Reconstructing and/or Deconstructing the 1980s. Gothic and Horror Tropes in *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-)

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Abstract: This article focuses on the gothic and horror tropes utilised in the Netflix series *Stranger Things* to offer a critical discourse on 1980s cultural, economic and social norms. To do so, the emphasis has been laid on the construction of tween and teen characters as "Gothicised" heroes, whose relations to borders, thresholds and in-between places enable them to define themselves as marginal(ised) if not altogether "othered" creatures. Relying on Deleuze's nomadism and Foucault's heterotopy, this essay wishes to demonstrate that Gothic does not merely provide an aesthetic to give Netflix viewers thrilling and horrific entertainment but also, and above all, a rhetoric that helps the Duffer Brothers to counter any nostalgic view on a decade marked by Republican President Reagan's conservatism.

Keywords: Gothic, TV Series, Reaganism, Heterotopy, Nomadism

Résumé : Cette étude s'intéresse à la façon dont les tropes gothiques et d'horreur sont utilisés dans la série *Stranger Things*, diffusée sur Netflix, pour porter un regard critique sur les normes culturelles, économiques et sociales des années 1980. Pour ce faire, l'accent est mis sur la construction de personnages adolescents « gothicisés », dont les relations avec les frontières, les seuils et les lieux intermédiaires leur permettent de se définir comme des créatures marginales, voire totalement « autres ». En s›appuyant sur le nomadisme de Deleuze et l'hétérotopie de Foucault, cet essai s'attache à démontrer que le gothique ne limite pas à une esthétique offrant aux abonnés de Netflix amateurs de frissons un divertissement horrifique, mais aussi et surtout que le mode gothique donne aux frères Duffer des outils rhétoriques leur permettant de désamorcer tout regard nostalgique sur une décennie marquée par le conservatisme du président républicain Ronald Reagan.

Mots clés : gothique, séries télévisées, reaganisme, nomadisme, hétérotopie

Introduction

"The Monster and the Superhero". The title of episode three, season four, of *Stranger Things* reflects the ambivalent identity of the show's main female protagonist, Eleven, who has been questioning her own nature since season one: is the shaved-head girl fond of Eggo waffles a child hero or a monstrous child? Her unsettled identity, ever more changing as she enters adolescence, sets the girl – and the viewers with her – on a quest to understand the origins of her supernatural abilities but also the roots of the evil menacing the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, where she finds friendship and shelter. Set in the 1980s, the Duffer Brothers' Netflix series was critically acclaimed as a recreation of Spielberg's films when it premiered in 2016. Besides its obvious Spielbergian undertones,[1] the show is also appreciated for its horrific atmosphere that borrows its themes and aesthetic from renowned masters of horror of the 1980s such as film maker John Carpenter and novelist Stephen King.[2] While the series most evidently pays homage to the horror films of the 1980s,[3] it also offers a nod to the period's iconic teen comedies, in the way the social hierarchical roles and relations between the various characters are upheld or contested.[4] For all those reasons, *Stranger Things* has been hailed, perhaps hastily, as a nostalgic mashup of 1980s pop culture and Reaganite entertainment.[5]

Yet, whereas Hollywood films under the Reagan administration tend to be considered as conservative works, scholars identify *Stranger Things*, with its 21st century hindsight, as a critical *de*construction (rather than a faithful *re*construction) of a decade marked by Republican President Reagan's New Right ideology and conservative backlash.[6] How is

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1. *E.T.* (1982) and *Close Encounter of the Third Kind* (1978) are the most obvious references: the band of tweenagers riding bikes and Eleven hiding in a closet with a blond wig concealing her cropped hair to escape scientists and the military seem to come straight out of *E.T.*; red glows from the Upside Down are reminiscent of the lights of alien spaceships in *Close Encounter*.
2. The series' original soundtrack is a nod to Carpenter's own synthwave scores while Eleven's telekinetic powers are evocative of King's 1980 novel *Firestarter* (the title of which was printed on the book cover in gothic font, as is the case in most King books – the series recycles the same typeface for its credit title). The novel was adapted for the big screen in 1984 and the film featured young Drew Barrymore as Charlie. The same Drew Barrymore could also be seen in *E.T.*
3. In season four, Wes Craven's 1984 *Nightmare on Elm Street* is notably and extensively referred to: not only are teenagers harrowed by deadly nightmares, but Robert Englund, who plays Freddy Krueger, makes a brief appearance in season four episode four.
4. In season four, the rebellious figure of Eddie Munson categorises students of Hawkins High using social labels the audience has been familiar with since John Hughes's 1985 *Breakfast Club*: the superficial cheer leader, the muscular but brainless athlete, the marginal geek, etc.
5. Britton defines Reaganite entertainment as "a general movement of reaction and conservative reassurance in […] Hollywood cinema" whose formal and thematic features could already be found before Reagan was elected. The phrase, Britton contends, nonetheless seems to be apt to represent "the tendencies in American society which have been consummated in the Reagan Administration" (Grant, 2009: 97). More generally speaking, Reaganite entertainment refers to film and television productions that offered an idealised representation of American society in the 1980s.
6. Beyond Stranger Things, Netflix's nostalgia for the 1980s is interpreted as a "basis for renewal", as "a way to rewrite history", as a way to "question traditional structures of

