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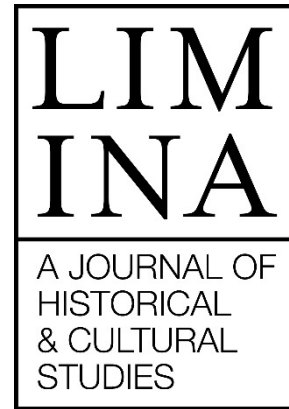
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Strange Things Are Happening: Reaching for the Retro in Response to Contemporary Crisis

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“You wanna know the worst thing that’s ever happened here in the four years I’ve been working here? Do you wanna know the worst thing? It was when an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie’s head because it thought that her hair was a nest.”

(Jim Hopper, *Stranger Things*, Season One, Episode One)

6th of November 1983, Hawkins, Indiana. A fictional, small, midwestern town in the US, located about 80 miles outside Indianapolis. Inside a suburban house, a group of middle-school friends, Mike Wheeler (played by Finn Wolfhard), Dustin Henderson (played by Gaten Matarazzo), Lucas Sinclair (played by Caleb McLaughlin) and Will Byers (played by Noah Schnapp), are playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in the basement. A poster of *The Thing*, a 1982 science-fiction horror film, visible in the background. Mike's mother, Karen (played by Cara Buono), interrupts, clad in high-waisted mom jeans, telling Mike that it is time for his friends to go home since it is a school night. In the carport, next to the family station wagon, Dustin, Lucas and Will prepare to leave on their bikes. As they ride off and down the street, the scene is familiar; we have seen this before in movies like *The Goonies* (1985) or *ET the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), these very scenes inform the first five minutes of season one, episode one of *Stranger Things* (2016).

Created by the Duffer brothers, the series infuses references to the popular culture of the 1980s, taking inspiration from the works of Steven Spielberg, John Carpenter, David Lynch, Stephen King, Wes Craven and H. P. Lovecraft, as well as drawing on the history of Cold War experiments and conspiracy theories. *Stranger Things* utilises this retro aesthetic to denote a connection between the past (on screen) and the present viewership. There is no shortage of research into *Stranger Things* and the nostalgia it invokes for the 1980s.² Following the release of season one, the popularity of the series has been

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² See, for example, Zachary Griffith. 2022. “Stranger Things, Nostalgia, and Aesthetics.” *Journal of Film and Video* 74 (1–2): 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.5406/19346018.74.1.2.01>; Dan Hassler-Forest. 2020. “When You Get There, You Will Already Be There: Stranger Things, Twin Peaks and the Nostalgia Industry.” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 13 (2): 175–97. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sftv.2020.10>.

considered as the cause of increased attention toward 'arcade games, Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying, and other cult historical and musical referents of the 1980s'.³ This highlights the viewer's emotional identification with consumer goods and cultural artifacts represented in *Stranger Things*, as the television series reflects the desire to find comfort in what is known to us. This essay argues that the representation of the 1980s in the television series *Stranger Things* is a manifestation of a contemporary identity crisis. By exploring how the unpredictability of the present compels people to seek comfort in the past, a seemingly stable place, we can see how people temporally anchor themselves to what they know to abate their fears about the future. In an attempt to return to this period of time, we ultimately end up only creating an idealised, nostalgic representation of the past. All attempts at evoking the past will be limited by stylised nostalgic representations, as there is a need for aesthetic cultural features and artefacts that the audience is able to quickly recognise, because we cannot ever recreate the specific temporal circumstances.

The 1980s marks a particularly important time in memory studies, being linked to increasing globalisation. Migration in the 70s and 80s due to globalisation played a key role in altering people's experiences and understanding of time and space.⁴ The rapid and unprecedented movement of people saw the 'uprooting and dissolution of ties [grown] in traditional societies'.⁵ With this disintegration of familiarity, memory became critical for anchoring people and their identities in new places and spaces. Alison Landsberg proposes the term 'prosthetic memory' to explain collective memory in contemporary society, given the mass migration and technological advances in the twentieth century that severed traditional memory practices defined by family, social or religious communities.⁶ Prosthetic memory considers how contemporary communities and their memories are created and influenced by media, which allows people to connect and negotiate their relationship with the past.⁷ The link between culture and memory has been clearly determined through understanding how human cultures create temporal frameworks of knowledge.⁸ In the collective memory of a community, each new generation follows temporal frameworks that recall, relate and reinterpret information

³ Lu Kevin, Greta Kaluzeviciute, and William Sharp, 'Things Can Only Get Stranger: Theoretical and Clinical Reflections on Netflix's *Stranger Things*,' *Journal of Popular Culture* 55, no. 3 (2022): 619, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13143>.

⁴ Sérgio Campos Matos, 'History, Memory and Fiction: What Boundaries,' *História da Historiografia* 8, no. 17 (2015): 427-439, 428, <https://doi.org/10.15848/hh.v0i17.930>.

⁵ Matos, 'History, Memory and Fiction,' 428.

⁶ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 7.

⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 4.

⁸ Aledia Assman, 'Canon and Archive,' In *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 97.

from the past.⁹ Thus, memory has a double vision, looking both to the past and the present, with the present informing the past and vice versa. Landsberg argues that these memories are 'transportable and therefore challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, "heritage" and "ownership"'.¹⁰

Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory conceptualises collective memory practices within distinct communities (often embodied as the nation-state) as no longer being the primary bearer of collective memory, arguing instead that memory is thrust upon us through mass cultural technologies such as cinema.¹¹ If a sense of belonging in the modern nation-state relies on a shared community, curated by cultural memory and policies that create a distinction between nations, then Landsberg asks in relation to contemporary memory, 'to what extent do modern technologies of mass culture such as film with their ability to transport individuals through time and space function as technologies of memory?'.¹² Consumption of television now primarily rests on the medium of streaming services, such as Netflix, Stan, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus and Binge. These services are accessible on any device capable of connecting to the internet, meaning that we can view television from a traditional setting via a television in the living room, our phones on a morning train commute, or even a plane going from one side of the world to the other. Streaming media, according to Gambarato, Heuman and Lindberg, has had a 'palpable impact on mediating practices of memories of the past and consequently, on understanding the present world'.¹³ *Stranger Things* functions as a technology of memory, creating the shared temporal and social frameworks needed for a sense of identity by drawing together the past and present. Its setting within the 1980s speaks to a time on the precipice of change while also still retaining the cultural and temporal regionalisms of 1980s small-town America.

With increasing globalisation and the development of new technologies throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of global commodities impacted processes of consumption. Natan Sznajder and Rainer Winter argue that:

⁹ Assman, 'Canon and Archive,' 97.

¹⁰ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 3.

¹¹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2.

Landsberg draws on the term 'collective memory' coined by Maurice Halbwachs in his seminal 1925 text *On Collective Memory*. Collective memory, according to this definition exists through social frameworks traditionally formed through family, religion or social class.

¹² Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 1.

¹³ Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Johannes Heuman, and Ylva Lindberg, 'Streaming Media and the Dynamics of Remembering and Forgetting: The Chernobyl Case,' *Memory Studies* 15, no. 2 (2022): 271–286, 271, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211037287>.

While diversification and the corresponding product marketing aim to manage differences globally, various creative forms of appropriation develop in the processes of localization. These forms give specific meaning to cultural – ideal or material – commodities circulated around the world. They effectively take over these commodities and make them resources for creating and developing a personal identity.¹⁴

With these changes to the structure of traditional societies, alongside developing global and transnational processes of production, circulation, and reception of cultural commodities (often dominated by American products), the critical reliance on memory for identity becomes associated with specific goods that can be temporally, (as opposed to spatially), located. These material objects, many of which are still in existence, as well as the re-production of new versions of these objects, become another layer with which we can actively connect to the past.

Stranger Things constructs a representation of the past based on what has survived the passage of time and can still be recognised in the present as valuable. The representation of material culture thus acts as a symbolic instrument that evokes the past. Key cultural items draw associations to specific decades. Just as the Beatles and their music dominated the 1960s, the Sony Walkman revolutionised the 1980s, and the flip phone was an icon of the 1990s, *Stranger Things* draws attention to the 1980s with its utilisation of objects that can be temporally located. Prominently featured in Season 4 of *Stranger Things*, Max Mayfield (played by Sadie Sink) is rarely seen without her Sony Walkman WM-8 portable cassette player, from which Kate Bush's song 'Running Up That Hill' is repeatedly heard and forms a major narrative element by tying Max to reality through the sound. The association between time and object is powerful and shapes how we continue to view and value material culture. Accordingly, when we reminisce, remember, or memorialise these objects into new forms of cultural output, the object is recontextualised for the present. Mark Currie approaches this through the concept of 'accelerated recontextualisation', which views the 'recycling of the increasingly recent past, [as] one model [in] which the present is understood as the bearer of historical traces'.¹⁵ As such, traces of the past become easier to discern in the present, which contributes to a linear narrative of identity progression. Currie uses fashion trend cycles as an example of this but highlights that the recontextualised object must have references to the past while its new format

¹⁴ Natan Sznajder and Rainer Winter, 'Introduction,' In *Global America?: The Cultural Consequences of Globalization*, ed. Ulrich Beck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁵ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 10.

and relation to its current existence are altered. The specific focus on recreating the cultural landscape of 1980s America relies on portraying outdated objects through a nostalgic lens.

The deliberate orientation of contemporary screen representations toward the past provides an opportunity to capture the transience of human life and how we evoke and reanimate past spaces and times to enable a critical understanding of our present. The success of *Stranger Things* (which was the most streamed Netflix program in 2022 following the release of season four) speaks to a desire for the past and a perceived sense of stability that the time period suggests. Some scholars believe the growing desire for this form of memory is due to its ability to act as a 'temporal anchoring' in an increasingly fast-paced world.¹⁶ Fragments of the past provide an escapism from the uncertainty of the future. This desire to slow time to maintain what is known to us or to seek out what was once known to us is memory in the form of nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'.¹⁷ Boym outlines two styles of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. For Boym these different styles of nostalgia are expressed through the same triggers of memory and symbols yet ultimately tell different stories; restorative nostalgia being nationally based and reflective nostalgia being about individual and cultural memory.¹⁸ Restorative nostalgia aims to rebuild the collective home and patch up memory gaps, 'characterising national and nationalist revivals worldwide, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths'.¹⁹ In the absence of a distinct nation-state within the globalised present and consequent lack of national memory and, therefore, national identity, the audience of *Stranger Things* forms a shared community that fosters a sense of belonging necessary for identity. The nostalgia identified in *Stranger Things* has been termed 'Goonies-Inflected Nostalgia'. Giulia Taurino defines this as:

a nostalgia built upon narrative and visual citations of Stephen King's stories and Steven Spielberg's movies, as well as on popular culture references to the 1980s and 1990s decades. Far from being a purely aesthetic choice, this longing-for-the-past comes with simulacra and objects fitting in the plot, in order to take the audience back to another era.²⁰

¹⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 28.

¹⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

¹⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

¹⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

²⁰ Giulia Taurino, 'Crossing Eras: Exploring Nostalgic Reconfigurations in Media Franchises,' In *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand*, ed. by Kathryn Pallister (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 11.

The role of the television series in contemporary identity formation speaks to a changing transnational process around memory. The cultural referents are recognisable on a global scale, reflective of the changing consumption processes of the time period and the growing interconnections, particularly in the Western world where an English song ('Running Up That Hill' by Kate Bush) becomes the soundtrack to American narrative conventions (Spielberg and King). We can even go so far as to say that the mullets of characters such as Billy Hargrove (Max Mayfield's half-brother played by Dacre Montgomery) and Steve Harrington (love interest to Mike's sister Nancy and friend to Dustin Henderson, played by Joe Keery), speak to recognisable Australian cultural trends. Despite the small-town vision of America, *Stranger Things* indicates how television mediates a shared sense of identity across national boundaries.

While *Stranger Things* evokes an idealistic representation of the past through nostalgic cultural objects and aesthetics, it also omits the anxieties of the 1980s regarding global change following World War Two and amidst the Cold War that also characterised the period. To a certain extent, the perceived stability of the 1980s can be linked to the conservative American politics under President Ronald Reagan, who served from 1981-1988. In season two, episode one of *Stranger Things*, a Reagan-Bush '84 sign can be seen in front of the Wheeler family's home. The Wheelers themselves embody a conservative nuclear family composed of a leading father, a home-making mother and three biological children. Conservative representations of the past have the ability to reassure already-held ideological positions, contributing to a sense of stability in the present. Just as the popular culture aspects of the 80s have managed to cling to the cultural consciousness, so has its politics. It must be said that *Stranger Things* doesn't entirely omit the presence of political crisis as it does draw heavily on the memory of the Cold War. Jason Landrum notes, however, that the series doesn't engage with the historical version of the Cold War, instead only drawing on it 'metaphorically, leaving it to operate like a historical shadow'.²¹ Murray Bauman (played by Brett Gelman) plays the partly comedic role of Hawkin's conspiracy theorist, concluding that the strange supernatural events occurring are evidence of a full-scale Russian invasion. While clever, Murray's eccentric personality undermines any real sense of fear about nuclear war or communist invasion that was notable in this era. The references to Russian technology and experiments in *Stranger Things*—inspired by the Cold War—are not representative of political crisis as they draw on elements of the supernatural, science-fiction and horror to reinforce nostalgia for media such as that produced by Steven Spielberg and Steven King, and therefore offer only a selective interpretation of the past.

²¹ Jason Landrum, 'Nostalgia, Fantasy, and Loss: *Stranger Things* and the Digital Gothic,' *Intertexts* 21, no. 1 (2017): 136-158, 141, <https://doi.org/10.1353/itx.2017.0006>.

So why can the Cold War be passed off as a supernatural threat with comedic elements? On one hand, the Cold War may provide insight into what it was like living in a state of uncertainty, the very same problem we are trying to avoid now. Framing it through the cinematic and narrative conventions of Spielberg and King locates it within a clear plot line from which we can trace the beginning and middle through to a recognisable and already solved resolution. On the other hand, the Cold War is potentially easier to overlook as a crisis because no physical war occurred. An ideological struggle is far simpler to recover from than an ongoing physical conflict, especially when the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When looking at the multiple threats that face the current world, while many involve ideological conflict, they are marked by widespread images of death and destruction shared across social media. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has a global impact, continues to cause a drastic loss of human life and socio-economic problems. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in an escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War that originally began in 2014, with the invasion becoming the largest attack on a European country since World War Two. In 2023, Israel declared war against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip following an attack by Hamas, an Islamist militant movement and one of the Palestinian territories' major political parties. There are multiple overlapping sources of anxiety in the present that are harder to overlook within a media-dominated world than the fictional 1980s small town of Hawkins, Indiana, where television was limited to the living room and corded phones were the most common form of communication.

Broadly, nostalgia forms a powerful force in the face of disruption. In the American context, for example, nostalgia has been identified within and among political rhetoric:

Donald Trump emerged victorious in the US election wearing a baseball cap emblazoned with the words "Make America Great Again", envisioning a return to the greatness of an America recently victorious in the second world war.²²

This desire for nostalgic sentiment indicates a collective identity crisis within the present, where the anchor to the past reaches across generations in its yearning for continuity on both an individual and group level. *Stranger Things* is situated within Trump's desired image of America, as despite its focus on supernatural childhood adventure, the series revolves around watching America defeat Russia and become the sole global superpower. Matt and Ross Duffer, while born in 1984, are not children of the 1980s in the generalised way

²² Stephen, Brown, 'Retro Galore! Is There No End to Nostalgia?', *Journal of Customer Behaviour* 17, no. 1 (2018): 17, doi.org/10.1362/147539218X15208755279216.

that people who were adolescents or young adults in the time period refer to themselves. The effect of pop culture would have had very little impact on the Duffer brothers until the 1990s. In episode one alone, the viewer is exposed to Dungeons and Dragons, X-Men comic books, references to *The Hobbit*, *The Poltergeist*, and audios of songs such as 'Africa' by Toto. So, what is their connection to a decade they were too young to experience? More importantly, what is the connection between the pop culture of the 1980s and the contemporary teenage and young adult viewership with the decade they have chosen to represent? Lu, Kaluzeviciute and Sharp identify how representation of the past and its escapism in *Stranger Things* works across multiple generations. They write:

Two processes of mourning are thus evoked in *Stranger Things* audiences: a mourning embedded in a desire to return to a once experienced and now phantasised childhood and a mourning of childhood that is seemingly no longer possible in today's world of surveillance and digital technology. In this sense, several audiences are united in their object of nostalgic desire: childhood.²³

This nostalgia is really a 'pseudo-nostalgia' because younger consumers have never experienced the original. Tom van Laer and Davide Orazi link the pseudo-nostalgia for *Stranger Things* to 'retromarketing', 'the relaunch or revival of a product or service from a historical period, which marketers usually update to ultramodern standards of functioning, performance or taste'.²⁴ As commodities reflect what is culturally relevant and contribute to a sense of contemporary identity formation, it is fitting that this nostalgic force extends to the product market. However, the nostalgia here also expresses an eagerness to restore a sense of simplicity to the world that no longer feels possible amidst widespread and ongoing crises. It is an eagerness to abate fears about the state of the world by returning to childhood innocence and adventure.

Stranger Things represents how we evoke and reanimate past spaces and times to enable a critical understanding of our present and capture the transience of human life. The text's preoccupation with elements of the 1980s raises questions not only about what drives memory but also what sustains memory when there is no feasible future. It's a version of the 1980s where music, fashion and cinema are shared across national boundaries, and technology exists but doesn't overwhelm us, presenting a temporal safe space.

²³ Lu, Kaluzeviciute, and Sharp, 'Things Can Only Get Stranger,' 621.

²⁴ Tom van Laer and Davide Orazi, 'It's not nostalgia. *Stranger Things* is fuelling a pseudo-nostalgia of the 1980s,' *The Conversation*, July 11, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/its-not-nostalgia-stranger-things-is-fuelling-a-pseudo-nostalgia-of-the-1980s-186389>

The specific 'Goonies-Inflected Nostalgia' conveys a desire for childhood simplicity that is no longer attainable by contemporary consumerism practices. More than anything, *Stranger Things* provides a sense of continuity in the face of discontinuity and disruption.