

Back to the Eighties! Angus McFadzean and the Suburban Fantastic

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Abstract: Angus McFadzean, Program Director of the Oxford University Summer School for Adults, writer, and researcher, categorized in 2017 the suburban fantastic – a cinematographic subgenre encompassing adventure films with elements of horror, fantasy, and science fiction from the 1980s such as *Back to the Future*, *E.T.* and *The Goonies*. Suburban Fantastic, marked by nostalgia for the American post-war period, was linked to the context of Reaganist entertainment, having its narratives built from the validation of a white and androcentric “American Dream”. In this interview, we discussed the subgenre, its syntactic, semantic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical elements, its return in the decade in films and series such as *Stranger Things*, and its adaptations to other markets such as the British and Brazilian.

Keywords: Suburban Fantastic; Suburbs; Eighties; Fantasy; Nostalgia.

De volta aos anos 1980! Angus McFadzean e o Suburbanismo Fantástico

Abstract: Angus McFadzean, professor da Universidade de Oxford, escritor e pesquisador, categorizou a partir de 2017 o suburban fantastic - subgênero cinematográfico que engloba filmes de aventura com elementos de horror, fantasia e ficção científica da década de 1980 como *Back to the Future*, *E.T.* e *The Goonies*. O Suburbanismo fantástico, marcado por uma nostalgia pelo período do pós-guerra, estava atrelado à conjuntura do entretenimento reaganista, tendo suas narrativas construídas a partir da validação de um “American Dream” branco e androcêntrico. Nessa entrevista, discutimos sobre o subgênero, seus elementos sintáticos, semânticos, estéticos e sociopolíticos, seu retorno na década em filmes e séries como *Stranger Things*, e suas adaptações para outros mercados como o britânico e o brasileiro.

Keywords: Suburbanismo Fantástico; Subúrbios; Década de 1980; Fantasia; Nostalgia.

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James Joyce, and WB Yeats. He is also the editor of *Collected Epiphanies of James Joyce: A Critical Edition* (2024).

However, the works discussed in this interview are from a different thematic field. Angus McFadzean is perhaps the first author to categorize the films aimed at young audiences that marked the 1980s as a specific subgenre. We are talking about works that permeate a variety of cinematographic genres such as adventures (*The Goonies*), fantasy (*E.T. – The Extraterrestrial*), science fiction (*Back to the Future*), or horror films (*Gremlins*), and often mixing them together.



Figure 1 – Angus McFadzean. Picture by Kate Dickson Byron.

It was from the perception that all these works shared semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and narrative elements that McFadzean considered categorizing them within the same subgenre, the Suburban Fantastic, which he developed in his book *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2019). He also wrote two complementary articles about the subgenre, *The Suburban Fantastic: A Semantic and Syntactic Grouping in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (2017) and *Historicizing Dystopia: Suburban Fantastic Media and White Millennial Childhood* (2021).

In his book, McFadzean defines Suburban Fantastic Cinema as:

[...] a name that designates a set of Hollywood movies that started to appear in the 1980s, in which pre-teen and teenage boys living within the suburbs are called upon to confront a

disruptive fantastic force – ghosts, aliens, vampires, gremlins and malevolent robots. These films emerged out of adult-focused, suburban-set melodramas, children's fantasy stories, and old-fashioned sf, horror, fantasy and adventure films and television mainly of the 1950s, and became synonymous with the work of Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante, Robert Zemeckis and Chris Columbus. Typically marketed as children's films or 'family' films, they were key parts of the childhood of late-Generation Xer's and millennials. (McFadzean, 2019, p.1)

According to him, based on Altman's syntactic-semantic categorization, these films start from the protagonist's maturation melodrama, and link is coming-of-age process to overcoming an exogenous element – usually coming from a semantic framework of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. The protagonist, usually a young middle-class white male, must restore the suburban peace disrupted by this "fantastic" element, be it a friendly E.T., a bloodthirsty vampire, or time travel.

These films of millennial/eighties culture shaped the conception of horror, fantasy, and science fiction, and have returned to prominence in recent decades through the success of works such as *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, Netflix, 2016-) and *It - Chapter 1 and 2* (Andy Muschietti, 2017 and 2019). My understanding of the impact of these films guided my Ph.D. and led me to meet Dr. Angus McFadzean. Thus, the opportunity to interview him brings, among its many objectives, the perspective of popularizing McFadzean's works in Brazil, advancing some questions of his research, and developing discussions about the Suburban Fantastic.

