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Analog Desires: On *Stranger Things* and the Logics of Nostalgia

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article étudie les liens entre la série *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–) et l'omniprésence de la nostalgie au sein des paysages médiatiques contemporains. La nostalgie pour les années 1980 est a priori un sujet bien défriché au sein des études cinématographiques et médiatiques; par ailleurs, la relation entre la nostalgie et le désir reste peu abordée. Comme tout désir conçu d'un point de vue psychanalytique, la nostalgie est dirigée vers un objet impossible qui est conçu en rétrospective. Après avoir comparé l'objet de la nostalgie avec l'objet-cause du désir tel qu'il est conceptualisé dans la pensée psychanalytique, cet article soutient que le désir nostalgique qui se dégage de la série se situe dans le passage de l'analogique au numérique. Il est proposé que la nostalgie au sein de *Stranger Things* émerge de la remédiation des médias et des technologies analogiques, et que sa relation avec le désir émane d'une absence rétrospectivement située au coeur des médias numériques.

Analog Desires: On *Stranger Things* and the Logics of Nostalgia

Louis-Paul Willis

While it is certainly true that contemporary popular culture and its media foster abundant ties with nostalgia, it seems that television has a particularly strong relation with the idealization of an inaccessible past. Of course, film, video games, advertisement, and online culture, to name but a few examples, are all deeply vested in nostalgic tropes; however, as Ryan Twomey notes, "[n]ostalgia has emerged as the dominant aesthetic of our time and television is a prime site for its employment."[1] This perhaps adds to Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz's observations on television's seriality as a catalyst for nostalgia; as they note, "television occupies a very important role [with regards to nostalgia], not only because of its capacity to imagine, evoke, quote, show or repeat aspects of the past, including its own, but also because it is simultaneously a medium of forgetting."[2] For instance, television can be said to be nostalgic simply because of a programming that regularly resorts to presenting reruns. It also addresses themes that are very often nostalgic. Indeed, over the last several decades, various shows have familiarized us with explorations of times previous to ours. Sitcoms from *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984) to *That 70s Show* (Fox, 1998–2006) have provided often idyllic glimpses into a not-too-

1. Ryan Twomey, "Competing Nostalgia and Popular Culture: *Mad Men* and *Stranger Things*," Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (ed.), *Uncovering* Stranger Things*: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2018, p. 40.

2. Katharina Niemeyer & Daniela Wentz, "Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series," Katharina Niemeyer (ed.), *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 130.

distant past; drama series such as *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–1993; 2021)[3] and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015) have similarly brought us through time, while also allowing us to ponder political and social issues related to the decades that precede our own. As Simon Reynolds demonstrates in his well-known *Retromania* (2011), the fascination for the immediate past has become a "dominant force in our culture";[4] he adds that "[n]ot only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is *able* to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously [the author's emphasis]."[5] This ability to access the immediate past no doubt hinges to a certain extent on the numerous possibilities opened up by digital media. In our current context, where traditional television is gradually replaced by streaming services that offer practically unlimited viewing options that range from binge-watching to the ability to re-watch content whenever one wishes to,[6] the dominant trend in cultural nostalgia and retromania incidentally seems to be aimed at a specific decade, that which stands as the final decade before what is generally referred to as the "digital revolution": the 1980s.

While the 1980s are indeed omnipresent throughout contemporary mediascapes, Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016–) stands out as an in-depth and meticulously crafted televisual take on 1980s nostalgia and has been aptly studied as such in the years since the airing of its first season. The show focuses on an abundance of topics and artifacts that make it a particularly compelling example of the fascination exerted by the 1980s within current cultural trends. Although many of these elements of the show have been substantially inventoried and studied over the past years, many questions remain with regards to the show's use of nostalgia and its impact on spectatorship and desire, with the most important one being: *where* is the logic—and object—of desire situated

3. It should be noted that a contemporary reboot of *The Wonder Years* is currently airing as of the writing of this article, with the same narrative setting in which a grown man (Don Cheadle) narrates his childhood through a nostalgic lens, focused both on his family and friends, and on the tumultuous epoch the show is set in (the late 1960s). Most interestingly, Fred Savage (who portrayed the main character, Kevin Arnold, in the original series) is acting both as director and executive producer for the reboot, which takes place in Alabama instead of the unknown midwestern suburbia of the original, and centers on a Black middle-class family.

4. Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, p. xiv.

5. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

6. The possibility to re-watch content whenever one wishes renders the traditional notion of the rerun somewhat obsolete. Streaming services offer perpetual reruns of their programming, accentuating the nostalgic aspect of immersing oneself in the pleasure of a series or show that was appreciated in a previous era.

within the spectatorial experience offered by the show, and how does nostalgia play a role in determining this desire? In what follows, I offer avenues for reflection on this specific aspect of the show. After tying nostalgia to the psychoanalytical logic of desire within film and media studies, notably through Susan Stewart's unique contribution to this question,[7] and while considering the 1980s as the last truly analog decade before the overwhelming turn to digital technologies and media, I will draw attention to the various strategies the show puts forth in order to elicit nostalgia for the 1980s as a bygone era, specifically through its digital remediations[8] of analog medialities (understood here as the formal and aesthetic elements specific to analog media). This will lead me to demonstrate how desire is situated around the very shift from the analog to the digital, and how the term "analog" designates a quality that is attributed in retrospect, from a digital standpoint. As I will suggest, nostalgia in *Stranger Things* emerges from the series' reproduction and remediation of various analog medialities, and as such it is first and foremost intermedial. Ultimately, and most importantly, its relation to desire emanates from the very lack that is retrospectively situated at the heart of digital media.

