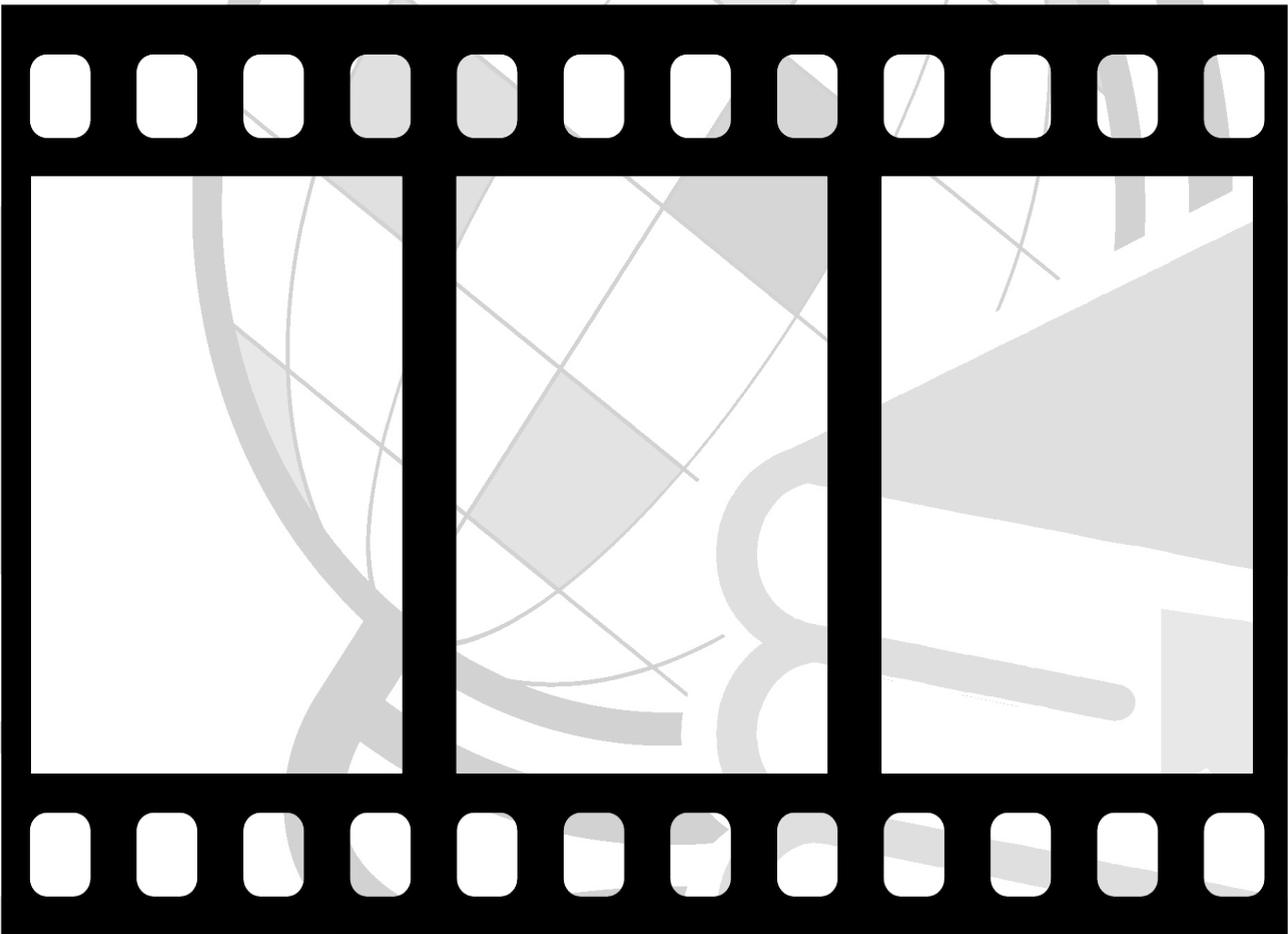


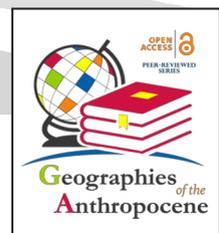
CINEMA, DISASTERS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Editors)



Foreword by David McEntire

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Cinema, Disasters and the Anthropocene

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Editors



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Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Eds.)

