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A Rift between Worlds: The Retro-1980s and the neoliberal Upside Down in *Stranger Things*

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Abstract:

The Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-) is one of a host of recent 1980s-set texts that returns to the decade through the lens of cultural nostalgia. Recalling and resituating its viewers in the Reagan era, the series presents a contemporary Gothic narrative by returning to the 1980s as a period of profound cultural importance, setting its secondary Gothic space, The Upside Down, as a Gothic neoliberal shadow world that conveys profound implications for a terrifying future. Examining the 1980s as a nexus point for socio-political anxieties and nostalgic recall, which has dominated the economic landscape and many Hollywood films and shows in the twenty-first century, this article argues that *Stranger Things* situates its characters at the precipice of a wrong turn in history, a period in which its youthful band of heroes, like their 1980s counterparts in its science fiction and fantasy cinema before them, must chase down their own futures to prevent a terrible fate. Through 'reflective nostalgia', this rift between the 1980s onscreen and the shadow future of the Upside Down is presented as a diachronic narrative, a return to the past to identify and critique the 1980s as a point of origin for numerous socio-economic anxieties and ills in our contemporary neoliberal Gothic world. *Stranger Things*, alongside other 1980s retro-texts, articulates our own Gothic terrors in the contemporary moment. Moreover, this article argues how and why the Gothic 1980s is a revisited site of return from which we need to learn, particularly following the post-2008 financial crisis, to overcome the necro-economic consequences of the 'Upside Down' neoliberal wasteland of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: 1980s; neoliberalism; The Upside Down; nostalgia; Re-Decades; Reaganomics.

Introduction

We have been living in the long shadow of the cultural legacy of the 1980s for much of the twenty-first century. In chronometric terms, the 1980s began over forty years ago, but its cultural recapitulation, undead economic legacies, and pop-cultural purchase continue to linger in cyclical bursts and through revived materials. Returns and repetition underpin foundational aspects of the Gothic, whether it takes the form of a nostalgic return to faded memories, jumbled up recollections, or as a revisited site of trauma. The Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-) is one of a host of recent 1980s-set texts that returns to the decade through the lens of cultural nostalgia and loss. Recalling and resituating its viewers into a dark visual echo of the Reagan era, the series presents its narrative at a period of profound cultural importance, setting its secondary space, The Upside Down, as a shadow world that conveys profound implications for a terrifying future.

Examining the decade as a nexus point for socio-political change that is overtly recalled under the presidency and legacy of the Trump administration (2017-2021), I argue that *Stranger Things* diegetically situates its characters at a profound juncture, or a wrong turn, in recent history. This schism is examined through postmodern simulacra and a remixing of the signifiers of the decade: like so many 1980s heroes in Gothic-inflected science fiction and

fantasy cinema, the adolescents in *Stranger Things* sense the instability of their promised future as a consequence of this disjunction in space-time in the 1980s. These rifts are narrative replays that concern anxious periods in time that we have witnessed before in the 1980s. During Reagan's presidency, a staunch return to the past, to overwrite the progress of the 1960s and 1970s was underway, and expressed through a rhetoric of an 'idyllic 1950s' (that never existed in reality) as a form of 'restorative nostalgia' against the country's socio-economic realities and its 'uncomfortable' advancements. *Stranger Things* deploys the same methodology through 'reflective nostalgia' in returning to the 1980s pop culture past to articulate a severe warning about a riven, necro-world of the future on the horizon, should we collectively fail to intervene in its creeping and destructive economic encroachment today. This article explores why contemporary popular culture continues to draw on the 1980s in particular as a site of return today, and how *The Upside Down* can be considered as a site of neoliberalism's inception as an infecting economic system in *Stranger Things*.

Described as the 'ReDecade' by television critic Tom Shales in *Esquire* in 1986, the 1980s was also driven by a similar compulsion to 'replay, recycle, recall, retrieve, reprocess, and re-run' earlier entertainments, anxieties, and concerns. Shales continues, on the nature of 1980s film and television entertainment, that 'we are not amazed at the thought of time travel because we do it every day. ... With time in a constant state of shift, our lives increasingly vicarious, our contact with other humans growing ever more remote, we're dislocated, disoriented, disengaged. We need new bearings for a new world.'¹ Examining Shale's article today, the sense of replay and disorientation feels thoroughly apt, articulating a similar concern that cultural progress is being stifled by our pronounced atomisation. Shales continues, 'it could be argued that although the Eighties are a retro decade, a kind of collective nostalgic breather, eventually an Eighties style will emerge, but then it could be argued right back that all the decades from now on will be ReDecades, because we will be more and more armed with the instruments of replay, and the technology will facilitate even more wizardly defiances of time.'² These 'wizardly defiances of time' not only perpetuate a sense of being stuck (i.e. replay culture), but also speak to the prevalence of time travel and nostalgic narratives that permeated 1980s popular culture, and continue to inform much of the 're-imagined' material, sequels, and multiverse expansions we witness in contemporary popular culture today.

