Feminist Philosophy

Time, history and the transformation of thought

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Chapter 10
Haunting Histories
– Regarding the Political Unconscious in the Television Series Stranger Things and the Film Ghostbusters

Erik Poulsen

> History is the subject of a construction whose site consists not of homogeneous, empty time, but of time filled by the presence of the now.
>
> Walter Benjamin,
> Theses on the Philosophy of History, XIV[1]

Anyone who has watched the second season of *Stranger Things* can probably recall the scene where Mike, Lucas, Will and Dustin come dressed up to school. The series takes place in the 1980s in a small American town where "nothing ever happens", and the second season – released on Netflix in the fall of 2017 – begins in the middle of the Halloween festivities. To celebrate the approaching holiday, the four boys have decided to dress up for school, wearing the same beige costumes and accompanying technical equipment as the ghost hunters of their favorite movie, the blockbuster film *Ghostbusters*.

However, just as the nerdy gang are about to enter the school building, Mike and Lucas suddenly begin to quarrel. It turns out that both boys have dressed up as the main character in *Ghostbusters*, namely the scientist Dr Venkman. Mike seems used to getting his way and cannot accept that someone has stolen his part. He insists that Lucas should be acting as another ghost hunter from the same film: Winston. However, Lucas is not convinced: "No one wants to be Winston, man." – "What's wrong with Winston?" Mike retorts, whereupon Lucas answers:

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 252–253.

"What's wrong with Winston? He joined the team super late, he's not funny, he's not even a scientist!" But Mike will not give in that easily, and the quarrel eventually ends with the following exchange of replies:

> Lucas says: "If he [Winston] is cool, then you be Winston."
>
> Mike: "I can't!"
>
> Lucas: "Why not?"
>
> Mike (starts to stammer): "Be… because…"
>
> Lucas (mockingly imitates his stammering): "Be-be-because you are not black?"
>
> Mike: "I didn't say that!"
>
> Lucas: "You thought it."[2]

However interesting this little intermezzo might be since both Lucas and the ghost hunter Winston happen to be black characters in screenplays where basically every other character is white, it adds little to the plot development. It is obvious that the scene is a metacommentary on how people of color are represented on film, but it does not lead to anything. The children do not manage to settle the issue before the bell and the shifting into the next scene – which is perfectly in order in this case. After all, it would be an exaggeration to call *Stranger Things* a political series. The plot does not exactly revolve around expressions of racist discrimination and prejudices in Western culture. Nor are the protagonists struggling with any economic inequality or social injustice, at least not explicitly. Instead, just as one might expect from an American science fiction horror series, the protagonists are busy struggling against supernatural evil creatures from another dimension who want to take over the human world.

However, in this essay I will argue that *Stranger Things* can be interpreted politically and that it is especially fruitful to

[2] See film clip in *Stranger Things*, Season 2, Episode 2, 10:20–12:25.

analyze it from a feminist point of view. Contrary to what the plot seems to suggest, I am suggesting that *Stranger Things* and other aesthetic artifacts offered by online streaming services such as Netflix and HBO, reveal something interesting about the conditions for contemporary film production. In the following text, I will take the issue addressed by Lucas seriously and consider how class, race, gender, and sexuality are represented. I will show that seemingly redundant scenes like the one just mentioned, have a social and political meaning that exceeds the explicit message of the series (that is: entertainment).

Nevertheless, the point is not to say that a certain fictive character is a representation of a certain marginalized group in the real world. I am not claiming that *Stranger Things* is an allegory over the subaltern subject in the 21st century, or that it bears evidence of the impact that social critique and political activism – as for example the MeToo movement – have had on the film industry and its products. Rather, I am proposing that every work of fiction is imbued with ideology which manifests itself in the forms of the aesthetic object per se. In this case, my object of investigation is a film sequence, and since film is a visual medium, it is crucial to be attentive to semblance. As will become evident later, it is only through appearances that the viewer can achieve a deeper understanding of film; by regarding what is allowed to be seen and to be heard.

However, before presenting my analysis, I will be saying a few words about my theoretical inspirations and formulate a thesis. Let me begin by returning to the supposition that aesthetic artifacts can say something of political interest. The idea that works of fiction are conditioned by social relations or modes of production stems from Marxist literary theory. The proposition above – that all artworks are imbued with ideology – has already been argued by the American literary critic and Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson whose works, as hinted in the title of this essay, will serve as a theoretical frame for this investigation. According to Jameson, a work of fiction is always something more than an utterance by an individual artist. In his view, an artwork is, first and foremost, a product of a historical situation.