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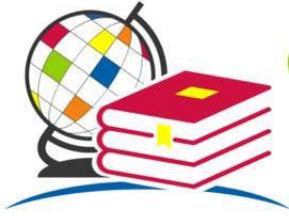


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CONTENTS

Foreword
David McEntire 8

Introduction
Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez 10

Section I

Narrating the Anthropocene in Cinema: Its Imagery between Romanticism and Symbolism

1. The Return of the Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Nostalgia and Ecological Dystopia in the Suburbia
Pedro Artur Baptista Lauria 18

2. Using the Zombie Metaphor and Apocalyptic Imageries to Preach Environmentalism in Nigeria: A Semiotic Reading of C.J. Obasi's *Ojuju*
Floribert Patrick C. Endong 33

3. Countering Stereotypes in Jamaican Cinema as Discourse for the Anthropocene
Joshua Paul, Tomlin Paul 58

4. From Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* to Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up*, cultivating a meeting ground for communicating the Anthropocene: will we speak Eggplant?
Andrea Nocera 71

5. Towards a Humble Vision in the Anthropocene: Critique of Anthropocentrism in *I Am Legend*
Seçil Erkoç Iqbal 90

Section II

Environment and Landscape Disaster during the Anthropocene: a call for Sustainability through Cinema

6. The *Chernobyl* miniseries as a narration case of environmental disasters in the Anthropocene era
Sonia Malvica, Lucrezia Lopez, Enrico Nicosia 112
7. “Il tempo dei giganti”. A mosaic of minute stories for a film-documentary account of the Xylella case in Salento
Fabio Pollice, Patrizia Miggiano 129
8. Cinema and digital technology: new communication formats characterizing the scenarios of modern communication networks
Maria Laura Pappalardo 147

Section III

Water Exploitation and its Consequences in the Anthropocene era: contribution from cinematic productions

9. The conquest of power. A look to hydroelectric landscapes of Alps through the lens of audiovisuals and cinema
Maria Conte 160
10. The China-Tibet relationship in the film story: an announced disaster?
Antonietta Ivona 182
11. Picturing the Anthropocene through flood narratives: The environmental disaster discourse in Indian cinema
Sony Jalarajan Raj, Adith K Suresh 204
- The Authors** 218

1. The Return of the Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Nostalgia and Ecological Dystopia in the Suburbia

Pedro Artur Baptista Lauria¹

Abstract

The present work focuses on the contemporary return of the Suburban Fantastic, a subgenre that tells narratives of children and adolescents who need to save their surroundings - the American suburbs - from fantastic exogenous elements, as is the case of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. This essay focuses on the nostalgic, pro-suburb, and anti-scientific discourse present in the Netflix series in a context in which the environmental impacts of American suburbs are better understood. This urbanization model boomed during the 1950s, in the “Great Acceleration” period, a turning point in the Anthropocene Era when the increased use of natural resources and burning of fossil fuels started to show visible changes in the Earth System. Considered synonymous with the so-called “American Dream”, these low-density urbanizations occupy wide green horizons, cover them with asphalt, and demand a huge daily fuel expenditure. True ecological dystopias romanticized in Suburban Fantastic series and films as utopias that need to be saved by the younger generations.

Keywords: Suburban Fantastic; Suburbia; Great Acceleration; American Dream; Anthropocene

1. Introduction

The present work is part of the cultural studies of the Anthropocene, with the objective of understanding how TV and cinema productions portray periods marked by the climate crisis and in the context of the unsustainable consumption of natural resources. In this way, this study intends to understand the urban, economic, and environmental discourses behind contemporary works, understanding their importance in the formation and support of revisionist or negationist narratives.

More specifically, this essay discusses the contemporary portrait of the American suburbs - urbanization inhabited mainly by a consumerist middle

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class and considered a synthesis of the so-called "American Dream". The ecological literature heavily criticizes American suburbs due to their inherent characteristics, such as the deforestation of extensive green areas and the need for daily use of large amounts of fossil fuels.

The object of analysis of this essay will be films and series of the so-called reflexive Suburban Fantastic, a contemporary cycle of this subgenre marked by narratives in which children and young people face fantastic creatures and/or events to recover the status quo of their suburban reality, usually situated in the 1980s. Our main object of analysis will be the TV series *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016-present), in which we will analyse the portrait of the suburb, but also from the 1980s and the "Reagan Years", marked by the neoliberal government that fomented a pro-suburb discourse. This work demonstrates how nostalgia for the 1980s and the suburban lifestyle present in these contemporary productions align partly with a restorative discourse – uncritically romanticizing a model of life and consumption today, known to be unsustainable.