Pedro Lauria: — Suburban Fantastic Cinema is extremely popular in Brazil – perhaps one of the most recognized subgenres of a film culture that we call "Filmes da Sessão da Tarde." Some of the most famous Suburban Fantastic works, such as *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), and *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986), were films shown daily on open television afternoons. How do you see this process of influence in a culture that is so far distant from the reality of middle-class American suburbia?

Angus McFadzean: — The reception of Hollywood cinema in non-U.S. markets is a complex phenomenon. At its base, there is the cultural power of the U.S.A. as a leading imperial power in the Global North that has the finance and infrastructure to disseminate its culture widely. Success in the States can build interest in a particular market, but doesn't necessarily translate into success in another market. The high production values of Hollywood cinema creates an attractive product, but there is no guarantee that a distinctively American subject matter (whether it is a western, a U.S. political drama or a suburban fantastic) will connect with a non-US audience. To increase the possibility of success, every film has to be tailored to this a new market through marketing: posters and trailers are critical and a national rating system can permit access to a different (or younger) demographic. In non-English speaking markets that rely on dubbing or subtitling, there is the opportunity to alter the film with a new title, new dialogue and re-edited scenes. For example, by

packaging suburban fantastic films as 'Filmes da Sessão da Tarde', shown on television after school, suburban fantastic films were delivered directly to the homes of the intended audience at a time convenient for this audience. But to become really popular, a movie must connect with something in the lives of the audience it is trying to reach. In the case of the suburban fantastic, the focus on childhood melodramas of friendship, family, romance and adventure, coupled with a heightened wish-fulfilment scenario, is probably enough to ensure that these stories speak to an audience of Brazilian pre-teens and teens. Secondly, suburban fantastic films also offer idealised portrayals of child-friendly environments with communities, town squares and nature. The difference between Brazilian suburban spaces and those idealised on screen may be part of their appeal. A careful reading of these environments with respect to the Brazilian urban and suburban environments would be necessary to tease out the implications of this contrast.

Pedro Lauria: — How did you, a researcher born in Scotland, become interested in studying such an "American" topic?

Angus McFadzean: — I grew up in the north-east of Scotland in the 1980s and 90s when it was experiencing an oil-boom through North Sea oil. Americans flooded into the area to facilitate the industry and they required particular infrastructure. New American-style suburban developments appeared, quite distinct from the previous local architecture. There was an International American School, a French school, a Dutch school, a Baptist church, an evangelical church, a Costco, and a Petroleum social club, all exclusive to the oil-families. This importation of a kind of Houston style environment defined the social terrain of my childhood and became the zone from which I received suburban fantastic movies of that period. I developed a powerful bond to these movies through the similarity between their suburban environments and my own. Ultimately this led me to return to these movies in adulthood to try to understand their uncanny effect on myself and others.

Pedro Lauria: — In your work on Suburban Fantastic Cinema, you clearly define the subgenre based on Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic classification – a choice that considers structural issues about film genres. At the same time, in *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century*, you pay a lot of attention to the historical/social moment in which the United States and its film industry were passing when such films began to be produced (that is, a more historical perspective). In this sense, I ask: at what moment did Altman's categorization appear in your work? Was it applied later to the delimitation of a possible "film cycle" in the 1980s? Is it by using this approach that you differentiate the

historical position of *Poltergeist* (which you consider a kind of transition point between suburban gothic and suburban fantastic) and *E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial* (which you consider to be the pioneer of the suburban fantastic cinema) – for the origin of the subgenre?

Angus McFadzean: — I used Altman's semantic/syntactic model of film genre in my original article on the suburban fantastic published with *Science Fiction Film and Television* in 2017. The article's main purpose was to assert the validity and utility of a sub-genre category of 'suburban fantastic' and Altman's approach gave me a framework to achieve this. With my book with Wallflower Press in 2019, I didn't need to justify the term so much and so I had more space to explore the historical context of the film cycle of the 1980s and its alterations into the present. Altman remains an important resource for me in reading the permutations of the sub-genre. It gives me a way of relating, say, *Zathura* (Jon Favreau, 2005) back to *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), despite many intervening stylistic trends and alterations in production.