The narrative structure found in a novel or a film will inevitably reflect a socio-political context, not in terms of an imitation or *mimesis* of any external reality, but in the form of a paraphrase which, to a certain degree, distorts the represented. The act of writing a novel or creating a film may therefore be regarded as a translation or circumlocution of an ideological subtext. The ideological subtexts that impregnate and organize works of fiction do not exist anywhere in terms of a "pure" text. However, according to Jameson, they can be deciphered or disclosed retroactively in an act of interpretation. This ideological subtext is what Jameson refers to as the *political unconscious*.[3]

Now to return to my object of investigation. As already stressed by way of an introduction, it would be inaccurate to say that *Stranger Things* is a realistic imitation of actual political events, or that certain characters are representatives for specific demographic groups in real society. In line with Jameson, I have suggested that works of fiction are like derivatives of history, and that they may represent reality by distorting and twisting it. However, I have also claimed that it is crucial to be attentive to appearances when interpreting film. Being attentive to appearances means taking note of what the film is trying to imitate realistically and to what it explicitly is referring. In the case of *Stranger Things*, it should be noted that history is not just a subject but also an object. The second season takes place in the 1980s – to be more precise, in the year 1984 – and it is obvious that the filmmakers have made an effort to create an authentic historic environment by infusing attributes, fashion and music usually associated with the late post-war period (arcade video games, backcombed hair, a post-punk aesthetic, etc.). Judging from the series' aesthetics, a historical past has been turned into an object of desire. A suitable description here would be to say that it is *nostalgic*, since it connotates longing for the past, a wish to revive old memories, or to feel what it used to feel like back in the days.

[3] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 80.

However, on a closer look, the nostalgic aesthetics that permeates *Stranger Things* is not concerned with history in general as much as it concerns film history in particular. The explicit reference of the series is not any actual historic event – not the Cold war, not Ronald Reagan, for example. Instead, the series refers to another work of fiction in the history of film, namely *Ghostbusters*. The intertextual conversation that *Stranger Things* is having with *Ghostbusters* is important in my view, not only because it is the subject of the dispute between Mike and Lucas, but also because the influences from *Ghostbusters* concern the science fiction adventure at the most basic level. In both cases, there are portals leading into other dimensions, characters who become possessed by demons, and several four-legged dog-like beasts who haunt and strike terror into their surroundings – just to mention a few examples. In this regard, *Stranger Things* seems to confirm the assumption made by many art historians that modern works of fiction are essentially self-referential; they represent nothing apart from themselves, and they reveal nothing apart from a fascination for their own medium.[4] The conclusion could be that the series refers to the same old-fashioned science fiction adventure, and it amounts to nothing more.

However, if this is the case, then a question immediately arises: If it is true that *Stranger Things* reflects a tendency to fetishize film history, then why would anyone want to look at a reproduction of the desired object rather than the object itself? If actual times are forever lost, the same cannot be said about film history, which, due to new digital technology, is more available than ever. If film nostalgia is symptomatic of a longing for a certain moment in film history, would it not be fair to assume that the original *Ghostbusters* from 1984 is a more authentic representation of that moment than a Netflix production that is trying to imitate its "historic" style? Considering the

[4] The notion that modern art is self-referential is typically emphasized in readings of modernist poetry. For an example, see Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, trans. Michael Metteer & Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 212–225.

commercial success of *Stranger Things*, why is it so that the contemporary audience seems to prefer a reference rather than the referred?

My answer to this question is that the ideological subtext of *Stranger Things* is radically different from its equivalent, *Ghostbusters*. The political unconscious structuring the narratives of the series and the film respectively has altered over time, meaning that a film consumer who finds pleasure in watching the former is most likely going to find the aesthetic experience of watching the latter unbearable. In fact, I would like to go further and claim that the discrepancies between *Stranger Things* and *Ghostbusters* are just as significant as their similarities. The ideological subtext of the series is revealed, not in the identities but in the discords between present and past, memory and amnesia, desire and aversion, pleasure and discontent. As I see it, nostalgia is not a major aesthetic feature, it is just a component, and this is where my thesis comes in: *Stranger Things* can be interpreted as a symptom of ambivalence towards a historic past. To explore this, I shall undertake a comparative study between *Stranger Things* and *Ghostbusters* with the intention to investigate the political unconscious structuring each narrative respectively. By contrasting my objects of investigation, I hope to show that the contemporary series is principally a story about present time rather than the 1980s.