this change of perspective on – and perception of – the 1980s made visible/possible in the series? One hypothesis is that the eighties are depicted as a time of terror and danger for the young protagonists in *Stranger Things*, a feeling mostly conveyed through the recycling of gothic motifs and tropes. Interestingly, Chloe Buckley explains that Gothic is identified as "*radical, subversive and excessive* by critics who situate Gothic on the *margins of hegemonic culture*" (Buckley, 2009: 3, my italics). Since children's fiction and Gothic appear to have been "connected since their inception" (Buckley, 2009: 17), it may thus make sense that the Duffer Brothers should develop the initiation story of marginalised child protagonists or "Gothic children",[7] especially as the narrative takes place in a slightly revisited, if not displaced, version of the eighties, thus subverting the hegemonic discourse conveyed by Reaganite entertainment.

This study will address the Gothic traits and features of *Stranger Things*' young heroes, paying close attention to such characters as Eleven, the lab girl with telekinetic abilities, and Will, the boy haunted by a mysterious creature from a dangerous parallel world. We shall see that the gothicisation of tween characters seemingly modelled on the conventions of 1980s pop culture is connected to their (and the show's) relation to space and places – from their apparently banal and ordinary hometown to the marginal space of the woods where children are lost and found, and, eventually, to the Lovecraftian hellish dimension they name the Upside Down.

The "Othering" of Hawkins: Panic on Main street

Except for season four, partly set in California, and a couple of episodes in season two situated in Chicago, the story of *Stranger Things* takes place in the fictitious small town of Hawkins, Indiana. The place seems familiar and uneventful, with its city hall, its middle school, its drugstore, its shopping mall and multiplex cinema, all of which serve as the background for the adventures of a gang of tween and teen characters (Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Will, and their older siblings Nancy and Jonathan). Hawkins is their hometown, where they are supposed to belong. Quite conventionally, thus recycling a recurring *topos* of 1980s blockbusters, they are seen scurrying through the streets of Hawkins on their bikes. The Hawkins community seems stereotypical of Reagan's America, at least as it was – idealistically – depicted in Hollywood blockbusters. At first sight, the pretty bungalows and the well-tended lawns, decorated with posters

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authority, [to] reflect the strain of society and expose cultural sensitivities" (Mollet and Scott, 2021: 9).

7.   Buckley also contends that "Gothic helps the children grow" (18) – the initiation story developed in ST is thus served by its Gothic dimension.

promoting the 1984 Reagan-Bush ticket (season 2), appear as a safe place where children can play unattended. Yet, not only is this hometown constantly threatened by an evil force that boils under its surface, but the children of Hawkins are definitely not protected by their community. In Hawkins, riding a bike is not an innocent playful activity but a moment when children are left on their own and fall prey to alienating monsters.[8] Young Will disappears mysteriously while riding back home from a Dungeons and Dragons session with his friends, and is believed to have been killed; the gang of tweens also get on their bikes whenever they are hunted down by their enemies, be they government agents or supernatural creatures. Far from being grounded to their home-not-so-sweet-home, the characters seem constantly on the move, in a desperate attempt to protect it as well as themselves.

Furthermore, two of the main protagonists are portrayed as homeless children. Just like Will, who loses his home when trapped in the Upside Down, his female counterpart Eleven is also initially deprived of a home: torn from her mother's womb, she grows up in a government facility and is nothing more than a lab rat, even if the scientist in charge is called "Papa". This idea of homelessness, Chloe Buckley contends, has been a significant feature of contemporary Gothic fiction for children since the beginning of the 21st century and has been reconfigured as nomadism or "nomadic subjectivity" in the sense given to the concept by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaux* (Buckley, 2009: 1). Eleven's homeless or nomadic feature is made manifest in the difficult construction of her identity, as her self "is continually in the process of becoming" (3). Her characterisation thus follows numerous "lines of flights" (Deleuze, 1980: 15), shifting from the androgynous badass run-away to the stereotypical damsel in distress, wearing a pink satin dress and a blond wig; from the terminator-like warrior to the self-conscious schoolgirl; from the fearful victim to the fearless killer; from the superhero to the monster. Her multiple and unstable identity seems to be defined by the multiplicity and instability of the places she feels trapped in and needs to escape: the laboratory she is being experimented on, the makeshift tent where she is hiding[9] in the Wheelers' basement, the cabin in the woods where she is protected, but also held captive, by the Sheriff. Each of those places determines who Eleven is supposed to be. The girl's characterisation takes on a metanarrative dimension as Eleven, before she grows into a fully-fledged and fleshed-out individual, is the result of the juxtaposition of several stories, or fictions, in other words, a discursive construct. Even her name varies according to who (and where) she is expected to be: Eleven (her identification number tattooed on her

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8.   In that regard, *IT Part one* (after Stephen King's eponymous novel), which came out in 2017 and is now set in 1989 when the original story took place in the 1960s, follows the same idea.
9.   The nod to Spielberg's 1982 *E.T.* is not anecdotal. The girl is explicitly equated with the kind extra-terrestrial, the intertextual reference signalling how Eleven does not belong, how she is here "deterritorialised" in Deleuzian terms, unable to fit in one singular fixed identity.