In my book, combining a historical perspective and Altman's approach allowed me to explore *Poltergeist* and *E.T.* as a kind of split origin of the sub-genre. Both developed out of a project by Spielberg to unite the suburban fantasies of children with horror, science fiction and fantasy. *Poltergeist* captured an adult market that was already interested in the modernised horror movies in the 1970s which often focused on children (*The Exorcist*, *The Omen*). But it also tried to capture a younger audience by linking the ghosts to fantasies about the intrusion of television into the family home. This is reflected in Spielberg and Hooper's struggle to reduce the film's rating from R to PG, a struggle they won. *Poltergeist* was an initial attempt to find the fine line that the suburban fantastic later pioneered – a cinematic intensity that is nonetheless acceptable for pre-teens. *E.T.* fully adopted a child perspective but nonetheless conveys an emotional intensity that was appealing to a larger audience of adults. It moved beyond the residual "suburban gothic/haunted house" narrative of *Poltergeist* into the "pre-teen melodrama heightened by fantastic invasion" narrative that defines the suburban fantastic.

Pedro Lauria: — Now, focusing more on the semantic aspect of Altman's categorization. In *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century*, you make it clear that films of the subgenre do not have to be specifically set in the suburbs – as it is the case with *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), which takes place in a small town, and *Back to the Future III* (Robert Zemeckis, 1990), which takes place in the "Old West." Analyzing the urban evolution of American suburbs since the post-war period, their social difference from small towns is apparent. For example, many researchers write about the lack of a sense of community in these new burbs such as Baumgartner, Putnam, and Coontz. In your book, you point out that perhaps

it is precisely the suburban child/youth who manages to have a more “communitarian” experience (more typical of a small town) – precisely because they are limited in that geography (they don't commute/drive to the city/urban centres). In this sense, do you think that, by choosing the child/youth protagonism, suburban fantastic cinema tries to create an “idealized experience” of suburban life closer to how it was sold in the post-war suburban expansion?

Angus McFadzean: — Absolutely. The sub-genre romanticises or glamourises suburbia, even as it reveals its decline or inadequacies. *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) is notable for the degree of urban decline in the town of Hillview in 1985 compared to the more idealised vision of the town in 1955. The juxtaposition of the two visions (and the actions of Marty over the course of the story) serve to revive the present-day town and bring reality closer to the ideal. The wish-fulfilment aspect of the story is only really possible from the teen's or pre-teen's perspective. An adult narrative of suburbia would have to involve the classic post-war criticism of suburbia as spaces of alienating conformity, a surface veneer hiding secrets of alcoholism, infidelity and unhappiness. In contrast, suburban fantastic movies and their child-protagonists buy into the utopianism of suburbia, perhaps simply because their directors had their suburban childhoods in the post-war period and found the advertising about suburban idylls matched their experiences. Suburban fantastic movies still introduce an imperfection: the protagonist is unhappy because of dramas with family or friends or just the growing pains of incipient adolescence. But the protagonist is the agent of renewal and their attempts to defeat the intrusion of the fantastic will restore the society to its utopia (a very flattering idea for pre-teens viewers identifying with the protagonist).

Pedro Lauria: — In *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century*, you define three pre-established narrative traditions on which Suburban Fantastic will be based: 1) the small town “Family film”; 2) the sci-fi, horror, and fantasy tropes from 50's TV and cinema; 3) the child-focused fantasy film. As for the latter, you mention films like *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Mel Stuart, 1971) and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968), mentioning that they are works in which children leave their homeland to solve a situation caused by the disruption a magical element: narratives that can be categorized in that Farah Mendlesohn (2008) calls “Portal/Quest Fantasy.” However, Suburban Fantastic Narratives, in general, seem to fit better in what Mendlesohn will call Intrusive Fantasy: works in which Fantasy disorganizes the protagonist's world, and he needs to bring it back to normality. This is the case of another film you also mention: *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964). How do you see this structural difference? Is it possible to identify (at least) two branches within the suburban fantastic cinema, or would they be two different subgenres? And how do you perceive

films that permeate between these structures, as is the case of *Pagemaster* (Pixote Hunt & Joe Johnston, 1994) and *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (Mark Waters, 2008)?