Thus far, I have presented my objects of investigation, a theoretical frame, a methodology, and have advanced my central thesis. However, considering that Jameson's work focuses on the history of literature, my use of his theory might still seem vague. Moreover, I have not explained how appearances, desire and pleasure are interrelated with the experience of watching film. The concept of the *unconscious*, of course, does not stem from Marxist theory but psychoanalysis. I will therefore expand on my theory by turning to the British film theorist Laura Mulvey and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Hence, the disposition of the investigation is divided into three parts: first, a theoretical part where I explore Jameson's theory of the political unconscious from a psychoanalytical perspective; second, the

analysis of *Ghostbusters*; and third, the comparative analysis of *Stranger Things*.

To explain how Jameson's theory of the political unconscious can apply to film, it will be necessary to remind the reader of some basic ideas from psychoanalytic theory and method. Even though the primary aim of psychoanalysis is to interpret symptoms of psychical illness, it has often been defined in terms of a critique of the human subject rather than as a science.[5] Regarding the benefits that psychoanalysis and art criticism have derived from one another during the last hundred years, it is safe to say that film occupies a place apart compared to other art forms. It has often been highlighted that the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud elaborated *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in the same historical period as the film medium was invented.[6] In the same book, Freud famously asserted that dreams are the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious. He equated the dream with a *wish fulfillment* (*Wunscherfüllung*), a manifestation of an inner wish, and suggested that interpretations of dreams could give insight into the unconscious desires that structure and govern the actions and speeches of the human subject.

Similarly, film can – and has – been considered a form of wish fulfillment. Film is usually associated with desire and not least with pleasure because it accentuates sight. In the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey writes, with reference to Freud, that the gaze may constitute a source of pleasure in itself.[7] However, as she also mentions in passing, it is not only the gaze of the actors and the gaze of the audience that is at stake in film. In each and every film, there is always a third eye which mediates and thus controls the gaze,

[5] cf. Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan. A feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–19.

[6] cf. Kittler, pp. 277–278. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 228–230.

[7] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 16–17.

namely the eye of the camera. What differentiates the camera eye from the eyes of the actors and the audience is that the camera consists of a completely mechanized gaze. The camera has no consciousness; it is a machine which sees. It takes no human subject for a camera to register things – a film can be recorded without anyone being aware of it.

Here it is important to underscore that Mulvey's essay is not actually about the eye of the camera. Her essay has become required reading within feminist film theory and Gender studies because it efficaciously discloses a patriarchal unconscious that organized most films produced in the palmy days of Hollywood. According to Mulvey, the patriarchal unconscious causes a sexual imbalance that has tangible effects on casting. It equates masculinity with narration by constantly portraying men as agents who direct the gaze and make things happen. On the other hand, the feminine does not even play a minor part in his narrative structure; she is just a visual image or a passive object whose sole purpose is to strengthen the ego of the subject – which is always male. If a female character is allowed to appear (which is not always the case in patriarchal film production), it is because the male subject needs an object upon which he can project his desires, fantasies, and anxieties.

Nevertheless, an ego may not only be strengthened through projection; a strengthening may also occur through identification. According to Mulvey, a viewer may occasionally identify with film characters in two different ways: either by mirroring himself or herself in the image of the actor according to the same principles as in Jacques Lacan's theory of subject formation during the mirror stage; or, the viewer may perceive the film entirely through the eyes of the actor and thereby turn the male gaze into his or her own gaze. Mulvey writes that the identification process, which may occur during a visit to the cinema, tends to become so strong that the viewers momentarily lose themselves. The film medium, therefore, seems to be able to establish a paradoxical double movement, an oscillation where the ego of the viewer, on the one hand, is strengthened, while on

the other, is dissolved with the result that the cinema audience momentarily forgets who they are and where they came from.[8]