What is striking about Shales' article in the twenty-first century is that he is largely frustrated with the stale nature of 1980s television, and how the culture at large seems to be caught between the decentred spin of cultural bricolage, and the impact of postmodernity on modern technology and cultural production. And while this frustration can be transplanted onto contemporary re-evaluations of 1980s texts, *Stranger Things* bypasses much of the *actual* televisual texts of the 1980s (retaining mere glimpses of its broadcast programming while tapping into many of 1980s TV's anti-big-government sentiments) and instead takes its aesthetic cues and references from 1980s films. Moreover, the series explicitly restages childhood agency as foregrounded in the cinema of Steven Spielberg, while delighting in the Gothic abjection of body horror and infiltration in John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (1982) and his searing critique of Reaganism in *They Live* (1988) (to name but a few of its major influences), in order to present familiar texts and citations to address the horrors of the *actual* policies and economic consequences of the 1980s that have destroyed the potential futures of 1980s adolescents as adults in the twenty-first century.

In 2016, President Donald Trump, repeating President Ronald Reagan's call to 'Make America Great Again',³ called out for a nostalgic return that reveals the retrograde viewpoint of restoration and past glory. In the contemporary moment, the accelerated infiltration of neoliberal ideology is revealed through generational anger, climate doom (and climate change denial), amplifying a profound sense of emotional alienation, and economic precarity. As I

have argued elsewhere, these sentiments recall similar 1980s anxieties about the future onscreen, as expressed through both time travel and apocalyptic-themed films during the decade.⁴ According to Tom Shone, numerous 1980s films envisioned the future as a precarious landscape that must be chased down, lest we collectively regress into the falsehood of a glorious past that never was.⁵

The Gothic ruptures in *Stranger Things* are made legible through the Duffer brothers' nostalgic science-fiction and fantasy series, at first seducing (Gen X and older) viewers with a sense of nostalgic and comforting return as an escape from our fractured and decentred postmodern present, only to then critique the encroachment and contemporary stranglehold of poisonous neoliberal economic policies that have dominated the 2010s; for younger viewers (particularly Millennials and Digital Natives, who have been disproportionately affected by neoliberal precarity, underemployment, and the privatization of social-safety nets), the series stages their precarious circumstances and imbues its representative youthful heroes with an urgent and necessary agency to respond to these calamitous outcomes accordingly. *Stranger Things* loops back to the 1980s as a site of rupture, a schism that fundamentally altered the contemporary world through its literal Gothic creation of a neoliberal necro-future. The series utilises the cosy yet dark aesthetics of the Spielbergian 'bliss-out'⁶ and Stephen King's Gothic trope of children-in-peril to conjure memories of the last decade of the analogue era to critique the inception of the contemporary American nightmare, hoping to find solutions to and reclaim a legible and hopeful future within the horrors of the present. At first, the series reads as being deceptively cloaked in nostalgic forms of replay, to draw in viewers with a seemingly simplified aesthetic return via products and screen citation, only to then critique, by weaponizing this act of nostalgic recall, the rapid and destructive advancement of neoliberalism as adopted in Reagan's America.

The return of the 1980s 'past'

The contemporary Gothic, as Steven Bruhm argues, is suffused with traumatic returns, marked out in narratives by 'the protagonists' and the viewers' compulsive return to certain fixations, obsessions, and blockages.⁷ This observation chimes well with our processing of 1980s nostalgia in the twenty-first century. Dressed up in the lacquered veneer of neon and mourning of a period of intense consumerism driven by Reaganite mantras to pursue prosperity, the period appears frivolous, empty even, to its critics, but this does not fully address the purchase of its undead continuance today. The 1980s, rather, often sets the stage onscreen for feelings, times and events associated with forgetting the *actual* pain of the past; rather than comfort, nostalgia also functions as 'a stinging, an aching, an emptiness of where something used to be', a lost time that 'shaped the world we live in now.'⁸ David Sirota notes that 1980s nostalgia in popular twenty-first-century entertainment has become more prominent because this nostalgia 'may not really be a resurrection at all... our 1980s fetish may actually be an intensification of an ethos that never actually went extinct, in part because no epochal force ever intervened to kill it.'⁹ Instead, this Gothic stranglehold feels distinctly evident in contemporary political divisions, raging on in contemporary culture wars over education, LGBTQI+ inclusivity, the terror of the oncoming digital world and metaverses, and the ferocity of toxic patriarchy in figures such as Trump who gleefully repress minorities and wrench whole communities asunder.

The cultural comforts of a promised, secure future through many nostalgic 1980s texts today have been irretrievably erased in the intervening years, unmasked through socio-political hypocrisies, Ponzi schemes, crooked governmental policies, bailouts of banks 'too big to fail', bubble/burst economic crises, and policies of austerity. These economic cycles ensure a continuance of rampant inequalities, the sustained influence of white patriarchal

privilege, and the unfettered acceleration of wealth accumulation by the economic 1%.¹⁰ As Henry A. Giroux observes, ‘what has emerged in this new historical conjuncture is an intensification of the practice of disposability in which more and more individuals and groups are now considered excess, consigned to zones of abandonment, surveillance, and incarceration.’¹¹ This scarring aftermath informs much of today’s contemporary Gothic texts, including *Stranger Things*, and the fiction of Stephen King (in *The Institute*, for example, in which its protagonist kids are also thrust into a decaying, Cold-War 1980s past),¹² and this keen sense of loss is articulated through ‘the problem of a lost object,’ or the snuffing out of a longed-for future, psychologically providing ‘the most overriding basis of our need for the Gothic.’¹³ For Bruhm, ‘that loss is usually material (parents, money, property, freedom to move around, a lover, or family member), but the materiality of that loss always has a psychological and symbolic dimension to it.’¹⁴ As David Ridley observes, Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) is explicitly marked out as different as she does not base her friendship or her understanding of the world on 1980s toys or through commodities. Raised as a prisoner in Hawkins Lab, she has little interest in or places any material capital value on the commodities that Mike (Finn Wolfhard) shows her to impress her (his Yoda action figure, or his family’s domestic possessions). Beyond a general bemusement with 1980s domesticity, she finds these distractions largely meaningless. She does, however, gaze at a photo of Mike’s friends – Dustin, Lucas, and Will — and craves a similar emotional connection.¹⁵ This sense of loss pervades the aesthetic tone/feel and material culture present in *Stranger Things*, in that it visually underscores a sense of ‘lost time’ by recalling earlier known film texts, and demarcates its 1980s insiders and outsiders through reference to and ownership of once-prized material possessions.