wrist in the laboratory), Elve (the nickname given by her male friends who are fond of fantasy tales when hiding in the Wheelers' basement), Jane Ives (the name given by her mother on her birth day in hospital), Jane Hopper (when adopted by the Sheriff of the same name and living in the woods) and, eventually, Jane Byers (when fostered by the Byers family, Joyce, Will, and Jonathan in California). The problematic naming of things and people is often found in the series and points to the grotesque, unfixed, in-between characteristic of those creatures opening a breach in the normal and apparently balanced world of Hawkins, thus introducing instability, strangeness and horror.[10] The phenomenon also applies to Will Byers, who is both dead and alive, present and absent, as he haunts his mother's house while trapped in the Upside Down and then is haunted, in his turn, by the Upside Down once back to his supposedly familiar home. Will is identified as "Will the Wise" by his friends on the model of Dungeons and Dragons characters but is also "Loser" and "Zombie Boy" for the other children of Hawkins who resent his being a "stranger thing", especially as he is portrayed as being "othered" by the experience of his symbolic death in the Upside Down.[11]

Although a fictional town, Hawkins is the site of the same types of moral panics that shook the nation during the Reagan era. Sensational news stories about abducted children and satanic cults hit the headlines,[12] fed by the country's social anxieties for which women entering the workforce and rising divorce rates were held responsible (Butler, 2018: 73). That *Stranger Things* should rely on Gothic tropes seems all the more relevant in such a context. Buckley indeed explains that Gothic discourse, historically, equally transcribed social and cultural anxiety (Buckley, 2009: 6). However, she says, 21st-century Gothic texts, "while […] acknowledging the continuing effects of oppressive discourses and uneven power relations" (6), take on a more positive dimension as monstrosity and "othered" characters are seen through a radically different lens, thanks to children's nomadic subjectivity. In season four, Eddie Munson is the most representative manifestation of this phenomenon. A leading member of the Hellfire Club,[13] the long-haired teenager living in a trailer with his uncle

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10. Eleven opens a gate between Hawkins and the Upside Down when using her power to run away from the laboratory; as she gets out of the lab, Will is swallowed into this alternative dimension. Later on, he brings back with him a minute larva from the Upside Down that will grow into a formidable and unsettling monster. The "thing", like Eleven and Will, will be given different names. When it is fed and loved by Dustin like a puppy, it is called "D'Artagnan", thus reflecting the sources of the boy's imagination (here Dumas's adventure novel). As the creature grows, its name shrinks into "Dart", signalling its increasing dangerousness. It eventually loses its name and becomes indeterminate/anonymous when blending in a group of similar monsters. It is then reduced to the generic name given by the children to those beasts and is identified as a "demodog".
11. Will is a wan, sickly boy, with big brown eyes.
12. The showrunners admitted in a tweet that the character of Eddie Munson was loosely based on real-life Damien Echols, a teenager clad in black and listening to heavy metal music accused of having killed three children in Arkansas in 1993. After being sent to death row, Echols served eighteen years in jail and was eventually released thanks to new DNA tests.
13. The Hellfire Club is a gang of Dungeon and Dragon players, among them Mike and Dustin.

is considered as a threat by the self-righteous inhabitants of Hawkins, who accuse him of having killed a cheerleader in cold blood. Tracked down by the Hawkins Tigers (the players on the high school basketball team), Eddie is forced to hide and he escapes in the Upside Down where he [spoiler alert] will eventually die. At first sight, Eddie appears as the *epitome* of the period's social, economic and moral anxieties. He is a financially impaired underdog. A low-achiever at school, he is not a popular student but rather acts as some sort of misfit, a Dungeons and Dragons adept with a penchant for heavy metal, refusing to play the game of social conventions, which he denounces in pointing – and ridiculing – the different groups and stereotypes that other teens choose to embrace (S04E01). Turned into a social monster that has to be hunted down and killed to preserve the peace and quiet of the town, Eddie may be said to be "gothicised" by his rejection of and his being rejected by Hawkins's mostly bourgeois community, cemented by their trust in American Lockeanism (to put it simply, the immovable belief in individual property),[14] which may be construed as the cornerstone of Reaganite bourgeois ideology. Gothic Eddie, with his black scraggly hair, his black leather jacket above a black and white Hellfire club T-shirt, is constructed as a nomadic character in several ways. In Deleuzian terms, Eddie is a nomadic force insofar as he is seen resisting the social and economic laws of Hawkins.[15] As a result, he becomes a nomad (or a Gothic wanderer), geographically speaking, as he has to move around to escape his pursuers and eventually leave Hawkins for the Upside Down. However, far from embracing the moral judgement of Hawkins's inhabitants, the TV series takes side with Eddie and transforms the outcast into a tragic hero who sacrifices himself in the hope of saving Hawkins from nightmarish creatures, intent on invading and conquering the small town. Just as Buckley contends, the monstrous child or teen takes on a positive dimension (Eddie is actually a world-saviour and not a menace to society) and that reversal of values enables the showrunners to offer a critical view of Hawkins's Reaganite community. The stereotypical peaceful and idealised Spielbergian suburbs is here depicted as a threatening environment for marginal and marginalised characters.

