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Things Can Only Get Stranger: Theoretical and Clinical Reflections on Netflix's *Stranger Things*

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WITH THE EAGERLY ANTICIPATED RELEASE OF SEASON FOUR OF *Stranger Things*, it is timely to reflect on the series up to its present point, considering possible reasons for its widespread popularity. We begin from the position that its ability to grip audiences lies in its representation of psychological themes that resonate with the show's audience. Some authors, such as Brenda Boudreau, note the tension between a desire to capture a nostalgic past and infusing the series with contemporary beliefs on gender and sexuality, albeit to various degrees of success (Mollet). Stated another way but along a psychological register, the show manages a delicate balance between a psychology of the past and a psychology of the present moment. Other articles have focused on the feelings evoked in specific audiences (Landrum; McCarthy; Mollet), shedding light, albeit once again indirectly, on psychological processes operating at the level of the group. While the insights gained are noteworthy, the use of psychological concepts remains superficial and needs to be grounded in an in-depth understanding of the psychological traditions from which they spring. There remains a noticeable gap for psychoanalytic explorations to unpack and add value to the complex psychological dynamics at play and being depicted in *Stranger Things*.

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Crucially, a close psychoanalytic reading of the series provides a springboard to addressing the larger question of psychoanalysis's relationship to culture. Psychoanalytic assessments of popular culture remain salient because the lens offers one way of appreciating how cultural artifacts—especially representations of the fantastic and uncanny—bring us closer to psychic reality. By engaging with and enjoying the products of culture, audiences are not necessarily indulging in escapism but are in fact inching ever closer to the doors behind which our very humanity is often concealed (i.e., the unconscious). Conversely, the discipline of psychoanalytic studies, broadly defined, would do well to pay closer attention to more contemporary popular artifacts like *Stranger Things*, if indeed it is serious in its pursuit of "applied psychoanalysis" and the discipline's ability to significantly contribute to our understanding of culture and society. What is unique about the series is its ability to captivate a wide-ranging viewership, including Gen-X, millenials and post-millenials. There is a momentous opportunity to not only explore the many converging factors that have brought these generations together and how *Stranger Things* has been able to achieve this but also how the show itself might spur greater reflection on psychoanalytic theory and formulations.

In this article, we offer diverging—but not uncomplimentary—perspectives speaking to the psychological processes awakened in the interaction between the viewer, that which is viewed, and the meaning constellated in the third space existing between the two (Winnicott, "Transitional Objects"; Hockley). First, our Jungian interpretation, which draws on the show's representation of the mother archetype, focuses on the imagery that arises when a process of personality development—what Jung termed *individuation*—is activated. Even the most problematic and lacklustre styles of parenting can give rise to individual growth, a fact that is demonstrated in the case of Will Byers and El. Second, we explore how a psychoanalytic approach to nostalgia, loss, and mourning elucidates the depiction of the end of childhood. The show's popularity lies in its ability to activate the nostalgia of audiences by reproducing the nostalgia that is part and parcel of a coming-of-age narrative. Audiences thus build a rapport with the show by identifying with universal themes and emotions accompanying stages of developmental transition and transformation.

A Descent Into the Unconscious (or the Upside Down)

It is striking how the central themes and narrative arcs within *Stranger Things* lend themselves to Jungian interpretation. First, the depiction of the Upside Down is akin to an understanding of the Jungian unconscious. Originally coined "the Nether" by the Duffer brothers, the Upside Down "is a region that exists outside of space and time—a terrifying, colorless underworld overrun by death and decay and populated by faceless monsters" (McIntyre 131). While a more contemporary and relational understanding of the unconscious would problematise drawing such correlations (Ganzer), Jung's willingness to spiritualise the unconscious—populating the *collective unconscious* with personified *archetypes* that have endless representations as *archetypal images*—stimulates the possibility of ghostly presences that could "haunt" our daily lives (Jung, "Relations"). The collective unconscious may be defined as the collective, general, and universal part of the unconscious mind. Its contents, the archetypes, are derived through eons of repetition of human cultural imagery and experiences that—despite differences in detail—remain typically human with recognizable commonalities and meanings. The archetype refers to the skeletal structures of human experience shared by all; the real, historical struggles and triumphs of our ancestors accumulate and begin to leave imprints on our psyches as the central scaffolding defining a typically human life. While these basic structures of human experience persist in shaping our lives, how we live out these potentialities will be different, depending on our personal circumstances, cultural narratives, and historical milieus. Archetypes in themselves, then, are ultimately unknowable; we only begin to know certain aspects of the archetype through their manifestations in culture as archetypal images. Consequently, if it so happens that—in the past and present—we image our fears and anxieties in the form of monstrous entities, then it should be no surprise that these images lie as potentials within the collective unconscious, able to become conscious when the conditions are ripe for their manifestation.