To trace the distinct political anxieties expressed about the 1980s as a commodified ‘pre-packaged’ decade in *Stranger Things* and similar retro-cultural texts, it is important to identify why the 1980s has become a site of cultural nostalgia three decades beyond its literal conclusion. As Stephen Shapiro notes, ‘Gothic’s troubled historical recollection and precognitive prolepsis occurs because the conjuncture of a contracting economic long-wave and a newly expansive one simultaneously enables a synoptic retrospection of the past cycle’s arc, while also foreshadowing the resurrection of its dynamics.’¹⁶ In the grip of an anxious cultural and traumatic present, brought about by the tentacular, networked, and contaminating erosion of social cohesion under the yoke of neoliberalism, the market’s ghostly ‘invisible hand’ informs a version of the future that looks uncertain, gloomy, if not doomed by automation and economic degradation. Nostalgia-inflected programming, then, provides a strategy to consolidate and/or critique myths about the past prior to the moment of the ‘wrong turn in history’; in *Stranger Things*, this feature of return drives the audience towards a socially shared desire for a promising future that reassures and re-orientates viewers, and urges them to seek out these social goals to counteract the distracting horrors of the precarious present.

The ‘1980s cycle’ of revived and reimagined film and TV properties has continued apace in the twenty-first century precisely because of economic studio drivers, repurposing owned commercial properties with built-in audiences. However, they frequently function in the cultural sphere as a traumatic response to overcome a ‘dizzy[ing] pace of change[;] the more desperate is the mind’s need for continuity, [the past] is simplified to resist the endless impingements of disorientating change.’¹⁷ As with similar uncertainties about the oncoming future felt during the 1980s, Reagan’s cultural tenet espoused “‘the past as a present, America’s remembered self,” which threatens to become a false ‘implanted memory, like those of the replicants of *Blade Runner*’¹⁸ if left critically unchallenged by audiences. Nostalgia has accelerated in the latter half of the twentieth century, Jacobsen observes, and is felt and expressed onscreen ‘perhaps even more so now than ever before... Nostalgia, it

seems, pops up in history and spreads whenever the world, the nation or the community experiences a sense of crisis and unrest and when forces start to talk about “the good old days” before everything went wrong.’¹⁹ However, these nostalgic turns are not always presented as an unambiguous desire for an uncomplicated return to an earlier time and place. 1980s nostalgia programmes do not universally present a sanitised version of the past in the form of ‘restorative nostalgia’, which can poison with its false promise of a restoration of a time that never actually happened. Rather, the retro-1980s texts examined here, including *Stranger Things* and *Ready Player One* (novel, 2011/film, 2018), function as ‘reflective nostalgia’ texts, as termed by Svetlana Boym.²⁰ Such texts are ‘about taking time out of time and about grasping the fleeing present,’ where recall and critical thinking are not mutually exclusive, and where irony, play and present-day concerns are reflected.²¹ For Boym, ‘[both restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia] can use the same triggers of memory and symbols, the same Proustian madeleine cookie, but tell different stories about it.’²²

Ernest Cline’s 2011 novel *Ready Player One* and its 2018 film adaptation, directed by Steven Spielberg, re-enter the past via postmodern bricolage and playful recall. Both Cline’s novel (which privileges early 1980s texts and games) and its film adaptation (which is dominated by mid-to-late exemplars of 1980s cinema *à la* Spielbergian self-citation) primarily critique contemporary anxieties concerning network intrusions and corporate surveillance and valorise 1980s pop-cultural knowledge as a source for potential freedom, and valuable life lessons for its adolescent heroes who wish to reclaim the direction of the future from the evil corporation, IOI (Innovative Online Industries).²³ In Cline’s vision of our near-future, players in the virtual platform, the OASIS, access (and are economically tethered to) an ethereal digital plane to feel truly alive in a digital metaverse to escape the physical decay of a riven neoliberal future.

While retro-texts such as these *initially* seem to sell, if not overwhelm, the viewer with a return to the 1980s as an escapist fantasy from our neoliberal present, they do not omit its horrors; rather, both *Stranger Things* and *Ready Player One* frontload their diegetic return to/or citation of the 1980s to critique neoliberalism’s real political consequences beyond the surface of its ‘lost’ artefacts and products. The visual gloss, rather than simply functioning as superficial distractions littered with SFX and nostalgic recall, provides a fleeting sweetness to ensure the bitter truth is fully absorbed. We may be, according to Fredric Jameson, under the conditions of postmodernity, ‘condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach’,²⁴ but we may also glean heuristic lessons and heed warnings about its socio-political shortcomings and true economic cost in our neoliberal present. The trauma of the failure of a hopeful future awaiting 1980s adolescents (and subsequent generations, namely Millennials and Digital Natives) lingers on in these particular retro-80s texts as ‘an ache of displacement.’²⁵ If *Ready Player One*’s diegesis situates itself at the brink of total neoliberal control in the future of 2045, wherein people are utterly tethered and networked, dazzled by and reliant upon their secondary, online lives and quantified by corporations according to their digital value, *Stranger Things* points to the inception point of these contemporary economic network anxieties that will condemn future generations to a similar fate.