2. Literature Review

The beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in the middle of the 18th century, is usually proposed as the beginning of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2013), a period when the large-scale use of fossil fuels by humans from the Global North countries generated an unquestionable mark in the Earth System. However, one second moment of this so-called "Human Epoch" starts from the mid-twentieth century with the massive increase in the use of natural resources, fossil fuels, and population growth (Fay, 2018). This period is what we define today as the Great Acceleration:

The second half of the twentieth century is unique in the entire history of human existence on Earth. Many human activities reached take-off points sometime in the twentieth century and have accelerated sharply towards the end of the century. The last 50 years have without doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind. (Steffen *et al.*, 2004: 131)

In this sense, it is impossible not to speak of the United States as one of the substantial causers of the Great Acceleration. With its consolidation as the world's largest economy, based on the use of fossil fuels and unsustainable use of natural resources, Richard Lane (2019) talks about a US-led "growth paradigm" to which "American Dream" discourse based its consumerist and

developmental policy. This model has received harsh criticism, such as James Kunstler's acid speaking in *The Geography of Nowhere*:

“Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading [...] the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobia-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call "growth." (Kunstler, 1994, p. 10).

Most of the constructions Kunstler refers to are the result of the suburban expansion that occurred along with the growth of the American middle class after the war. For example, between 1945 and 1960, 85% of new homes on American territory were built in the suburbs (Coontz, 2000, p. 67), which led Halberstam to state that:

The American dream was now located in the suburbs, and for millions of Americans, still living in urban apartments, where families were crunched up against each other and where, more often than not, two or more siblings shared the same bedroom... (Halberstam, 1993, p. 511).

In this regard, it is worth highlighting to the reader the influence represented by this urbanization model of low density and huge environmental impact that occupies large green horizons, covers them with asphalt, and demands and daily fuel expenditure. After all, due to its residential nature and distance from large urban centres, the vast majority of suburban residents are forced to exercise the habit of commuting: going and returning long distances by car to work. As explained by Eric Sanderson oil, cards and suburbs sing together as “sirens”, with music that “bridges history and landscape to appeal to US identity as a free nation” (2013, p. 2). As Kenneth Jackson ponders:

Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.” (Jackson, 1987, p. 15).

In this sense, the American suburbia presents itself not as an utopia, but as an “ecological dystopia” hidden by a discourse of greater quality of life

and proximity to nature. As discussed by Kunstler (1994), the suburbs are a symbol of an unsustainable model of life, inhabited by an individualistic middle-class who wants to fulfil their privilege to live the “American Dream”. It is worth pointing out that today more Americans live in the suburbs than in the countryside and cities combined². This urbanization model is a great example of the “Tragedy of Commons” as written by Garret Hardin (1968): the depletion of a shared resource by a group of people acting through their uncoordinated act according to one’s self-interests. The difference, however, is that such actions are not only fostered by the Government but also by a mediatic romanticization of the suburban lifestyle. It is precisely on this second point, that this present article intends to delve into, more specifically in the return of the Suburban Fantastic films and series in the 2010s.

The suburban fantastic is a subgenre that victimizes the suburb and the suburban lifestyle by putting them in the place of being defended by new generations. Angus McFadzean originally conceptualized it as:

‘a set of Hollywood movies that started to appear in the 1980s, in which pre-teen and teenage boys living within the suburbs are called upon to confront a disruptive fantastic force – ghosts, aliens, vampires, gremlins and malevolent robots. (McFadzean, 2019, p. 1).

This subgenre encompasses productions such as *ET – The Extraterrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984), *Back to The Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985) and *Jumanji* (Joe Johnston, 1995). In these films, middle-class children are forced to return the status quo of their suburban neighbourhoods after dealing with the disruption caused by an exogenous element. Ultimately, it is up to the protagonist to defeat, assimilate or resolve this disruption, returning that suburban environment to normality in a mixture of coming-of-age dramas and the hero’s journey typical of the fantasy genre (McFadzean, 2019).