Interestingly, Lacan describes something similar in one of his early seminars. Commenting on Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan notes that since the subject is shaped through mirroring and projections, the ego can be comprehended as the sum of all identifications of the subject. At stake, though, when someone is dreaming is not the ego but the unconscious. Dreams, therefore, seem to establish an inversion of the logic of subject formation, namely a state of dissolution in which the subject is decomposed into minor parts. Lacan claims that if one image could represent Freud's idea of the unconscious, it would be the image of a *headless subject* – a body without ego. The method of dream interpretation is to try to locate the subject's ego, which tends to get lost in the dream.[9]

Now, for a brief moment, I am going to suppose that Lacan was right. Suppose dreams tend to decompose and dissolve the subject. In that case, there seem to be many similarities between dreams and some of the experiences that Mulvey claims that the audience momentarily may have at the cinema. It could then be suggested that both dreams and films are a form of *headless seeing* in the sense that a subject who is dreaming is just as unable to control what appears in the dream as the cinema audience is unable to control the movements of the camera directing our attention in the diegetic world of the film. Metaphorically speaking, one could say that when we are dreaming, a film is playing inside of us. However, this metaphor works equally well when reversed. Mulvey is neither the first nor the last writer who has alluded to the image of the Hollywood industry as one grand factory which manufactures dreams. If dreams are like films and films are like dreams, then it should not be too far-fetched to interpret films the same way Freud interpreted dreams – that is, as manifestations of collective unconscious structures of desire.

[8] Mulvey, p. 18.

[9] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Norton & Company, 1988), pp. 167–172.

I hope to have made it clear now how the theory of a political unconscious can apply to film, and why it is crucial to be attentive to appearances when interpreting them.

So far, I have discussed the elementary mechanisms behind film production and the makings of fictive narrative structures. In the following section, I will turn to my first object of investigation, *Ghostbusters*. There are, of course, several different versions of this incredibly popular franchise. Still, it is the very first version from 1984 that interests me here since its original release in the United States is the same year as the second season of *Stranger Things* is set. Let me begin by simply asking: What kinds of collective unconscious structures of desire are put into play in *Ghostbusters*? For starters it should be said that Freud's theory of the unconscious is something more than a possible perspective in this case. Just as history is both a subject and object in *Stranger Things*, the unconscious is both latent and manifest in *Ghostbusters*, meaning that interpretation becomes almost superfluous. In principle, it is not necessary to analyze *Ghostbusters* to understand what it is about. It is perfectly sufficient just to watch and observe everything there is to be seen and to be heard. I will try to explain what I mean by this without going into too intricate details about the film.

In the leading role, starring Bill Murray, the viewer encounters the scientist Dr Peter Venkman. The film begins with Venkman and his two colleagues, Raymond Stantz and Egon Spengler, losing their grant funding because the management at the university has realized that their research project is pure quackery. It is worth mentioning here that their field of research is within *parapsychology* – the study of paranormal or supersensual phenomena. In order to survive economically, the three scientists decide to start their own business that would allow them to combine their research on supersensual phenomena with social protection. The trio's business idea is to offer services to anyone afflicted by supernatural disturbances in the environment. Initially, business is slow, but it is not long until they are inundated with calls; New York City seems to be crawling with ghosts and lost souls. And so, the ghost hunt begins. The scient-

ists eventually become successful enough to hire a fourth collaborator named Winston Zeddemore – the character that none of the nerd boys in *Stranger Things* wants to be. The fact that Winston is not an interesting character in the eyes of the boys is understandable since he is not introduced until about halfway through the film and plays a peripheral role in relation to the other three ghost hunters.

Needless to say, the viewer does not need to be a certified parapsychologist to be able to understand that the ghosts in *Ghostbusters* are not just any ghosts. It is important to underscore that the scientists are not catching the ghosts in order to kill them. They are only interested in locking them up for safe keeping in the business office's cellar, perhaps for future observations. The motif around which the film pivots is, thus, a pseudo-scientific ability to control and master something that conventional science has never been able to explain. Unconscious desire is part and parcel of the film's content as far as ghostbusting is tantamount to achieving a knowledge of the unknown. Dr Venkman and his colleagues are explorers of the latent; their job is to catch and lock up ghosts in the same way as the psychoanalyst's job is to interpret and remedy symptoms whose causes are unexplainable and irrational.

