightest doubt what the message would be. 'Just pay the electric bill, junior, and leave the difficult stuff to me'" (36). Its round-the-clock automatism is a sly reversal of the detached but empowered consumer role Nixon believed men would play. The narrator's comment alternatively describes this position as "humiliating" because it entails that men play a frighteningly passive, ignorant role in domesticity.

Cartoons for the article, inked by Leo Hershfield, famed court illustrator of the Army-McCarthy hearings, further exaggerate the sense of emasculation.<sup>8</sup> The narrator is envisioned as a slender man seated on a chair with a heart shape carved out of its back. His limp wrist holds a cup of coffee. Hershfield places a leering, winking refrigerator directly behind the narrator and out of his sight. The appliance's size and position, expressive of its technological dominance, underlines his vulnerability and his ignorance. Another cartoon takes on a darker hue. Again placed behind the narrator, the appliance now glowers and angles forward aggressively, its cord wrapped around his shoulders in a choker hold.

Oozing with seditious threat, Hershfield's drawings display a truly monstrous refrigerator, capable of disposing of unaware husbands and fathers. However, the narrator, like other men in this era, paints the appliance in much more latent terms. Consequently, constructing it as an enemy proves difficult, since men's dismay largely stems from its self-contained otherness. The refrigerator therefore does not achieve its "mutiny" through means that might provide Yoder's narrator a chance to prove his masculinity. A "necessary" expenditure in a functioning consumer household, its capability to run itself, and monitor a variety of perishable foods vital to the narrator's life, is sufficiently damaging. Such a device reduces a man's proficiency to care for himself or his family without the appliance's aid—a lack of aptitude this particular range of media codes as feminine.

Given its slippery self-sufficiency, the refrigerator is not as easily disparaged as other domestic devices, such as a small saucepan, which the narrator argues can be controlled by men's "superior intelligence," having "no electronic mind of her own." Indeed, the saucepan's "simpleton" status is "her charm" as it cannot work without a man's immediate involvement (Yoder 146). "Genius" appliances like an oven or a washing machine are also easily effeminized. A Hershfield illustration paints the oven as sexualized and helpless. Its door fails to fend off the narrator as he jams a tubular fruit into its gaping interior. Spiraled stove coils stand in for the oven's eyes, giving it a dazed expression. Likewise, the washing machine is erotically exploited, as the narrator shoves a bar of soap into its unwilling mouth with his hips. The refrigerator, on the other hand, escapes punishment. Its size and especially its complexity do not allow for similar degradation. So while its door might make it vulnerable to the same kind of attack suffered by the stove and washing machine, each of Hershfield's cartoons depicts the refrigerator as sealed, its innards protected – impenetrable.

Other representations rendered the refrigerator as a menace to owners by dint of its sheer indifference. Nicholas Ray's Cinemascope treatise on suburban chaos, *Bigger Than Life* (1956), captures such a unit. James Mason plays a father flailing financially and afflicted with a bizarre, debilitating illness. In an early scene, he attempts to conceal his pain from his wife and visiting neighbors by crouching behind the open door of his refrigerator. Yet *Bigger Than Life*'s creators intone that the refrigerator is competent, independent, and entirely uninterested in protecting its owner. So as Mason holds onto the appliance for support, he simultaneously struggles against its insensate bulk. Squinting at its interior light, his arm struggles to keep the door open. His fingers fail to gain a hold on its slick, utterly synthetic surface. He appears on the cusp of being completely thrown or swallowed by the appliance. And although the refrigerator is framed as overwhelming, it simultaneously fails to shield his body from those around him, mainly the scrutinizing gaze of his wife.