Because of this syntactic structure, the subgenre has an inherently reactionary aspect: after all such narratives are rites of passage that involve white middle-class children and teenagers returning suburbia to its middle-class normality (maintaining the social and economic structures that privileges them) after resolving the disruption caused by an “Other” (something or someone who does not share the values of that environment/class). Farah Mendelsohn categorizes it as an “intrusion fantasy”: a fantasy that takes us out of safety without taking the protagonist

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-14/u-s-is-majority-suburban-but-doesn-t-define-suburb> (Accessed 12 April 2022)

from its place, with the base assumption that normality is organized and that when the fantastic retreats, the world, while not necessarily unchanged, return to predictability (2008, XXII).

Because of this restorative narrative, it is no coincidence that the emergence of suburban fantastic cinema occurred in the middle of the “Reagan Era”. Ronald Reagan, after all, was the first US president to come from the suburbs, perpetuating many of its values (Troy, 2005, p. 338) and was the creator of the slogan “Make American Great Again”. This restorative/nostalgic motto was a counterpoint to the previous decades and, mainly, the political and economic vision of Jimmy Carter, his predecessor, who had a more communitarian agenda concerned with the use natural of resources. After a decade marked by two oil crises (the 70s), Carter went so far as to say that “the American people cannot accept the simple fact that they have an energy crisis that will get worse in the future.” (in Jackson, 1987, p. 329). Its energy secretary, James Schlesinger, even defended the return to the cities, noting that “Urban life has certain advantages (...) as they are areas of greater energy efficiency than the suburbs and the countryside” (Jackson, 1987, p. 329).

Despite these ecological concerns, Carter was defeated in 1980. Decades later, however, the deepening of climate and environmental discussions in the 21st century made the suburbs once again in the sights of ecological criticism as an unsustainable urbanization model at this critical moment of the Anthropocene Era. In addition, events such as the 2008 housing crisis and fuel crises also threatened the maintenance of the suburban middle-class. These crises were decisive in the election of Donald Trump in 2016³, a president whose term was marked by his climate-denial discourse and policies focused on fossil fuels (Rose, 2018).

It is in this context that Angus McFadzean points to the return of the suburban fantastic cinema in the 2010s, in a “reflexive” cycle (2019, p. 115), marked by remakes, sequels, reboots, and tributes such as *Super 8* (J.J. Abrams, 2011), *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016-), *It – Chapter 1* (Andy Muschietti, 2017), *Bumblebee* (Travis Knight, 2018) and *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (Jason Reitman, 2021). Most of these works nostalgically are set in the 1980s, the Reagan Era. This is the same decade that Trump alludes by reusing the campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” as things “started to go wrong” for the suburban middle class and their lifestyle after this period. According to the author, these films/series “take the audience to a place of comfort, safety, and security by delivering again the

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2016/11/22/donald-trump-clinton-rural-suburbs/> (Accessed 01 April 2022)

wonder and happiness they associate with the original suburban fantastic films” (2019, p.119). This would make such works meet the need of a millennial audience to return to the past, in the face of a time of great instability, becoming a nostalgic commodity (Jameson, 1991) that serves as a breath amid the political and economic crises of the capitalist system (Duyvendak, 2011).

However, as pointed out by Susan Stewart (in Cross, 2015, p.13), nostalgia, while responding to the future and discrediting the present, can have the function of authenticating the past. In other words, it goes beyond the audience’s desire to return to simpler times, and impacts our perception about that period. Thus, works that show great amounts of nostalgia for the 1980s somehow validate, for example, the neoliberal government of the Reagan Era as a “period of good feelings”, not investing with the same impetus in a critical reading of its economic and environmental policy.

This “less critical” look at the past also impacts a phenomenon that McFadzean calls the “dystopia historicization”. In other words, this new cycle of suburban fantastic works makes us look back 30 years to tell us how we got from there to here (2021). This view, however, abdicates a correlational perspective between the 1980s and the present, treating them as a period in which “things still went right” and then “started to go wrong”. And if Jorritsma speaks of the human need to look at past landscapes to correct the moment when “we slowly drifted from the good” (2021, p. 206), in suburban fantastic this takes its own contours. After all, Jorritsma refers to nostalgia for cities and civilizations before the Anthropocene, while in suburban fantastic, we speak of nostalgia for an urbanization model that is a symbol of the Great Acceleration. From this context, in the following sections, I analyse how some of the main productions of this new cycle of suburban fantastic portray the suburbs and the “Reagan Era”, facing the contemporary ecological discussion about the unsustainability of the suburban lifestyle.

