MAGICAL REALISM OR REALIST MAGIC:

THE ONTOLOGY OF MAGIC IN STEPHEN KING'S *INSOMNIA* AND THE DUFFER BROTHERS' *STRANGER THINGS*

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This Thesis is dedicated to my parents who never let me stop believing I can do whatever I set my mind to - no matter how long it takes.

A special thanks to my mother who introduced me to Stephen King at a probably inappropriately young age and Shereen Siwpersad for the writing sessions, pity parties and encouragement.

As I write the last sentence of this thesis after almost four years of on and off writing I would like to echo Ralph:

"Anything's possible [...]' he said. 'I know that now."

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In this thesis, I will outline how the ontology and the use of the magic in magical realism has changed over time, taking as my starting point Stephen King's novel *Insomnia* (1994) and comparing and contrasting this with The Duffer Brother's Netflix original series *Stranger Things* (2016). Additionally, I will examine whether the medium of the cultural object – novel versus on-demand series – has had an influence on this change. I argue that the ontology of the magic in the cultural objects has shifted from external threats to internal ones. I will argue this based on a threefold shift that has taken place within the magical realist genre since the popularization of Streaming Media. That is, a shift from representations of: 1) biopower to biotechnology, 2) disciplinary society to a society of control and 3) the uncanny to the abject. I believe that these shifts observable in *Insomnia* and *Stranger Things* could be indicative of a larger shift within North American magical realism from *magical realism* that places the magic in conjunction with the real to *realist magic* that places magic within the real and the real within the magic.

So what is magical realism? Some literary critics have attempted to create a taxonomy of defining factors of the genre. The essence of magical realism is as paradoxical as the name itself – it "represents both fantastic and real without allowing either a greater claim to truth" (Warnes 3). But, as with any genre, there are as many different definitions, taxonomies and theories as there are literary critics. Wendy Faris, for instance, has established a five-point taxonomy of elements that must be present for a text to be considered magical realist. Her definition includes five elements of which I would argue, in line with Christopher Warnes (Hermeneutics 6) only the first two are absolutely necessary, while the other three elements may or may not be present. These elements are: (1) "[t]he text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic," (2) "the descriptions [...] detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world," (3) "the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events," (4) "the narrative merges different realms," and (5)

it "disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris 7). An important point that Faris makes, and a reason I believe a checklist or taxonomy to be unhelpful in this discussion, is that "belief systems differ, clearly, some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others, depending on their beliefs and narrative traditions" (17). I must recognize then that in my analysis there will be some implicit Western bias as my response and hesitation to these texts will not be exactly the same as others. In Chapter 1, I will consider Faris' theory and others in more detail from the conception of magical realism to now. While magical realism is often regarded as either a European or a Latin-American genre, I will explore the way in which it has developed in North America. The reason for this geographic reconsideration is twofold: 1) my academic pursuits have always had a particular focus on the Gothic and North American horror and 2) magical realism in North American fiction is a relatively under researched area. Considering anything to only be present in or relevant to one area in this vastly globalized world seems short-sighted.

To answer the research question, I will analyse two cultural objects from different eras and from different media – Stephen King's novel *Insomnia* (published in 1994 but started in 1990) and the Netflix original series *Stranger Things* released on July 15, 2016 and created by Matt and Ross Duffer. While to the layman's eye Stephen King and the Duffer Brothers' series are seemingly unrelated, it is important to establish that the former has deeply informed and influenced the latter. Set in the 1980s, *Stranger Things* is a dead ringer for a King novel. The ambiance, the setting – even the font of the series' title (ITC Benguiat) was used on many a King cover. King did some of his most prolific writing in the 80s – he wrote over 25% of his novels in the 80s – and his novels are rife with references to the American Culture of the average Joe and Jane. Due to King's (hyper)realist style, his writing gives a uniquely detailed peek into their world. The protagonist group of kids, bullied but resilient, is a classic King trope and equally present in *Stranger Things*. But of course the

important similarity, at least for this thesis, is their use of magical realism. The way in which both cultural objects engage with magical realism is in turn also the most important difference.