Desiring in Retrospect

The omnipresence of nostalgia within contemporary mediascapes has prompted much attention from scholars in recent years. The origin of the term, coined in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation, has been amply discussed, as has been the evolution of the term, which has progressed from the designation of a specific type of homesickness to the broader sense it carries today with regards to the

7. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993.

8. In what follows, I understand the notion of "digital remediation" as it is characterized by Dominik Schrey ("Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," Katharina Niemeyer (ed.), *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 27–38). Schrey relates the notion of the digital remediation of analog media with Laura Mark's notion of "analog nostalgia" as it is developed in *Touch* (Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media, Minneapolis*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), where she argues that such nostalgia relies on digital video's asserting of its "particular embodiment through a nostalgia for the analog," notably in its "reasserting [of] early analog techniques" (p. 148). In other words, the digital remediation of analog media represents the various tendencies that aim to digitally reproduce the imperfections of analog media, such as the visual noise of a VHS tape or the addition of visual artifacts that suggest the decay of film, to name but a select few.

fascination with—and the desire for—an inaccessible past.[9] However, while current studies on nostalgia open broad areas for fascinating research, there remains much to be said with regards to the relation between nostalgia and desire, even though both have much in common. After all, nostalgia is a fascination for a highly idealized and fetishized past, a past which of course is an ontological impossibility simply because it is constructed in retrospect. In this regard, the past as object of nostalgia bears great resemblance to the object of desire as it is conceptualized in psychoanalytic thought. While this specific aspect of nostalgia is highly understudied, Susan Stewart's *On Longing*[10] offers a rare yet important foray into the psychoanalytical underpinnings of nostalgia and its ties to the logic of desire. As early on as the first paragraph in the book's preface, Stewart specifies that "[n]arrative is seen in this essay as a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object and thereby inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic."[11] This insistence on narrative is most important for Stewart's argument insofar as it situates the crucial ties between the logic of desire and that of storytelling, all the while hinting at the semiotic foundation of desire. It is also important for the argument I will develop here, simply because nostalgia *is* narrative in that it retells the past from a retrospective vantage point. Using this focus on desire within the narrative, Stewart defines nostalgia as a "sadness without an object which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience."[12] The absence of nostalgia's object, which renders it inauthentic, as well as its constitution in retrospect, which distances it from "lived experience," is precisely what defines it as a modality within the psychoanalytic logic of desire.[13] As Stewart goes on to note, "the past [nostalgia] seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. [...] This point

9. For more on the history of nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym's important contribution (Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001) and, more recently, Katharina Niemeyer's article on nostalgia and new media (Katharina Niemeyer, "Du mal du pays aux nostalgies numériques. Réflexions sur les liens entre nostalgie, nouvelles technologies et médias," *Recherches en communication,* no. 46, 2018, p. 5–20).

10. Stewart, 1993.

11. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

13. To Stewart, nostalgia relies on narrative, on constructing an idealized past through the mediation of storytelling. This is why it is removed from what she conceives as "lived experience," which "cannot be transferred to mediated experience" (*Ibid.*, p. 22).

of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire."[14] Despite the psychoanalytical aspect of her argument being first and foremost Freudian, such reflections call for additional conceptual attention through a perspective that considers current theoretical approaches in the wake of Jacques Lacan's and Slavoj Žižek's influence on psychoanalytic film and media studies, especially as it pertains to the logic of desire.[15]

In its psychoanalytical definition, desire is much more complex than the simple wish to attain a given material object; as Todd McGowan explains, "[t]hough an object triggers desire, the subject actually enjoys not attaining its object rather than attaining it. Desire perpetuates itself not through success (attaining or incorporating the object) but through failure (submitting itself to the object)."[16] This is because desire is not centered on an ordinary, attainable object that exists in reality. The Lacanian logic of desire considers the object *and* the cause of desire—the objet *a*[17]—as an evanescent entity that does not materially exist but in fact results from the projection of the subject's desire onto a material object. In Žižek's words (as he paraphrases Lacan), the objet *a* is "that which is 'in the object more than the object itself.'"[18] The very function of the objet *a* relies on a surplus that is projected onto the object; the subject constitutes its desire based on the idea of a plenitude that is constructed entirely in retrospect. In Todd McGowan's words, the objet *a*:

> is a lost object, an object that the subject separates itself from in order to constitute itself as a desiring subject. It is the loss of the object that inaugurates the process of desiring, and the subject desires on the basis of this loss. The subject is incomplete or lacking because it doesn't have this object, though the object exists only insofar as it is missing. As such, it acts as a trigger for the subject's desire, as the object-cause of this desire, not as the desired object.[19]

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
15. For more on the influence of Lacan's thought on desire and the implications of his theory for film studies, see Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*, New York, SUNY Press, 2007; Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture, Cambridge* (MA), MIT Press, 1992.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
17. In Lacanian terminology, the objet *a* designates the object *and* the cause of the subject's desire. While I will tackle this concept succinctly in what follows, as it has much in common with the past as object of nostalgia, more can be read on this important concept in Todd McGowan's *The Real Gaze* and Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, New York, Verso, 1989, among others.
18. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006, p. 17.
19. McGowan, 2007, p. 6.