As I suggested initially, distinctions between manifest and latent tend to collapse in *Ghostbusters*. The fact that the film deliberately mediates between the visible and invisible is especially evident in a scene where the scientists are commissioned to catch a ghost which haunts an old hotel. Judging from the interiors, the hotel is a typical upper middle-class environment with cut-glass chandeliers in the ceiling, heavy draperies along with everything else that goes with it. As the scientists enter the hotel lobby, they encounter a rather stiff company from which they receive plenty of looks in askance. It becomes clear that the hotel's prudish guests and staff are not in command of their ghosts. No wonder, then, that a particularly nasty ghost haunts the hotel in the shape of a green, gluttonous slime ball which guzzles down all the food it comes across. The reason why the ghost has been allowed to ravage the hotel for a considerable

time is because the hotel manager has suppressed the situation to maintain the hotel's elegant façade instead of dealing with the problem – anything not to lose face.

In other words, the animated ghosts in the film – the transparent slime balls, the strange four-legged creatures, etc. – are metonymies for the middle classes' unconscious desires. The guests and staff at the hotel cannot or do not want to deal with their ghosts which has the reverse effect: The more suppressed a ghost is, the more annoying it becomes. The green slime ball of a ghost teases and haunts the hotel in accordance with the logic of "the return of the repressed". The Ghostbusters team are depicted as heroes in the film because they are the only ones who know how to tackle unconscious desires and meddle with what is latent. In the scene at the hotel, Dr Venkman and his colleagues – literally – break the stiff, upper middle-class façade by shooting down the cut-glass chandeliers in the ceiling and facing the nasty slime ball rather than shying away from it. By taking the slime ball down and catching it, the ghost hunters manage to clean out the hotel's elegant rooms both literally and figuratively. By contrasting the skeptical looks that the Ghostbusters team receive at the beginning of the scene with the astonished looks shown at the end, it becomes obvious that the ghost hunters have faced down and disclosed the hypocrisy with which the walls of the hotel drip. In this regard, the film could be viewed as a sly dig at bourgeois culture.

However, catching a ghost or cleaning out the lurking stench of hypocrisy remains just a motif in the film. The purpose of my analysis, however, is not to identify motifs but to trace out a political unconscious. To catch a glimpse of the political unconscious, the viewer must look closer, and with a closer look, it is obvious that the ghostbusting business is full of contradictions. As I have already stressed, the Ghostbusters team is never after the ghosts in order to kill them; they just want to put a lid on them once and for all. Their aim is not to liberate, rather the opposite: Dr Venkman and his associates want to control the ghosts even more efficaciously than the reactionary bourgeoisie are capable. As clearly as the ghost hunters are aware of the

effects of displacement, they are, however, acutely unaware of transference. In fact, I would like to suggest that the scientists' obsession with chasing animated ghosts and exploring the latent realm has made them blind to their own desires and the actual world under their noses.

As an illustrative example, I would like to bring out an incident that takes place during the above-mentioned scene at the hotel. Minutes before they catch the nasty slime ball, the scientists accidentally shoot at a cleaning carriage that suddenly comes out through a door of one of the corridors. After the laser guns have been fired, a cleaning woman cautiously peeps out of the cleaning carriage, wondering what the heck they are doing. If the viewer looks extra carefully at the scene, he or she will realize that this cleaning woman – who is pictured as completely insignificant since she just flickers by very quickly – is, in fact, the only *real* ghost throughout the whole film. The incident is depicted as a witty joke, or a crazy mistake. However, as every true psychoanalyst knows, jokes and slips of the tongue can have special relations to the unconscious. The fact that three men (Winston is not present in the scene) are accidentally shooting at a woman who is – literally speaking – cleaning up the hotel, might seem ironic at first sight, given that the scientists' mission is to clear away the slimy ghost. However, as far as I can see, this "Freudian slip shot" is by no means an accident. On the contrary, the incident with the cleaning woman is a distinctive trait in the narrative structure of the film.