We can, with clarity, point to a ‘1980s cycle’ that has dominated Hollywood outputs since the 2008 financial crisis as a means of processing the trauma of the failure of neoliberalism’s economic model of endless growth, policies that have largely destabilised concepts of future security since their adoption by Reagan in the early 1980s. The rise of market precarity, boom-bust property cycles and the fiscal disaster of 2008 proved that future security could easily be swept aside. In response, Hollywood has been rebooting the 1980s past for at least fifteen years in popular cinema and television. By 2010, film and television critics were quick to predict the year as the ‘year of 80s remakes’, featuring re-booted

releases that included *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Karate Kid* and *The A-Team*. Kathleen Loock observes in her study on the ‘1980s Cycle’ in Hollywood that the trend continued apace throughout the 2010s, during which time [by 2016] ‘up to thirty feature films and television shows from the 1980s will be remade in the 2010s – a number that has led *Variety*’s Marc Graser to describe the long-past decade as “a dynamo for contemporary remakes”.²⁶ The trend of reviving 1980s entertainment properties is a booming economic expression of what Simon Reynolds terms ‘retromania.’²⁷ Such trends are driven by ‘commercial imperatives and rely on pretested material that they repeat, modify, and continue in order to ensure box-office success.’²⁸ Pop continues to eat itself.

However, many of these *remakes* lacked both critical and commercial traction and, I argue, suggest a marked difference between the earlier part of the ‘1980s cycle’ in the 2010s, which largely consisted of replication and reinterpretation, and post-2016 ‘1980s Cycle’ retro-texts, the most critically and commercially successful of which are situated in, or in active dialogue with, the broader landscape of 1980s culture onscreen. They are, as retro-texts, also marked out as ‘actually more about the present than the past it appears to revere and revive. [Retro-] uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital...[situated at] the intersection between mass entertainment and personal memory.’²⁹ In the case of *Ready Player One* and *Stranger Things*, both texts actively critique the theft of a promised tomorrow and attain an explicit form of cultural resonance that is overlooked in many remakes in the earlier part of the ‘1980s Cycle’ of the 2010s.

This return to the 1980s has also been facilitated through the increased speed and availability with which we consume the past like never before, a practice that ostensibly began in the 1980s through video rentals, sell-thru video purchases, and sequelisation. This economic appetite for endless continuation and access to material properties of the past was incepted through the technological advancement of VHS culture in the late 1970s and gave rise to new modes of Hollywood production, consumption, and viewing practices as an economic means to extend the reach and shelf-life of established and successful products.³⁰ As Stephen Prince argued about the 1980s as a decade of sequel film production more generally:

It seemed as if the [1980s film] industry had been taken over by mathematicians. ... The imperative to sequelize a successful picture became so all-powerful in the period that... the studios sought to brand audience loyalty by developing characters and film properties that could be manufactured in perpetuity. As a result, the endings of many films were not really endings, just the postponing of narrative until the next installments.³¹

And this economic strategy has continued apace ever since. Exchanging video box circulation for networked streaming and indefinite narrative expansion of properties through multiverses, it is a perfectly logical extension of the economic reliance on synergistic potentialities of properties that can be reimagined, rebooted, and expanded as required, and for as long as the audience interest proves profitable. For series such as *Stranger Things*, the economic system that infiltrates and dominates our world is rendered visible in its sprawling totality and critiqued through a literalised abject space that is incepted during the “golden age” of neoliberalism, when the consolidation of financial deregulation [and the accumulation of global capital] created an economic boom – which would, after 30 years, turn out to be a spectacular “bubble”.³² According to David Ridley, *Stranger Things* ‘simultaneously reels us in—allowing for the necessary suspension of disbelief – and distances us, creating the ‘cognitive estrangement’ so important to science fiction’s critical function.’³³ The series’ layered approach sets up nostalgic consumption through the rediscovery of artefacts, toys,

retro aesthetics, music, and popular culture, only to reveal, critique, and, on occasion, attempt to reject, the neoliberal sprawl beneath its deceptively comforting surface.

The ‘decade of nightmares’ and the Neoliberal Upside Down

In his 2011 study on 1980s US culture in the twenty-first century, David Sirota cogently observes that the 1980s is a decade rife with contradictions that ‘defies [neat] taxonomy. Depending on the age, race, sexual orientation, geography, ... and the person you are reminiscing with, the decade was hilarious, awful, or ... the beginning of America’s rebirth, the beginning of the end of the world, or perhaps – not coincidentally, all of the above.’³⁴ These divisions and contradictions continue to find purchase in *Stranger Things*, in which one form of othered threat (Cold War politics) temporarily masks other forms of terrifying infiltration (neoliberal ideology) within the American homeland. According to Philip Jenkins, the 1980s was a ‘decade of nightmares,’ splintered by a variety of interest groups and agendas: Reaganite populists and moralising evangelical conservatives including Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan promoted a return to traditional family values (read: patriarchal, white and unquestioned privilege) and found ‘suspicious’ Satanic influence in popular entertainments including music, games (most infamously in *Dungeons and Dragons*) and films that failed to adopt this worldview. This ‘moral majority’ decried the decay of traditional values and operated in parallel with the abject neglect of the poor through targeted government defunding (in welfare and housing) and ignoring the plight of HIV+ patients.