Desire itself is based on the function of *a*; it is centered on an object that, according to McGowan, "does not exist prior to being lost."[20] In our experience as desiring subjects, we are incessantly faced with the realization that the various desired objects that we eventually obtain never satisfy our desires. In this respect, any pleasure obtained from desire is tied to the (f)act of desiring in and of itself.

This aspect of desire in its psychoanalytical conception is particularly relevant in the study of nostalgia. Turning back to Susan Stewart's study, the emphasis she places on the "gap between signifier and signified" as the "place of generation for the symbolic"[21] provides her argument with a resolutely Lacanian perspective. This is perhaps most obvious when she states that "nostalgia is the desire for desire."[22] While nostalgia is a specific form of desire, it remains fully dependent on the very logic of desire and its ties to the function of the objet *a*; nostalgia is aimed at an impossible object that is conceptualized in retrospect, which is undoubtedly why André Habib states that "the object of nostalgia rarely corresponds to the reality of that object."[23] Through its narrativization, the past itself becomes the "lost object that never existed prior to being lost." As Stewart points out, "[n]ostalgia cannot be sustained without loss. For the nostalgic to reach his or her goal of closing the gap between resemblance and identity, lived experience would have to take place, an erasure of the gap between sign and signified, an experience which would cancel out the desire that is nostalgia's reason for existence."[24] In this sense, nostalgia—much like desire in the broader psychoanalytical sense— provides pleasure not through attainment of the object, but through the act of desiring (or "nostalgizing")[25] in and of itself. Desire is not aimed at obtaining its object, but rather at perpetuating itself. Because the same goes for nostalgia, studying the nostalgic trends in current popular culture and media prompts the question of what strategies are set to elicit this specific form of desire for the past? But if the object of nostalgic desire is "the past," how is it mediated in *Stranger Things*? And most importantly, how does the series articulate a desire for analog media?

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20. *Ibid.*
21. Stewart, 1993, p ix.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
23. André Habib, "Kodachrome: la couleur de la nostalgie," *Cinémas*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2021, p. 69 (our translation). Original quote: "l'objet de la nostalgie correspond rarement à la réalité de cet objet."
24. Stewart, 1993, p. 145.
25. For more on the act of "nostalgizing": Katharina Niemeyer's introduction to *Media and nostalgia*, p. 1–23."

Analog Nostalgia

In a critique of *Stranger Things* written for the *Hong Kong Review of Books* (2016) in the wake of the first season, Grafton Tanner considers the show's use of nostalgia as reactionary and devoid of any actual reflection on the 1980s as an era with its own forms of crises and antagonisms. To him, in a pop cultural context where nostalgia for the 1980s is rampant and set on presenting "a reductionist version of history," "*Stranger Things* marks the point at which 1980s pop nostalgia jumped the shark."[26] His argument seems to implicitly suggest that *Stranger Things* offers what Svetlana Boym refers to as restorative nostalgia, as opposed to reflective nostalgia. Indeed, restorative nostalgia is founded on the idea that things were better "before," a conception that necessarily (re)conceives the past through a reductionist prism, while reflective nostalgia longs for something that has been lost and cannot be recuperated. In distinguishing between these two types of nostalgia, Boym states that "[r]estorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately."[27] Restorative nostalgia is aimed at restoring the past and is not always aware of the idealization it accomplishes; reflective nostalgia keeps the past at a distance and yearns for what is implicitly impossible. While Boym does insist that these two kinds of nostalgia "are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing,"[28] Tanner's criticism of *Stranger Things* does suggest a reading of the show as revisionist; to him, it is a form of "reactionary nostalgia [that] indicates a failure of the future and a purity of the past."[29] Boym's important distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia is nevertheless absent from Tanner's discourse on the nostalgia expressed within the Duffer brothers' series.[30] As I will argue in what follows, nostalgia in *Stranger Things* cannot be reduced to a reactionary, restorative expression of the past; instead, the series' use of nostalgia attests to current nostalgic desires that are fueled by various

26. Grafton Tanner, "Essays: *Stranger Things* and the Nostalgia Industry," *Hong Kong Review of Books*, 23 November 2016, https://hkrbooks.com/2016/11/23/hkrb-essays-stranger-things-and-the-nostalgia-industry/ (accessed 29 October 2021).
27. Boym, 2001, p. xviii.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
29. Tanner, 2016.
30. It should be noted, however, that Tanner's most recent book on nostalgia, which was published while the present article was being written, does involve an argument that relies on Boym's important distinction. Grafton Tanner, *The Hours Have Lost Their Clocks: The Politics of Nostalgia*, London, Repeater Books, 2021.

facets of the shift from analog to digital media. It does not present the analog past as superior or purer but does reflectively highlight important contrasts between that past and the digital context.