The first season introduces the mother-son relationship between Joyce and Will Byers. While Boudreau has criticized the trend towards blaming mothers for their offspring's deficiencies, our approach is to focus on the symbolic ways in which this dynamic is

represented, while demonstrating how Joyce's mothering style also awakens Will's own process of psychological maturation. Indeed, the initial violent act of separation between mother and son augurs a symbolic journey of self-discovery. Will is portrayed as a sensitive individual who delights in a realm of fantasy and for whom relationships with others—outside of his friends and immediate family—remain difficult. Will's high sensitivity, coupled with his strained relationship to his father, Lonnie, are factors to consider when assessing the close bond with his mother. It is his mother with whom Will initially communicates when he is in the Upside Down. An intuitive link seemingly exists between the pair: Will is able to convey his ghostly presence to his mother via the telephone, Christmas lights, and eventually, the Ouija board she paints on the wall. This closeness is reinforced with nostalgic flashbacks of the time they spent together, the memories of which are made more bittersweet because of Will's disappearance. The symbiotic nature of their relationship may be read as a specific representation of a *mother complex*.

A complex is a conglomeration of emotions and feeling tones gravitating towards a central core, one that is usually shaped and defined by one's experiences of, and relationships with, primary caregivers (Jung, "Review"). While not all complexes are pathological and negative in nature, they usually arise because of a distinct gap between the "ideal" and the real. We may hold, develop, and fantasise about what an ideal maternal relationship looks like, but one's actual experience of mother will most likely fall short of the phantasy image. It is within this gap or tension of opposites that a complex arises, leaving an imprint on the psyche around which emotions and associations can begin to form. These psychic elements then begin to interweave with one another and the complex that emerges is likened to a system that has attracted other fragments into its orbit, growing larger and larger as time passes. A myriad of feelings and thoughts reflecting the ambivalence with which we regard "mother" can act as triggers channelling the force of the entire complex when constellated throughout our day-to-day interactions. What is mobilized in such cases is not just the thought or feeling tied to the trigger but the entire system that comprises the complex. This in part explains why, when we have become "possessed" by a complex, we are unaware of what has gripped us in that particular moment and how we may have acted "out of character." Yet, the irrationality of the reactions,

accompanied by the violent emotions that may erupt, point to the complex's existence. The way in which we might be overwhelmed by a complex also elucidates its autonomous nature. It is as if something outside of us—some ghostly presence—haunts us and can swallow us whole (Jung, "Review").

For Jung, there comes a time when close ties with our primary caregivers need to be severed in the service of personal growth and that the prime object of unconscious desire, which can prevent maturation, is the mother (both literal and symbolic). The danger lies in clinging to the mother for too long (Jung, *Symbols* 307); an overdependence on her prevents the establishment of meaningful relationships in the outer world. Breaking free of the paradoxically comforting and suffocating maternal grip is the individual's goal. Although every person's development depends on an attachment to this "maternal source," one's full potential can only be realized when unhealthy links with unconscious desires are severed.

This "cutting of the apron strings" is central to psychological development in most Western societies and it is at this crucial point in the lives of the protagonists that we are invited in—not as passive bystanders but active participants in witnessing (and perhaps reliving) the nostalgia of coming of age. Will's relationship with Joyce images the need for a separation between mother and son so that the latter's development is, symbolically speaking, secured. Will's disappearance is a metaphor for the rebellious stage at which children disappear from the lives of their parents: to explore what it means to be in their own skin before a more realistic and, in psychoanalytic terms, less incestuous, relationship can be established. The series presents this in a rather striking way: Will literally disappears into another realm of existence. Symbolically, Will enters an engagement with the unconscious to find out who he is outside his immediate relationships. Joyce's frantic desire to find and save her child is not surprising; she is seeking to reestablish that dependency between mother and son which can become all too comforting. Joyce's behaviour and her longing to be reunited with Will denotes an archetypal expression of the devouring mother. Rather than have the child separate from a symbolic maternal womb to follow his/her own path of development, a mother may go to any lengths to maintain codependency in both conscious and unconscious ways.