### **Fists and Guitars**

Endangered by such an object, a few male characters from this era did attempt to physically overpower offensive refrigerators, transforming

the contest into a matter of brawn rather than technological prowess – an approach retrospectively acknowledged by *The Prize Winner*. A memorable use of muscle is seen in an episode of the 1950s television program *Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home*, starring the famed guitarist and his singing wife. The show consistently mined laughs by imagining the reactions this popular couple might have if depicted as simple, working-class folk dealing with the humdrum hassles of everyday suburban life. True to form, Les finds himself faced with the baffling task of repairing his refrigerator that has unexpectedly ceased to work. His puzzlement mirrors Yoder's intimation that refrigerators' workings are unfathomable to their male owners, even to a maestro of engineering like Les, designer of the legendary Gibson Les Paul solid-body electric guitar. That the appliance does not work is entirely due to the musician's own ineptitude. Instead of simply making sure it is plugged in (as his wife does), Les humorously tries to "serenade it back to life" by performing the song "Can't Be Love" to the fridge. When this fails, though, the tone of the show shifts. Les furiously slams his body against the device, sending it rocking back against a wall. His outburst implies that as domestic technology advanced beyond the Everyman's understanding and invaded his home in the postwar period, refrigerators could still be brought into line with a good, hard push.

Although instances like that seen on *Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home* may have appeared cathartic to male refrigerator owners and viewers at the time, these storylines also suggested that giving the box a beating was a fruitless endeavor. Les's unit does not disappear as an issue once it is confronted, shoved, and dented. Its presence is undiminished. Undergirding their status as a necessity that men must adapt to, refrigerators as problematic objects persist in narratives during this period. Their enduring strength derives from the precise nexus between mechanical omniscience, the site of the kitchen (where men are the least authoritative and most susceptible to the desires of their wives), and the increasing corporate systemization and economic control of the family's consumer choices and lifestyle. While Les is prepared to either give up or destroy the machinery, his wife quickly reminds him of its usefulness and its price tag, and is more than willing to call for outside help, placing the fate of the appliance before the opinions of her spouse.

An everyday husband like Les who fails to fix a recondite item wholly outside of his area of specialization is perhaps understandable. A specifically trained refrigerator repairman going into similar fits of temper, however, would seem unlikely. Yet reactions to this device were not solely attributed to family men. Beginning in 1949, the manufacturer International Harvester provided its repairmen with an illustrated manual, *Service Procedures for Household Refrigerators*, a guide that attempted to humorously defuse any possible anger these men might feel towards the appliance. “Hey Doc!...Take it easy!” a furious fridge in a cartoon from the manual roars as a repairman wields a crowbar and advances threateningly. The device is illustrated as a gigantic, fully equal adversary to the repairman, whose rage is undercut by his petite stature. Another drawing urges care and consideration for the appliance’s finish and coating, implying that it is less important to actually fix a broken unit than to maintain, and respectfully serve, the surface precision of its design, elevating the appliance into the decidedly higher-class, feminine-coded realm of domestic style and appearance (“Now You’ve Done It!”). The confrontation consequently revolves around men’s ability to maintain their mechanical authority against a complicated gadget while adapting to the social parameters of the kitchen. As a particular cartoon informs repairmen, “Conduct yourself in a pleasant, neat, and self-assured manner.” In the accompanying cartoon, a beaming refrigerator crows, “Boy! Are we glad to see you!” as a housewife in the background clasps her hands in anticipation. With the emphasis placed upon the talking appliance, repairmen are informed to carefully groom and adjust their potentially coarse behavior not only for their female customers, but also for the refrigerator itself. In this way, the device, and the manufacturing conglomerate behind it, tame and domesticate men outside of the immediate family by influencing any activity that takes place within the supposedly private sphere of the household.

## Conclusion

Although mechanical refrigerators existed as commodities beginning in the 1910s, after World War II and the U.S. financial system’s renovation into a consumer economy, the increase in media representations of domestic life vaunted the appliance to a position of unparalleled cultural impor-

tance. Included in a wide range of advertising media, highly publicized political discourses like the Kitchen Debate, and especially TV sitcoms and Hollywood dramas, the refrigerator signified a well-deserved reward for citizens after several years of dutifully practicing wartime thriftiness. One of a dazzling array of domestic items and devices to gild a new “purchaser as citizen” lifestyle, the presence of a refrigerator in almost ninety percent of the country’s households seemed to prove that the architecture of American society—ideological, financial, technological, familial—truly worked and was indeed superior to any other national system.