Angus McFadzean: — Suburban fantastic cinema welcomes all science fiction, horror and fantasy tropes, including Mendlesohn's "portal/quest" fantasy. Many films of the 1980s emphasize Mendlesohn's "intrusive fantasy" narrative, by showing an element of the fantastic interrupting suburban life and creating a crisis that only the pre-teen protagonist can resolve. But *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985) arguably has something of the "portal/quest" narrative to it, in that the protagonists descend into a tunnel network of Indiana Jones-style booby-traps leading to a pirate ship. Their teenage melodramas are played out in this alternate space rather than in the topology of their small town. Similarly, *Explorers* (Joe Dante, 1985) uses the spacecraft built by the protagonists to fly to a larger spaceship where they encounter aliens. And *Back to the Future* involves a "portal" which leads Marty McFly (Michael J Fox) to another world (except here it is a suburbia of the past). Mendlesohn's categories are tools we can use to understand the content of these films, and it's possible for films to fulfil different criteria simultaneously. The *Pagemaster* and *The Spiderwick Chronicles* could be categorised as suburban fantastic films or as "portal/quest" fantasy films with some suburban fantastic elements, depending on our emphasis. The "intrusive fantasy" narrative has priority for me because of its predominance in the early suburban fantastic films from Amblin. But the subsequent development of the sub-genre shows a wide use of fantasy tropes. I wouldn't be inclined to schematically sub-divide the genre into two branches or types, although I would welcome further illuminating categorisation.

Pedro Lauria: — In *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century*, you underline the existence of an intrinsically conservative/reactionary structure in the Suburban Fantastic subgenre. After all, their narratives involve the maturation of a young person (almost always a white boy) from resolving the disruption caused by a non-suburban "Other." For example, in *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Momies* (2002), Patricia Turner writes about the racist metaphor in *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984), where the little monsters would perform as a stereotype of a black teenager: eating fried chicken, breakdancing, and speaking in slang. In such a way, it would be possible to see *Gremlins* from the perspective of the "anxiety of the white middle class" with the "invasion" of the suburbs by non-white dwellers. How do you position this type of construction within suburban fantastic cinema? Do you see this "aversion to the Other" (non-white, non-heterosexual) as something intrinsic to the subgenre, or as a mark of this first cycle still heavily influenced by the Reagan years and "Reaganite entertainment"?

Angus McFadzean: — Suburban fantastic cinema addresses a dual audience of pre-teens/teens and adults and offers different messages to those groups. Regarding *Gremlins*, for pre-teens the gremlins most immediately signify the pleasurable anarchy of disobedient children. But to an adult middle-class audience, the gremlins can be coded as social Others (non-white, non-heterosexual, non-middle class). Furthermore, these significations cannot be limited to their intended audiences. Pre-teens and teens literate in the signifiers of social cultures, can receive the adult references. This raises the question of how suburban fantastic cinema facilitates the construction of a modernised “acceptable” racism in a white audience. My own take is that each suburban fantastic film should be closely read for the way it characterises otherness. Sometimes the Other (as with *E.T.*) is welcomed and those who would harm it are villainised. But fears and anxieties about “Others” sometimes appear embodied in the intruding fantastic, even though some suburban fantastic protagonists ally themselves with characters that are bullied, marginalised, non-white, or non-middle class. The narrative structure that emphasises an opposition between ‘self’ and ‘Other’ lends itself to “othering,” particularly racialised othering. However I don’t see an “aversion” to the Other as intrinsic to the genre. What defines suburban fantastic narratives is the link between the intrusion of the fantastic and the personal melodramas of the protagonist. When designing the fantastic intrusion, directors can chose to play up or tone down racialised elements for different strands of the audience and are responsible for those choices. Undoubtedly the context of Reagan’s America influenced the films of that period in complex ways. But recent films like *See you Yesterday* (Stefon Bristol, 2019) and *Vampires vs. the Bronx* (Osmany Rodriguez, 2020) have revealed the attraction of the suburban fantastic stories for non-white audiences, as well as the versatility of the genre to adapt itself to different forms of the fantastic, non-suburban settings, non-white protagonists, and a different set of codes (pro-Black Lives Matter, anti-gentrification).

Pedro Lauria: — Due to the pioneering spirit of your publication, you establish in *Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Growing Up in the Late Twentieth Century* that you prefer to pay more attention to films that fit more orthodoxly within the syntactic/semantic definition of Suburban Fantastic and, therefore, some more liminal films are not the focus of your discussion. This is the case, for example, of the so-called “animal/pet films.” However, as is common in film genre studies, some works occupy a hybrid place – as is the case of *Beethoven* (Brian Levant, 1992), *Free Willy* (Simon Wincer, 1993), and *Air Bud* (Charles Martin Smith, 1997) that can be understood as Suburban Fantastic/Family/Pet Films. Considering that the 90s is the decade when Suburban Fantastic starts to fade away from the “high fantasy” narratives that will take

over the first decade of the 21st century, do you see the possibility of facing these "pet films" as a "transition cycle" of the suburban fantastic?

Angus McFadzean: — There is a long history of anthropomorphising animals in cartoons, animation and movies and this has influenced suburban fantastic movies. *Gremlins* is partly about receiving a new pet, as is *Harry and the Hendersons* (William Dear, 1987). Other 1980s movies such as *Turner and Hooch* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1989) and *K-9* (Rod Daniel, 1989) combined animal/pet genre with the buddy-cop genre to great success. In the 1990s the general revival of the family movie included the revival of the family-centred pet movie in the titles you mention. However, suburban fantastic films of the same period tend to stress meeting a special friend (a mad explorer in *Jumanji* (Joe Johnston, 1995), a ghost in *Casper* (Brad Silberling, 1995), the giant robot in *The Iron Giant* (Brad Bird, 1999)) rather than a pet. Consequently, I don't see a strong connection between 90s pet movies and 90s suburban fantastic. Pet films echo the suburban fantastic in that they unite a pre-teen or teenage protagonist with an 'other' who will help them work through a personal melodrama. However, for me, a pet lacks a heightened 'fantastic' aspect that would link it to the suburban fantastic. If I were to imagine a pet-focused suburban fantastic film, it might be something closer to a suburban version of Disney's *The Shaggy Dog* series (1959-) in which the adult protagonist turns into a dog thanks to a cursed ring.

That said, I stress in my study that many different genres can include elements of the suburban fantastic. I haven't rewatched the 1990s pet movies recently – I'm open to the idea they have suburban fantastic elements I've overlooked.

Pedro Lauria: — In Brazil – mainly from the 2010s onwards, we saw the emergence of some works that can be categorized as Suburban Fantastic Films – as is the case of *O Segredo dos Diamantes* (Hélcio Ratton, 2014), *Mate-me Por Favor* (Anita da Rocha, 2015), *O Escaravelho do Diabo* (Carlo Milani, 2016) and *Turma da Mônica - Laços* (Daniel Rezende, 2019). In British cinema, we have the case of *Attack the Block* (Joe Cornish, 2011) that you mention in your book. Have you mapped other films/series produced in the UK from the 2010s onwards? If so, did you identify any peculiarities that might indicate the consolidation of a "British Suburban Fantastic Cinema"?

Angus McFadzean: — Since many forms of fantasy (ghosts, vampires) are transnational, non-U.S. suburban fantastic cinema has been produced for national markets. In 1980s Spain and West Germany, there was *Los Nuevos Extraterrestres* (Extra-Terrestrial Visitors, a.k.a. Pod People, Juan Piquer Simon, 1983) and *Making Contact* (a.k.a. Joey, Roland Emmerich, 1985) that tried to capitalise on the suburban fantastic boom. Given the global dissemination of suburban fantastic

movies, there is nothing preventing directors in other countries from creating their own suburban fantastic sub-genres, in which their protagonists respond to an intruding fantastic, either a familiar U.S. version (a UFO) or a pre-existing folk fantasy from a non U.S. culture (see the creature deriving from Spanish Caribbean folklore in *Chupa* (Jonás Cuarón, 2023)). Discovering these movies however is a challenge, partly because they do not necessarily include the visual iconography of American suburbia. U.S. suburban fantastic movies are tied to the social reality of mid-century suburbanisation and the subsequent cultural representation of suburbia as both utopian and dystopian, although in practice the setting can be swapped for other housing communities, small towns (*The Goonies*), tenement blocks (**batteries not included* (Mathew Robbins, 1987)) and condos (*Child's Play* (Lars Klevberg, 2019)). American-style tract housing has come to many parts of the world, but filmmakers are not obliged to use this iconography when telling a suburban fantastic story. What matters is not the setting but the question: is the pre-teen protagonist mentally colonised by the image repertoire of sf, fantasy or horror media that could then be manifested in their reality as an intrusive fantastic? If the answer is yes, then it is likely that the film is suburban fantastic, even if the setting is not suburbia.

The question of a specifically British suburban fantastic reveals some of the complexities of identifying imitations of the U.S. model. Britain has a pre-existing form of children's fantasy, often in the "portal/quest" mode and taking place in townhouses and terraced houses (think *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and many mid-century children's novels like *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *Moondial*). British children's fantasy was powerfully boosted by the outsized global success of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (1997-2007) and the subsequent U.S. movie series (2001-2011), leading to a slew of imitators in fantasy media in Britain and the U.S. Their dominance has largely prevented a direct equivalent to the American suburban fantastic emerging. For example, *Attack the Block* consciously imitates the "intrusive fantasy" of American suburban fantastic movies. But tellingly, Cornish's follow-up *The Kid Who Would Be King* (Joe Cornish, 2019) leans closer to traditional British children's fantasy, as does his current Netflix show *Lockwood* (2023). Nevertheless, the particularities of British children's fantasy (and its attendant themes of empire, capitalism and race) offers an illuminating comparison with the American suburban fantastic and there may be individual episodes of TV shows that come closer to the suburban fantastic model.

Pedro Lauria: — In your book, you mention that Suburban Fantastic is a mostly white and androcentric subgenre. However, shortly after releasing it, many Suburban Fantastic films with more diverse protagonists began to be released – mainly on Netflix, like *See You Yesterday*

(Stefon Bristol, 2019), *Vampires vs. The Bronx* (Osmany Rodriguez, 2020), and the *Fear Street trilogy* (Leigh Janiak, 2021). How do you understand these changes? What are the semantic and syntactic impacts that you believe these works can have on the subgenre as a whole?

Angus McFadzean: — The centrality of white males in suburban fantastic narratives is historically circumstantial and not essential to the sub-genre. In the 1980s and 90s, white male directors appealed to young white male audiences through representing young white pre-teens and teens with a passion for science fiction, fantasy and horror in films. However, changes in audience demographics nationally and globally, the diversification of the typically “white male” genres of sf, fantasy and horror, and the increasing opportunities for women and people of colour to produce or star in fantasy films, have led to films which draw upon the suburban fantastic model while adapting it to non-suburban settings and non-white themes. *Fear Street’s* queer protagonists directly address the foundational injustices committed by patriarchy that lie in the town’s and implicitly America’s past. *Finding ‘Ohana* (Jude Weng, 2021) uses a Goonies-style adventure to address issues of Hawaiian cultural pride. These developments are welcome and long-overdue. However, genres always have a constitutive tension between limiting themselves to their classical components and hybridising with another genre beyond recognition. So far, my sense is that the inclusion of progressive themes and minority representation is fully compatible with the core tenet of the sub-genre: the coordination of the protagonist’s personal melodrama with an intruding element of the fantastic.

Pedro Lauria: — In your article *Historicizing Dystopia: Suburban Fantastic Media and White Millennial Childhood*, you discuss how contemporary works such as *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016-), *Dark* (Baran bo Odar and Jantje Friese, 2017-2020) and the *Fear Street* trilogy imagine a period in which “the future was still open and full of utopian possibilities, and terror could still be defeated”. It is difficult not to think of these narratives from the perspective of an American suburban middle-class that has gone through the 2008 housing crisis, which put the suburb itself at risk, and the climate crisis – that makes us question the sustainability of an urbanization model based on asphalt and fuel burning. Do you see contemporary suburban fantastic as a nostalgic response to these crises? Within this same logic, do you think that more contemporary concerns - such as the rise of a global extreme right and its discourse of rejection of the “Other”, and the COVID-19 pandemic (narratively worked as this “great external evil” that broke the “status quo”) – can impact future suburban fantastic productions?

Angus McFadzean: — What links these seminal instances of the contemporary suburban fantastic is the way they show the suburb or small town changing through history. While *Stranger*

Things moves slowly through the 1980s, *Fear Street* and *Dark* offer expanded visions that range back to the Salem Witch Trials or forward into a post-apocalyptic society. In doing so, they warn the contemporary audiences of the 2020s that the future is grim because of a crime that occurred in the past and that exposing the crime can alter present and future dramatically. These stories still believe in solutions and justice and a future that is “still open”. Other suburban fantastic stories are more pessimistic about this. The 2008 housing crisis is cited in the remake of *Poltergeist* (Gil Kenan, 2015) and the bleak aesthetics of suburban desperation and poverty in movies like *Midnight Special* (Jeff Nichols, 2016) and *Super Dark Times* (Kevin Phillips, 2017) or *Kin* (Josh and Jonathan Baker, 2018) suggest a foreclosed future. While audiences might be protected from this contemporary reality by more nostalgic representations of suburbia, such nostalgia is always complicated by the intruding fantastic – a rift between worlds has opened, reality has split in two, or a crime from the past is spilling into the present. What seems like nostalgia is, in my view, more like the romanticisation or glamourisation of the hero’s attempts to fix the world, rather than nostalgic for the idyllic suburban lifestyle. Suburban fantastic stories remain hopeful for a happy ending for suburbanites. Consequently, suburban fantastic media has yet to fully grapple with these issues that threaten suburban comfort and security - the rise of the far-right, the pandemic, and the climate crisis. To my mind, suburban fantastic stories are well-placed to reveal suburban complicity with environmental destruction, but to do so would involve confronting a genuine “end of suburbia”, which may not be popular.

Pedro Lauria: — Speaking of more contemporary works, it is possible to notice the existence of Suburban Fantastic Productions that go beyond cinema and TV series – such as video games, music videos, and literature. What potentialities do you believe such productions can bring to consolidating the subgenre?

Angus McFadzean: — Absolutely. The suburban fantastic, like film noir, is an aesthetic as well as a narrative, and appears in other media forms. Most prominently, Simon Stålenhag’s graphic art shows teenagers in natural landscapes strewn with the debris of future technology. His *Tales from the Loop* (2014) and *The Electric State* (2017) have both been adapted to live-action media. Bryan K. Vaughan and Cliff Chiang’s comic book series *Paper Girls* (2015-19) offered a female-focused suburban fantastic focused on time travel technology (its excellent Amazon series (2022) was sadly cancelled). In music, M83 pioneered a synth-based sound that the cover art and music videos for *Saturdays=Youth* (2008) and *Hurry Up, I’m Dreaming* (2011) connected to suburbia, bikes, kids, and their telekinetic powers: subsequently, the Duffer brothers used synthwave music for the soundtrack of *Stranger Things*. In video games, there was Hi-Bit Studio’s *198X* (2020), featuring Kid

whose life in Suburbia is intruded upon by powerfully addictive 80s arcade games. And in graphic design, the retro t-shirt images of Steven Rhodes combine illustrations in the style of children's activity books with occult iconography; they now adorn posters, mugs, and a book *My Little Occult Book Club* (2020). My expectation is that the suburban fantastic aesthetic will continue to dominate representations of the 1980s as much as a generic 50 aesthetic dominates representations of the American 1950s.



Figure 2 – Fjärrhandske (2014) by Simon Stålenhag in www.simonstalenhag.se.

Pedro Lauria: — Finally, what would you say to researchers and, above all, to Brazilian researchers who want to start working with Suburban Fantastic Cinema?

Angus McFadzean: — As the generation of Hollywood actors and directors associated with the 1980s and 1990s (Spielberg, Lucas, Harrison Ford, etc.) become part of the past, scholars and critics will find opportunities to reassess their careers and influence from a historical perspective (Julie A. Turnock's recent study *The Empire of Effects: Industrial Light and Magic and the Rendering of Realism* (2022) offers a fine example of such reassessment and historicization). Any reassessment will have to take account of suburban fantastic media and its reception in many global film markets, particularly in large countries like Brazil. In this there is much work to be done. Brazilian researchers will naturally pioneer research into the Brazilian media landscape and the effect of Hollywood productions and home-grown productions on Brazilian audiences. But there will also be possibilities for addressing contemporary non-Brazilian media through the wide dissemination of suburban fantastic content through modern streaming services such as Netflix (today nothing stops a Brazilian

researcher writing on, for example, the Danish Netflix show *Chosen* (Jannik Tai Mosholt, Kaspar Munk e Christian Potalivo, 2022)).

Hopefully such researchers into the suburban fantastic will present themselves from Brazil, Scotland and elsewhere. The intrusion of Hollywood media into the lives of pre-teens and teenagers is an experience that many millennial adults in many different countries hold in common. Suburban fantastic movies purport to offer “realistic” representations of the hopes and fears of young millennials growing up in a media-saturated environment of mass-produced entertainment. Yet the way millennial childhood is refracted through these representations deserves scrutiny for the things that are elided in a nostalgic glow. Revisiting these movies offers opportunities for researchers to reflect to readers a shared experience: the emotional and intellectual ties created in a key demographic of merchandise-purchasing pre-teens and teenagers by the intruding force of Hollywood fantasies.

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