14. On American political culture and the Lockean legacy, see Richard J. Ellis, "Radical Lockeanism in American Political Culture", *The Western Political Quaterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December 1992, p. 825-849.
15. Deleuze speaks of the State and its laws in terms of "war machines", remarkable for their immobilism. In contrast, nomadism and deterritorialization are seen as contesting and subverting impulses.

Gothicised Tweens Haunting Hawkins's Geographical and Social Margins

Will is a ghostlike character haunting the margins of Hawkins's Reaganite society. Even before he vanishes in the Upside Down, Will is represented as a marginal child, whose imagination is fed by fantasy stories and who is eager to retreat to his shed made of junk wooden planks to read comics, far from the madding crowd of bullies. Located in the woods, on the edge of the family's ground, the shed, pompously named "Castle Byers" and surmounted by the star-bangled banner, is an example of Foucault's "counter-space" defined as a place that is radically different from and in opposition to all other places, and whose purpose is "to erase, neutralise and purify them" (Foucault, 2009: 24, my translation). Foucault explains that children are particularly familiar with those utopian sites, which they find "at the back of their gardens or in their attic" (24, my translation). Castle Byers definitely offers Will a utopian escape from the real world while apparently defending core American cultural values (such as the belief in self-reliance for instance), erasing/neutralising some Reaganite economic, political and social beliefs, and somehow purifying the US flag: although the son of a low-income single mother (the scourge of the nation from a New Right perspective), Will is not a juvenile delinquent but a dreamy child who is reluctant to grow up, thus refusing to sacrifice his imagination and artistic talents (he is a gifted draughtsman) to consumer society and teenage seduction.[16] Not only is he isolated by his refusal to grow out of childhood, when he shuts himself away from the rest of the world in his Castle, but he is also even more marginalised when wandering in a parallel dimension, finding refuge in the Upside Down version of his childish construction. From that radically heterotopic position in the Upside Down, he manages to communicate with his mother Joyce, the only one who does not give up on him and remains convinced that her boy is still alive and worthy to be saved. Haunting the family house, Will turns his familiar home into something "unhomely", strange and uncanny. The house walls are no longer a solid protection against the outside world, instead they seem to melt to take the shape of Will's face or hands, again signalling his liminal situation: the wall is no longer a limit but a threshold, a site of passage between two dimensions. The characterisation of Will matches Margarita Georgieva's definition of the gothic adolescent who "open[s] doors, cross[es] passages, discover[s] portraits, manuscripts and daggers, suits of armours, tapestries and bloodied scarves" (Georgieva, 2013: 89). Season after season, the definition can be extended to most of the other adolescents in the show, even if the portraits, daggers

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16. Unlike his friends Mike and Lucas who give up on their Dungeons and Dragons games to go out with their female friends, Eleven and Max, Will is not interested in forming a traditional, conventional couple.

and various gothic props mentioned by Georgieva are adapted to the 1980s and replaced by a grandfather clock, a patient file found in a psychiatric hospital, a wooden door, with a coloured glass panel, opening onto a Victorian-like hallway, etc. Will nonetheless remains the most gothic of all as he is defined from the start by his uncanny character, as his story is marked by something *Unheimlich*. Freud's concept describes how what is unfamiliar, strange or unknown, when introduced in an otherwise familiar environment, becomes weird and unsettling, frightening even. Will's mother's living room becomes unhomely when she uses Christmas light garlands to receive messages from her son: the banal decoration, originally the symbol of family reunions, filled with the memories of the Byers' past, has now become a means of communication with Joyce's supposedly dead boy. The living room thus combines, or juxtaposes in Foucault's terminology, several radically different and potentially incompatible places in one site: the ordinary space dedicated to the family routine is contaminated by the extraordinary, deadly space the child is trying to escape (Foucault, 2009: 28-29). Will's house transforms into an uncanny heterotopia all the more easily since the family has already been relegated to the (social) margins of Hawkins. As has already been said, the Byers family apparently does not meet the expectations of Hawkins's normative Reaganite community: Joyce[17] is a divorced mother of two, a working woman living on a low-paid job, wearing worn-out jeans and jumpers, inhabiting a clean but decrepit house that seems located outside the middle-class suburban neighbourhood where the other families are to be found.[18] Jonathan Byers, her elder son, is constructed in opposition to the other stereotypical male characters of his age in the show: he is not popular nor muscular, he is not on the school's football team, does not wear fancy clothes or a fashionable haircut, and he drives a rusty old car; an amateur photographer, he is considered a voyeur and is rejected by the other students in his school. In the same way, Will is mocked for his old-fashioned clothes and is seen as a weirdo. The Byers are literally outsiders if not outcasts: not only do they inhabit the economic, geographical (and, to some extent, ontological) borders of Hawkins but they are eventually expelled from the small town and have to settle elsewhere, in California.

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17. On the character of Joyce Byers and the performance of actress Winona Ryder, see Lisa Morton, "Not a Princess Anymore: How the Casting of Winona Ryder in Stranger Things Speaks to The Essential Falsehood of 1980s Media Depictions of the American Working Class", in Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (ed.), *Uncovering Stranger Things*, Jefferson (NC): McFarland, 2018, p. 93-102.