Furthermore, the early decade witnessed significant shifts in demography, post-Vietnam trauma, the stoking of Cold War tensions, and palpable anxiety about the future direction of the country, all of which set the stage for a decade that churned with political uncertainty. These multifaceted cultural powder kegs were awkwardly couched and given ‘form and direction’ and a ‘particular vision’ under the banner of Reaganism, a term loaded with complexity and contradictions.³⁵ These cultural debates and competing narratives about the future of America were also largely underway before Reagan’s election in 1980, Jenkins argues, and surfaced during his terms in office as a Gothic ebullition of past sins and economic insecurities that refused to remain buried.³⁶ Reagan’s solution to quell these competing national anxieties on the political left and right was to strive to provide a booming economic recovery that not only attempted to quash these criticisms and distract (or convert) potential voters—a method that proved highly effective in the November 1984 election³⁷—but in so doing furthered aggressive policies to enact neoliberal economic expansion that has remained firmly ingrained ever since.

Reagan’s re-election victory speech affirmed this approach, serving as a rallying cry to his supporters and as a warning to those dismayed by its true costs: “‘You know, so many people act as if this election means the end of something,” Mr Reagan concluded in an indirect reference to the fact that this was the last election night of his career. “To each one of you I say, it’s the beginning of everything... You ain’t seen nothing yet”.”³⁸ As Jenkins notes, ‘[i]f the Reagan presidency did nothing else, it restored the belief in free enterprise capitalism in a way that shaped the policies of all subsequent administrations of whatever party.’³⁹ As a result, the economic and cultural instabilities brought about under the yoke of neoliberal destruction to social securities, re-routing of wealth, and the propping up of dead financial systems, zombie banks, and ghostly glimpses of lost futures, all take on a distinctive undead shape in the latter 2010s through 1980s retro-texts that point to these moments as pivotal mistakes and wrong turns in time.

Stranger Things also points to this discourse of socio-cultural unease and necrotic sprawl permeating for some time. The government research facility in Hawkins meddles with powers and conducts experiments it does not fully understand, unleashing a parallel dead world that they cannot contain as the series progresses; only the kids and teens can

understand the horrors of the encroachment of the Gothic space beneath them and spring into action to secure the future of the town (if only temporarily). The experiments conducted on Eleven in the research facility give rise to the literal opening of the gate to The Upside Down⁴⁰ – an economic experiment on the youth of the 1980s that opens the fissure between the worlds of the 1980s and the wasteland of its economic future, consuming future generations' economic and social stabilities to feed the greed of the Reaganite present. This allegory of neoliberalism as an ideological monstrosity is visibly manifested in the series as a subterranean dead space that engulfs and consumes the town from beneath.

Monikered by the kids as The Upside Down, this negative shadow world occasionally ruptures into the diegetic familiar 'reality' of the show. The necrotic wasteland of The Upside Down poisons and devours, marked out by the floating dust particles and consumed abject detritus; this shadow world is ruled over by the monstrous 'Mind Flayer', a tentacular gaseous creature that infects and devours, briefly glimpsed amidst clouds and flashes of lightning, perpetually towering over the wasteland. As Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) describes this parallel world, likening it to 'The Vale of Shadows', a fictional construct based on the group's *Dungeons and Dragons* games, The Upside Down 'is a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. It is right next to you and you don't even see it.'⁴¹ Dustin's description emphasises this shadow plane as the 'invisible hand' of the neoliberal market. This is further explicated by their science teacher Mr Clarke, who similarly defines this parallel dark world as 'an echo of the Material Plane, where necrotic and shadow magic exists'.⁴² This Gothic world is ruled over by the monster of deregulated finance – a form of shadow magic that remains hidden from view – that hollows out and exploits the body politic in service to corporate and private interests.

As Julia Wright observes on similar modes of anxiety, surveillance and infiltration in Gothic television series, the 'Gothic nightmare of the US libertarian fantasy of regularity without regulation, [is] exemplified by the figure of the "invisible hand" in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776).'⁴³ The Upside Down is a biological and abject expression of the growing and unseen infiltration of neoliberalism's full effects, which literally expands and hollows out the promise of the American dream into an empty consumerist fantasy of economic prosperity without end for a fortunate few. For American Midwestern towns such as Hawkins, the oncoming effects of 'economic blight' are literalised as it plummets such communities into severe decline. Once unleashed, the spread of free-market capitalism is both ubiquitous and profound. When The Upside Down flashes into view, the extent of its infiltration is frightening by virtue of its totality: glimpses of its invasive tentacular rotting vines spread throughout the town of Hawkins, from the walls of the school to the local arcade and into the homes of its residents, particularly the home of Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), the young boy whose disappearance and rescue informs the first season of the series.