3. Methodology

The present work uses the critical analysis of discourse, understanding TV and cinema works as producers of meanings between subjects and a constitutive part of the social and historical moment in which they find themselves. This analysis has as its object the first four seasons of the *Stranger Things* series, understanding that this is the most significant success of the suburban fantastic since its return in the 2010s. In addition, the Netflix

series is the work that best groups the semantic and syntactic elements of the subgenre, being a reference for other productions.

However, to make a more general look at the decade, the present essay also contemplates the comparative reading of some films from the reflexive cycle of suburban fantastic categorized by Angus McFadzean in his book (2019) as *Super 8*, *Fright Night* (Craig Gillespie, 2011) *Tomorrowland* (Brad Bird, 2015), *Poltergeist* (Gil Kenan, 2015), *Midnight Special* (Jeff Nichols, 2016), *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (Jake Kasdan, 2017), *Bumblebee* (Travis Knight, 2018), *It - Chapter 1*, *See You Yesterday* (Stefon Bristol, 2019) *Vampires vs The Bronx* (Osmany Rodriguez, 2020), *A Babysitter's Guide to Monster Hunting* (Rachel Talalay, 2020). The analysis of these works focuses on the portrait of the suburb in these productions, taking into account the environmental impact represented by this urbanization model. In the more specific case of *Stranger Things* and other works set in the 1980s, the portrait of the “Reagan Era” and the idea of “dystopia historicization” discussed by Angus McFadzean are also analysed from the critical ecological perspective.

4. Findings

In the first episode of the first season of *Stranger Things*, the town of Hawkins is shown to be a calm, peaceful place where the local police barely need to work. The only interurrences that need to be resolved by the local police are minor problems between neighbours. Furthermore, the city shows a certain diversity of classes, ranging from the upper-middle class (like Mike Wheeler and Steve Harrington) to the working classes (like Will and Jonathan Byers). The relationship between such classes also goes from fraternal harmony (as between Mike and Will) to bullying (as between Steve and Jonathan). However, the everyday of these classes is erupted by a recurring external element – the government. Since the first season, the authorities have affected the daily lives of Hawkins' residents due to its ill-fated experiments. The problems brought by the authorities range from residents' disappearance and death to Hawkins's almost total destruction (at the end of the fourth season).

It is important to note that Hawkins is built as a mosaic of semantic elements taken from the suburbs and small towns of classics from the 1980s teen cinema, which are added according to the seasons. For example, the first season focuses on High School, a typical setting for 1980s teen movies like *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1986). In the second season, the references

become even more specific, as in the case of the arcade that refers to films like *The Last Starfighter* (Nick Castle, 1984) and the train track that refers to one of the most famous scenes of *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986). Finally, in the third season, the mall, the iconic setting of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982), becomes the primary setting of the narrative.

The producers of *Stranger Things* also create diverse visuals in Hawkins by incorporating new thematic elements in each one of the seasons, representing different festivities that also nods to the classics from the 1980s. In the first season, Hawkins is marked by Christmas holidays, setting for works such as *Gremlins* and *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990). By focusing on Halloween, the second season allows direct references to *ET - The Extraterrestrial* and *Hocus Pocus* (Kenny Ortega, 1993). The third season takes place on the 4th of July (Independence Day), referencing works such as *Russkies* (Rick Rosenthal, 1987). Finally, the fourth season takes place on Spring Break, referencing the film of the same name directed by Sean Cunningham (1983).

Hawkins' characteristic of encompassing each of these environments and themes allows, of course, to end up referring to the nostalgic aspects of multiple memories of *Stranger Things*' spectators - functioning as a great simulacrum of what we understand as a 1980s' cinematic representation of a suburb. As Lacey Smith explains:

the suburbia invoked by Hawkins is not merely a suburb but a representation of suburban-ness, meshed with small town-ness, and Midwest-ness, and other simulacra that coalesce under the guise of a coherent visual past informed by the 1950s but colored by the aesthetics of 1980s pop culture (in WETMORE, 2018, p. 193).