18. In that regard, Joyce is to be opposed to Karen Wheeler, a stay-at-home mother of three, whose house is well-decorated and who obviously is a Republican voter (see the 1984 Reagan-Bush poster in her front yard). At first sight, Mrs Wheeler seems to embody the figure of the model mother as defined by the conservative new right (this ideology expected women to stop working and go back to their homes in order 1) to make jobs available for men and 2) to look after their offspring so they also stayed at home and thus could not risk running into trouble and becoming juvenile delinquents). Ironically, Mrs Wheeler (and her husband) often know nothing of their children's activities and whereabouts; she is more concerned with the way she looks (exaggerated make-up, bleached curly hair) and is often represented as a desperate housewife.

Hawkins's geographical margins (Castle Byers, Joyce's remote house, Brenner's laboratory, for instance) can be interpreted as places of exile and non-conformity. The woods, in particular, play a significant part in the marginalisation and gothicisation of the young heroes that find themselves wandering in that fearful space. Will and his friends call the woods Mirkwood, after Tolkien's enchanted forest in *The Hobbit* (1937) and they happen to be indeed as dangerous and mysterious in Hawkins as they are in Middle Earth. Strange creatures like the Demogorgon can be encountered there; Mirkwood might offer shelter to lost children (Will and Eleven); tree trunks might be gates opening onto another supernatural world where time runs at a different pace. But, more importantly (and interestingly), they are also places of transition and "sublimation"[19] of the child (Georgieva, 2013: 94). Margarita Georgieva emphasises the importance of rituals ennobling the child in Gothic fiction. Images of baptism and rebirth are thus recurring tropes in Gothic tradition. The same motif can be found in *Stranger Things* when Will's drowned body is found in the lake in the middle of the woods. Georgieva explains that in Gothic fiction, drowning or falling into a lake is like baptism, the equivalent of a symbolical death and spiritual rebirth for the child who is irremediably changed (70). This experience of death (for Will) and mourning (for his young friends) can be understood as a rite of passage and, as such, that phenomenon prompts the readers of a Gothic tale and the viewers of *Stranger Things* to analyse the story as a Bildungsroman (69-70). Will is indeed transformed when his corpse is pulled out of the lake's dark waters. However, this dead body is a fake, a manikin meant to stop the Byers family from looking for Will. As a manikin, a simulacrum for the actual boy, Will is turned into a passive object, a mere prop in the staging of his own death. Whether as a dead boy or a manikin, Will is transformed, radically alienated even, but is nonetheless refused the right to grow up and learn from his experience, unlike his pals who go through loss and mourning. He is apparently condemned to remain in a state of powerlessness and in-betweenness, as he becomes an intermediary between two worlds. As with traditional Gothic child heroes, the ritual of Will's drowning, of his symbolic baptism, has turned him into an almost mythical figure, as he has unwillingly become a gate between two dimensions, a channel of (uncontrolled) communication between two planes of being, "a hero close to God that receives otherworldly messages" (Georgieva, 2013: 94). Mirkwood, as a marginal space, situated outside the boundaries of Hawkins's civilised world, is the site for testing the characters' strength. While Will emerges as a passive otherworldly if not altogether ethereal creature, thus endorsing traditionally Gothic female characteristics, girls who go through Mirkwood appear to be challenging gender stereotypes of

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19. Sublimation is to be understood as the "ennobling" process through which the child's character becomes a hero endowed with "noble ideals and high principles" (Georgiva, 2013: 94).

Gothic tales in their refusal to conform to whatever fate 1980s society had in store for them.

Georgieva contends that Gothic, as genre, "may render the role of the two sexes interchangeable", "effeminate", "weak": male youth are thus depicted languishing in dungeons (or in castles of their own making as far as Will is concerned), whereas young women are strong and active, refusing forced marriages or disguising themselves into men (86). The description may particularly apply to two female characters in the series, Nancy and Eleven. While Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers are combing the woods in search of Will and Nancy's friend Barbara – whom, the viewers know, has been killed by a demogorgon (S01E03) –, they lose their sense of direction and fail to keep track of time. Deprived of her spatial (and social) landmarks, the teenage girl allows herself to express her wishes for the future for the first time. Far from her middle-class neighbourhood, she admits to socially ostracised Jonathan her desire to break from the gender role promoted and upheld by her mother, a visibly desperate housewife, obsessed with maintaining her physical appearance, married to a man more interested in reading the newspaper than looking after his children. The four seasons seem to test her subversive character. Although originally portrayed as a hard-working bookworm, Nancy soon deviates from the gender stereotype of the screaming girl horror film fans are familiar with. Karen Sturgeon-Dodsworth, relying on a concept coined by Carol Clover in 1987, identifies Nancy as one of the many "Final Girls" to be found in the show:

> In *Her Body, Himself,* Clover establishes some useful first principle. She extols the virtues of the Final Girl, describing her as 'intelligent, watchful, level-headed' […]. In terms of the formulation of strong, independent and agentive young women striving to ensure positive narrative equilibrium, *Stranger Things* could be seen at a glance as a highly progressive text, not least because the show presents the audience with a multitude of female characters of just the 'stature' Clover suggests. (Sturgeon-Dodsworth, 2021: 69)

While Will is depicted as a "male damsel in distress, powerless in his castle", Nancy is a "female knight", a "questing hero" plotting "rescue and revenge" (74).[20]

First appearing as a genderless character (with her shaven head, she is initially mistaken for a little boy), Eleven can also be considered as a

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20. Her femininity and sexuality are never questioned: not only is she the object of the desire of two boys, Jonathan and Steve, but she is also the subject of this desire and, unlike traditional screaming girls, she is not punished for it and killed soon after making out. She is the first on the war path, she carries guns and is the best shooter!

resisting female character whose marginality eventually enables her to break free from conventional social codes and to develop her own (counter-) narrative. Eleven's various "homes" ("Papa"'s lab, Hopper's cabin in the woods, the Byers's) also occupy the margins of Hawkins and can equally be interpreted in Gothic terms. The maze-like laboratory, located in the woods on the outskirts of town, is the natural environment of the girl's "Papa", Dr Brenner, who is reminiscent of Gothic mad scientists. Kaufler contends that "Dr Brenner is essentially Dr Frankenstein with Reagan ideals" (87). Drawing from a tradition that can be traced back to the horror films of the 1930s, the figure of the mad scientist plays God with women's bodies, using their wombs for science (Kaufler, 2018: 87). Dr Brenner is indeed a father, despite his circumventing women for reproduction (89). He claims *his* rights over women who are reduced to mere powerless pregnant bodies and whose unborn babies can be altered without their consent and stolen at birth.[21] Eleven thus appears as the repressed daughter of an eminently Gothic father figure, who reduces any potential female opposition "by enclosure, imprisonment […] and by forcefully inflicting on [women] the burden of pregnancy" (Georgieva, 2013: 85). However, Eleven, who is also reminiscent of the Gothic stolen child figure, eventually rejects Dr Brenner's godlike authority: as in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the nameless creature (referred to by her number or by "Jane" as in "Jane Doe" thus signalling her lack of – pre-defined – identity) breaks free from the scientist who created her and leaves him to die, without acknowledging his last-minute fatherly affection (S04E08).

Will, Nancy and Eleven can be interpreted as exiled adolescents in the literal and metaphorical sense as they will not or cannot comply with Reaganite social determinism. Although Will escapes from the Upside Down, he remains stuck in the closet of his homosexuality (at least until season four when he leaves for California); although Nancy is fighting evil in a parallel dimension with all her might and bravery, she is nonetheless relegated to an ancillary position when working for the local newspaper, the Hawkins Post, serving coffee to her male colleagues; although Eleven can kill a man with her mind, she is nonetheless bullied by her classmates because she is different. As they are exploring, haunting or wandering around Hawkins's borders, the teenagers' liminal and Gothicised selves reveal and highlight the reterritorializing[22] potential of the Upside Down

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21. Ronald Reagan is considered as a pro-life champion. In his 1984 "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation", under the pretext of assessing the consequences of the Roe vs Wade ruling after ten years of implementation, he fiercely attacked women's right to abortion and jeopardised their freedom of choice. He thus declared: "over the first two years of my administration, I have closely followed and assisted efforts in Congress to reverse the tide of abortion – efforts of Congressmen, Senators, and citizens responding to an urgent moral crisis." R. Reagan, "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation", *The Catholic Lawyer*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Spring 1986 (https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/tcl/vol30/iss2/2, last accessed on 10/12/22).

22. In Deleuzio-Guattarian terminology, deterritorialization is the process by which social, cultural, political, and/or linguistic articulations are disarticulated. Conversely,

version of Hawkins, insofar as those characters are given the opportunity to leave their familiar (frustrating) territory in order to reterritorialise their selves where and how they wish.

Beyond Hawkins and its Margins: The Upside Down as a Heterochronic Alternate Dimension

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The opportunity for "self-fashioning" is made possible thanks to Gothic "nomadic subjectivity" (Buckley, 2009: 7). The character of young Henry Creel, appearing late in the show (in season four) although his storyline begins early in the diegesis's timeline (1959) is chronologically the first child in Hawkins to be able to deterritorialise his self and reterritorialize his home in the Upside Down. This process enables him to become who/what he is: Eleven's arch-enemy and the source of the "curse"[23] that threatens Hawkins, named 001 by Dr Brenner (Henry is the first child he has experimented on) also known as Vecna (a name given by the gang of tweens after one Dungeons and Dragons character). His characterisation is intimately connected to the house he lives in in Hawkins. Inherited from a distant uncle, the Creel House is presented as the place where the Creel family can have a fresh start. It is, at the same time, the legacy of the family's past and the promise of a better future for the parents, Victor and Virginia, and their children, Henry and Alice. The narrative significance given to the Creel House prompts the viewers to interpret the whole series in Gothic terms. On arriving in the house, the two children express opposite reactions to the 19th-century house's architecture: with a name obviously borrowed from Lewis Carroll's Wonderland tales, Alice sees the Victorian mansion as a fairy-tale house. As for Henry, who explores every nook and cranny of the ancient building to capture spiders, the place is soon turned into a house of horror, as he kills his mother and sister with his telekinetic power in order, his adult self explains, to tear the veil of hypocrisy that conceals the real. The Creel House looks like the conventional haunted house of classic horror films. Its architecture is based on that of the Claremont House, an actual Gothic Revival style mansion built in the 1880s and located in Georgia. More specifically, the Creel House is Carpenter Gothic style, which was quite popular for domestic buildings in the United States in the mid-19th century and can be defined as "an eclectic and naive use of the most superficial and obvious motifs of Gothic decoration. Turrets, spires, and pointed arches were applied, in many instances

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reterritorialization refers to the process of re-articulating, or "re-doing" what has previously been undone or "deterritorialised" without going back to a previous, primitive, territory (Deleuze, 1980: 214, 434-527). I am using those terms here to analyse the deconstruction and reconstruction of teenage characters notably through their relation to space and places.

23. The word is used repeatedly season after season to explain Hawkins's exceptionally high death rate.

with abandon, and there was usually no logical relationship of ornamentation to the structure of the house".[24] The Creel House is thus remarkable for its juxtaposition of Gothic features (dark wooden panels, creaky stairs, wooden beams covered in cobwebs), whose lack of "logical relationship" is made literally visible in the Upside Down as the house's architectural elements seem disassembled and disarticulated: a wooden door, a glass panel, a broken window frame suspended in the air. Those fragmented ruins are covered in vines that seem to stem out of Vecna's scarred body: he is the one who controls and shapes the Upside Down. Minute details glimpsed in the Creel House confirm that the Gothic building is Vecna's source of inspiration for his fashioning of the alternate dimension: the flower-patterned wallpaper heralds the shape of the demogorgon's head; the eight-legged Mindflayer is evocative of the black widows the boy is fascinated with. When he reveals his story to Eleven (S04E07), Vecna admits he "didn't fit with the other children. Something was wrong with me. All the teachers and the doctors said that I was *broken*" (my italics). It thus makes sense that a broken mind should build a broken world, born of the pieces of the Gothic architecture of the Upside Down version of the Creel House, a broken world that is a utopia for the misfit villain. This idea of deconstruction and broken structures is central to the creation of the Upside Down by Vecna, who explains that he was obsessed with black widows as a child because:

> They bring balance and to an imbalanced ecosystem. But the human world was disrupting this harmony. You see, humans are a unique type of parasites, *multiplying* and poisoning our world, all the while enforcing a *structure* of their own. A deeply *unnatural structure*. Where others saw order, I saw a straight jacket, a cruel, oppressive world dictated by made up rules, *seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades*, each life a faded, lesser copy of the one before. Wake up, eat, work, sleep, reproduce and die. Everyone is just waiting. Waiting for it all to be over. All performing in a silly terrible play *day after day*. I could not do that". (S04E07, 1:21:54 - 1:24:55, my italics)

This human "unnatural" "structure" that Vecna sets himself to annihilate is intrinsically connected to one specific perception of time, defined in Vecna's speech in terms of linear time ("seconds, minutes," etc., "day after day"), marked by the passing of generations (cf. the biblical "multiplying"). As a result, the destruction of the human world also means the destruction of *Chronos*, classically understood as chronological time. In the Upside Down, taken as Vecna's psychic construction, time is also suspended and broken.

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24.   https//www.britannica.com/art/Carpenter-Gothic, last accessed 10/29/2022.

In classic horror house films, this focus on time is meant to translate the threatening persistence of the American past. In that matter, the Creel plotline is reminiscent of *The Amityville Horror* (1980). The same emphasis is put on historic or "revival" architecture reminding the houses' modern inhabitants of the country's colonial history and problematic European roots. In *the Amityville Horror*, based on a true story, the Lutz stepfamily settles in a neo-colonial house, where, as the opening credits inform the viewers in capital letters, "[a] mother, father and four of their children [have been] murdered… no apparent motive". At first sight, *The Amityville Horror* seems to provide a matrix for the Creel storyline. In the film's opening sequence, a red filter is colouring the sky beyond the house in blood red, the same colour as in the Upside Down. The presence of insects is also important in both works: flies in the film, signifying evil decay but also the biblical multiplicity of the devilish entity that haunts the house ("My name is Legion, for we are many", Mark 5:9); spiders in the series, which are described as both "solitary" and multiple, in the image of the evil boy that will destroy his home. In both cases, as an homage paid to Gothic literary tradition, the house is also like a body. In the Amityville old mansion, blood is oozing from the walls and the stairs. The façade is reminiscent of a menacing face: the gable windows are eyes watching the family, the brick chimney wall looks like a nose, and the row of downstairs windows is made to look like teeth ready to devour the newcomers. Fiedler affirms, "beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the *womb* from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last" (Fiedler, 1966: 132; quoted in Kahane, 1980: 47, my italics). Domesticity is here threatened by an evil force that is to be found in the cellar. The "womb" of darkness lies in the very foundations of the Dutch colonial house, represented as unstable, since the house seems to have been built on some sort of black oily goo that nearly swallows the family's stepfather. Menace here comes from the lower parts of the house, of mankind and its history. First, the father gets violent with his newly wed wife and her children (he nearly chops them into pieces with an axe), then the viewers learn that the neo-colonial house was home of a satanic cult in the 1920s. However, the menace remains non-descript as it is never individualised and clearly identified.