While it is true of any form of nostalgic narrative that there is an idealization of the past as object of desire, including within reflective nostalgia, discourse—and signification—emerges from the very act of this idealization, and from the surplus that permeates the shift from a lived past to a past for which a nostalgic desire emerges. As Tanner pertinently writes about the series' focus:

> *Stranger Things* is not a show about people, government conspiracies, or monsters, regardless of what the synopsis says. It's about analog media technologies and the iconography of 80s mundanity. The dated telephones, televisions, walkie-talkies, furniture, fashion, and toys fill up every inch of the mise-en-scène, threatening to eclipse the actors themselves. The images of the past are the stars of the show.[31]

This observation is most accurate, and impossible to contradict: *Stranger Things* is above all a show *about* 1980s technology and media, and the nostalgia for these items as they are retrospectively represented in ways that would never have occurred within televisual or filmic images produced during that time period. Everything else in the narrative serves the very purpose of producing this nostalgia for the analog media and technologies that populate every scene within the show's three available seasons. I argue, *contra* Tanner, that this focus on dated technologies and media is not aimed at presenting a "failure of the future and a purity of the past"[32] through a reactionary nostalgic lens, even though it *has* garnered commercial success and can be perceived as the paroxysm of the current tendency for 1980s nostalgia. After all, it is the imperfections and impurities of past media and technologies that are at the heart of the show's nostalgia. Its insistence on the remediation of analog medialities carries signification because of the way it generates nostalgic desire. It is reflective, and intermedial.

The technological and media artifacts represented within *Stranger Things* through a nostalgic lens all share a common denominator: they are all analog. While CDs—perhaps the first consumer digital media used in a pop cultural context—

31. Tanner, 2016.
32. *Ibid.*

existed in the time-period portrayed by the show, they remain completely absent. On the other hand, the show displays many intertextual and intermedial references, articulating a nostalgic look at the cultural artifacts that have shaped its very aesthetic, from TV advertisements to arcade and home videogames, and from the films of John Carpenter and Stephen Spielberg to the narrative tropes of Stephen King's novels and their adaptations.[33] Overall, the extremely vast array of cultural influences for the show—displayed via posters on the wall, the framing of a scene, specific subplots, or musical references—have been broadly inventoried as early as the summer of 2016 when the show was first available for streaming on Netflix. However, much more attention should be given to the *analog* qualities of the technologies and media on display, as they tell their own story of nostalgic desire. The framing and narrative attention given to these analog artifacts exemplify nostalgia's functioning in designating an object of desire in retrospect. One of the numerous examples can be found in the episode titled "The Weirdo on Maple Street" (season 1, episode 2)[34]: Joyce (Winona Ryder) brings home a new telephone to replace the one that was damaged during her conversation with her son Will (Noah Schnapp). The scene closely resembles an "unboxing," a social media trend where a user purchases a new—and often coveted—technological product and video-documents its unpacking, all the while commenting on it. As a phenomenon first and foremost driven by social media, the unboxing extends a pre-existing fetishism for technological objects of consumption. In the scene in question, the editing insistently shows Joyce unpacking the box, removing the packing paper, finding the receiver's wire, plugging it into the base unit, assembling the device, and eventually plugging it into the wall socket. It is highly unlikely that such a scene could have existed in a media production from the 1980s as its insistent editing would have been deemed useless and redundant. While 1980s culture, and its media, did include an important focus on technological devices as fetishized objects of desire, the unboxing trend that is fueled by social media situates such objects of consumption in a very different light, one that is focused on the object and its packaging. In the setting of *Stranger Things*' insistence on nostalgia, this unboxing scene thus humorously adds an important focus on the device itself, the omnipresent beige rotary phone from a

33. Examples include *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982); *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982); Stephen King's *Firestarter* (New York, Viking Press, 1980) and It (New York, Viking Press, 1986) and their numerous film and television adaptations.

34. *Stranger Things*, 2016–, Matt Duffer & Ross Duffer, season 1, episode 2, "The Weirdo on Maple Street," aired on 15 July 2016, Netflix.

bygone era.[35] This specific example is echoed throughout the show's three seasons, putting an unlikely emphasis on such outdated analog media and devices as remote-controlled 22-inch televisions, walkie-talkies, Walkmans, ghetto blasters, incandescent Christmas lights, shortwave radios, and so on. Through their narrative presence as well as their contrast with their digital equivalents, these objects participate in forging a spectatorial desire that inscribes nostalgia in its very genesis and functioning.

It could be argued that the nostalgic display of dated technologies and media in *Stranger Things* participates in what Tim van der Heijden calls a "'technostalgic' trend in media culture."[36] While he is not the first to coin the term, he defines technostalgia as "the reminiscence of past media technologies in contemporary memory practices."[37] Others have added to the understanding of technostalgia, giving the term further clarity in recent years: André Habib defines it as "a sensible investment in a past that is embodied in a media or technology perceived as obsolete, or 'residual,'"[38] all the while making implicit ties between the term and a larger nostalgia for the analog.[39] This, of course, raises the question of the opposition between analog and digital—which I will discuss in the next section—as well as the presence of an aura (in the Benjaminian sense)[40] within analog technology, and the absence of such an aura within digital technologies and media.[41] In comparing the manifestations of technostalgia within two cultural artifacts (Johan Kramer's *Bye Bye Super 8—In Loving Memory of Kodachrome* [2010], a tribute to Kodak's

35. The scene's continuation beyond the unboxing becomes increasingly humorous after Joyce plugs the phone into the wall socket and attempts to bring the phone with her to sit in the living room, only to find out that the cord is not long enough, prompting her to bring her armchair closer to the socket. In the digital age of cordless and wifi technologies, this type of limitation is of course antiquated and an object of derision.