However, by 1949 at least, evidence both in magazines as well as in the country’s cinema and television programs suggests that the appliance was just as rapidly and vociferously being defined by working-class families as burdensome. The refrigerator’s controversial definition increasingly split along gender lines. A major contingent of male social critics angrily proposed that husbands and fathers were unfairly expected to procure a new cold storage for their household regardless of whether the device could be afforded or was even needed. In this case, the appliance functioned as a telling emblem of the hidden emotional and financial strain placed upon a certain strata of citizens as they struggled to embody their country’s changing classification of domesticity.

Adding to the ideological and economic tension was a historically unheralded characterization of the refrigerator as incomprehensible. Ineffable in its workings, texts across type and genre overwhelmingly presented postwar cold storage units as machinery produced by an industrial system far exceeding the comprehension of most working-class individuals. Perplexing mechanics in these media interpretations fed a definition of the refrigerator as a spatially disruptive presence, heightening portrayals of the kitchen and its objects as utterly unfamiliar to men—material evidence of a culture that many social critics deemed effeminizing—and which these media productions consequently suggest was difficult to combat.

This outlook continues to steer depictions in contemporary pieces like *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio*, which attempt to retrospectively excavate the domestic, gendered geology Richard Nixon tried to officially map when he traveled to Moscow in 1959. While refrigerators have undoubtedly become an essential part of American life, as the Vice President believed, the highly mediated definition of this appliance as a thorny, obtru-

sive entity is perhaps more prominent and enduring than his ecstatic pronouncements. As *The Prize Winner* recuperates the dialogues created by Yoder's "Are Gadgets Replacing the Housewife?", *Les Paul*, and *Bigger Than Life*, the film treats men's difficulties with refrigerators as an important aspect of the postwar experience, an indispensable tonic to Nixon's whitewashed, hands-off version of domestic reality. Histories of refrigeration should not only follow a timeline of dominant cultural statements, technological advancements, or advertising strategies. Media reflections of the refrigerator's fraught identity in television and film are crucial sites where concerns over domesticity were and still are being challenged and negotiated.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Photographs that depict the kitchen in more detail were actively suppressed. One available image captures a female model demonstrating the kitchen to the two politicians, detailing the space and appliances fully. Yet it did not receive circulation in the U.S. since Nixon's press team desired a picture that clearly represented "a conversation between men about the ideas of capitalism and communism" (Oldenziel and Zachmann 2).

<sup>2</sup> See the Stewart-Warner Corporation's 1942 advertisement, "Would you rob him of a single cartridge he needs?"

<sup>3</sup> "Comparison Proves...the New Hotpoint a Great Refrigerator Buy!" *Farm Journal* 1946; "Sunday...Some Day," *Life* 1944. Also see "We'll Live in a Kingdom All of Our Own," *Life* 1945.

<sup>4</sup> The vision of a suburban woman "trapped" by her household accoutrements usually focuses not on a refrigerator but the television set. Jeffrey Sconce (151) observes that this narrative permeates postwar science fiction shows like *The Outer Limits* ("The Bellaro Shield," Season 1, Episode 20, 1964), and I would add can also be seen in domestic melodramas of the period, such as Douglas Sirk's *All That Heavens Allows* (1955).

<sup>5</sup> Debates about masculinity and its crisis in the 1950s are rich, highly complex, and have been discussed in much more detail elsewhere, recurring in government reports, news magazines, films and television shows, and women's journals that wondered "When Will Your Husband Be Obsolete?" – to name only a few (Diebold and Cahn). Steven Cohan's book *Masked Men* remains the most comprehensive look at how gender and sexuality was rehearsed, performed, and legitimized in the postwar period in Hollywood cinema; and Fred Turner's essay "Romantic Automatism" offers an equally excellent look into how men – particularly male artists – reaffirmed their masculinity, and place in society, against technological encroachment and innovation.

<sup>6</sup> This vision of the American kitchen as patently feminine is long running, beginning with Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

<sup>7</sup> As Lipsitz might argue, unlike the character "Papa" on the show *Mama* for instance, Yoder's narrator does not have the useful working-class DIY ethos, imagination and tools at his disposal to craft an appliance like a stove from scratch for his loved ones (365).

<sup>8</sup> For more on Hershfield, see "The Press: The Artist as Reporter."

## Works Cited

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