This diachronic reading is amplified in the show as it continues its exploration of The Upside Down in season two. Moving the events onscreen to October 1984 – on the cusp of Reagan's crucial re-election under the banner of 'It's Morning in America' – and its economic promise of a prosperous future for the country – Will's ability to 'see' the workings of The Upside Down, having survived its infecting grasp in the first season, enables him to map the spread of the poisonous vines beneath the town. Expressing his visions creatively, he draws a sprawling series of tunnels to articulate its vast extent and the coming of the arachnid-shaped monster that lies at its centre. Will functions as the seer among his peer group of adolescent friends; marked out as the group's most vulnerable member (particularly in terms of his emotional sensitivity and the economic precarity of his home life), Will acts as both the first victim of the infecting shadow system and the only member capable of articulating its horrors

through his experience of ‘now memories’, a term he uses to articulate his ability to see and feel the workings of the supernatural, hive mind system where others cannot.

The use of the term ‘now memories’ renders this diachronic narrative explicit. It is apt, then, that upon his return to the town following his disappearance in season one, he is cruelly called ‘zombie boy’ by the local school bullies, his survival leaving him vulnerable to traumatic flashes and physical paralysis when glimpsing the encroaching Upside Down in Hawkins. Will’s sustained connection to The Upside Down dovetails with the oncoming infiltration of ‘zombie economics’ as coined by John Quiggin, the neoliberal policies that take hold throughout the 1980s and will in the future result in bubbles and cataclysmic crashes such as the global 2008 financial crisis.⁴⁴ Will sees that the model of promised prosperity for all (i.e., ‘trickle-down economics’) is rigged and that the future is being actively erased. In the series, Will can be considered as both dead and alive, infected yet resurrected, networked, and traumatised, and caught between the rifts of these two worlds. As the ‘cleric’ of his group’s *Dungeons and Dragons* party, he is at once representative of their generational possibility and is subject to foreboding, paralysing visions of a hopeless future.

For Cain and Montgomerie, ‘living death is the death of state-backed systems of social reproduction, and of the individual forced to emulate an empty entrepreneurial ethic of constant expansion and consumption....On a broader metaphorical level, the zombie is our future in a post-apocalyptic nightmare where global warming and/or accelerating political instability have created a world fit only for the already-dead.’⁴⁵ As the season progresses, Will can see the system is rigged particularly against economically forgotten people like him (though all but the elite are rendered vulnerable under its sway) who will collectively be reduced and discarded by neoliberal policies that hollow out small towns across America under the banner of austerity and suppressed wages for the next several decades. Will’s ‘now memories’ point to the diachronic narrative purchase of the series, one in which we as viewers know but cannot conceive of the full extent of our economic and digital infiltration and surveillance; it is at once ethereal and malleable, pervasive, and invasive – anxiety-inducing, numbing, and overwhelming.

To further underscore its horrifying intrusion, Kerry Dodd notes that this evident disruption caused by the advancement of The Upside Down is articulated through flickering lights and electrical interference, revealing the extent of this immense network;⁴⁶ the desire to locate errors and glitches in the series unmasks The Upside Down’s proximate ‘invisible hand’ at work. Writing in *The Atlantic* in November 2017, Megan Garver observes how this articulation of the Gothic Upside Down resonates with contemporary neoliberalism and widespread cultural anxieties:

Hawkins’s new megamonster is vaguely arachnoid in shape, vaguely viral in function, and by turns, apparently, both electric and gaseous. The show’s kids nickname it ‘the Mind Flayer,’ and it’s appropriate: This is a monster of the mind. It hijacks the system – a body, a town, a world – right through the nerves. It lives among the people, below the people, around the people, in the parallel world of The Upside Down. And in its formlessness – *monsters, mirrors* – lurk anxieties about terrorism and climate change, about Facebook and hacking, about systems that are too powerful and not powerful enough. The invisible. The invincible. All the threats we cannot see and therefore cannot, directly, fight. No amount of human bravery or ingenuity – no well-aimed slingshot, no powerful gun, no bold act of collaboration – can destroy it. The Mind Flayer is helplessness, made monstrous.⁴⁷

This sense of economic helplessness under neoliberal infiltration is particularly apt through the show's depiction of the Mind Flayer as a Gothic gaseous arachnid, taking a specific form that recalls earlier spider allegories in fiction. As a Gothic monster, Claire Charlotte McKechnie notes that 'the spider image has a pivotal role in conveying the horror of imperial endeavour'.⁴⁸ This expansive network of spinning webs lies at the heart of representations of Arachne in the works of numerous authors including Jonathan Swift and H. G. Wells, for example, and here continues a longstanding and pervasive cultural trope of industrious and networked arachnids in allegorical debates about the expansion of industry, commerce, and trade. For Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, neoliberal ideology is 'markedly imperialistic' through its need for expansion;⁴⁹ given the Mind Flayer advances on the town to acquire total infiltration, it acts exactly as an abject hegemonic devouring mass. This deadening expanse performs, then, as 'any hegemon, if it is to maintain its position in relation to endless (and endlessly expanding) capital accumulation, [and] must endlessly seek to extend, expand, and intensify its power.'⁵⁰ The Mind Flayer melds with the spider's established allegorical monstrous resonance in fiction through its tentacular supernatural network to actualise Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market, exposing *The Upside Down* as a pervasive economic undead web in the twenty-first century. This arachnid-styled monster possesses the ability to create systems and tunnels, poisonous chutes and siloes to trap and absorb its helpless victims (such as zero-hours contracts, the privatization of healthcare and education, and the destruction of labour unions) and destroys secure and familiar spaces including the natural world (through pollution and climate change denial) with its infecting touch. The inhabitants of *The Upside Down*, specifically the Demogorgon and demodogs, are slaves to the master Mind Flayer, their faces reduced to merely all-consuming treacherous mouths to literalise this horror, akin to the zombie hordes whose ravenous consumption without end defines their Gothic neoliberal existence.