36. Tim van der Heijden, "Technostalgia of the Present: From Technologies of Memory to a Memory of Technologies," *European Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, September 2015, p. 104.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Habib, 2021 p. 57 (our translation). Original quote: "un investissement sensible dans un passé qui s'incarne en un média ou une technologie perçus comme obsolètes, ou 'résiduels.'"

39. Nostalgia for analog media technologies was explored as early on as in Laura Marks' *Touch* (2002).

40. In his groundbreaking text on the mechanical reproduction of works of art, Walter Benjamin differentiates traditional arts from industrial arts, arguing that the former possess an "aura" that the latter lack. This aura consists of an artwork's *hic et nunc* (here and now), its historicity and its unicity. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction [1935]," Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 217–252.

41. While this question would warrant its own investigation, one could possibly argue that the absence of an aura within the digital paradigm results from the lack of an "original" within a technology that is based on the endless reproduction of identical copies. In the digital paradigm, there is no such thing as an "original" copy.

iconographic film, and the iSupr8 smartphone app), van der Heijden differentiates two different forms of analog technostalgia that follow Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. To him, "Johan Kramer's Super 8 Kodachrome tribute clearly expresses a form of restorative technostalgia towards Super 8 as a media technology from the past,"[42] while "the iSupr8 app manifests a form of reflective technostalgia due to its remediation of the analogue media technology."[43] Important for my argument is the fact that van der Heijden ties reflective technostalgia with remediation. As Katharina Niemeyer suggests, the difference between restorative and reflective technostalgia resides in the former's attempt to safeguard the aesthetics of past media technologies by using them in the present tense, while the intentions of the latter are to reenact the codes and technologies of the past.[44] This perspective adds an important nuance to my previous argument against Tanner's criticism of the articulation of nostalgia in *Stranger Things*: the digital remediation of analog media in the show is reflective insofar as it highlights the passing of time as well as the unattainability of the artifacts from the past. This is notably done via the numerous and implicit contrasts between the media and technologies on display and their digital equivalents, known to the viewer. In this regard, *Stranger Things* presents its viewers with a meticulously detailed reappropriation of 1980s culture as well as its analog media and technologies, which are remediated within the show in what is no doubt a prime example of reflective technostalgia.

The "analog technostalgic" remediation of 1980s culture and media artifacts within *Stranger Things* is notably illustrated by the show's heavy reliance on synthwave within its musical score. As early on as August 2016 (a month after the first season's release), Molly Lambert reflected on synthwave as a musical remediation of 1980s horror film and videogame soundtracks, and on the band Tangerine Dream's lasting televisual presence as aided by their music being included in the series' first season. Important for my argument is the fact that synthwave is in and of itself a nostalgic musical genre, dedicated to producing—*in retrospect*—soundscapes reminiscent of 1980s culture. "Inspired by the early days of electronic music and artists like Giorgio Moroder, Vangelis, John Carpenter, and [...] Tangerine Dream, synthwave is a postmodern take

42. Van der Heijden, 2015, p. 114.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 114–115.
44. Niemeyer, 2018, p. 13–14.

on the '80s."[45] It is postmodern in the Jamesonian sense: it is a historicist take on a "dead style."[46] Synthwave relies on its retrospective position with regards to the object of the nostalgia it produces; it is a musical style that is founded on a digital remediation of analog soundscapes, and as such, just like the unboxing scene described previously, it is unlikely that it could have existed in the 1980s. Of course, the 1980s mark the gradual arrival of digital synthesizers on the market; yet much of synthwave's influences are soundscapes that heavily relied on analog synthesizers, which are incorporated into the contemporary and entirely digital workflow of today's digital audio workstations (DAWs). While digital synthesizers rely on digital signal processing in order to generate electronic musical sounds, analog synthesizers produce such sounds through analog circuits and variable voltage signals which provide potential imperfections that can only be *emulated* on digital synthesizers. In the recounting of a conversation with Tangerine Dream's Paul Haslinger on the imperfections of analog synthesizers, Molly Lambert notes how "other people spend endless amounts of time *trying* to make digital music sound similarly out of tune, because it's the imperfections inherent in these perfect' machines that can be so pleasurable [the author's emphasis]."[47] *Stranger Things*' synthwave music score similarly combines the analog soundscape of vintage synthesizers with the digital recording environment of contemporary DAWs. As composer Kyle Dixon states about the scoring of the series, "[t]he score is primarily analogue synths, but we aren't trying to pretend we are living in the '80s. After all we do record into computers!"[48] To a large extent, synthwave relies on remediation, just as *Stranger Things* does beyond its musical soundscapes, which is no doubt why Lambert states that "*Stranger Things* is a synthwave TV show, and as with every part of it, the soundtrack comes in quotes."[49] Nicholas Diak examines this specific aspect of the relation between *Stranger Things* and synthwave through the prism of the feedback loop, noting how a "cultural influence exists between synthwave [...] and *Stranger Things*, though a third party needs to be factored in: eighties culture and

45. Molly Lambert, "*Stranger Things* and How Tangerine Dream Soundtracked the '80s," *MTV News*, 4 August 2016, https://www.mtv.com/news/2914736/molly-lambert-on-the-german-synthrock-bands-tv-moment/ (accessed 2 November 2021).
46. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 18.
47. Lambert, 2016.
48. Kyle Dixon, quoted in Will Betts, "Scoring *Stranger Things*," *Sound on Sound*, March 2017, https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/scoring-stranger-things (accessed 17 May 2022).
49. Lambert, 2016.

aesthetics."[50] Through this feedback loop, "*Stranger Things* receives its 80s elements through two sources: directly from '80s culture and aesthetics, but also via a filtered or modified fashion from synthwave."[51] Diak adds that "[i]n turn, *Stranger Things* influences the synthwave genre,"[52] thus completing the feedback loop.

When coupled with the overwhelming presence of outdated analog media and technologies in the show, its synthwave predisposition reveals how the overall technostalgia it stages is above all aimed at analog technologies at the height of their progress, in an intermedial perspective, during the final decade before the full-fledged digital revolution of the 1990s and 2000s. Of course, everything that concerns the world of the Upside Down is entirely produced through digital special effects, and I will discuss this aspect of the show shortly. On the other hand, there are *visual* effects in the show's rendering of its 1980s reality, with one of the most striking examples being Eleven's (Millie Bobby Brown) ability to flip one of the vans that is pursuing her friends and herself. The production team wanted to avoid using computer-generated images (CGI) for this scene and resorted to filming an actual van being flipped by explosives in order to overlay that image with the rest of the images that were shot. While such an approach was much more frequent before the overreliance on CGI in the digital context, the overlaying of images was not as convincing when completed through conventional editing tables. Contemporary digital editing environments allow for a much more realistic rendering of such visual effects, notably because of the tracking and processing possibilities offered by editing and postproduction software. Such an example attests to the intervention of the digital within traditional methods of visual effects that were relied upon in the times that preceded CGI. It also attests to the show's craftmanship with regards to its remediation of 1980s analog technologies, including within its production. Thus, ironically, and just as it is the case with synthwave, many aesthetic aspects of *Stranger Things*' rendering of the final analog era rely on digital technology's remediation. In this regard, from our current perspective within the digital era, analog technology is the "other" of digital technology. It is its underside, its repressed otherness and, most importantly, the crux

50. Nicholas Diak, "Lost Nights and Dangerous Days: Unraveling the Relationship Between *Stranger Things* and Synthwave," Wetmore, 2018, p. 22.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*

of a pervasive nostalgic desire. As such, it is vested with an important surplus, which makes it a perfect object of desire.

Digital Lack

"Analog" is a quality that is applied to a given artifact in retrospect, from the contemporary perspective of our digital world. In other words, the term "analog" is necessarily enunciated from a digital context. As André Habib specifies, "analog refers less to a technology, to a circumscribed medium, than to a binary relationship with its digital equivalent [...]. A print magazine is 'analog' only compared to a web-based journal, not in itself."[53] As he goes on to exemplify, no one celebrated the "analog" qualities of vinyl records or of typewriters during the 1950s; these artifacts are deemed as "analog" from our current digital perspective. Because analog is something that is defined in retrospect, it acts as a vector for the desire articulated within analog technostalgia. This confers a surplus to analog technologies and media that is not without its ties with the surplus at the heart of the object-cause of desire, the objet *a*. This surplus is situated within the term "analog" in and of itself, as a signifier of something that eludes us from our digital standpoint. As Žižek explains, "it is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object. That 'surplus' in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is 'something more than itself', that is to say the Lacanian *objet petit a*."[54] Just like the objet *a* can be defined as that which is in the object "more than the object," as the result of the subject's projection of his or her desire onto the object and the surplus that emanates from such a projection, the quality of being "analog" is something that is projected as a surplus onto a given technological media or artifact. And just as it is the case with the objet *a*, analog is something that is lost, but which did not exist—at least not in its current conception—prior to being lost. As Dominik Schrey notes, the current trend for analog nostalgia represents (or is the result of) "the longing for what is assumed to be lost in the continuing process of digitisation that accounts for contemporary media culture's widespread romanticising and fetishising of analogue media."[55] This,

53. Habib, 2021, p. 67 (our translation). Original quote: "[l]'analogique réfère moins à une technologie, à un médium circonscrit, qu'à une relation binaire avec son équivalent numérique [...]. Une revue imprimée n'est 'analogique' que par rapport à une revue sur le Web. Elle ne l'est pas en soi."
54. Žižek, 1989, p. 104.
55. Schrey, 2014, p. 28.

perhaps, is where the nostalgic desire articulated within *Stranger Things* is most effective: in highlighting the surplus within the analog, a surplus that is based on the lack within the digital. Such a highlighting of the surplus within the analog occurs through the over-presence of dated technologies and media in the show.

Of course, this begs the question of *what* could possibly be lacking within the over-perfection inherent to digital media and technologies. Schrey discusses the debates surrounding "the consequences of digitisation and the differences between analogue and digital representation"[56] within film and media theory, and dates the fundamental debate on the issue back to the introduction of CDs in the 1980s:

> The forced displacement of analogue vinyl records and audio cassettes by the digital compact disc throughout the 1980s was one of the first moments when the scope of imminent media technological changes became evident to a broad public, creating an instant sense of nostalgia for the supplanted recording media. Many of the claims that the digital lacked something essential stem from this historical situation.[57]

He goes on to quote an article from a 1983 issue of *Rolling Stone* in which David Lander stated that "[m]aybe there's something in music that numbers and lasers can't translate."[58] In other words, digital media's self-appointed perfection is precisely the location of its lack. Not only is this the kernel of analog technostalgia and its ties to the logics of desire, but it is also at the heart of the overall cultural nostalgia for the 1980s and its culmination in *Stranger Things*. It is the location where the digital attempts to generate the aura of the analog. As Thomas Levin notes, "[t]he moment of the scratch is no longer the signal of malfunction but it is instead the almost nostalgic trace of a bygone era of mechanical reproducibility, one can say that it has become auratic."[59] These analog imperfections are digitally remediated within the series, from its synthwave soundtrack to the addition of grainy imperfections in the images of the opening titles. Jimmy Butts draws attention to the "impressive investment in the materiality of recreating the 1980s"[60] within the show; he states that "*Stranger*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 30–31.
58. Lander, *original title of the publication unknown* [1983], p. 88, quoted in Schrey, 2014, p. 31.
59. Thomas Y. Levin, "Indexicality Concrète: The Aesthetic Politics of Christian Marclay's Grammophonia [1999]," Parkett, vol. 56, p. 162, quoted in Schrey, 2014, p. 32.
60. Jimmy Butts, "The Strangest Thing About *Stranger Things*," Wetmore, 2018, p. 239.

Things (and much of 1980s technology if we think about it) is filled with distortions: buggy phones, crackling lights, bending walls, waves of snow on the television set."[61] Through their remediation, these all participate in producing nostalgia by revealing what lacks within digital perfection.

Examples of this functioning of nostalgia and desire in the series abound and attest to the intermedial aspect of the analog technostalgia that is produced within the spectatorial experience. In the first season, this can be traced to the important emphasis placed on various analog technologies, which continues into the second and third seasons. Jonathan Byer's (Charlie Heaton) penchant for photography takes us into the darkroom on several occasions; for instance, this is where Jonathan and Nancy confirm the presence of the Demogorgon behind Barbara (Shannon Purser), while developing a photograph taken just before her disappearing. Other moments in the show seem to emphasize dead analog technologies, which exert fascination because of the implicit contrast with their contemporary digital counterparts. Examples include Joyce's previously-mentioned telephone with its limiting cord, the (oversized) walkie-talkies the boys use to communicate, the cameo appearance of such devices as the Sony Walkman and various radio-cassette recorders and ghetto blasters, dated home media players such as cathode-ray televisions and record players, library index cards that predate digitized search engines, or even Eleven's reliance on radio static to mimic the experience of the sensory deprivation tank, as well as many other examples that are too numerous to be exhaustively listed here. Season two opens at the arcade, with Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) playing the game *Dragon's Lair*; while placing the characters in an arcade resolutely suggests the budding importance of digital technology in entertainment media, even more so when considering that *Dragon's Lair* was one of the first games to rely on LaserDisc technology, this specific game is especially important given the fact that it relied on traditional animation instead of digital animation, evoking the visual aesthetics of animated cartoons much more than that of the 8-bit videogame graphics from that epoch. As such, while the technology behind the arcade videogame is resolutely digital, its appearance and aesthetic are first and foremost analog, a choice that emphasizes the show's obvious intent to confront the viewer with the clash between those two paradigms.

61. *Ibid.*

Aside from the dated and often analog media artifacts that are showcased in *Stranger Things*, several cultural references participate in the show's nostalgic aim. The second season initiates references to such landmark popular films as *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) and *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985): while the four boys dress up as ghostbusters for Halloween (and argue as to who should be Dr. Venkman), Bob (Sean Astin) has the same JVC video camcorder that Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) uses, and when Joyce seems annoyed at his filming her, he tells her she "gotta get used to it. This is the future" (season 2, episode 1).[62] This scene is shown via a remediation of the analog aesthetic of the VHS home movie, in yet another manifestation of analog technostalgia within the series. The third season of course also contains such references (including scenes from *Back to the Future* that play in the background). But most importantly, in the episode "The Bite" (season 3, episode 7)[63], when Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) opens a can of New Coke, a significant argument erupts between him and Mike (Finn Wolfhard) as to whether the original Coke is better than the New Coke—an argument that ends up implicating John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (1982)[64] and, overall, whether a remake can be superior to the original opus. Although it lasts less than a minute, this argument attests to the series' self-awareness as it epitomizes the importance of the remediation at the heart of its analog technostalgia. Upon defiantly drinking his can of New Coke in front of his bewildered friends, Lucas describes the beverage as "sweeter, bolder, better" (a phrase that highly resembles a Coke slogan); this seems to imply a metanarrative comment on *Stranger Things* itself, and its reflective recreation of the 1980s: by locating our nostalgic desire within a bygone analog era, the object of this desire is made out to be "sweeter, bolder, and better" than the actual 1980s, only because the object is constructed in retrospect, through digital remediation. The series' insistence on dead analog technologies and media allows us to locate the object of desire within the retrospective constitution of a digital lack.

62. *Stranger Things*, 2016–, Matt Duffer & Ross Duffer, season 2, episode 1: "MADMAX," aired on 27 October 2017, Netflix.

63. *Stranger Things*, 2016–, Matt Duffer & Ross Duffer, season 3, episode 7: "The Bite," aired on 4 July 2019, Netflix.

64. Carpenter's *The Thing* is in fact a remake of *The Thing From Another World*, Christian Nyby, 1951.

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Studying media expressions of nostalgia requires situating nostalgia itself as a form of desire that relies on narrative. In other words, to long for the past, this past must be narrativized and, through such mediation, turned into an object of desire. By tying the study of nostalgia to Susan Stewart's original foray into these questions, and by resituating them along the lines of the logic of desire as it is conceived in contemporary Lacanian film and media studies, it is my hope that this article allowed certain unexplored questions to be addressed. Nostalgia is a firmly implanted cultural tendency, and the current nostalgic fascination for the 1980s is of particular interest insofar as it epitomizes the importance as well as the impact of the shift from analog media to digital media. The focus on the contrast between dated analog media and technologies and their contemporary digital counterparts, and the desire that emerges from this contrast and its retrospective construction of the essence of the analog, says much about our current cultural and media context. *Stranger Things* cleverly tapped into this widespread tendency.

Ultimately, as I have argued, the crux of 1980s nostalgia remains the *digital* remediation within *Stranger Things*' analog setting. This is where—and how—the show produces nostalgia as a form of spectatorial desire. Just like the iSupr8 app analyzed by van der Heijden, *Stranger Things* offers a reflective technostalgia by using digital technology to remediate analog media and technologies. The series heavily relies on digital post-production to generate its analog technostalgia but also in its staging of the "Upside Down," where digital effects create the particles that float in the air, and CGI are used to produce the Demogorgons and other creatures. While the intervention of digital technology is mostly subtle in the series' main narrative setting, the Upside Down relies exclusively and ostensibly on it. This emphasizes the binary opposition between the analog and the digital; whereas analog incarnates otherness for the digital, the Upside Down represents the ultimate incarnation of otherness in *Stranger Things*. Yet the Upside Down *is digital;* it is where the analog past meets its own unknown otherness. Inversely—and most importantly—as Jimmy Butts aptly puts it, "[t]he 1980s is the haunting monster for the contemporary audience,

our Upside Down [emphasis added],"[65] our analog otherness. As the object of our contemporary analog technostalgia, the 1980s fascinate us. Nonetheless—just as it is the case with the object-cause of desire, the objet *a*—they are perhaps best appreciated from a digital distance, in retrospect.

65. Butts, 2018, p. 236-237.

Analog Desires: On *Stranger Things* and the Logics of Nostalgia

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Abstract

This paper examines the relation between *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–) and the omnipresence of nostalgic tropes within current mediascapes. Nostalgia for the 1980s is already a well-examined subject within film and media studies, yet there remains much to say about the ties between nostalgia and desire. As with any desire considered from a psychoanalytic standpoint, nostalgia is focused on an impossible object that is conceived in retrospect. After comparing the object of nostalgia with the functioning of the object-cause of desire as it is conceptualized in psychoanalytic thought, this paper argues that the nostalgic desire expressed within the series is situated around the very shift from the analog to the digital. It is argued that nostalgia within *Stranger Things* emerges from the remediation of analog media and technologies, and that its relation to desire emanates from the very lack that is retrospectively situated at the heart of digital media.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les liens entre la série *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–) et l'omniprésence de la nostalgie au sein des paysages médiatiques contemporains. La nostalgie pour les

années 1980 est a priori un sujet bien défriché au sein des études cinématographiques et médiatiques; par ailleurs, la relation entre la nostalgie et le désir reste peu abordée. Comme tout désir conçu d'un point de vue psychanalytique, la nostalgie est dirigée vers un objet impossible qui est conçu en rétrospective. Après avoir comparé l'objet de la nostalgie avec l'objet-cause du désir tel qu'il est conceptualisé dans la pensée psychanalytique, cet article soutient que le désir nostalgique qui se dégage de la série se situe dans le passage de l'analogique au numérique. Il est proposé que la nostalgie au sein de *Stranger Things* émerge de la remédiation des médias et des technologies analogiques, et que sa relation avec le désir émane d'une absence rétrospectivement située au cœur des médias numériques.

Biographical note

Louis-Paul Willis is Associate Professor at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue. His main research interests revolve around feminist and psychoanalytic film/media studies as well as narratology. He is the co-editor of *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader* (2014), has acted as guest editor for journals such as *CiNéMAS* and *Écranosphère*, and has published in various journals and collected editions.