It is here, in the depiction of the Upside Down and one of its grotesque inhabitants, the Demagorgon, that we find the archetypal urge to symbolically devour our children lest they should develop and leave their parents too far behind. A separation between parents and children can be painful and the level of emotional difficulty experienced during separation "is proportionate to the strength of the bond uniting the son with the mother" (Jung, *Symbolic* 312). "The stronger this broken bond was in the first place," Jung writes, "the more dangerously does the 'mother' approach him in the guise of the unconscious" (312). Here, psychology and conceptual design meet: The Demagorgon, as a symbol, encapsulates a yearning (both Will's and Joyce's) to maintain an unconscious, incestuous relationship. Concept artist Aaron Sims was tasked with creating the monster, who took inspiration from a Venus flytrap. The monster's mouth is comprised of five flaps of flesh that, when opened, expose hundreds of sharp teeth. Mark Setrakian, the Demagorgon's mask designer, further comments: "When the face opens, it's like this orchid's flower that opens up with all the teeth and the gullet in the centre.... But then when it closes, it looks like this meat wad" (Setrakian qtd. in McIntyre 136). The Demagorgon's head resembles a vulva; when its face opens to consume its prey, the various layers described by Setrakian bear a likeness to the vaginal opening, labia minora, and labia majora. The rich symbolism of this image further supports our contention that the show's depiction of the devouring mother archetype resonates with audiences at a deeper level, and the extent to which we are gripped by these images is central to the show's popularity. The episodes of season one provide an opportunity for viewers to recall their own battles with devouring mothers while capturing the grotesque form these relationships can take if not dealt with sufficiently.

The Demagorgon and Joyce are psychologically connected. The former is a depiction of the latter's over-bearing mothering of Will and how this can destroy him. What is not recognized in consciousness—mainly, that Joyce's way of expressing her love for Will is suffocating his development—means that the archetypal image lying in the unconscious is that much more ferocious. The less conscious we are of something, fewer are the possibilities of controlling the psychic energy when it eventually finds its way into consciousness. The Demagorgon's growing ability to leave the confines of the Upside Down and to disrupt and terrorize the real world symbolises the

emergence of unconscious complexes. Will's fight is a fight for freedom and the challenge of building a new relationship to the mother, both his real mother, Joyce, and the archetypal image of mothering he has experienced up to this point.

The use of vaginal imagery is not limited to the design elements of the Demagorgon. When El defeats the monster at the end of season one, the audience fears that she has perished in the Upside Down. We eventually learn, at the start of season two, of her escape from the Upside Down and re-entry into the real world, a scene in which vaginal imagery is once more evoked. Her emergence from the Upside Down—or the unconscious—is nothing less than a symbolic rebirth from the grips of something that was once unknown to conscious perception, a proverbial closing of one chapter and the beginning of the next.

It is fitting that this scene bridges seasons one and two, foreshadowing El's psychological emergence, her upcoming journey of discovery and, eventually, her own encounter with her mother. The diverse depictions of vaginal imagery remind us of the subtlety of Jung's archetypal theory. Every archetype is considered bipolar, meaning that for every positive manifestation of an archetype, its complete opposite will exist alongside it (Jung). In the case of the mother archetype, the devouring mother occupies one pole and on the other, the life-giving and life-affirming aspects of mother are symbolized. Yet, they are two sides of the same coin; adhering to one extreme position is never too far from the danger of flipping into its complete opposite (Jung, *Psychological Types* 426–27). It is not surprising to see that the theme of the devouring mother is complemented by themes of rebirth. Stated another way, while the striking features of the Demogorgon depict the ugliness of separation, within its clutches are also clues of symbolic rebirth and psychological growth.

In *Symbols of Transformation* (1952), Jung discusses the dual aspect of the mother archetype. In many hero myths, the protagonist is exposed by biological parents and then reared by foster parents. The second mother functions as a symbolic mother who completes the task the natural mother cannot. The second, symbolic mother facilitates the growth of the individual, whose reemergence is often depicted as a rebirth. The dual mother is accordingly tied to the theme of *dual birth* (the death/rebirth motif) (Jung, *Symbols*). On the surface and in the real world, Will distances himself from his mother

while Eleven searches for hers. Of perhaps greater psychological import, however, is how the archetypal image of mother is negotiated in the Upside Down. In seasons one and two, we witness no less than two rebirth sequences (Will's and El's)—an emergence from the unconscious (The Upside Down) facilitated by an encounter with the symbolic, second mother (The Demogorgon).

In *Stranger Things*, parental figures are lacklustre role models to say the least: Joyce is overbearing, anxious, and nervous; her husband, Lonnie, is a deadbeat dad whose attendance at Will's funeral only masks his desire to secure compensation for his son's death; Hopper has failed to mourn the loss of his daughter and the breakdown of his previous marriage; Karen Wheeler is consumed by the ambivalence of her marriage and flirting with Billy Hargrove; Ted Wheeler is completely oblivious, both to the developments in his family and the strange occurrences in Hawkins; Neil Hargrove is an abusive father who rules his new family with an iron fist; Dr. Brenner, a father figure to El, puts her through harrowing experiments to heighten her telekinetic abilities; Steve Harrington describes his father as an "asshole." While some of our protagonists will go on to find parental substitutes, it is also instructive to look for symbolic figures who facilitate a process of maturation and growth, a theme central to *Stranger Things*. While the monstrous Demagorgon may be a representation of the devouring feminine, it also initiates a difficult period of transformation that cannot be ignored and must, ultimately, be undertaken. The demonic image is both a threat and a catalyst, that which makes psychological rebirth and individual growth distinct possibilities. In Jung's psychology, the opposite is always contained within itself, and the Duffer brothers have astutely captured this in the first three seasons of their series.

Things Can Only Get Stranger: Nostalgia, Loss, and Mourning

The phenomenon of nostalgia in media and, specifically, modern cinema, has been explored thoroughly via retro aesthetics (Sielke), the portrayal of former and commonly celebrated times and spaces (Niemeyer) and the evocation of a sense of familiarity (Kim et al.). These themes have also been explored in *Stranger Things*, which has been

dubbed as *the* nostalgia show (Landrum; Mollet). However, although these explorations touch upon the psychological experiences of familiarity and longing, relatively little attention has been paid to the underlying and, one might say, unconscious, longing for the reexperiencing of the past in *Stranger Things*. In this section, we explore how *Stranger Things* invokes nostalgic experiences across different audiences through its portrayal of loss and, in particular, the loss of childhood. In our view, the series does so explicitly through its cultural and symbolic setting (the 1980s) as well as psychological narrative (the protagonists' desire for childish escapism paired with real experiences of loss). The psychoanalytic analysis of nostalgia will provide another important dimension in understanding our collective gravitation toward stories, visuals, and characters from an unreachable past.

At its most basic, nostalgia refers to a period or place in the past that is remembered with feelings of fondness, sadness, yearning, and melancholy. Its Greek derivative combines these two meanings: *nóstos* meaning "homecoming," and *álgos* referring to "pain" or "ache." In scientific literature, nostalgia was first conceptualized as a disease impacting both body and mind in medical literature (Tuke). Later psychological and clinical observations classified nostalgia as a universal human experience (Kaplan). It is precisely under the remit of psychoanalysis that an experience of nostalgia can be connected to two other universal psychic processes: repetition compulsion(s) and mourning. The mind's propensity to relive distressing experiences can be seen as relating to the *álgos* ("pain") component of nostalgia, whereas mourning, a grieving of an ideal time and state of being, can be connected to *nostos* ("homecoming"). The universality of these psychic experiences enables us to understand the phenomenon of nostalgia not only in a clinical context but also the ways it is expressed in media and culture.

It is evident that the portrayal of 1980s culture in *Stranger Things* has a nostalgic appeal to those viewers who possess a "lived experience" of this period. After the release of season one, arcade games, *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying, and other cult historical and musical referents of the 1980s have been reinvigorated (Landrum). From a Lacanian perspective, these well-constructed 1980s signifiers—material representations and objects pertaining to the eighties experience—invoke within the viewers a desire known as the *gaze*. According to Lacan, the gaze is a state of anxiety that comes with the self-awareness that one can be

seen and looked at, and, more importantly, that one can be subjected to another's gaze leading to loss of autonomy (Lacan). Ruti has recently argued that the gaze is always partial: Our gaze (and subsequently, the gaze of the other) is always distorted, dependent on contextual and temporal lenses. As a result, objects can never be fully perceived or understood by those looking, assessing, and gazing.