In sum, the 'reimagined' 1980s in *Stranger Things* serves very specific needs felt at this moment in the contemporary Gothic. These texts resuscitate the temporal disjunctions of the 'past as present' to unmask the pervasive infiltration of neoliberalism. While using nostalgia to articulate the undercurrents of neoliberal infiltration today, both *Stranger Things* and *Ready Player One* deploy these invocations to point to a Gothic rift in time. Both texts present a nostalgic gloss only to fissure and fragment its delicate surface to expose the Gothic underbelly of its neoliberal systems that have hollowed out the future. The seductions of nostalgic gloss function to deploy 'reflective nostalgia'—it rejects the conservative calls for a reinstatement of a 'great past' and instead points to our current instabilities, namely, to warn about the Reaganomic future that is already underway and must be restructured and recovered from the violence of the market. *Ready Player One*, as a postmodern grail narrative, finds its solution in securing the OASIS, ending the corporate enslavement of the digital terrain, and encouraging a return to reality—to friendship, companionship, and community—to actively resist neoliberal atomisation and heal the wasteland.⁵¹ *Stranger Things* also points to this solution (however temporarily) in each season with the restoration and structural companionship of the group either reaffirmed or positively restructured;⁵² without community and social responsibility, and failing to learn from the mistakes of the past, we will all lose without the strength of one another. In the end, both texts return to a lost time of the 1980s to identify and critique the consolidation of Gothic neoliberalism during the decade and utilise the diachronic powers of 'reflective nostalgia' to turn our gaze toward the present. Both *Stranger Things* and *Ready Player One* are '[m]asked as sci-fi blockbusters [...and lay] bare the necessity to turn our gaze towards the present once more, so that the dreadful future depict[ed] might be avoided. At the same time, it warns us against pure utopianism, which inevitably hides the seeds of dystopia within itself, in favour of a more

realistic vision of the future which, having lost its gloss, now seems darker than ever.’⁵³ The future can only be what *we* make it.

Notes

¹ Tom Shales, ‘The ReDecade,’ *Esquire*, 01 March 1986, 67-8. <https://classic.esquire.com/article/1986/3/1/the-re-decade>. Accessed 5 January 2021.

² Shales, ‘ReDecade’, 70.

³ Ronald Reagan famously used this phrase during his ‘Labor Day’ speech on the campaign trail in 1980 (01 September 1980). Donald Trump reused it as his 2016 election slogan, featuring it on MAGA red hats and T-shirts.

⁴ Sorchá Ní Fhlainn, “‘There’s Something Very Familiar About All This’: Time Machines, Cultural Tangents, and Mastering Time in H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and the *Back to the Future* trilogy.’ *Adaptation*, 9, no. 2, (2016): 164-184, <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apv028>; and Sorchá Ní Fhlainn, ‘Gothic Horror Films at the *Fin-de-Millennium*: From Nightmare Videos to Filtered Realities (1980 – 2000)’, in *Twentieth-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Sorchá Ní Fhlainn and Bernice M. Murphy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 144-162.

⁵ Tom Shone. *Blockbuster: How the Jaws and Jedi Generation Turned Hollywood into a Boom-town* (London: Scribner, 2005), 157.

⁶ Blissing out on Spielberg’s cinema is a phrase coined by Pauline Kael in her review of *E.T.* in the *New Yorker* in 1982, a phrase which was subsequently used by other critics to dismiss Spielberg’s cinema as an empty glossy shell in popular entertainment. For more on this, see James Kendrick, *Darkness in the Bliss-Out: A Reconsideration of the films of Steven Spielberg*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1-21.

⁷ Steven Bruhm, ‘The Contemporary Gothic: Why we need it’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 261.

⁸ Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. ‘Introduction: Stranger (Things) in a Strange Land or, I Love the 1980s?’, in *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series*, ed. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018), 3.

⁹ David Sirota, *Back to our Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), xx.

¹⁰ For more on the economic destruction of midwestern communities versus coastal ‘elite’ technology hubs, see Stephanie Coontz, ‘The Nostalgia Trap’, *Harvard Business Review*, 10 April 2018. <https://hbr.org/2018/04/the-nostalgia-trap>. Accessed 12 December 2021.

¹¹ Henry A. Giroux, ‘Neoliberalism and the Machinery of Disposability’, *Truthout*, April 08 2014, <https://truthout.org/articles/neoliberalism-and-the-machinery-of-disposability/>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

¹² Stephen King, *The Institute* (New York: Scribner, 2019). King’s novel bears a remarkable thematic overlap with *Stranger Things*, which King also observed while noting that *Stranger Things* owes a debt to his 1986 novel, *IT* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986). This is particularly evident in the deployment of its band of 1980s child protagonists and the monstrous spider that *IT* reveals itself to be at its conclusion. See also, Andy Greene, ‘Stephen King on His New Horror Novel, the “Nightmare” of Trump, and “Stranger Things”’, 1 September 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/stephen-king-interview-trump-institute-stranger-things-878362/>. Accessed 13 December 2021.

¹³ Bruhm, ‘Contemporary Gothic’, 263.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David Ridley, ‘The neoliberal Upside Down: Toward a critical theory of contemporary science-fiction television,’ *Monthly Review*, 16 November 2018. <https://mronline.org/2018/11/16/the-neoliberal-upside-down/>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

¹⁶ Stephen Shapiro, ‘Transvaal, Transylvania: *Dracula*’s World-system and Gothic Periodicity,’ *Gothic Studies*, 10, no. 1 (2008): 34.