The most obvious contradiction that impregnates the narrative of *Ghostbusters* is that the more ghosts Dr Venkman and his friends manage to catch, the more aggressive the supernatural forces seem to become in the latent sphere. As already stated, the animated ghosts in the film are metonymies for repressed, unconscious desires. Towards the end of the film, dark forces have awoken and take the shape of a dangerous, unrestrained desire threatening not only the city of New York but the whole of Western civilisation. In this case, the film makers have not bothered to spare the effects and tone down a sense of doom with biblical connotations and references to

"judgment day". Interestingly, the dangerous uncontrolled desire often takes the expression of a dangerous sexuality, to be more precise, the sexuality of women and LGBTQ people. To give an example: one of the first customers assisted by Dr Venkman – who also happens to be one of the few female characters in the film – is Miss Dana Barret who has a problem with some strange creatures who seem to have occupied the refrigerator in the kitchen of her apartment. During the film, the viewer gets to know that the strange creatures in miss Barret's refrigerator are guardians who protect a portal which leads into another dimension governed by an evil Sumerian god from ancient Mesopotamia. These creatures – who incidentally, are very similar to the creatures in *Stranger Things* – eventually break out of the kitchen and attack Miss Barret by possessing her body. As possessed, Miss Barret is transformed into an "exotic seducer" who does not want anything else but to get laid with "the key master" – for whom she mistakes Dr Venkman.

As the film gradually reaches its climax, the portal into the other dimension is opened wide. The oriental evil god steps forward and appears in the shape of something apparently meant to represent a being in-between a man and a woman; an androgynous or non-binary person (incidentally, suspiciously similar to David Bowie). Thus, the most terrifying monster the makers of the 1984 *Ghostbusters* film could conjure up is a being that transgresses the male–female binary. The androgynous person untethers on the Ghostbusters team one last ghost that goes by the name of "The Stay Puft Marshmallow Man"; a white, giant marshmallow figure which crushes yellow taxi cabs under its feet like another Godzilla. However, the dudes in the Ghostbuster team manage to save the world by crossing the streams from their laser guns and thereby turning them into one super strong stream, which they then direct against the portal. Finally, in the moment of dramatic closure, everything explodes, including the marshmallow-Godzilla, resulting in a white sticky stuff literally raining over the whole of New York City. The threat from the unconscious desire is defeated, the dangerous sexuality is once more under control, and order is restored.

Needless to say, the film ends with Dr Venkman and Miss Barret kissing and then driving away together in the Ghostbuster car to live happily ever after. It is, in other words, hard to tell whether *Ghostbusters* from 1984 is a comedy or a thriller. I am not sure whether I should laugh or cry out loud.

With all that said, the interpretation of my first object of investigation is complete. I have interpreted *Ghostbusters* with respect to the theory of a political unconscious and reached the conclusion that its narrative structure pleases a stereotypical white male heterosexual desire. Interestingly, representations of class, race, gender, and sexuality in the film are conflated with a psychoanalytic history of reproducing sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Although there is no explicit reference to Freud or any other psychoanalytic theoretician in the film, I have suggested that the ghost hunting enterprise amounts to a psychoanalytical conception of achieving a knowledge of unconscious desire. The fact that oppositions between the latent and the manifest are interwoven with the film's motifs makes interpretation challenging, but not impossible. I am aware that it might seem contradictory to scrutinize and criticize *Ghostbusters* by using the same theoretical and methodological tool as I am criticizing. Considering that I have charged Dr Venkman and his associates with being ignorant of transference, how can I know for sure that I am not repeating the same analytical fallacy in my interpretation and that I am not disregarding my own unconscious desires?

To avoid the pitfall of transference, I have tried to focus on the manifest realm instead of the latent. I have tried to look at the aesthetic object just like Oscar Wilde's novel character Lord Henry looked at Dorian Gray: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."[10] In other words, the biggest mystery is not what *Ghostbusters* "really" is about but rather why one of the most popular Netflix productions of the 21st century is trying to reproduce it, which brings me back to my initial question: What

[10] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 24.

exactly does the reference to *Ghostbusters* in *Stranger Things* entail?

I have now reached the third and last part of my investigation where I intend to contrast the film with the series. It is noteworthy that my first object of investigation is an analogous film while my second object is a digital television series. As already noted in the theoretical part of my discussion, the technological medium itself can have effects on the message of the aesthetic object. It is interesting to keep that in mind when considering how television series as an artform has evolved in the 21st century. When the first television series started to appear in the post-war era, they were mostly viewed as a kind of schlock or pulp fiction for housewives and second-rate actors. However, in recent years, due to new digital technology and the commercial success of online streaming services, the television series as a specific genre has transformed and achieved a completely different cultural status. Not only has the digital medium affected the film content; it has also changed the way the cinema audience consumes film.