The viewer who possesses the "lived experience" of the 1980s and relives its representation in *Stranger Things* embarks on what might be called a gaze anxiety: There is a distorted recollection of how things have *really* been (as opposed to how they are portrayed in the show), and an increasingly conscious desire to re-experience the past (one's individual participation in the 1980s but also the 1980s as a broader, collective phenomenon) in its fullness (as opposed to one's distorted memories). Since, however, the latter is impossible, viewers seek to address their anxiety by creating a nostalgic *phantasy*. Phantasy—as opposed to a consciously imagined unreality in fantasy—has been described as a state of mind that is largely unconscious, yet not clearly differentiated from conscious reality (Spillius). For Melanie Klein, phantasies are not just reveries or imagined scenarios; she describes them as imprints on the mind that have creative and destructive repercussions for the expression of internal object relations and external events: "Phantasies leave . . . their imprints on the mind, imprints that do not fade away but get stored up, remain active, and exert a continuous and powerful influence on the emotional and intellectual life of the individual" (290). The concept of nostalgic phantasy is useful in understanding Žižek's idea of nostalgic objects and antimony:

> The function of the nostalgic object is precisely to conceal the antimony between the eye and the gaze—i.e., the traumatic impact of the gaze *qua* object . . .. Instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic, disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of "seeing ourselves seeing," of seeing the gaze itself.
>
> (114)

Herein, the term "antimony" (Greek derivative of *anti*, meaning "not," and *monos*, meaning "alone") refers to an opposition, an incompatibility between two laws. In this sense, attempts to reestablish past cultural artifacts—such as arcade games and *Dungeons & Dragons*

roleplaying—and to mourn an idealized time and state of being that no longer exists is an antimony between the eye and the gaze, between the nostalgic phantasy and the traumatic reality. Our experiences of antimony (however disharmonious and incompatible) through the construction of nostalgic phantasy can be thought of as an attempt to find a compromise between the past, our recreation of the past, and the current reality.

The *Stranger Things* universe, however, appears to be no less nostalgic for viewers who do not possess the "lived experience" of the 1980s. If anything, nostalgia is intensified for millennial audiences. Landrum argues that the escapist phantasy portrayed in *Stranger Things* is impossible and inaccessible for viewers who have grown up in the modern-day surveillance era, where an obsession with capturing and preserving data is rife and loss unimaginable. As such, despite not having to mourn a "lived experience" of the 1980s, millennials are anxiously gazing at an entirely strange and novel world of escapism that they wish was possible for them (Landrum). The show's aesthetic landscape explicitly blends themes that are familiar (e.g., video games) with settings that are seemingly lost, inaccessible (e.g., paper and dice roleplaying) to millennial audiences. 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.

For Donald Winnicott, childhood is the *ultimate good*: It encompasses an Oedipal fusion with the caregiver, a therapeutic form of play, and a chance to discover one's selfhood. Contrary to the Kleinian view of childhood as a period of desperation and persecution, Winnicott sees it as a period of hope, optimism, and productive escapism. The child is described as having a power "to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle, and to appropriate" in a world where they are free enough to exist irresponsibly (Winnicott, "Children's Hostels" 115). Given the crucial significance that childhood has on human development, any form of deprivation (a severe environmental failure breaking the continuity of a child's object relations) or privation (the lack of a stable and continuous holding environment) in the child's ability to exercise autonomy will

result in significant relational impairments (Winnicott, "Children's Hostels").

The end of childhood (and with it, the end of various freedoms that are only accessible to children) is one of the most difficult losses and one of the most powerful catalysts for nostalgia. According to Kaplan, every form of *nóstos* involves "an acute yearning for a union ... a saddening farewell to childhood, a defense against mourning, or a longing for a past forever lost" (466). Indeed, much of the early clinical literature conflated mourning with nostalgia, treating it as a desire to return to the pre-Oedipal period: Some patients are often described as idealising the pre-Oedipal period as one of ultimate gratification, while other patients recall it as a period full of pain (in ways that reflect Winnicott's notions of deprivation and privation). In the latter, patients utilize nostalgic longings as a defensive framework to either fulfil unsatisfied desires or correct traumatic events via imaginary situations (Kaplan).

Herein, Freud's notion of painful libidinal detachments becomes instructive in differentiating the processes of mourning and nostalgia. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud positions mourning as a process by which we (1) acknowledge the loss of the object (a loved person, period of time, material possession, ideal, etc.), and (2) withdraw our libidinal attachment in order to displace it onto other objects. The struggle and anxieties associated with detachment from the lost object is a natural progression in mourning. Freud notes that mourning individuals underwent phases of avoidance and helplessness (what he called "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" ["Mourning and Melancholy" 244]). Similarly, Bowlby's attachment theory emphasises that loss often leaves a continuing sense of the deceased individual's presence. Mourning is thus neither immediate nor straightforward; the relationship with the lost object, although ultimately different after loss, lingers on via recollection and imagining at conscious and unconscious levels. In this sense, nostalgia and nostalgic phantasies are not equivalent to mourning; rather, they are forms of conscious and unconscious communication with the lost object prior (and even after) libidinal detachment is fully withdrawn and displaced.

Stranger Things capitalizes upon our inevitable (past or anticipated) loss of childhood through its main protagonists. Eleven, who grew up in the Hawkins National Laboratory, perhaps most obviously embodies the experiences of loss and mourning. She possesses psychic

powers with which she can manipulate objects and living creatures. Although Eleven's gift is considered to be supernatural—acquired through inheritance and exposure to hallucinogenic drugs—a Winnicottian perspective would contend that all children (and adults) capable of play possess a great deal of power in forming relationships, communicating, transforming objects and their meaning, and, ultimately, in challenging the world ("Children's Hostels").

However, Eleven is not allowed to experiment with her gift or use it to pursue her desires. Instead, she is put through experiments that seek to test and enhance her abilities for tasks that she does not fully understand. This is coupled with the absence of a loving environment: Eleven is shown to have no parental figures besides Dr Martin Brenner, the senior research scientist. It soon becomes clear that Eleven is no daughter to Brenner; she is a research subject, valued for her mind and telekinetic abilities. Her rights and freedoms as an individual and child, capable of self-determination, creativity, and failure, are denied and sacrificed in the interest of the state. In other words, Eleven is completely deprived of a "good enough" childhood.

Eleven is not able to mourn her lost childhood because she is not conscious of what has been lost within her: "[the melancholic] knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy" 245). The difference between mourning and melancholia is that in the latter, the loss is withdrawn from consciousness whereas in the former, the experience of loss is conscious. Melancholia can be likened to Kaplan's pathological nostalgia, in which nostalgic objects continue to live on in the unconscious because the individual is unable to confront the loss itself: "[Pathological nostalgia]... no longer relate[s] to wistful feelings for the good old days but would be considered a compromise formation, the function of which would be the fulfilment of secret and repressed wishes that protect the ego from anxiety arising from undischarged instinctual tensions in the present" (498–99).

Eleven's melancholic disposition is challenged when she begins using her powers in a free and exploratory way. This does not mean, however, that Eleven's experiences of freedom are without failure or pain. In an attempt to rescue those lost in the Upside Down, Eleven is forced to encounter monsters, traumatic memories and even death. But these traumatic and painful encounters are also part of what it means to discover the world. After all, *play is embedded in expansion*:

expanding the world beyond the immediate child and the primary caregiver's relationship through spontaneous gestures, successes and failures, expression and elaboration, transformation, and loss. By using her powers to search for lost objects in the Upside Down, Eleven becomes a conduit between mourning (conscious loss) and melancholia (unconscious loss): She is able to indicate whether the lost object is still out there (e.g., Will) or beyond saving (e.g., Barbara Holland's death at the hands of the Demagorgon). Eleven's character is crucial in allowing the other protagonists—as well as the viewers—to mourn deceased characters and create nostalgic attachments.

An even more vivid example of Eleven mediating between mourning and melancholia is through the discovery of her mother, Terry Ives. Eleven never had an opportunity to mourn the absence of her mother: Brenner kidnapped Eleven from Terry right after birth, and Terry was made to believe that she had a miscarriage. Terry herself was Brenner's research subject who tried to take her daughter by force from Hawkins Lab. Although she managed to catch a glimpse of Eleven in the lab, she was eventually discovered by Brenner and put through electroconvulsive therapy, leaving her in a permanent vegetative state. In season two, Eleven questions Hopper about the whereabouts of her mother. It is made clear that, although Eleven feels her absence, she cannot understand or process this loss. "She's not around anymore," Hopper says, which evokes, for once, a truly child–like response from Eleven: "*Gone?*"

Eleven utilizes Hopper's collected files about the experiments conducted on Terry to meet her in a psychic state. She sees her mother conscious, whispering her real name, Jane (which is an interesting referent to loss and nostalgia in the series, as the name Jane often refers to an anonymised identity), only for the maternal image to disappear seconds later. The scene is abrupt but full of emotion as Eleven confronts her loss for the first time—the loss of her mother, of Oedipal fusion, of a carefree childhood, and of moments spent playing and being creative—and is finally able to begin a process of mourning.

Eleven's ability to mourn her lost childhood is central to understanding her relationship with Hopper. In season three, Hopper disappears and Eleven's powers are gone after engaging with the Mind Flayer. This effectively means that she lost any mediating powers between the real world and the Upside Down (and simultaneously, between the experiences of mourning and melancholia). The loss is,

as per Freud's definitions of melancholia, ambiguous, and Eleven is unable to transcend melancholia in the same manner as she did with her mother. While it is not fully clear whether Hopper is deceased in the season three finale at the time of writing, Eleven is, paradoxically, able to identify exactly what is lost within her. As she reads through Hopper's letter, she recognises everything of which she has been deprived, including Hopper as a father figure:

> Lately, I guess I've been feeling . . . distant from you. Like you're pulling away from me or something. I miss playing board games with you every night, making triple-decker-Eggo-extravaganzas at sunrise. Watching westerns together before we doze off. But I know you're getting older. Growing. Changing. And I guess . . . If I'm being really honest, that's what scares me. I don't want things to change.
>
> So I think that's why, maybe, I came in here. To try to, maybe... Stop that change. To turn back the clock. To make things go back to how they were.
>
> But I know that's naive. That's just not how life works. It's moving, always moving, whether you like it or not. And, yeah. Sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's sad, and sometimes, it's surprising. Happy.
>
> So, you know what. Keep on growing up, kid. Don't let me stop you. Make mistakes, learn from them. And when life hurts you—because it will—remember the hurt. The hurt is good. It means you're out of that cave.

Eleven is finally able to feel nostalgic and to grieve for a time in which she was genuinely happy. The viewers, alongside Eleven, are encouraged to discard any denial for a childhood long gone; to grow, and mature; to expand through play and creativity; to cherish the past but also to recognise that it is irrevocable; and finally, in Hopper's words, to be "out of that cave."

Psychoanalysis and Culture

Moving beyond the fact that discursive similarities exist between psychoanalytic theories and themes depicted in *Stranger Things*, as well as

psychoanalysis's ability to theorize the show's overall positive reception, our analysis is situated within a larger conversation about why psychoanalytic interpretations of *Stranger Things* (and indeed cultural products more generally) are both timely and necessary. From its inception, psychoanalysis has been concerned with the function of various manifestations of our mental life, including dreams, jokes and *parapraxes* (slips of the tongue). In all three instances, repressed content is revealed to consciousness via elaborate psychological processes and mechanisms. While that which is repressed usually finds expression in a very public way in the case of jokes and slips of the tongue, dreams occupy a slightly different register; it is worth contemplating Freud's approach further, as this provides one justification for the larger project of facilitating a dialogue between psychoanalysis and culture.

In the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud explores the biological function of dreams, mainly, to preserve sleep. The dream intercedes as a way of fulfilling an unconscious wish so that one does not have to wake to satisfy one's desires. In a similar vein, the dream content itself is a wish-fulfilment. While the meaning of some dreams is straightforward, others are disguised and, on the surface, quite disturbing. This leads Freud to distinguish between the *manifest* and *latent content*. What the dream shows us (manifest content) is actually energized by hidden desires and that which is forbidden, something of which the dreamer may not be aware (latent content). At core, some defence against the wish has been mobilised to protect the dreamer from fully realising the extent of the desire itself; the wish cannot express itself unless it is distorted so as to facilitate enjoyment (vicariously fulfilling the wish) but hiding the fact that the desire springs directly from the dreamer's unconscious reservoirs. It would be too overwhelming to consciously admit to the wish, so a compromise formation is constructed—the dream satisfies the wish but does so in way that also allows the dreamer to continue sleeping. The content of the dream straddles that which is strange yet at the same time, all too familiar. The dream itself, then, has no regard for sustaining logical narratives and collapses constructed notions of time and space to achieve the psyche's objective. Indeed, we can reexperience events and people from our past in the present. In our dreams, we can satisfy our most infantile wishes, where the rules by which we abide in waking life no longer hold sway. This might include indulging sexual fantasies, committing acts of violence, upturning norms

of decency and imaging activities defying the parameters of what it means to be a civilized member of society.

What we wish to emphasize here is that, at the heart of psychoanalysis, is a real concern for the human capacity for creativity and the myriad of ways this may be reproduced. The psyche, of its own accord, can distort and shape our experiences of the everyday into something truly fantastic and phantasy-laden. While the dream itself is not "real," it is *psychologically* real, as it brings us closer—albeit indirectly—to our deepest desires. The way in which the creative function of the psyche can distort dreams also aligns with how audiences might process, consume, be gripped by and find meaning in (both consciously and unconsciously) cultural artifacts. When we engage products of culture, we enter into an (unconscious) agreement whereby reality is suspended so that we may be moved—perhaps even transformed—by that which commands our attention (Fauteux). We are, for an agreed and limited period of time, given the chance to indulge in certain phantasies as if they were real and, in so doing, provided an opportunity to live out, gratify and work through our innermost desires, a situation which is not dissimilar to therapy (Fauteux). The stranger the plot and the characters we meet, the closer we may approach our own phantasy life, meeting our deepest fears and wishes but in a disguised form. By bringing us closer to that which is unconscious, the show brings us closer to that which, at core, makes us all too human. The artifact can be the proverbial mirror we hold up to ourselves, reflecting back to us what we cannot—and perhaps do not—wish to see. Through the products of culture, we find a symbolic "release valve" whereby that which is forbidden is given space to exist. Phantasy in the psychoanalytic sense—and extending this to the fantasy genre of which *Stranger Things* is a part—is by no means merely indicative of an infantile process of imagination that should ultimately be rejected. Rather, phantasy and the fantasy genre are doorways to a greater understanding of our interiority. "Fantasy is not," Chow rightly states, "a flight from reality, but helps us to better understand that very reality" (Chow qtd. in Bowman 120). *Stranger Things* has certainly taken us far from the "real" but, upon reflection, perhaps never too far. The Upside Down and its inhabitants may be strange but simultaneously all too familiar. It is the show's ability to capture this liminal space and uncanny sense of alterity that is interwoven with the "I"—the very elements of human experience with which psychoanalysis is concerned—that merit a dialogue between the two specifically and psychoanalysis

and culture more generally. Crucially, *Stranger Things* presents audiences with a rather novel equation or theoretical puzzle to which psychoanalysis must dedicate greater attention, mainly, that nostalgia is a potential bridge or pathway central to self-actualization, what Jung terms individuation. Not only can psychoanalysis tell us something about *Stranger Things*, the show itself might tell us something about the operations of the human psyche; each engagement with the products of culture can be an opportunity to theorize anew.

Conclusion

In this article, we argue that the popularity of *Stranger Things* can be attributed to the deeply psychological themes being presented as we follow the various characters and their movement towards self-discovery (or lack thereof). The apt portrayal of various psychological processes and mechanisms—whether deliberate or unintentional—fosters a deeper connection to the series transcending the many "surface" reasons that initially attract audiences to the show. Undertaking this analysis also provided a springboard to considering the relationship between psychoanalysis and culture and why psychoanalysis may be well-placed to elucidate cultural artifacts. The show's ability to balance that with which we are familiar at a conscious level, and that which we dissociate as completely "Other," speaks to the very aspects of mental life to which psychoanalysis lays claim. Hearing the music we loved, seeing the toys we once owned, and revisiting the games we once played hook us in, but we stay with the series because a deeper stratum of the human psyche has been touched and activated. We are both fascinated and terrified by what might be lurking around the next corner—what we will find out about our protagonists and what, in the process, we ultimately discover about ourselves.

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