This "mixed portrait" is a recurring feature of works from this reflexive cycle of the suburban fantastic and also occurs, for example, in films like *Super 8* and *Bumblebee*. In these works, suburbia is shown as the most natural, healthy, and desirable environment imaginable (McFadzean, 2019, p.134) with the better characteristics of small towns (proximity to nature, family-based economy) and large cities (proximity to urban facilities, cultural cosmopolitanism), according to the narrative need. Meanwhile, works of the subgenre set in the metropolis demonstrate a very dystopian construction, as is the case of *Fright Night* (Craig Gillespie, 2011) and *Kin* (Baker Brothers, 2018) which show urban centres marked by prostitution, violence and gambling. Meanwhile, *See You Yesterday* (Stefon Bristol, 2019) and *Vampires vs. The Bronx* (Osmany Rodriguez, 2020) focus their urban narratives on peripheral areas exposed to violence and the neglect of public

power, even though their protagonists have affective bonds with the urban location. *Stranger Things* also dedicates an episode of its second season taking the protagonist, Eleven, to the metropolis – marked by gangs, garbage, homeless people, and drug dealers. Such portraits reinforce the idea of the city as a place of crime and danger, where no one is safe, where no self-respecting middle-class person would venture. From this perspective, the suburbs would be the only logical answer (Dickey, 2019).

The city is not the only “dystopian portrait” that legitimizes the suburb as a desirable urbanization model within the subgenre. The protagonist of this new cycle of suburban fantastic is recurrently presented with an alternative, parallel, or hidden world that proves to be uninhabitable and full of dangers. This world is presented in different ways, be inside the sewer as in *It - Chapter 1*, in a ghostly dimension in *Poltergeist*, inside a video game in *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*, or in places inhabited by monsters in *A Babysitter's Guide to Monster Hunting*. The Upside Down, from *Stranger Things*, stands out among the many examples “a nether world of zombified tentacular roots, blood-thirsty parasitic demons, and diseased air” which “we must turn our thinking upside down to prevent living in our own approximation of The Upside Down” (Neilson, 2017). These alternative environments serve to show to the protagonist and the audience what the world can come to be, if humanity “fails it”. And in the particular case of *Stranger Things*, considering that the work takes place in the 1980s, it is clear that this comment is directed to the present and to our immediate future. But ultimately, all these alternative worlds also reaffirm the suburb as a place of pleasantness and comfort. After all, in none of the films mentioned does the protagonist find a better place to live than the suburbs – not even in the *Poltergeist* remake, in which the family continues to insist to live in the suburbs, even after having their house destroyed by spectral creatures.

Stranger Things also reinforce the idea that the “past is a foreign country” in which “when a problem happens, no one can pull out a cell phone to solve it”, as pointed out by Wetmore (2018, p.9). This perspective, in turn, helps to distance the 1980s from our current period, removing the causal aspect between these two periods. In other words, by illustrating the 1980s as so “different” from the current period it makes the eighties appear not to be responsible for the historical developments that led us to the current moment. Instead, the 1980s, like the 1950s, became moments “outside of history” – safe havens of a time when the “American Dream” was in full swing for a certain social group, and which could be accessed again by memory, nostalgia, or populist speeches.

Finally, it is essential to discuss the portrait of science and technology in these works. After all the scientist figure is conceived since the beginning of suburban fantastic cinema as one of the main antagonists of the subgenre. Whether trying to kidnap innocent aliens as in *E.T. – The Extraterrestrial* and *Flight of the Navigator* (Randal Kleiser, 1986), experimenting with destructive robots as in *D.A.R.Y.L.* (Simon Wincer, 1985) and *Short Circuit* (John Badham, 1986) or murderous creatures as in *Watchers* (Jon Hess, 1988) and *Gremlins 2* (Joe Dante, 1990). Even humorous and positive representations of scientists bring the dangers of their experiments as is the case of the *Back to the Future* trilogy (Robert Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990) and *Honey - I Shrunk the Kids* (Joe Johnston, 1989). And if in the 1980s films this apprehension was linked to anxiety about the digital world, the return of these characteristics in the suburban fantastic of the 2010s demonstrates a certain pessimism with the developments of science in recent decades. This is the case of works set in the present/near future, such as *Tomorrowland* (Brad Bird, 2015) and *Midnight Special* (Jeff Nichols, 2016), but also in productions set in the 1980s as *Super 8* and *Stranger Things*. In these works, when scientists do not appear as villains, they appear as embittered beings, repentant or working with blind obedience to the government.

In this regard, Eleven, the protagonist of the Netflix series, is a great example of the personification of the evil caused by science. The character appears in the first season as a laboratory experience, without any social abilities, and starts to be assimilated by the harmonic Hawkins' suburban reality between seasons. The peak comes at the end of the third season when she loses her powers and becomes a "normal" Hawkins dweller. In the fourth season, however, to undo the evil caused by authorities and the Government, Eleven needs to return to her status as a "laboratory test subject". It is a moment when it is shown the traumas that such experiences caused in her and other young people in a similar situation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present analysis points out how *Stranger Things* is imbued with nostalgic feelings not only from its setting in the 1980s but also because of Hawkins' construction as a "mosaic" of references to 1980s classics. All these readings point towards the construction of the image of a suburb and a period that never existed in time, and the nostalgia evoked by it results from a construction that appeals to the affective memory of the spectator. Thus, when Jennifer Fay states that cinema's dominant mode of aesthetic world making

is often at odds with the very real human world it is meant to simulate (2018, p. IV), it is difficult not to apply this idea in a particular way to these portraits made by *Stranger Things* and the reflexive suburban fantastic cinema. In these works, the suburb is not an ecological dystopia whose existence endangers the Earth System but a utopian environment that needs to be defended from scientists, authorities, and outside threats.

Therefore, it seems that the suburban fantastic does not even try to simulate the “real world”, but tries to produce a fictional world where the American society project succeeded. In this portrait, the suburbs and their residents are portrayed as victims of external actions from an authoritarian and technicist governmental machine. In this sense, its residents are not held responsible for embracing this unsustainable suburban lifestyle, but as wronged citizens who were just trying to live the “fair” American Dream. Thus, it is not coincidental that McFadzean points out that some recent suburban fantastic films/series as *Stranger Things* and *Super 8* appear to be rather comfortable with aspects of contemporary American society (McFadzean, 2019, p.121). In other words, nostalgia for the suburbs implies that this urbanization is not seen as part of the ecological problems faced by the Anthropocene – despite the environmental unsustainability its model represent. After all, the suburban fantastic narrative involves the perspective that it is something “outside” the suburbs that needs to be corrected.

This approach of the subgenre reflects the isolationism of the American suburban middle class and its false perspective that suburbs, since have “fewer grey areas” and less pollution than cities, do not have the same ecological impact as them (when in fact, they are larger).(tinha um espaço duplo aqui, corrige no teu) In this regard, McFadzean ponders that the reflexive suburban fantastic returns to the perspective of lower-middle-class suburbia depicting families experiencing economic and social unease (as the case of Will and Jonathan Byers) chimes with audiences after the 2008 financial crash (McFadzean, 2019, p.119). This construction, in turn, further removes the idea that the suburban dwellers can have a destructive impact on the world since he/she is a victim of the capitalist system and is only fighting to have his/her place within the “American Dream”. But in doing so, these works legitimize suburban and middle-class America’s consumerism as a desirable lifestyle.

The portrait shown in *Stranger Things* is also of resignation to the future, as its narrative is based on the idea of Hawkins’ peaceful reality being invaded by technology and science. As stated by Kevin Wetmore, *Stranger Things* depict the 1980s as a decade of innocence, when we did not know how horrible things were (2018, p.9). McFadzean will say that this decade will be

portrayed as a period when the future was still open and full of utopian possibilities, and the invading terrors could still be defeated (2021). However, this perspective that the 1980s were “simpler periods” and “with fewer problems” is based on a historical dissociation that our current moment is not a direct consequence of this recent past. A naive idea that the US policies of suburban sprawl, exploitation of fossil fuels, and the promotion of hyper-consumerism that exploded after the war are not related to the moment we are in today. On the contrary (eu não gosto muito de começar frases com “on the contrary”, eu usaria “on another perspective” aqui), such narratives make it desirable to return to these periods as moments when American society was living its dream. The very expression “American Dream” seems to carry this dissociation – as if the “dream” operated in a dimension of its own, with no direct impact on reality.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize that works such as *Stranger Things* and *Super 8* reproduce anti-government discourses, casting scientists, military, or other State agents as villains. Lars Olson will point out that the subgenre carries this “pessimistic view” of paternal and government authorities, fostering narratives that the young will need to solve problems that older generations have caused or are unable to solve (2011, p.1). In this sense, it is again worth positioning such films as part of historical moments in which presidents like Reagan or Trump brought anti-State, anti-intellectual and anti-international organizations’ postures and rhetoric. As Sirota (2011) recalls, it was one of Reagan’s classic lines: “The nine scariest words anyone can say are: I’m from the government and I’m here to help.” In this sense, it is worth going back to the fact that behind the apparently planned nature of the suburbs, as Samuelsson rightly points out, he “was never regulated and it was never meant to be” (2013) – since its conception, a true celebration of individual enterprises packed in a rhetoric of a social dream, which would generate a national identity.

In this regard, there is a contrast between the scientist as a greedy authority, who messes with what he/she does not understand, and the suburban resident as this peaceful figure who wants to (try to) live the “American Dream”. In other words, such works emphasize that the suburban dweller is the representative of what “worked” in American society (and that is why he/she will be elevated to the role of hero in the narrative), while scientists are those who “went too far” or who “failed to save the world”. It is easy to see how this perspective can foster a contrary view to scientists when they talk about intangible evils such as the issue of “global warming” or “climate change”. After all, how could a suburbanite living the “American Dream” be impacting the world’s temperatures? Could be suburbia not an ecological utopia as

planned by Ebenezer Howard (1898), but an ecological dystopia? The answer, as Kunstler (1994) and other suburban critics have already given, is: yes.

It is precisely the metaphor of the “car” – that element so essential for the suburbs – that brings us back to the causal ordering of history. The “Great Acceleration” seems like the perfect metaphor for what was happening since the 1950s – we were speeding up towards a dystopian present where the “American Dream” actually acted as fuel. It is not possible to understand the speed we are at today (and the urgent need to take our foot off the accelerator) without understanding this idea. However, this dissociation is not a simple lack of historical perspective on the part of American society. As the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out, the historicity of US society is deeply linked to the construction of its sense of identity (2001, p.197). Thus, at the moment when this identity deeply linked with the suburbs is placed under the scrutiny of global scientific opinion due to the predictions of its ecological unsustainability in the medium to long-term, the construction of a nostalgic simulacrum seems to come as one of the most immediate reactions. They can come from speeches by populist politicians chanting “Let’s Make America Great Again” or from a TV Show with young protagonists fighting beings from another dimension. Therefore, when Jennifer Fay says that the dominant mode of film production is governed by a preference for the artificial and the made over any location (2018, p. VI), the same seems to be true for the preferred urbanization model of the United States. Housing projects that are built anywhere, homogeneous, following an aesthetic of control and compliance that can be replicated anytime (Dickey, 2019). In other words, if the suburb itself appears to us as a simulacrum, this leads us to infer that suburban cinema itself can be understood as a simulacrum of a simulacrum.

It is in this sense that the suburban fantastic stands out as an excellent object of the cultural study of the Anthropocene and, even more, of the post-Great Acceleration culture. After all, it is a subgenre aimed at building a generational narrative and identity construction of a middle-class that has in these suburbs the materialization of the life project of an entire nation – in despite of their ecological problems. In *The Horror of the Anthropocene*, Sarah Dillon cites the famous researcher of fantasy, John Clute (2014) to point out how fantastic literature emerges from 1750 onwards, aware of the planet itself and its mortality, being a great candidate for the title of “literature of the Anthropocene” (2018, p.4). Based on this premise, it might be interesting to start thinking of Suburban Fantastic as a “genre of the Great Acceleration”.

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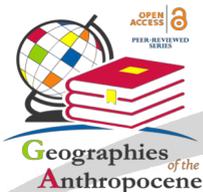
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The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. This volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of the future, and the potential of visual communication offered by cinema, documentaries and television series. In fact, fiction could represent the appropriate medium to examine the notions of the Anthropocene, being a language of global diffusion and highly evocative since it uses the engagement of narration and entertainment to convey messages of vital importance, arousing emotions in the viewer, shared awareness and, finally, responsibility. In the Anthropocene era, the challenge of climate change is not a problem of science but a failure of politics. And politics fails because the Great Acceleration has led to the good life and certainly a better life for people everywhere. Who is willing to give up the great stuff of the Great Acceleration? What would that new life look like? What kind of challenges does the future propose? Some of these questions, among others, are raised in the chapters of the present volume. The different geographical contexts and approaches, here collected, can play an important clarifying function, to reduce the complexity of (today's) social, economic, political, and technological reality, presenting a much deeper vision of reality than it appears to us, and at the same time offering us the means to navigate it. Thus, the volume deals with these issues in three sections, moving from narrative methods to the representation of ecological disasters and finally analysing a more specific topic.

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