I am now going to look at my second object of investigation. Despite all the similarities and intertexture, some of the motifs in *Stranger Things* seem to be inversions of those in *Ghostbusters*. In the television series, it is the scientists who have lost control over the evil forces and the androgynous character Eleven who, thanks to her supernatural powers, manages to close the portal leading to the other dimension and thereby saves the world. The four nerdy boys mentioned in the introduction are not the only ones who know how to meddle with the latent. They are surrounded by several female characters who often are depicted as bolder than most of the male heroes. For example, Lucas has a little sister named Erica who not only is intelligent, she also has the coolest and bitchiest attitude in the whole series. Then there is Mike's big sister Nancy, a high school student who at first sight appears to be a typical "good girl" who does her homework on time. However, as the series proceeds, it turns out that Nancy not only knows how to study; she also knows perfectly well how to swing a baseball bat and aim with a shotgun.

These female characters are allowed to be seen and heard; they have their own agencies in ways that would have been unthinkable in the Hollywood film productions scrutinized by Laura Mulvey in her essay. As I see it, the presence of these new characters has nothing to do with film nostalgia, it is not a resurrection of a historic past that has been lost with the passing of time. On the contrary, the presence of strong feminine characters seems to me rather like a historical revenge.

As I have argued initially, history reveals itself in the discrepancies between past and present. In the case of *Stranger Things*, a historic past has turned into an object of desire. If the series pleases contemporary viewers, it does so not by realistically imitating film history as it actually was, but by retelling and modifying the past as the viewer *wish* it would have been. The same can be said about many contemporary television series that tend to fetishize different historical moments in the 20th century. *Mad Men* is another striking example of film aesthetics that is pervaded with nostalgia. In a series such as *Mad Men*, the secretaries, the cleaners, and the homosexuals are for sure still as oppressed as they actually were in the 1960s, but with an essential difference: the camera has become more moveable, more mobile, so to speak. The camera has started to show things through the eyes of the oppressed and not exclusively from the perspectives of white heterosexual middle-class men.

Television series as an art form is especially sufficient for these kinds of shifts of perspectives. Since the duration time is so much longer compared to a single film, the camera is allowed to roam the settings and therefore has the time to delineate more characters and more life stories within the frame of the same narrative. And precisely this is exactly what the quarrel mentioned initially between Mike and Lucas is all about: Who is to play the most important role? Whose perspective is most important in the stories of our time? It is obvious that many contemporary remakes of older film productions reveal a demand for other perspectives and voices that have been silenced earlier in history. It is not for nothing that a contemporary remake of Ghostbusters (from 2016) starred three female actors as the

scientists, just to mention one example. However, in many television series, the question of perspective is even more intricate compared to most long feature films, since it is not always obvious who plays the main character anyway.

The fact that the camera eye is prone to see more than it used to is in my opinion a positive outcome of technological development. However, in the case of *Stranger Things*, the positive sides of the development come at a price. Since such fundamental parts of the film narrative in *Ghostbusters* have been repressed, the past has now returned and manifested itself in the shape of the evil forces from the other side of the portal, in the so-called "upside-down world". The uncanny, indefinable creatures from the other dimension are condensations of the dark parts of history – all those memories that most viewers most likely want to forget.

To support my suggestion that the evil forces in the series are metaphors for the past, I would like to dwell on a scene in the third episode of the second season which involves one of the nerd boys, Will. Just like Miss Barrett in *Ghostbusters*, Will's body is possessed by the visitors from the "upside-down word". The scientists try to explain his unpleasant experiences of being possessed by saying that Will is probably suffering from post-traumatic stress. In the scene in the third episode, Will is accidentally trapped in the "upside down world" and tries to escape in a panic. He runs over a schoolyard, but then, all of a sudden, he stops, as if thinking that the scientists might be right. Maybe he is just imagining things, maybe he is just hallucinating. He turns around and sees a dark cloud towering up in the shape of a terrifying spider-like evil demon. He tries to shout, "Go away, GO AWAY", but that will certainly not do any good since the heritage of film history is no figment of imagination – it is real. The dark side of the historical past is a force that produces the monsters of our time. Alternatively, to quote a famous line from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake".