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"How about . . . We Watch a Scary Movie Together"

Paying Tribute

The Overhead Spiral

Thomas Carrasco (Shea Wigham), a Department of Defense auditor, suspects that there is a lot more to uncover at the mysterious Homecoming Transitional Support Center, a secretive government facility ostensibly set up for transitioning soldiers into civilian life. When he begins investigating an anonymous complaint about Homecoming, he does not know that it is a gigantic live-in complex, funded by the Geist Group, intended to medicate veterans in order to erase their wartime memories and send them back to the frontlines. Though Carrasco has no understanding of the scope of Homecoming's ethical and legal violations, his hunch tells him to pursue the investigation. Instead of hitting "confirm" on his computer report that would dismiss the complaint, Carrasco pauses, uncertain that he has done all he can to justify such a resolution. Following his instinct, he exits his highly populated, cubicled office and walks down a square-shaped spiral staircase to the archives in the basement. Filmed with a descender rig, an Escheresque overhead shot follows his descent. In the closed frame, all that is visible is Carrasco's diminishing body zigzagging down the stairs. As he gets closer to the bottom, so does the camera, as if the vertiginous camera is just as determined as Carrasco to expose Homecoming's secrets. But the bottom is not reached quickly. Indeed, the stairs seem to be unending (Figure 1.1). Though located in a small interior space, there is grandeur in this moment. In qualitative terms, it can certainly be called cinematic.

What also makes it cinematic is its unmissable resemblance to films that conspicuously use the overhead shot in this way. In fact, *Homecoming* (Prime, 2018–present) appears to be performing memory work, particularly in its visual aesthetic, by recalling iconic cinematic moments that have

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Figure 1.1. *Homecoming* (Eli Horowitz and Micah Bloomberg, 2018–present)

used the overhead shot to reconfigure spatial orientation. These recollections are explicit and unmissable, and they seem intended to pay tribute to some paradigmatic films. *Homecoming* invokes this stylistic trope in a reverential manner throughout the series. Whether on an office or an outdoor fountain, the camera looks down on spaces again and again. Given that the series is a psychological thriller, this recurring shot works well to create a sense of dread or paranoia and interrogate levels of institutional power while overtly marking its relationship with cinema. Think of the top-down composition that reduces gallant journalists into insignificant specks at the Library of Congress in Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), or the extreme overhead shot looking down on Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro) sitting on a couch in a trance, after a massive bloodbath at a brothel near the end of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Looking down on the protagonists gives their psychological bewilderment a material dimension. *Homecoming* relies on this motif to minimize the investigator's authority, destabilizing

any unwavering interpretation of reality. The more Carrasco tries to unearth Homecoming's secrets, the shot seems to argue, the more engulfed he will become in the political intrigue.

Out of all the films it pays tribute to, *Homecoming*'s generalized sense of hovering paranoia most distinctly associates it with Hitchcock's canon, which is replete with elegant overhead compositions. In particular, *Homecoming* appears to be tipping its hat to *Vertigo* (1958), where an overhead shot in a bell tower creates the illusion of the bottom falling out. John Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), a former police detective who is forced into retirement due to acrophobia, is hired by Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) to follow his wife Madeleine (Kim Novak) around the San Francisco area. Gavin claims to be fearful that Madeleine is suicidal. As Scottie trails Madeleine, he falls in love with her, although this entire plotline is a setup, since Gavin is using Scottie to make his wife's murder look like a suicide. Even Madeleine is being played by a lookalike who serves as Gavin's accomplice. At the Mission San Juan Bautista, Scottie and "Madeleine" confess their love for each other, but she runs up the church's bell tower, knowing he won't be able to stop her. As he follows her up the stairs, his vertigo kicks in, and Hitchcock's renowned trombone shot creates what Richard Allen describes as "the spiral of time down which the hero travels or is drawn as he is fascinated and lured by the object of desire."[1] After Madeleine's body falls to its demise, another overhead shot shows Scottie retreating in guilt. Comparing Figures 1.1 and 1.2 reveals that the series locates Carrasco in the exact spot as Scottie. Though

Figure 1.2. *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Carrasco's descent is for knowledge and not for love, *Homecoming*'s overhead shot produces a similar spatial warp. The ground floor appears to recede, as if he is falling to the limitless bottom, implying that there are many more layers to this investigation than previously imagined.

Further, *Homecoming*'s recreation of this overhead shot places it within a long line of texts that use it not only to honor Hitchcock but also to insert themselves into the Hitchcockian tradition. Brian De Palma is the most obvious candidate in this category, as he recalls and recalibrates the overhead shot (among other Hitchcockian means) again and again. There are myriad examples of overhead shots going at least as far back as *Carrie* (1976). Among the most distinguished is the shot of Jack Terry (John Travolta) in *Blow Out* (1981). Terry is a sound effects technician who unsuspectingly records audio evidence of an assassination; once he realizes the magnitude of the conspiracy, an overhead shot shows him ripping apart his own shambolic studio. Beyond that tribute, De Palma's overhead shots often occur in stairwells, as in *Mission: Impossible* (1996), when special agent Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) walks up a circular spiral staircase by himself. Unlike Hitchcock's relatively stable shot, De Palma's camera spins around a half circle as Hunt ascends the stairs, making it look like a ring has been tightened in a labyrinthine maze. But this maze is not existential, like Scottie's, and it will eventually unravel to show that Hunt is not a traitor. Other filmmakers have operated similarly. In Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), for instance, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), an investment banker who is also a serial killer, chases one of his victims out of an apartment. As she flees down a spiral staircase, an absurdly slow overhead shot shows Bateman aiming and dropping a chainsaw on her. The camera whirls around here too, making the staircase look like a series of stacked triangles. But for all its suspense, the scene ends anticlimactically, because the chainsaw in fact hits its target. Harron's appears to be a sardonic take on *Vertigo*. In Griffin Dunne's *Practical Magic* (1998), sisters Sally (Sandra Bullock) and Gillian Owens (Nicole Kidman) are witches whose lovers appear destined to untimely deaths. They grow up in an old Victorian house, and overhead shots showcase its spiral staircase that goes from the attic to a lighthouse-like tower—without investing the staircase with any sense of dread. In Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), PreCrime Captain John Anderton (Tom Cruise) is accused of a future murder, and when he flees, a series of roving overhead shots around the fire escape of an apartment building captures how he evades the intricate judicial network. What these brief examples demonstrate is how films acknowledge their debt

to Hitchcock's overhead spiral. But they are not recreating its intensity or its drive. In fact, these recreations foreground and then thwart our desire to go back. *Homecoming* does this too, for the moment's uncertainties are simulated. Though he occupies the same spot as Scottie in the frame, Carrasco does actually get to the bottom of his case. The series turns out not to be as open-ended as *Vertigo*. It deploys Hitchcock's signature device to create a texturally dense scene, placing itself within the rich Hitchcockian tradition. It also sparks a reflection on what it means to be a cinematic detective. In intertextual terms, we can define this love-tied-up-with-longing-combined-with-reflection as homage.

On Homage

There is an intriguing anecdote that shows how homage is understood (or misunderstood) in Hollywood. From the start, Jack Warner was not a fan of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). He believed that gangster films were passé by the late 1960s, and he didn't get along with the movie's young star, Warren Beatty. Warner, as the story goes, did not react well during a screening of a rough cut at his home. Beatty tried to justify the film by suggesting that it was an homage to the studio's gangster films from the 1930s. This justification did not go over well, and Warner reportedly yelled out: "What the fuck's an homage?"[2] It makes sense that an old-timer like Warner would have trouble understanding how a movie pays homage. But he isn't the only one who is unclear about the term. There is plenty of ambiguity about what homage means.

In popular usage, homage is associated with reverence, adulation, even worship. "How Pixar Pays Homage to Classic Cinema," a short piece posted by Sophia Stewart on filmschoolrejects.com, is representative of this understanding of homage.[3] Stewart argues that Pixar films from *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) to *Coco* (Lee Unkrich, 2017) rise above typical kids' animations with clever allusions to classic films that adults are bound to recognize and appreciate. Some of these references may be funny, like *Finding Nemo*'s (Andrew Stanton, 2003) "Here's Brucey" line alluding to *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). But many more of them, like the tribute to *Vertigo* in *Toy Story 2* (John Lasseter, 1999), are meant to "demonstrate a profound appreciation for cinema itself, and assure us that Pixar intends to honor and build from the great pantheon of films." For Stewart, *Vertigo* lends cultural

legitimacy to Pixar films for it serves two functions: it pays tribute to the classic film and uses that tribute to qualitatively elevate the new film. In other words, for critics like Stewart, popular films that refer to classic films reverentially are paying homage. In popular parlance, then, homage signifies a respectful and recognizable appropriation of well-known masterworks.

This notion of homage as affectionate reverence is derived from its etymological roots. The word came into usage in Middle English, and it was borrowed from Norman French. Homage then signified a feudal ceremony that allowed a vassal to acknowledge his allegiance publicly to his king or lord. The vassal openly submitted himself in worship of and service to his master, who promised to protect him. In feudal law, it also denoted a system of land tenure whereby a tenant paid homage to their lord. Over time, homage came to imply an acknowledgment of superiority and the act of expressing respect toward such superior authority. In *Paradise Regained*, for instance, when Satan tries to tempt Jesus with an elaborate banquet, he flatters him with: "All these are Spirits of Air, and Woods, and Springs / Thy gentle Ministers, who come to pay / Thee homage, and acknowledge thee thir Lord."[4] The spirits are not literal vassals paying homage but airy creatures who are supposedly there to show respect.[5] In *Essays on the Laws of Nature*, John Locke uses the term to denote faithful worship: "For God, being the maker of both the body and the soul, requires the homage and worship of both the body and the soul."[6] In American English too, homage takes on similar connotations. In "Wealth," Ralph Waldo Emerson famously suggests that "There is no country in which so absolute a homage is paid to wealth."[7] Emerson is speaking about England, and his use of homage works as a critique of what he sees as a British obsession with materialism. In these examples, homage becomes transformed from its original meaning, now applying to any gesture of deference. Starting in the twentieth century, homage comes to be used for aesthetic criticism, as a way of discussing how a particular work of art shows respect for an established work of art by incorporating stylistic or thematic elements from that recognized classic. Writing about how Johannes Brahms borrows a portion of a chorale from Bach, Philipp Spitta calls it "a sort of homage to Bach."[8] This borrowing from Bach is overt; in fact, it is directly signaled in Brahms's piece. In broad aesthetic terms, what distinguishes homage from other forms of imitation is that its primary objective is to pay tribute.

This meaning of homage as tribute has persisted in film and media criticism too. Scholars have employed it for describing a wide range of cinematic marks of reverence, from Michel's (Jean-Paul Belmondo) imitation of

Humphrey Bogart's mannerisms in Godard's *Breathless* (1960) to Quentin Tarantino's diverse borrowings from American, French, Hong Kong, Italian, and Japanese films. But these examples differ dramatically from each other, so it is hard to say what specifically characterizes the term—or, more significantly, how it can be used critically. Indeed, although it is used extensively, homage is surprisingly undertheorized. As far as I know, there are no book-length studies on or even many theoretical essays devoted entirely to the subject. When it appears in critical scholarship, it is assumed that everyone means the same thing—loosely, a reverence for the source text. But does that reverence imply direct imitation? Or is it a reworking of the hypotext? Can homage only be paid to canonical or well-known films? Or can allusions to unfamiliar or non-canonical films also be considered homage? And considering this chapter's primary concern, how does intermedial homage work? Given how many questions still surround homage, we might agree with Jack Warner's rhetorical question about the meaning of homage itself. For whether that tale about *Bonnie and Clyde*'s initial screening is true or apocryphal, it illustrates the need for developing a fuller understanding of homage. More importantly, it reminds us that we can trace homage's admiration back to a particular moment in American film history. For Beatty's defense of *Bonnie and Clyde* as homage is not coincidental. It is grounded in the transformation of American cinema in the 1960s.

As an idea, homage was rarely used to describe intertextual relationships among American films or filmmakers during the studio era. Its usage gained momentum with the elevation of the auteur. Until then, producers had been in charge, especially in Hollywood. Producers had no pretensions of being artists, and they would "revel in their untutoredness, often pretending to be illiterate, valorizing a more intuitive approach to film-making based on almost magical concepts such as 'gut instinct.' "[9] When the critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma* began writing lovingly yet polemically about Hollywood films in the 1950s, they started treating cinema, even and especially popular cinema, as an art form. When this treatment became codified into *la politique des auteurs*, certain directors became elevated as artists—and, as in other art forms, auteurs were capable of dialoguing with other artists by being inspired by them. Homage, then, became a crucial way for younger directors to correspond with canonical or beloved filmmakers. French New Wave directors honored Hollywood cinema by lovingly quoting from or alluding to popular American films. François Truffaut even called his early work an "affectionate homage to American cinema."[10] When the

Hollywood studio system came to an end, and it was replaced by a younger generation of radical filmmakers, homage became a standard way of paying tribute. This is what Warren Beatty was likely trying to explain to Jack Warner. Because, starting in the late 1960s, American filmmakers "wore their erudition in matters cinematic proudly and indulged in homage, reference and intertextuality."[11] Since then, homage has been used regularly for demonstrating ciné-literacy as well as ciné-love.

Noël Carroll is among the earliest film scholars to notice this tendency of American cinema after the 1960s. Carroll argues that what "distinguishes the cinema of the seventies and eighties [and beyond] from every other decade in Hollywood's past" is allusionism, which is a broad term for filmmaking strategies that expect viewers to "recall past films" and understand that cinematic recollection "as part of the expressive design of the new films."[12] He traces this "boom of allusionism" to the popularity of American auteurism, which led to "an unprecedented awareness of film history" among young filmmakers and audiences alike.[13] One characteristic of allusionism that Carroll outlines is homage. He points out that some films rely on "memorialization" or "the loving evocation through imitation and exaggeration."[14] In this category, he includes films like George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) and Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), which function "as remembrances of things past, of comic books and serials, of times of which it is said that good and evil were sharply cleaved."[15] These are not remakes of films like *Tim Tyler's Luck* (1937) but loving recreations of old B-movie adventure sagas, an idea that will be revisited in the next section. Though the newer films are much bigger in scale, they retain their prototypes' "plot implausibilities" and "oxymoronic, surrealist juxtapositions," which "are not forsaken but defended as homage duly paid to the very source of charm in the originals."[16] An expression of ciné-love is at the heart of Carroll's understanding of homage. But he also offers an interesting revision of the widely held definition of homage. His examples of the B-movie adventure sagas as source texts for filmmakers like Lucas and Spielberg suggest that homage, at least in visual media, does not limit itself to films that are considered classics. Any film, as long as it functions as an object of love or adulation, can be paid homage to. Richard Dyer has pointed out that homage is "by definition evaluative," because "valuation is built inescapably into the very form itself."[17] Paying homage, in other words, is a way of evaluating and thereby elevating any beloved text, which sometimes means transforming a non-canonical text into a cult classic.

But, as Thomas Leitch shows, love and affirmative evaluation are more complex than they might seem. Like Carroll, Leitch traces the roots of homage back to the 1960s. He argues that though homages were more common in Europe—particularly as seen in the French New Wave's taking of "American films more seriously than most Americans"—"it is only with the entrance of film into the curriculum of American universities that the ideal of the homage emerge[d] full-blown."[18] Academization of cinema allowed for the development of a film canon or a widely accepted catalog of classic films that would be worthy of paying homage to. For Leitch, homages are primarily a matter of honoring classic texts. Homages, he argues, "situate themselves as secondary texts whose value depends on their relation to the primary texts they gloss."[19] His key example is Woody Allen, whose homages to Ingmar Bergman "show the impulse toward tribute and celebration at its purest, for Allen never gives a sense of wanting to transcend his masters."[20] In this type of adulatory homage, the latter text simply borrows from the earlier text and makes its borrowing visible, without trying to revise or outdo it. This understanding of homage is similar to Carroll's, because homage here serves as a valorization of the source text. It equates homage with emulation. However, Leitch also pushes the concept of homage further by offering a counterexample. He notes that in Brian De Palma's homages to Hitchcock, "the celebratory impulse [is] complicated by an impulse to develop, to elaborate, and . . . to combine motifs from the original films in a way that marks the frontiers of the homage."[21] De Palma imitates and honors Hitchcock's work, as we saw earlier, but he also transforms it. Thus, in addition to serving a valorizing function, homage can revise and thereby ask us to reflect on the source text.

More recently, it is this latter connotation of homage as valorization with revision that has gained traction. In his discussion of how independent (indie) films draw on and differ from mainstream American cinema, Michael Z. Newman uses the term in that manner. He argues, for example, that the Coen brothers' "*homages* to classic American tough-guy, hard-boiled literature and *film noir* . . . work on several levels: as suspenseful storytelling, as allusive re-creations of classic forms, and as commentary on their appeals and on Hollywood representation."[22] Homages, in other words, are not blank valorizations of classic texts. Even when they are being honored, earlier texts can be investigated, commented upon, even challenged. Laura McMahon makes a similar argument about Rainer Werner Fassbinder's tributes to Jean-Luc Godard, who early on honored

classical Hollywood himself. A gangster film like Fassbinder's *Love Is Colder than Death* (1970) foregrounds its status as an imitation of an imitation. McMahon defines this form of paying homage as "a relation of affectionate inhabitation and critical distance, of loving imitation and radical reworking."[23] Fassbinder neither copies Godard precisely nor does he desire to replace him. Godard's films occupy a privileged position born out of love in Fassbinder's films, which pay homage to the former by engaging in a historically conscious rewriting of them. Of course, as the introductory chapter has illustrated, no imitation is ever an exact copy. Every copy exhibits this desire to rewrite cinematic predecessors critically. But, as later chapters will demonstrate, other types of imitations do not necessarily revere their source texts in the way that homages do; their forms of rewriting do not overtly signal affection for them. What distinguishes homage is that here love is balanced with critique, adulation with contemplation, adoring proximity with critical distance. Homage reveres its object of love but then analyzes its privileges and critiques its omissions.

It is this crucial paradigm that allows us to tell homage apart from other allusions or references to loved cinematic objects. *Gilmore Girls* (WB 2000-06, CW 2006-07), for instance, has a penchant for quoting widely and voraciously from the movies, but most of those moments work as suggestive winks that don't build toward an analytical engagement with cinema. Here is one example: after complaining over drinks with Rory (Alexis Bledel) and Lane (Keiko Agena) about their boyfriends, Paris (Liza Weil) caves and decides to call her boyfriend Doyle (Danny Strong) ("To Live and Let Diorama," 5.18). Having anticipated this possibility, Rory is holding on to Paris's wallet and cellphone. So, Paris asks strangers on a quaint street in Stars Hollow for fifty cents to use a payphone. The scene plays out as a nod to John Cassevetes's *A Woman under the Influence* (1974), where Mabel (Gena Rowlands), an emotionally unstable mother, waits for her children's school bus to arrive and asks strangers for the time on a busy street in Los Angeles. Her erratic accosting of passersby records the disintegration of a woman whose mysterious madness is never fully explained. As soon as her kids arrive, she changes dramatically into a doting mother, and her kids are equally thrilled to see her. This scene captures the psychological challenges of motherhood and domesticity, especially in the wake of women's liberation. The scene in *Gilmore Girls* echoes Cassavetes's film visually, as the camera pans back and forth unsteadily, then cuts unevenly between shots, to capture Paris's inebriated wanderings. But it does no more than allude to the cinematic moment, as Paris has nothing in

common with Mabel. Nor are her troubles with men contextualized in larger cultural terms through this intertextual reference. Whereas Mabel's peculiar movements allow us to feel her agitation over her circumscribed situation, Paris's antics are played for laughs. Here is an inebriated young woman who is merely looking for spare change, so that she can reunite with her boyfriend. This callback is at best a hidden gem for fans of the show and film. Nothing will come of it. I would argue that this may be an instance of cinematic tribute, but it isn't really homage.

By contrast, let's take an example from *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011–present), an anthology drama that pays homage to the history of horror cinema, from classic horror films like Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) to more contemporary horror films like Takashi Shimizu's *The Grudge* (2004). The show returns again and again to Tobe Hooper's grindhouse gorefest *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), about a family of cannibals that tortures its victims and makes their body parts into furniture and clothing. The very first episode opens with a low-angle tracking shot that reveals a house with overgrown bushes and vines, explicitly similar to the one that introduces the Sawyer family farm in Hooper's film ("Pilot," 1.1). The homage continues in the next shot of a wind chime made of bones, eerily reminiscent of the mobiles made of bones and teeth in the Sawyer house. What does it mean, the show asks, to relocate the horrors of cannibalism found deep in the Texas countryside to thriving Los Angeles? How do we view terrors attributed to the rural in an urban setting? The second season's serial killer, Bloody Face (Zachary Quinto), also pays tribute to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Like his predecessor Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), Bloody Face is a psychopathic killer who wears a mask stitched together from human skin and teeth. Instead of a crazed hillbilly cannibal, however, the killer is a respected psychiatrist who is supposed to treat the mentally and criminally insane. The show asks us to consider the implications of this ironic reversal. Though it admires Hooper's film, *American Horror Story* does not reproduce it. *American Horror Story*'s homage looks like a reincarnation, where the ghosts of the earlier film return, but in altered form, their familiar strangeness making them doubly unnerving. Indeed, we might say that estranging a beloved object is a key feature of homage. Unlike Cassavetes's film, which remains a minor hypotext in *Gilmore Girls*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* becomes a sort of ur-text for *American Horror Story*. The multiple returns evince a love of, even an obsession with, particular moments and scenes from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* that can never be truly recreated. By drawing on the dynamic of familiarity and

estrangement, the show uses its homage to Hooper's film for meditating on the notion of horror in American visual culture.

Given all that, homage can be seen as an act of reflective love. It looks back wistfully and critically. This kind of love brings homage closer to a gesture of what Svetlana Boym defines as reflective nostalgia. Writing about how nostalgia, which translates as a longing for returning home, functions in national and personal memory, Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia aims to restore the past or the lost home and "ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time."[24] Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, "savors details and memorials signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself" by realizing that homecoming is actually impossible.[25] It enables us to critique our desire for going back, showing that "longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from . . . critical reflection."[26] In other words, reflective nostalgia embraces the past but also creates enough distance to analyze it judiciously. Homage is similarly characterized by a desire to repossess the loved object, combined with the need to critically separate from and sometimes to surpass it. In serial drama in particular, homage involves recreating a moment or motif or style from a cherished film. But the recreation does not restore the cinematic past, as we have already seen with the examples from *Homecoming* as well as *American Horror Story*. Rather, serial drama's tribute to cinema is productive, as it enables us to reflect on the intermedial relationship between television and cinema.

In the next section, we will consider an example of extended homage, where an entire series evolves into an homage to American cinema. Among the most referentially rich of all serial dramas, *Stranger Things* chronicles how a group of young friends deals with supernatural forces and secret scientific experiments in their fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. *Stranger Things* meticulously recreates the 1980s, though it is far more interested in resurrecting the movies of the '80s (and beyond) than the actual decade itself. As Kevin J. Wetmore argues, "*Stranger Things* reduces, reuses, and recycles the '80s and the pop culture that decade produced."[27] Though the show is influenced by the era's books, music, television shows, and games, it is cinema that most influences its aesthetic and ideological design. And it is to cinema that the show pays a protracted homage. Showrunners Matt and Ross Duffer present themselves as film fans. They talk about watching and rewatching their favorite movies on VHS in the '80s and '90s, scouring video rental stores to

find older films, making movies together since they were in third grade, and attending Chapman University as film geeks. When they discuss the process for creating *Stranger Things*, the Duffer brothers begin by talking about "the stuff [they] fell in love with."[28] Here's how they explain where they started: "So the idea was, could we take [*sic*]—what Spielberg did in the 80s was that he took these kind of B-movie ideas, like flying saucers or killer sharks, and he elevated it. In this new medium, can we go back and try and do a little of what he did, take something that's been relegated to being cheesy, and can you do an elevated version of that?"[29] The impetus for *Stranger Things* may be the desire to recreate a personal favorite like Spielberg in the way that Spielberg himself once did with his own loved objects. But this recreation goes well beyond that. What the Duffer brothers want to create is an "elevated version" or a better version of their film favorites in the "new medium" of web television. Unpacking how *Stranger Things* functions as an elevated version of beloved films, primarily but not solely from the eighties, will enable us to see how homage works as an intertextual approach, or how paying homage implies balancing admiration with critique, recreation with inversion and, at times, subversion.

"Did You See This Thing Again?"

We get hints of how *Stranger Things* sees itself paying homage to cinema from its earliest paratext: the show bible used by the Duffer brothers to sell the show to networks. The show bible is a pitching tool used by prospective creators, outlining the new show's storyline, themes, and inspirations. For *Stranger Things*, then titled "Montauk," the show bible starts with a book cover that resembles an old Stephen King paperback, with an abandoned bike in the foreground and a bucolic but eerie small town in the distance. The introduction lists texts that this show invokes: "The feeling of fear and wonder as Elliot approaches a fog-drenched shed in E.T. . . . the helpless dread that consumes Chief Brody as he watches a boy and his raft dragged under the water by an unseen monster in Jaws . . . the crackling television in Poltergeist . . . the horror of a cackling clown in It . . . the friendship and adventure of Stand by Me." It sums up the outline with this pitch: "emotional, cinematic, rooted in character, Montauk is a love letter to the golden age of Steven Spielberg and Stephen King—a marriage of human drama and supernatural fear."[30] In sketching what the show will be about, the pitch book

emphasizes its look and feel rather than its plot. In listing its cinematic predecessors, it focuses on emotional details like "the feeling of fear and wonder" or "the helpless dread." And it boldly declares itself as "a love letter to the golden age of Stephen Spielberg and Stephen King." The entire series is constructed out of its love for primarily eighties popular American cinema. Cinematic homage is at its core.

The show's love for this Spielberg-King-Carpenter era can be seen as part of a broader popular trend. Due to Hollywood's investment in remakes and reboots, there have been a number of remakes of eighties genre films in the last decade, including Marcus Nispel's *Friday the 13th* (2009), Samuel Bayer's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), Craig Brewer's *Footloose* (2011), and Gil Kenan's *Poltergeist* (2015). Remakes of films like David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1983), and Lester's *Firestarter* (1984) have been announced or are in development. Television has also shown tremendous interest in reconstructing the eighties, with series like *The Americans* (FX, 2013–18), *Halt and Catch Fire* (AMC, 2014–17), and *GLOW* (Netflix, 2017–19) exploring specific aspects of the decade, such as Cold War espionage, the personal computer revolution, and syndicated women's pro wrestling respectively. A little earlier in the new millennium, VH1 created shows like *I Love the 70s* (2003), *I Love the 80s* (2002), and *I Love the 90s* (2004), which playfully reviewed films, television shows, and music videos of those decades. Those shows seek to remind us of the peculiar popular culture details of each decade. Whereas the remakes and period television shows tend to recreate the past a little more seriously, the *I Love* series looks back with a sense of campy fondness. Its primary approach is to gently mock earlier popular culture, but there is no space for contemplation. *Stranger Things*'s recreation, on the other hand, is rooted in reflection. Its backward gazing is not blissfully nostalgic, simply meant for reconnecting viewers "with childhood memories of friendship, riding bikes, exploring the neighborhood surrounds, and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*."[31] It is true that *Stranger Things* affectionately brings the era back to life, pausing to foreground period objects, from brick-sized walkie-talkies to BMX bikes to rotary dial phones to the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) board game. But its true object of love is cinema, which it valorizes and revises, emulates and overshadows.

Cinematic love is woven into the series from the start. After a heart-pounding, tone-establishing opening, where an unidentified scientist is chased by a mysterious creature at Hawkins Lab, the pilot slows down to introduce the lead characters by paying homage to Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The*

Extra Terrestrial (1982) ("Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers," 1.1). Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), Mike Wheeler (Finn Woldhard), Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo), and Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin) are conducting a D&D campaign in Will's basement. We learn shortly that they've spent ten hours on the operation, which they'd spent weeks planning. The dimly lit basement is reminiscent of the kitchen in *E.T.*, where Elliot (Henry Thomas) isn't allowed to join the game of D&D that his older brother Michael (Robert MacNaughton) and his friends are immersed in. They order a pizza. When Elliot goes outside to pick it up, he hears some rattling noises. Instead of heading in, the camera pans right, and a wide shot shows Elliot walking toward their tool shed. It's a beautiful, fog-drenched night in the San Fernando Valley, and a sliver of the moon illuminates the backyard. Elliot walks slowly, drops the pizza on the lawn, and stands outside his shed, tossing a ball in. To his absolute astonishment, the ball gets tossed back to him. Spooked, he runs into his house, calling for his mother Mary (Dee Wallace) and yelling, "There's something out there!" His mother is in the kitchen, and though she doesn't believe him, they all rush outside to the shed, armed with a flashlight and a couple of kitchen knives. They find nothing but some footprints, which Mike attributes to coyotes, and everyone heads back in, snapping at poor Elliot for having ditched the pizza. After everyone clears out, the camera returns to the shed, tracking in slowly to reveal three long alien fingers grabbing its doorframe. The creature isn't fully exposed in this shot; in fact, it appears to be hiding from the boys. Around two in the morning, Elliot heads out again, and a near-identical wide shot captures him walking toward the shed. This time he decides to look in the bushes with his flashlight instead of retreating, whistling and calling himself "crazy." Just then, he notices footprints again, tracks them, and finds E.T. Alternating close-ups show both Elliot and E.T. screaming. In a panic, Elliot drops his flashlight, but it is the alien who flees.

Will Byers will not be so lucky. In the middle of their D&D game, Noah, Dustin, and Lucas are kicked out of Mike's house by his mother, as it's too late on a school night. The three boys head home in the dark, guided only by the little flashlights on their bikes. Will lives the farthest from Mike's, and while riding through the woods, he is followed by an unknown creature. He falls off his bike, abandons it, and runs home. He calls out to his mother Joyce (Winona Ryder), but neither she nor his brother Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) is home. When he can't make any phone calls for help, and a large monstrous shadow looms outside his front door, Will rushes out to their shed.

Figure 1.3. *E. T.: The Extra Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982)

The camera pans right as in *E.T.*, but unlike Elliot, Will is running for his life. This night in rural Indiana is also foggy, but it is darker because the moon is missing. Will runs into his shed, occupying the position that E.T. had. But the creature will not stay safely outside or toss him a ball. Will's shotgun will be no match for it either. The sound track registers Will's quick, panicked breathing and the monster's guttural growling. The growling turns into screeching, and Will turns around to see the monster. A close-up of Will's face displays sheer dread. The reverse shot shows not the monster but the light bulb in the shed going out. A final cut to a wide shot inside the shed reveals that Will has vanished.

It is easy to see how *Stranger Things* pays tribute to Spielberg's film by turning Elliot's first meeting with E.T. into the abduction of Will Byers. Both scenes are about how the supernatural encroaches upon the world inhabited by young boys. Both Elliot and Will perceive danger outside, both are drawn to their sheds, and both encounter alien creatures there. In addition to the comprehensive narrative parallels, *Stranger Things* visually approximates the look of *E.T.* so closely at times that the shot of Elliot walking over to his shed in *E.T.* (Figure 1.3) and the one of Will running to his shed in *Stranger Things* (Figure 1.4) seem interchangeable. In fact, the similarities are so striking that several shots appear to be urging us to play a game of spot-the-difference. On the other hand, *Stranger Things* is a deliberate reversal of its predecessor, not only because Will meets an unrelenting Demogorgon instead of a cuddly alien but also because the threat in *Stranger Things* is completely

Figure 1.4. *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016–present)

merciless. Jacopo della Quercia rightly suggests that "*Stranger Things* is as much a tribute to *E.T.* as it is a funhouse mirror of it: a deliberate distortion of perhaps the most culturally significant depiction of childhood in eighties cinema."[32] But how can "deliberate distortion" function as homage?

Let's compare the moments of first encounter that lead in opposite directions. When Elliot comes face to face with E.T., they both scream; their frightened expressions match, as they terrify each other. These alternating close-ups signify that they are more alike than not. E.T. is not to be feared, because it is almost the same as Elliot. In fact, it is E.T. who takes off. The scene ends with a final cut to Elliot's face, which signals a mix of relief and delight—as well as a bit of intrigue. It is this intrigue after all that leads him to lure the alien to his house with Reese's Pieces. No such relief is possible for Will, whose opponent is so fierce that we only view it in shadows and through the creeping horror on his face. When he finally sees the supernatural villain, it consumes him entirely. Elliot will befriend the alien creature, whose only desire is to return to his home in outer space. Will will vanish into the ominous realm of the Upside Down. Whereas both texts begin with the same premise, they end up in different versions of the fantastical. What *Stranger Things* distorts is *E.T.*'s confidence in, even reverence for, the supernatural.

Before we look at how *Stranger Things* revises *E.T.*, it is important to remind ourselves that the film is itself a revision of the action-adventure and sci-fi film serials from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Robin Wood, who is among the fiercest critics of popular American cinema of the Cold War era, argues

that filmmakers like Spielberg and Lucas were simply imitating the cheap thrills and cliffhangers of these serials, which were their childhood favorites. Given their replication of serials like *Flash Gordon* (1936) and *Buck Rogers* (1939), their films evince "a widespread *desire* for regression to infantilism."[33] For Wood, the celebration of childhood wonder, captured often in the Spielbergian close-up, debases the films, making them less serious and almost worthless. These kinds of films have always existed, he argues, but they used to be considered trivial or laughable, "not taken seriously on any level (except perhaps by real children, and then only young ones); their role in popular culture was minor and marginal; they posed no threat to the co-existence of challenging, disturbing or genuinely distinguished Hollywood movies."[34] But filmmakers like Spielberg and Lucas elevated these childish texts and thereby diminished the significance of American cinema at large. What Wood sees as an unrefined imitation of disposable serials, however, can actually be read as a more nuanced appropriation of older material. Peter Decherney, for instance, suggests that filmmakers like Lucas and Spielberg "turned B movies into blockbusters and converted formulaic genre fare into bold authorial statements."[35] Andrew M. Gordon similarly argues for seeing certain eighties films as paying "homage to an outdated Hollywood genre."[36] Such films may have the episodic quest plot of an adventure serial, but their "sophisticated composition, camera movement, and editing . . . distinguish [them] from the cheaply made serials."[37] This distinction isn't just a matter of higher production values or location shooting or faster action. When they started making movies, Gordon notes, Spielberg and Lucas recalled the Saturday morning adventure serials fondly. But when they "screened all fifteen episodes of *Don Winslow of the Navy* [1942], '[they] were bored out of our minds.' "[38] Gordon cites this anecdote to show that they were not aiming for straightforward imitation or "a revival of the serials," because "the economic conditions and the particular audience for that form no longer exist."[39] Instead, what Lucas and Spielberg created is "a new kind of adventure fantasy, an elaborate entertainment which attempts to allow a more sophisticated, demanding audience to experience the feeling and original impact the serials had on naïve young viewers decades ago."[40] That is, the movies that Wood criticizes for relying too heavily on simplistic escapades and childish perceptions of winning and losing can actually be read as self-conscious recreations of that formula. They enable the viewer to reflect on their resemblance to earlier texts as well as their distance. As Noël Carroll puts it in relation to Robert Altman's *Popeye* (1980)—another film whose source text, a comic strip, was once popular

among children—the adaptation "defamiliarizes its source (by humanizing it) in order to reveal the strangeness of this thing, Popeye, that we once accepted unblinkingly."[41] It is this kind of defamiliarization, which adds depth to the two-dimensional comic strip character, that elevates Altman's film beyond direct adaptation.

E.T. makes a similar alteration. It combines the science fiction serial—particularly *Stranger from Space* (1951–53), about a Martian boy befriending a human boy—with elements of a fairy tale. This is what makes Elliot and E.T. magical doubles of one another. They feel each other's pain, and they teach each other to mature, even as the film engages in a Peter Pan fantasy. However, though the adults are critiqued as either negligent or malevolent, and though childhood is venerated, not growing up is not a viable option. Wood might argue that *E.T.* adopts a childish point of view, but Gordon shows how the film operates on two levels: "For children, *E.T.* is a voyage of emotional discovery; for adults, a rediscovery of feelings we thought we had lost or outgrown."[42] There are flying saucers here, and there is nostalgia too, but it is reflective rather than restorative. Just as Elliot and E.T. cannot reunite at the end, we cannot simply watch *E.T.* and indulge in some fanciful world of make-believe. *E.T.* resurrects and revises the older serial form. It remains in awe of the supernatural, but its narrative emphasizes the unexpected material and philosophical connections between the human and the alien instead of the whiz-bang thrills of the old serials.

What Spielberg did with older popular texts that had fallen out of favor is exactly what the Duffer brothers have said they want to do with Spielberg. The opening of *Stranger Things* demonstrates how the show loves that which it cannot—or to be more specific, can no longer—be. That is why it engages in what Jacopo della Quercia has called a "deliberate distortion." Here is another way to articulate that distortion. While Elliot discovers a strange intrusion in their backyard, Mary asks Michael how anyone wins a game of Dungeons & Dragons. The answer is, "There's no winning. It's like life. You don't win at life." This is the idea that *Stranger Things* builds on in order to distort the stable world of Spielberg's film. If D&D is like life, then it can come to life or exist next to life. As Dustin intuits, their moves in the game can have real-world consequences; while awaiting Mike's move, he says, "We're so screwed if it's the Demogorgon." In this parallel world of the Upside Down, aliens are monstrous, not endearing. Elliot, we should recall, does not participate in the game. But Will rolls the dice, and he cannot meet an amicable extraterrestrial like himself. The rules of this game insist that encounters take the form

of battles with monsters of all kinds. That is why, "once Will realizes there is something inside the shed, he cannot escape it."[43] The fantasy isn't, as it was in *E.T.*, about finding a friendly alien in one's backyard. It is about losing oneself, as Will does, in a space that is farther away and far stranger.

Moreover, even after Will returns home, he keeps reencountering the monster. In the first episode of Season 2, which takes place a year later, Will Byers remains preoccupied by the creatures that come alive from D&D ("Chapter One: Madmax," 2.1). After waking up to pee in the middle of the night, he seems beckoned by a force outside his home. As he creeps into his living room, Will sees blinding red lights flashing outside; the front door opens automatically, and through an over-the-shoulder shot we see the monstrous creature in the distance, while in the foreground we see the back of Will's neck, where veins pulsate rapidly and goose bumps pop up. He can't help stepping outside, and the scene ends on his ashen face, mesmerized and petrified to see that the beast has returned to haunt him. This scene recreates a similar moment in another Spielberg film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), where a younger boy, Barry (Cary Guffey), is abducted by an alien force. Because Barry is only three years old, he is fascinated by the red light pouring in through the keyhole in the front door. He opens it wide, as luminous light from a UFO floods their home, but his mother Jillian (Melinda Dillon) closes the door shut. Of course, there is no escaping the UFO force field, and little Barry soon disappears. The recreated moment in *Stranger Things* lasts a little longer, allowing us to recall and reflect on this homage. Barry is more naïve than Will, whose face registers the continuing trauma of having been abducted. While Barry is awestruck by the supernatural presence, Will is tormented by the dark, malevolent entity called the shadow monster. *Stranger Things* re-presents *Close Encounters* as a younger, more innocent version of the same premise. But this is no easy critique of Spielberg's film; if it were, the show would be invested in realism, not in fantasy. Rather, as with its reworking of *E.T.*, it asks the viewer to reflect on a cinematic time when one could believe in the beauty and majesty of the supernatural. Barry is wonderstruck. Though he too is abducted later, he is returned unscathed. He remains captivated by the aliens until the end. That sense of awe isn't abandoned by *Stranger Things*. Will is, after all, still drawn to the flashing lights outside his home, even though he knows they portend doom. But the Duffer brothers rely on an older meaning of awe, which used to imply terror or dread. *Stranger Things* ultimately pays homage to Spielberg by turning the very idea of being awestruck upside down.

Just as it draws on Spielbergian science fiction to rewrite the close encounter with alien creatures, *Stranger Things* turns to the era's other films about aliens or monsters for its parallel world-building. These creatures occur primarily but not solely in horror films. Unlike what we will see later in Chapter 3, however, the series does not engage in generic rewriting. Rather, it borrows from a range of films about monstrosities to construct its dual worlds of Hawkins and the Upside Down. The idea of a parallel universe isn't unique to horror cinema anyway. Alternate realities have been imagined in mythological texts, from Valhalla in Norse mythology to the multiple universes in the ancient Hindu *Puranas*. In fiction, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) is among the earliest depictions of a utopian world that can be reached via the North Pole. In cinema, parallel universes have usually been the domain of science fiction. Films like Robert Parrish's *Journey to the Far Side of the Sun* (1969) or Lee H. Katzin's *The Stranger* (1973), for instance, focus on discovering planets that may be mirror images of earth. But in the 1980s, films invested in scare tactics take on the idea of creating a parallel world, uncannily similar to our own, from which emerges a terrifying monstrosity. John Kenneth Muir attributes the popularity of this new plot device to the "glut of slasher films, all adhering to the statutes of a common paradigm" in the 1970s.[44] "The killers in these films seemed capable of surviving any assault," argues Muir, "but otherwise the film existed in the 'real' world."[45] To innovate, films turn to what Wes Craven labels "rubber reality," which is the creation of a dream world that exists next to the waking world. Don Coscarelli's *Phantasm* (1979) had already introduced the notion of a parallel world as a source of terror. In Coscarelli's film, an undertaker reanimates corpses to make them work on a red planet; young Mike (Michael Baldwin) accidentally falls through a portal and witnesses deformed zombies working for the Tall Man (Angus Scrimm). Craven builds on this idea by fleshing out the spatial and psychological relationship between the parallel worlds. In particular, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) demonstrates how Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund), the serial killer who slashes his victims in their dreams, penetrates the waking world. Instead of another planet that resembles our own, Craven places the two worlds next to each other. There is a very thin line separating these near-identical landscapes. Horror is generated from the fact that the nightmare world intrudes upon the real world without any warning and with real consequences.

One such instance occurs when Tina Gray's (Amanda Wyss) mother leaves town, shortly after she has been traumatized in her nightmare by a

fiend with a razor-gloved hand. Tina's best friend Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) and Nancy's boyfriend Glen (Johnny Depp) agree to sleep over at her house. Before another horrendous assault on Tina begins, the film cuts to the room where Nancy is sleeping. A wide shot shows Nancy in the center of the frame, asleep, when suddenly something bulges out of the wall. A slight tilt up reveals more of the protrusion, which now looks like a face and two arms with claw-like fingers jutting out of the wall. The menacing figure, presumably Freddy himself, hovers over Nancy (Figure 1.5). Only a moment later it recedes, and the wall becomes a solid surface once more. Nancy stirs, taps the wall, clutches a crucifix that had fallen off the wall earlier, and returns to sleep. This motif of a firm surface becoming distended as if it were made of rubber already appears in two earlier films, both of which deal with the contemporary anxiety of television's massive and insidious cultural influence. In Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982), the Freeling family is haunted by ghosts emanating from their television set. One night, while their young daughter Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) is transfixed by the static, the television screen becomes a membrane, and a ghostly creature reaches out into their bedroom, a physical manifestation of the sinister intrusion that television represents. Similarly, in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, Max Renn (James Woods), the president of a trashy television channel, broadcasts a show called "Videodrome," which is actually involved in a mind-control conspiracy. Watching the show unleashes strange effects, including the violation of boundaries between self and screen. The television screen becomes

Figure 1.5. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)

distended here too, and a nightmarish figure intrudes upon Max's world. In both of these examples, the screen becomes a kind of portal that functions as "an entrance into another world or the gateway through which evil enters into this world."[46] *Nightmare* goes beyond these limited critiques of technology in its use of rubber reality. When the wall above Nancy's bed stretches to show Freddy's face and arms, the shot breaks the laws of physics and intimates the kind of violence that will follow. It is the most distinct materialization of Craven's dreamscape invading the real world and threatening to subsume it.

The Upside Down explicitly pays homage to the dreamscape of *Nightmare*. As in *Nightmare*, *Stranger Things*'s alternate dimension exists alongside the real world and visually resembles its locations. But it is darker, colder, and foggier there, with ash-like spores drifting through the air. After Will's abduction, his friends rely on their knowledge of D&D lore to understand it as "a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world" ("Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat," 1.5). As in *Nightmare*, this reflection or echo can impinge upon the real world through walls that stretch to become gateways or portals. When Joyce starts suspecting that Will is making contact with her by using electrical currents, she notices that the lights in her house are turning on, while the boombox in his room begins playing The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go" ("Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street," 1.2). After she enters his bedroom, the light goes out, the music stops, and the wall stretches out toward Joyce. It takes her a second to register the intrusion. A poster for Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) in the background amplifies the terror, while Joyce's wide-open mouth underscores her dread. The wall keeps distending, and claw-like limbs jut out, as they do in *Nightmare*. But unlike Nancy, who sleeps through the incident and wakes up only to investigate it briefly before falling asleep again, Joyce runs out of her home, contemplates taking off in her car, but then goes back inside. That is because the portal through which the Demogorgon enters her house might also be the one through which Joyce can rescue her son. The stakes here are much higher, the borders between the two realms much less stable.

Moreover, the intrusion is not merely a gimmick or special effect in *Stranger Things*, as it is repeated in the very next episode ("Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly," 1.3). When Joyce realizes that Will can contact her using electrical currents, she strings Christmas lights all over her house and paints letters on her living room wall. When Will communicates with her again, he tells her he is "right here," confirming that the parallel world exists right here rather than in a separate realm somewhere else or someplace unknown.

Will's response also recalls and subverts Carol Anne's near-playful line, "they're here," from *Poltergeist*. That film's ghostly white hand reaching out from the television screen seems innocuous—closer to the laughably spooky creatures emerging willy-nilly in Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* (1984)—when compared with what comes out of Joyce's wall next. Will advises her to "run" just before the wall balloons again, out of which emerge the long, scaly, spiky fingers, then arms, then faceless head of the Demogorgon (Figure 1.6). At first, the Demogorgon bears a striking resemblance to Freddy Krueger, and it claws its way into the real world in much the same way. A little later, Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) tries to lure the monster out of the Upside Down by setting up booby traps and planning to burn it just as Nancy Thompson does in Craven's film, emphasizing that there are tears in the membrane that separates the real world from the Upside Down ("Chapter Eight: The Upside Down," 1.8).

If the Upside Down parallels *Nightmare*'s dreamscape, its origin story is derived from another dreadful tale, Lester's *Firestarter*. Lester's film, an adaptation of Stephen King's novel of the same name, centers on Charlie (Drew Barrymore), a young girl with pyrokinetic powers who is fleeing from a secret government agency trying to control her. Unlike Regan from William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) or the eponymous heroine from De Palma's *Carrie*, both of whom have supernatural powers that make them horrifying, Charlie is an innocent girl who wants to use her pyrokinesis only when she is confronting malicious people. A covert agency called The Shop captures her and runs experiments on her. It is this story that becomes *Stranger Things*'s

Figure 1.6. *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016–present)

backstory, revealed through Eleven's (Mille Bobby Brown) flashbacks of her time at Hawkins Lab, where the secret mission run by Dr. Martin Brenner (Matthew Modine) conducts experiments on her. Like Charlie, Eleven is simply an object—she is called just by her number rather than her birth name, Jane—to the scientists, including to Dr. Brenner, whom she calls "papa." During one such flashback, in a direct nod to *Firestarter*, Eleven is instructed to use her telekinetic powers to crush a Coke can while her brain activity is measured in exactly the way Charlie is monitored while being forced to demonstrate her pyrokinetic powers ("Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly," 1.3). Moreover, just as Charlie's powers can be attributed to her parents' voluntary participation in experiments where they were given hallucinogens, Eleven may be the product of her mother Terry's (Aimee Mullins) taking psychedelic drugs and being sensorily deprived as part of Project MKUltra. But *Stranger Things* ups the ante. During another flashback, Eleven recalls being placed in a water tank for experiments in sensory deprivation. In that state, while eavesdropping on a Russian man, she inadvertently makes interdimensional contact with a Demogorgon ("Chapter Six: The Monster," 1.6). The wall at the lab begins to crumble, and a gate opens between the Upside Down and the "real" world. The true horror of Lester's film, as Simon Brown points out, is "the specter of child abuse through The Shop's experimentation with Charlie and through John Rainbird's [George C. Scott] obsession with killing her in order to absorb her power at the moment of death."[47] *Stranger Things* absorbs this horror. Hawkins Lab is a secretive and abusive place where nightmares originate; like The Shop, it exists within the regular world of Hawkins, Indiana, and it has to be destroyed.

As it does with *Nightmare*, the series also exceeds Lester's version. Near the end, after her father Andy (David Keith) is shot dead by Rainbird, Charlie escapes The Shop by pyrokinetically burning down the entire compound and killing all the agents in a final conflagration. As her hair blows freely in response to the rising heat, Charlie sends fireballs flying through the air, blowing up all the buildings and helicopters and people in sight (Figure 1.7). It's impossible to ignore *Stranger Things*'s homage to this climax when Eleven volunteers to close the gate beneath the Hawkins lab, to bury all its inhabitants, including the shadow monster, the Demogorgon, and the Demo-dogs, forever. Eleven and Chief Hopper (David Harbour) take the elevator down to the gateway, dwarfed by the immense creature behind the wall. While Hopper shoots down the Demo-dogs attacking them, the shadow monster's arm appears to break through the seam. Eleven raises both hands,

Figure 1.7. *Firestarter* (Mark L. Lester, 1984)

Figure 1.8. *Stranger Things* (Duffer brothers, 2016–present)

bleeds through both nostrils, and even lifts up off the ground to push it all the way back. Glowing embers fly around her, recalling Charlie burning down The Shop (Figure 1.8).

Even though they are nearly identical shots, the tone of *Stranger Things* is quite different. This is not only because Eleven channels her anger over her traumatic past in this laboratory to close the portal. Nor is it because Hawkins Lab needs to bury far more sinister creatures that are beyond the imagination of *Firestarter*. There is something else that distinguishes *Stranger Things* from 1980s horror movies, even as it imitates their narrative or stylistic designs. Even a quick glance at Figures 1.7 and 1.8 suggests a greater intensity in Eleven's pushing back of monsters from the Upside Down. Just as it rewrites Spielberg's films by inverting their sense of wonderment, the

series reworks films like *Nightmare* and *Firestarter* by subverting their campiness. On that note, we should recall that when Nancy Thompson tries to bait Freddy Krueger into popping up again in her dream, she declares, "Okay, Krueger, we play in your court." Once she pulls him into the waking world, he becomes a slapstick figure, deceived by her booby traps, tumbling down the stairs, and thrashing around comically after being set on fire. There is a sense of playfulness in these moments, which dramatically undercut Krueger's terror. Similarly, in *Firestarter*, when Charlie hurls gigantic fireballs at men in suits, and they run around shrieking in terror, the scene becomes somewhat ludicrous. Scholars have noticed this tendency in much of '80s cinema, when the terror gives way to something lighter or farcical. "Weird as it may seem to most adults," Jon Lewis notes, "teenagers find Craven's . . . films amusing as well as, if not instead of, frightening."[48] This is not just a matter of teenage spectators deliberately viewing horror against the grain. Lewis argues that there is something particularly impish about the way cinematic fear is generated in this decade. If the 1960s and '70s had pushed the boundaries of horror films in the direction of terrorizing violence, then by the 1980s, as James Kendrick explains, "the self-aware humor of a new breed of horror film . . . reveled in a previously untapped sense of perverse playfulness, making guts and gore funny and campy rather than sick and disturbing."[49] Campiness, or what Susan Sontag defines as a "playful, anti-serious" aesthetic sensibility, has always been a part of pop cultural texts that are aiming to scare audiences.[50] James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and Irvin Yeaworth's *The Blob* (1958) are widely considered campy for being both horrifying and self-consciously comical, an inclination that becomes pervasive in '80s cinema. And that is exactly what *Stranger Things* undermines in its homage to these particular films.

Consider, for instance, how the series transforms the motif of an alien creature imitating and taking possession of a person's body from John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982). Though the film, about American scientists finding a terrifying shape-shifting being in Antarctica, is darkly nihilistic, it exults in campiness every time the Thing invades or "assimilates" someone's body in "a series of increasingly gory encounters."[51] When the Thing assimilates the team's sled dogs, the Dog-Thing transforms into a multi-headed beast with tendrils reaching out to assimilate other creatures. When it assimilates their geologist Norris (Charles Hallahan), in the film's most memorable moment, the Norris-Thing's head detaches from its body, takes off, and roars until it is burnt. Echoing the audience's sentiment, a

crew member says incredulously: "You've got to be fucking kidding me!" Though terrifying, these scenes also have a carnivalesque energy, with every invasion becoming more grotesque than the last and requiring more firepower to root out.

The Thing is a familiar reference in *Stranger Things*. Its poster hangs in Mike's basement, and their science teacher, Mr. Clarke (Randy Havens), watches the film with his girlfriend. Like the show itself, Mr. Clarke is a fan, and he admiringly explains how the scene with the Norris-Thing uses "melted plastic and microwaved bubblegum" for its special effects ("Chapter Seven: The Bathtub," 1.7). But the show does not replicate any of these over-the-top chills. Instead, it draws on the idea of the Thing in its construction of the shadow monster, whose smoke tendrils invading Will's body through every orifice recall the shape-shifting beast's tentacles ("Chapter Three: The Pollywog," 2.3). Once they realize that Will's body has been colonized, Joyce calls the creature "that thing" inside her son ("Chapter Six: The Spy," 2.6). Like the Thing, the shadow monster is sensitive to extreme heat. Eventually, Will is tied down in Hopper's cabin, and Joyce turns up the heat, until the shadow monster leaves his body and vanishes into the nighttime sky ("Chapter Nine: The Gate," 2.9). *Stranger Things* critiques the uncomplicated solution of lighting the monster's body on fire, which would generate spectacular thrills but would also burn Will alive. In other words, it borrows *The Thing*'s horrifying premise of a monster hiding inside a living being but then more thoroughly develops the implications of bodily possession—for the show does not make a clear distinction between a pre- and post-invasion human body. While the shadow monster is inside Will, he declares that they can stop it by sending a team of soldiers into the Upside Down. But it's an ambush, planned by the shadow monster to enable the Demo-dogs to enter the lab—making it appear that Will has been completely possessed ("Chapter Six: The Lab," 2.6). Later, however, Will-inside-Will taps out a message in Morse code about closing the gate ("Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer," 2.8). This suggests that the thing inside Will coexists with him, making it more terrifying. Where the process from human to Thing is linear and irreversible in Carpenter's film, Will is both himself and this thing that he has also become. After he becomes possessed, Joyce asks him: "Did you see this thing again?" ("Chapter Four: Will the Wise," 2.4). But Will knows that this isn't just a matter of re-seeing the monster, as in a recurring nightmare. What Will experiences is a kind of reincarnation, where the old Demogorgon has come

alive in the form of a far more menacing and horrifying shadow monster—which is exactly how the show revises *The Thing* as well.

This is what *Stranger Things* does with *Nightmare* and *Firestarter* too, combining their premises to create the Upside Down as a parallel world that comes into existence due to secret government experimentation. It plays out its homage deliberately, developing more fully the horrors of this alternate dimension without resorting to a gorefest or a high-octane blowout. Writing about Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) as a revisionist neo-noir, R. Barton Palmer demonstrates how the film goes beyond recycling noir motifs. Palmer argues that "the Coens use these [noir] quotations as a framework on which, in the spirit of the new sincerity, they reconstruct the noir universe—or, perhaps more accurately, attempt to produce for the first time its true version."[52] I would argue that *Stranger Things* similarly attempts to produce a truer or more sincere reconstruction of the Craven and Lester films as well as of the broader horror universe. The parallel world does away with the gorier but cheesier elements of the eighties. For though still flamboyant, there is nothing droll about the Upside Down. The series pays homage by becoming a more authentic version of its loved objects.

While eradicating the campiness from scary stories, *Stranger Things* teases out the underlying terror of coming-of-age narratives, such that what may appear to be indulgent nostalgia turns out to be a kind of melancholy reflection on the era. Nancy Wheeler, for instance, looks like a combination of two Molly Ringwald characters. She starts off as the prissy and popular Claire Standish (Molly Ringwald) in John Hughes's *The Breakfast Club* (1985). But her life is hardly perfect, and she is especially distressed by her parents' vapid suburban life. Nancy is dating the school jock, Steve Harrington (Joe Keery), though she is secretly attracted to the troubled recluse, Jonathan Wheeler, and their love triangle is similar to the one shared by Andie Walsh (Molly Ringwald), her outsider friend Duckie Dale (Jon Cryer), and the well-groomed Blane McDonough (Andrew McCarthy) in Hughes's *Pretty in Pink* (1986). However, unlike Andie, who chooses Blane at the end, Nancy picks Jonathan instead of Steve. What hangs over this triangle is their battle with the unknown monster, not a high school popularity contest. Visually she may thoroughly resemble Andie, but Nancy bonds with Jonathan after they seize Will back from the Upside Down. Similarly, when Eleven, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin go looking for a potential gate to the underworld in order to find Will, they walk down an old railroad track toward Hawkins Lab ("Chapter

Five: The Flea and the Acrobat," 1.5). This scene mirrors a sequence in Rob Reiner's *Stand by Me* (1986), where four young boys go on a hike to find the dead body of a missing boy. There is greater urgency in wanting to find their own friend alive in *Stranger Things* than in Reiner's film, where the boys are merely looking for a dead boy in the hopes of becoming local heroes. Placing Eleven, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin in a near-identical location makes it look like they are following in the footsteps of that former crew. But there are subtler differences, including the fact that the tracks in *Stranger Things* look more worn down, as though acknowledging that other sets of friends have made that trek before. Moreover, the boys in *Stand by Me* become heroic by not claiming credit for finding the dead body after all and reporting it anonymously to the police. Such gallantry is not possible in Hawkins. Nor can childhood be bracketed off as a period of innocence to grow out of and look back nostalgically on, as in Reiner's film. When Gordie LaChance (Richard Dreyfuss) looks back on and rewrites an episode from his childhood, he is wistful about boyhood friendships. When Will looks back longingly at his childhood, leafing through old comic books and recalling joyful times with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin, he is traumatized. He shouts, "This is stupid, so stupid," and tears down his tent in the woods ("Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard," 3.3). Unlike *Stand by Me*'s Gordie, whose romanticized tribute to childhood frames the narrative, Will looks back in anger and pain.

Even during the more joyful moments that serve as rites of passage, youthful setups appear doomed. The second season's finale ends with a winter dance that lovingly recalls the prom from *Pretty in Pink*. During the dance, while the kids pair up and kiss their partners, the camera cuts to an exterior shot of Hawkins Middle School, then rotates 180° to reveal its chilling imitation in the Upside Down ("Chapter Nine: The Gate," 2.9). The Police's "Every Breath You Take," to which the kids slow dance at the Snow Ball in Hawkins, is replaced by the growling sounds of the Mind Flayer, which soars over Hawkins's replica. While they blithely experience this initiation into young adulthood, their growth is marked as terrorizing. This idea is best crystallized at the Starcourt mall, where most of the third season unfolds. Starcourt is Hawkins's first full-scale mall, a space that mesmerizes its young residents. The seventies and eighties were a boom time for malls, where young folks discovered independence and self-expression through consumption. Starcourt offers all of that, but it also serves as the spot for a Soviet-controlled underground lab, where scientists are trying to force open another portal to the

Upside Down. But what the series suggests is that danger lurks not only below ground but also above ground, in plain sight. Though Hopper has forbidden Eleven from being in crowded places, she goes shopping with Max (Sadie Sink), who encourages her to forget about her boy troubles with Mike. When they arrive at Starcourt, the camera pans across the mall interior, showing its dazzling possibilities. Eleven and Max run through the stores, trying on everything in order to find something that feels true to their personalities. Once Eleven commits to this, the scene turns into a montage of the girls changing in and out of outfits, belts, shoes, and sunglasses ("Chapter 2: The Mall Rats," 3.2). This moment is a distinct homage to the mallgoing experience, captured in films like Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and Martha Coolidge's *Valley Girl* (1983), where malls offer a seemingly liberatory space for young women to define themselves without the intervention of men. Max and Eleven navigate the mall freely, as though they own the place, while Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" plays non-diegetically. As Max claims at the end of this makeover montage, their shopping experience proves that "there's more to life than stupid boys." The scene ends with the girls literally running past Mike, Will, and Lucas, who are sitting by the water fountain, heads in hands, immobilized by the fact that the girls have caught them in a lie. Lest we think that this is some kind of feminist triumph—what shopping trip could be?—this scene also invokes Thom Eberhadt's *Night of the Comet* (1984). Eberhardt's film is a sci-fi satire about a comet that generates an extinction event, where people turn into dust or zombies. Sisters Reggie (Catherine Mary Stewart) and Sam Belmont (Kelli Maroney) are among the very few survivors. While at a mall to restock on weapons, they pause to enjoy a shopping spree—to the tune of Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." It may look like the women have complete control over this space, but they are stalked via surveillance cameras and later attacked by zombie stock boys. Reggie and Sam's fate hangs over Max and Eleven's, as the mall is not as innocuous as teen films would like to pretend. In fact, when Max and Eleven later return with their friends to an eerily empty mall, which becomes almost indistinguishable from the one that Reggie and Sam occupy, the Mind Flayer follows them there through a piece of itself embedded in Eleven's left leg ("Chapter 8: The Battle of Starcourt," 3.8). As the final showdown rages, a vast and bustling teen haven turns confining and threatening. *Stranger Things* may look back affectionately at mall culture, but it is no ode to teenage consumption. After all, it is the monster that is trying to consume Eleven.

But what exactly is this monster? Eleven telekinetically pulls a piece of it out of her leg and slams it away. It looks like a hand, physically severed and yet psychically attached to the larger monster, just like Ash's (Bruce Campbell) possessed hand scurries away in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 2* (1982). Steve is understandably confused, and he wonders: "This big, fleshy spider thing that hurt El, it's some kind of gigantic . . . weapon?" What is further perplexing is that "instead of, like, screws and metal, the Mind Flayer made its weapon with melted people." This is true in the third season, where the Spider Monster becomes the physical embodiment of the Mind Flayer. It constitutes itself initially out of a horde of possessed rats that feast on fertilizer and blow up into gooey blobs that fuse with other blobs, later made out of possessed or flayed humans. The gelatinous mass of flayed bodies has spidery legs, multiplying tentacles, and a mouth with a thousand jagged teeth. This manifestation of the Mind Flayer is similar but not identical to earlier versions, for its tentacles resemble those that possess Will as well as the vines that grow in the tunnels underneath Hawkins in previous seasons. It is larger and more menacing than the Demogorgon, which similarly obeys the Mind Flayer in the first season. The Mind Flayer, then, is a composite monster that contains smaller, shape-shifting monstrous creatures. About the unnamable creature in Carpenter's *The Thing*, John Palisano argues that "the threat is a non-specific monster that is conceptualized by a name that is ultimately meaningless. It is not a vampire, werewolf, zombie, or disease. It escapes easy definition, and therefore it is referred to as 'the thing.' It is literally a thing."[53] The threat in *Stranger Things* also cannot be easily defined. But that is because, unlike Carpenter's monstrous thing, the creatures from the Upside Down represent too many things. They are not meaningless but saturated with meaning. More significantly, though we have mainly tracked its homage to films from the eighties, the series's cinematic tribute reaches farther. For though it is set in that decade, it does not settle there. What is truly unique about this homage is its insatiable borrowing from varied eras of film history.

Let us consider a few key examples. The blue-hued parallel world of the Upside Down has its own distinctive ecosystem. Tendrils and fleshy membranes cover its surfaces and spread like plant life. At first, it appears that this alternate dimension is inhabited by a humanoid monster called the Demogorgon. The Demogorgon physically resembles the amoeboidal entity in Yeaworth's *The Blob*, the xenomorphs in the *Alien* franchise, and the Pale Man in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). Its chilling clicking sound before an attack echoes the extra-terrestrial in John McTiernan's

Predator (1987), and the way its face opens into a flower-like trap looks like the plant-monster in Frank Oz's *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986). But the Demogorgon is just one of the dwellers of the Upside Down, which is controlled by a superorganism called the shadow monster or the Mind Flayer. The shadow monster is a dark, gargantuan creature with an elongated head and spidery limbs. Thematically, the way the shadow monster seems unreal and yet controls everything is similar to the creature in Andrew Leman's *The Call of Cthulhu* (2005), a silent adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's tale, where it is described as "a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster."[54] The shadow monster similarly serves as a symbolic monster, an amalgamation of many other monsters. Visually, it looks like a combination of the outer-space aliens in adaptations of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898), big bug movies like Jack Arnold's *Tarantula* (1955), Ib Melchior's *Angry Red Planet* (1959), and the female MUTO in Gareth Edwards's *Godzilla* (2014). The thick cloudy substance swirling around the shadow monster is reminiscent of the whirling tornado in Victor Fleming's *Wizard of Oz* (1939) as well as the unnatural haze that accompanies the pterodactyl-like monsters in Frank Darabont's *The Mist* (2007). The shadow monster is capable of unleashing an army of Demo-dogs and tendrils, both of which move swiftly through an underground tunnel system. In their early stages of development, the Demo-dogs overtly allude to the furry pollywogs in Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984), but their agile chasing of their prey is reminiscent of the velociraptors in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the high-speed zombies in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002). The sprawling tunnels below Hawkins recreate the dread of the frightful sewers of New York City in Douglas Creek's *C.H.U.D.* (1984) and the unnatural seismic activity below the ground in the Nevada desert in Ron Underwood's *Tremors* (1990). The invasive vines that tangle and strangle people to death might immediately recall Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981), but they also bring to mind terrors from other plant horror films, like Steve Sekely's *The Day of the Triffids* (1962) and Carter Smith's *The Ruins* (2008). The Spider Monster's tentacles are also like tendrils, but instead of asphyxiating its victims, they chase after their prey, like the ginormous creatures in Gordon Douglas's *Them!* (1954), Bill Rebane's *The Giant Spider Invasion* (1975), and Marko Mäkilaakso's *It Came from the Desert* (2017). Its initial victims are rats that eat fertilizer, and Nancy notices this anomalous behavior has spread throughout Hawkins in the way the chickens stop eating their feed in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). Once the Spider Monster succeeds in flaying Billy (Dacre Montgomery), Max's brother, Eleven and

her friends lock him in a sauna to try to roast the creature out. But fueled by the Spider Monster's energy, Billy overpowers them, his maniacal, destructive attitude resembling the crazed posture of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) in Kubrick's *The Shining*. As more and more humans get flayed, the Spider Monster gains strength from congealing together their flesh. As gooey blobs of humans slither toward the behemoth, their transformation looks like Seth Brundle's (Jeff Goldblum) metamorphosis from human to giant fly in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). *The Fly* itself is an homage to body horror films going back to Irvin Yeaworth's *The Blob*, where an amoebic alien grows monstrous by possessing the bodies of ordinary citizens. In fact, the Spider Monster slinks and takes over people's bodies just like the blob. More than that, just as the Mind Flayer is a composite of several body and entities, *Stranger Things* itself comes together as an amalgam of cinematic monsters. Intriguingly, when Eleven looks for the origins of the Mind Flayer, she ends up in Southern California. She pursues the source through Billy's memories, which lead her to understand his broken childhood and his rage over losing his mother. This explains Billy's vulnerability to the invasion of the Mind Flayer, whose angry tentacles storm over an otherwise clear Southern California day at the beach ("Chapter Six: E Pluribus Unum," 3.6). Thematically, Eleven has found what she calls "the source" inside Billy's mind. But this location in Southern California can also be read as the show's acknowledgment that the Mind Flayer originates in Hollywood.

Based on this sampling, we might say that there is nothing all that strange about *Stranger Things*. Its monsters, terrifying though they are, are rather familiar. What is unfamiliar is the way in which so many of them are simultaneously invoked. If we return to Palisano's argument about *The Thing* being a non-specific or unidentifiable monster, then we might say the opposite about *Stranger Things*: here, the threat comes from aliens *and* predators *and* zombies *and* dinosaurs *and* nature *and* on and on. And it is their cumulative effect that makes the show extraordinary. The shadow monster is after all just a vague shape in the sky that can be filled in with traces of earlier monsters, which, individually, appear tame by comparison. In that sense, one could see the Mind Flayer as a Frankensteinian monster. The series seems to be aware of this analogy, as seen in its direct citation of Whale's *Frankenstein*. Though she is supposed to be hiding out from the world in Hopper's cabin, Eleven desires to go trick-or-treating for Halloween ("Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak," 2.2). Hopper refuses, so they compromise. He promises to return home early with "a bunch of candy," so they can "watch a scary movie together." But he

is late, and Eleven watches Whale's film by herself. In the scene she's viewing, Frankenstein's monster (Boris Karloff) meets Maria (Marilyn Harris), who asks if he'll play with her. We cut to Eleven sitting on Hopper's couch, clutching a teddy bear, while the monster and the little girl walk away hand in hand. The monster here is friendly and docile, not truly threatening, especially when compared to the dangers Eleven faces away from her small screen. Watching a scary movie has become much less chilling. Watching it on Eleven's small screen especially deflates its horrors. By contrast, watching *Stranger Things*—for many, it is safe to assume, on a much larger screen—is what is truly scary. This scene makes visible what has been alluded to all along: that the show functions like a televisual Frankensteinian monster, sewn together from earlier monsters that it has lovingly devoured.[55]

The series even boasts about how it devours and thereby becomes stronger than its sources. When Eleven is trying to channel the location of the Mind Flayer at a convenience store, Lucas pops open a can of New Coke. He, Max, and Mike get into an argument about it, with Lucas advocating for the recreated version, and the others backing the original. Lucas compares New Coke with Carpenter's *The Thing*. Though the original version, Christian Nyby's *The Thing from Another World* (1951), is "a classic," he contends that the new version is "sweeter, bolder, . . . better." The others look at him in disbelief, as though suggesting that nothing compares with the original ("Chapter Seven: The Bite," 3.7). They are right about New Coke, which was roundly reviled, with the Coca Cola headquarters receiving so many complaints that they reversed course within seventy-nine days and brought back the original Coke.[56] While *Stranger Things* cites this example facetiously, it takes Lucas's claim that the new version is "sweeter, bolder, . . . better" than the original very seriously.[57] It pays homage to earlier monsters, many of which are already recreations of even earlier versions. But in consolidating them, their outsized danger in *Stranger Things* surpasses any of those former threats.

Because *Stranger Things* consumes ravenously and relentlessly, homage is ultimately transformed into an act of cinematic devouring. Ryan Lizardi hints at this idea when he suggests that the show "feels like watching the films . . . put into a blender and served on Netflix for maximum transgenerational appeal."[58] For Lizardi, the reasons for such blending are primarily commercial. As he puts it, the series functions as "the perfect love letter to the generic and specific 1980s films that primes older viewers for encouraged nostalgia and primes younger viewers for encouraged surrogate attachments."[59] This approach boosts viewership by breaking up the traditional demographics

model, particularly one based on age—an idea consistent with Netflix's need to expand its subscriber base. Though I would not dispute this economic argument, I would argue that *Stranger Things*'s "perfect love letter" does much more than maximizing viewership for the series and thereby profits for Netflix. Its homage is all-consuming, one that relies in part on that older meaning of devour, which is to swallow up and destroy. During his travels of Persia in the seventeenth century, for instance, Thomas Herbert comes upon the tomb of Hephaestion, an ancient Macedonian nobleman and a general in Alexander's army. "Here Ephestion (Alexander's favourite) was buried," Herbert observes, "but the monument upon which the Macedonian conqueror expended twelve thousand talents is not now to be seen, for time has devoured it."[60] Along those lines, the work of homage as devouring rests on swallowing up and therefore destroying cinematic shrines, so to speak, instead of monumentalizing them.

Interestingly, such devouring can also be located in the varied works of media fandom, starting with this early anecdote. In the 1960s, Allan Kohl joined his high school's Cinema Appreciation Club and worked to raise money for renting films to be shown using the school projector. But watching movies wasn't enough, and Kohl and his friends purchased an 8 mm camera to make movies. Francesca Davis DiPiazza reports that their first effort, *Stinko: The Sewage Eating Monster*, was a loving recreation of "radiation-spawned monsters, such as Godzilla."[61] Though *Stinko* could not find distribution, it registers how amateur filmmakers often made films out of fragments of cherished films. Kohl's wasn't the only or even the first attempt at making a film that way. DiPiazza argues that we might consider Joseph Cornell's experimental collage *Rose Hobart* (1936) "the first-known fanvid."[62] Though Cornell's film is typically regarded as an example of avant-garde cinema, and Salvador Dali even allegedly claimed that Cornell "stole the film from [his] subconscious," Cornell was a film enthusiast, and his work of remixing and repurposing films in personal, idiosyncratic, loving ways anticipates fan-filmmakers who "invented the idea of tribute movies."[63] Tribute movies vary greatly in content and quality, from Andy Warhol's campy *Batman Dracula* (1964), an unauthorized homage to the DC Comics franchise, to Eric Zala's *Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation* (1989), a shot-for-shot remake of Spielberg's film made by three Mississippi teenage fans. But they all rely on existing media materials, combined or converted in order

to pay tribute to beloved films. While they acknowledge the power of authorship, and their works often exhibit reverential characteristics, tribute movies tend to ransack mass culture for their own purposes and pleasures without regard for concepts of intellectual property.

The art of tribute movies was boosted by the home video revolution, which made it possible for fans to record and collect films and television shows that could be edited into "vids." Drawing on Trekkers as his primary example and on Michel de Certeau's idea of textual poaching, Henry Jenkins demonstrates the complex relationship between fans and mass media. Unlike popular conceptions of fans as obsessive consumers or social misfits, he sees fans as active participants in media culture. Fans treat *Star Trek*, for instance, as "not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more responsive to [fans'] needs, to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures."[64] Fans are not just spectators of visual media; they also become producers who write for fan magazines, attend conventions, and create new content. New digital technologies have made it easier to generate and share fan materials. As Chuck Tryon points out, some produce "fan videos that edit, annotate, and sometimes rewrite show episodes," while others construct "homemade episodes of shows based in the worlds of their favorite . . . franchises."[65] Like tribute films before them, vids redesign the loved media object through a series of combinations or recreations. In the process, as E. Charlotte Stevens notes, vidders "construct creative and critical analyses of existing media."[66] Though born out of love, vids are always rooted in critical rewriting. Stevens offers the example of *All Coming Back*, an early and popular vid that reimagines the relationship between Captain Kirk and Spock. *All Coming Back*, she argues, "rewrites the bond between Kirk and Spock as attraction, as it re-captions a touch shared after a near-fatal mission as a passionate lovers' embrace."[67] By rethinking their connection as a romantic relationship, this vid celebrates *Star Trek* while also challenging its heteronormativity. This rewriting makes the original loved object, as Jenkins would argue, "a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures." Vidding, then, negotiates between love and critical analysis. Moreover, vidders borrow from everywhere, without regard for generic or temporal boundaries. "Media fan culture," as Jenkins puts it elsewhere, "may be understood not in terms of an exclusive interest in any one series or genre; rather, media fans take pleasure in making intertextual connections across a broad range of media texts."[68] Where would they

access this range of media texts? In the era of the videotape, fans generally relied on personal recordings of films or television shows, clips from which would be edited together to make vids. In the digital era, these collections have moved online, enabling wider access and more rapid editing. But the impulse in each case is similar. By choosing and combining film and television clips, vidders treat the larger collection like an archive that they can consume ravenously.

I would argue that serial dramas rooted in homage function in a manner that is analogous to vidding. They too treat American cinema like a fan's collection, from which they can borrow voraciously. Barbara Klinger confirms this connection when she argues that "many fan films, like fan fictions, are homages that create their alternative dramatic texts out of the originals."[69] As in vidding, these obsessive returns are guided initially by a desire to pay tribute. However, veneration leads to interpretation and reinterpretation of beloved source texts. The ultimate purpose of raiding the cinematic past for paying homage is not restoration. That is because, despite Lizardi's argument, serial dramas engaging in homage are not rooted in popular conceptions of nostalgia. The cinema of the past, however beloved, is not being recreated. Serial dramas look back very differently from the restorative nostalgia of, say, *The Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988–93), which attempts to faithfully reconstruct the cookie-cutter white suburban lifestyle of the 1950s and '60s. Its protagonist, an older Kevin Arnold (voiced by Daniel Stern), looks back on his younger self (Fred Savage), recalling sentimentally an era "that really was the wonder years in the suburbs, a golden age of kids." *The Wonder Years*'s recreation enables, even expects, its audience to wallow in a desire to return to a sugarcoated and whitewashed version of midcentury America. It is the very definition of Svetlana Boym's notion of restorative nostalgia, which, like the restoration of the Sistine Chapel or the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, aims "to restore a sense of the sacred believed to be missing from the modern world."[70] It is not surprising, then, that restorative nostalgia is linked with an actual or metaphorical return to childhood, which is perceived as a pure and innocent past, as in *The Wonder Years*. This is exactly what distinguishes *Stranger Things*—as well as, I would argue, serial dramas invested in homage, even if they are not set in the past—from episodic television. Contemporary television gazes at the cinematic past unromantically. The reflective distance between serial dramas and their cherished cinematic sources demonstrates that those sources are "not [recreated] as fairy tales

come true."[71] Rather, serial dramas reconstruct films in order to show that there is no way to go back. They pay homage to the cinematic past by reflecting on, rather than investing in, the allure of nostalgic fantasy.

One final observation about homage: its resemblance to the uncanny. The concept is usually traced back to Freud, who distinguishes it from something eerie or mysterious or terrifying. The uncanny, for Freud, is a way of thinking about the strangeness inherent in what is familiar, an idea that can be explained anecdotally: Freud was traveling by train and alone in his compartment "when the train lurched violently. The door of the adjacent toilet swung open and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and travelling cap entered my compartment."[72] He "found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant," until he realized that he was looking at a reflection of himself.[73] This misrecognition, Freud argues, is uncanny, because he sees his likeness as unlike himself. Doubling offers an otherness that is both familiar and strange at the same time. If the self can become uncanny, so can the home. We know that Freud shows the curious way in which the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*—opposites at first, connoting the homely and the unhomely—blend into each other. The home as a place of love, comfort, and security becomes also a place of intimacy and privacy and ultimately turns into a place of concealment and secrecy. The homely thus becomes unhomely or uncanny. Drawing on this argument, Susan E. Linville suggests that our desire to return home, or to the familiar, also carries this dual sensibility. "The uncanny is," she points out, "a double of nostalgia."[74] This argument clearly parallels Boym's conception of reflective nostalgia, wherein looking back at an old place doesn't provide the pleasurable memories we associate with it. All imitations carry something of the uncanny, but I am arguing that homages are overtly so. Jimmy Butts rightly intuits "an intrinsic connection between *homage* and the *unheimlich*."[75] That is because of the way homage self-consciously plays with the balance between familiarity and estrangement. Homages are both too close to their source text and not close enough. We feel at home with them, and that is precisely what we find so unnerving. Even when they are not explicitly about the supernatural, they can appear ghostly. Their recreations evince a love for, even obsession with, particular moments, scenes, films, eras that can never be wholly recreated, critically reminding us what (and why) we can never have again. Instead, the ghosts of earlier films return, but in altered form, their familiar strangeness making them doubly unnerving or, ahem, strang*er*.

In this chapter, we have interrogated homage through an exclusive focus on familiar sources, whether they are canonical or cult classics. The hypotexts have been overt and easy to recognize, and they compel their unpacking from the viewer. But what happens when the references are not plainly invoked? Or when the films being referenced are neither recognizable nor intentional? In the next chapter, we will turn to serial dramas whose cinematicity is everywhere and yet harder to place. These TV series seem less allusive to and more haunted by cinematic moments that break through. Such outbursts may not be intended by their creators, and they reveal a lot about how thoroughly television has absorbed cinema.