Comparing the Creel plotline to the 1980 film offers many interpretive keys, especially thanks to the series's divergence from the canon set by *The Amityville Horror*. First and foremost, to recycle Fiedler's wording, the darkness from which Vecna's ego emerges does not come from the cellar considered as the "womb" of the house, but from its upper part in the attic, from its head or mind. This special situation points the psychic ability and literal superiority of the boy. Unlike the Amityville non-descript menace from the past, the evil presence haunting the Creel House is clearly identified and individualised. It is the deranged mind of the

contemporary child, considered as different and unable to fit in, which is going to dismember the Creel family (and their house in the Upside Down). In other words, the menace comes from the Creel's present, not from the house's past. In dismembering the wooden family house, Vecna also chops down the family tree. No new generation is born of him as time is stopped in the Upside Down, "multiplying" is replaced by the rhizomatic proliferation of the same individual under different forms that are all connected. Vecna's power expands like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, defined by two principles: "connection" and "heterogeneity", "any point of a rhizome can be connected and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 13, my translation). The horizontality of Vecna's influence seems to thwart the verticality of historical, chronological time. The family branch is thus replaced by Vecna's vines[25] corrupting whatever they are spreading over (see, for instance the rotting pumpkin field in season two). In the Upside Down, *Chronos* (linear, chronological time) gives way to *Kairos* (non-linear, frozen time). In Greek mythology, kairotic time represents a tipping point, the specific moment when choices are to be made and opportunities seized. It is thus not anecdotal that the last date in Nancy's diary in the Upside Down version of her teenage bedroom should be November 6th 1983. The day is that of Will's disappearance in the woods and that of her friend Barbara's murder by the Demogorgon. In the Upside Down, time has not moved on beyond that symbolic and traumatic moment, when Nancy chose to leave her friend alone and unprotected to have sex for the first time with Steve. When guilt-ridden Nancy confronts Vecna for the first time (S04E06), he keeps repeating that *he* remembers what *she* seems to have forgotten (her responsibility in Barb's death). What is dis/membered in Hawkins is re/membered in the Upside Down, where past traumas prevent time from passing and teenagers from healing and moving on.

> The gothic children, literally, are the children of the gothic edifice because of its capacity to contain and preserve memory. To the gothic child, the gothic edifice (as a structure of and within the text) is a receptacle of history, a monument, a place for remembering and a place to remember. (Georgieva, 2013: 19)

The whole of the Upside down can be said to work as a heterochronic "gothic edifice". The ruins that fill the Upside Down landscape are as many "receptacles" of what is lost and left behind by the unfortunates

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25. Those slimy bloody red vines are definitely organic as they look like intestines digesting Hawkins but also like umbilical cords feeding deviant creatures (demogorgons, demodogs, demobats and the mindflayer, which are eventually identified as mere extensions of Vecna's mind and body).

that are trapped in the alternate dimension, which preserves (and feeds on) traumatic memories.[26]

Conclusion

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In *Stranger Things*, the gothic mode is not merely utilised to create a sensational horrific atmosphere. Gothic enables the showrunners to build changing characters, caught in in-between situations and conditions, in other words adolescents, in the etymological sense, *adulescens* – children on their way to becoming adults. Gothic thus appears to be the proper narrative and generic tool to draw the tortured portraits of (in this case American) teenagers, already scarred by a traumatic past.[27]

Gothic is manifest in the excess of the architecture of the ancient Creel House, quite conventionally, but it is also used, and this is less traditional perhaps, to transcribe the excess of teenage characters, who oscillate between monstrous identities and super-heroic figures.

In the end, *Stranger Things* teenage heroes are *gothicised* insofar as they are represented as grotesque creatures roaming the liminal spaces – in the literal and metaphorical sense – of Hawkins. They embrace Gothic margins and in so doing are marginalised by their home community (parents and schoolmates for instance). Experiencing heterotopias (and even heterochronies, as far as the Upside Down is concerned), they develop heterogeneous individualities, for better (Nancy, Eleven, Eddie) or for worse (Vecna and even Will to some extent), which go beyond the stereotypical, univocal norms set by 1980s US society, which do not seem that remote from Victorian standards of traditional Gothic and horrific tales (if one thinks of "the angel of the house" or middle-class economic success, for instance). As gothicised adolescents, they are free to construct themselves "against" Reaganite social determinism and parental role models.

In the end, the 1980s as they are experienced by the Duffer Brothers' gothicised young protagonists are definitely not worth the viewers' nostalgia since the decade is depicted as socially and economically oppressive, unable to accept and absorb what Reaganite culture considered as "other".

Otherness is yet what the show's heroes long for.

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26. All of Vecna's younger victims have some guilty and traumatic event they wish to forget: their responsibility in a car accident or in a brother's horrible death, for instance.
27. Which might be interpreted as a metaphor for the US at large, whose national identity relied on its being a young, innocent country, traumatised (and guilt-ridden) by the horrors of the Vietnam war.

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