¹⁷ Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (London: Heinemann, 1987), 375-6.

¹⁸ J. Hoberman, *Make My Day: Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 240. Hoberman quotes Garry Wills, 375.

¹⁹ Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ‘In times of nostalgia: the brave new world of a grand old emotion’, in *Nostalgia Now: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (London: Routledge, 2020), 1-2.

²⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

²¹ Svetlana Boym, ‘Nostalgia and its discontents,’ *The Hedgehog Review*, 9, no. 2 (2007). *Gale Academic*. Accessed 12 January 2022.

- ²² Boym, 'Nostalgia and its discontents.'
- ²³ Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*. (London: Arrow, 2011).
- ²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998), 10.
- ²⁵ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), xxv.
- ²⁶ Kathleen Loock, 'Retro-remaking: The 1980s Film Cycle in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema', in *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, ed. Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 277.
- ²⁷ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xiii.
- ²⁸ Loock, 'Retro-remaking,' 278-9.
- ²⁹ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xxx-xxxi.
- ³⁰ For more on this see Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and Siorcha Ní Fhlainn, 'Gothic Horror Films at the Fin-de-Millennium: From Nightmare Videos to Filtered Realities (1980 – 2000)', 144-162.
- ³¹ Stephen Prince, 'Introduction: Movies and the 1980s', in Stephen Prince (ed.) *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 1-21 (2-3).
- ³² Ridley, 'The neoliberal Upside Down: Toward a critical theory of contemporary science-fiction television'.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Sirota, *Back to our Future*, xviii.
- ³⁵ For Jenkins, Reaganism is a collective term for many ills of the period that have risen to the surface in popular culture during the 'decade of nightmares', many of which directly emanate from the shattering upheavals of the 1970s. Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-23.
- ³⁶ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 23.
- ³⁷ The election, held on 6 November 1984, proved to be a national endorsement of Reagan's agenda. Securing a second term over his Democrat challenger Walter Mondale, Reagan carried forty-nine out of fifty states and secured 525 electoral college votes. While Reagan carried only 58.8 per cent of the popular vote, this decisive win in terms of states carried and electoral college votes set a record that remains yet unbeaten.
- ³⁸ Howell Raines, 'Reagan Wins By a Landslide, Sweeping at Least 48 States; G.O.P. Gains Strength in House', *New York Times*, 7 November 1984. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/07/politics/reagan-wins-by-a-landslide-sweeping-at-least-48-states-gop-gains.html>. Accessed 12 December 2021.
- ³⁹ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 185.
- ⁴⁰ *Stranger Things*, 'The Monster', Dirs. The Duffer Brothers, Season 1, chapter 6, 2016, Netflix.
- ⁴¹ *Stranger Things*, 'The Flea and the Acrobat', Dirs. The Duffer Brothers, Season 1, chapter 5, 2016, Netflix.
- ⁴² 'The Flea and the Acrobat'.
- ⁴³ Julia M. Wright, 'The *Unheimlich* State: Surveillance and the Digital Nation', in *Twentieth-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Siorcha Ní Fhlainn and Bernice M. Murphy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 130.
- ⁴⁴ John Quiggin. *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- ⁴⁵ Ruth Cain and Johnna Montgomerie, 'The Zombie Economy and the Aesthetic of Austerity,' *Angles* [Online], 8 (2019). <https://journals.openedition.org/angles/582>. Accessed 13 January 2022.
- ⁴⁶ Kerry Dodd, 'Stranger Networks: Ancillary Threats, Cult Nostalgia and Technological Invasions', in *Investigating Stranger Things: Upside Down in the World of Mainstream Cult Entertainment*, ed. Tracey Mollet and Lindsey Scott (London: Palgrave, 2021), 133-148.
- ⁴⁷ Megan Garber, 'Is This the Upside Down?', *Atlantic*, 2 November 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/11/is-this-the-upside-down/544655/>. Accessed 19 November 2018.
- ⁴⁸ Claire Charlotte McKechnie. 'Spiders, Horror, and Animal Others in Late Victorian Empire Fiction,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 4 (2012): 514.
- ⁴⁹ Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet. 'Introduction: Neoliberal gothic', in *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age*, ed. Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 7.
- ⁵⁰ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35, quoted in Blake and Soltysik Monnet, 'Introduction: Neoliberal gothic', 7.
- ⁵¹ Susan Aronstein and Jason Thompson, 'Coding the Grail: *Ready Player One*'s Arthurian Mash-Up'. *Arthuriana*, Special Issue in Honor of Elizabeth Sklar, 25, no. 4, (2015): 63.
- ⁵² To date, there have been three seasons of *Stranger Things*, with the fourth season announced for release (in two parts) in May and July 2022, and a fifth season to follow to draw the series to a close. While the bulk of my analysis here concerns seasons one and two of the series, *The Upside Down* continues to be an ongoing threat throughout the series and is only ever temporarily held at bay; this shadow world and its monstrous use of spider

allegories are likely to continue to function as the diegetic source of Gothic destruction for the duration of the entire series.

⁵³ Valentina Romanzi, 'Levels of Reality in Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One*: Utopia, Dystopia, and Retrotopia,' *JAm It!: The Journal of American Studies in Italy*, 3 (2020): 171-172.