The works that will be discussed are part of 'popular culture' and have hitherto been largely ignored by, or underrepresented in literary criticism. These works have neither been universally recognized as 'Literature' nor have they been substantially classified as belonging to the magical realist genre before. Magical realism can be considered a sub-genre of the larger and overarching genre of fantasy, which has been conspicuously absent from the official canon, despite some fantasy novels having the same merits as canonical literature. While being extensively researched in Cultural Studies, fantasy is academically underappreciated within Literary Studies in part due to its over-appreciation in culture: books that cater to a wide audience are often dismissed as not being worthy of academic criticism. Another reason for this underappreciation is that popular culture still suffers from an implied inferiority. Popular culture has been defined in a qualitative manner as: "the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (Storey 5). This definition is a faulty dichotomy and inherently classist. How would, for instance, Shakespeare be classified using this definition? Based on his popularity among the populous his plays would be considered popular culture, however most would class it as high culture and it would therefore fall without this category. Another problem with this definition, as Holt Parker has argued, is that "popular culture can be a residual area only if "popular" and "high" represent two nonintersecting sets, that is, if the elite and the "people" have no common pursuits" (152). This is a dangerous way to categorize culture as it automatically marginalizes and denounces anything that does not appeal to the elite. Stephen King's writing in particular has been dividing critics, readers and reviewers alike. King has been charged on multiple occasions with a case of 'diarrhoea of the pen' (King, *Bag of Bones*). Others have attempted to elevate

King's work to the realm of literature by illuminating its representations of and engagement with American cultural anxieties. This thesis will attempt to contribute to the latter.

Chapter 1 will first give a (very) brief history of magical realism. It will discuss the germination of the term and its subsequent use in literary criticism within different geological and temporal contexts. It will further outline some of the major genres that influenced magical realism, including but not limited to: surrealism, horror, gothic and science fiction all falling under the larger genre of fantasy. The terms disciplinary society, biopower, and the uncanny will be defined and discussed in conjunction with a short summary of Stephen King's novel *Insomnia* (1994). In Chapter 2, I will examine in more detail what North American magical realism is exactly. Furthermore, the terms biotechnology, society of control, and the abject will be defined and discussed in conjunction with a short summary of the first season of the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things*. Chapter 3 will constitute the largest section of this thesis in which I will discuss, in further detail, the ways in which the three shifts from representations of biopower to biotechnology, disciplinary society to a society of control and the uncanny to the abject occur between the two cultural objects. In Chapter 4, I will conclude by presenting a sliding scale of magical realism with on one end, *magical realism* and on the other *realist magic.* It will also present an answer to the research question.

Chapter 1 – Stephen King's Magical Realism: Disciplinary Society, Biopower and the Uncanny

Before I discuss magical realism as a genre, we must attempt to define the term genre itself. This has proven difficult in the past, as well as today, because, as Jane Feuer remarks, "[a] genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world" (144). Genre is commonly considered as a category or class, the members of which adhere to a certain set of conventions or rules. Individual texts are often judged on the basis of their "generic height" (Fowler 100), or in other words, on the extent to which the work in question follows these so called "rules." I would argue that works that do not completely fit the genre and works that play with the conventions, change them, undermine them or transgress them are a much more interesting subject for academic discussion than works that simply use the genre conventions as a to-do list – checking as many boxes as possible. However, we cannot analyse these transformative works of art without a clear base line: "for there to be a transgression, the norm must be apparent" (Todorov, *The Fantastic* 8). Thus, while many of these conventions and the classification of many works have been heavily discussed among scholars, genre provides a somewhat stable framework that can be used as a starting point of analysis.

To establish the 'baseline' from which the specific geographical context of North American magical realism can be discussed we must first consider the following questions: When and where did magical realism emerge? What was the original context in which magical realism was used? What genres have influenced magical realism? How has magical realism been defined by other scholars? And finally, what is North American magical realism and how does it differentiate itself? While this chapter attempts to answer these questions, I will heed an important warning by a scholar coincidentally named Warnes. He points out

that, when trying to define magical realism as a genre, some scholars have presented sweeping generalizations, but these "are bound to fail; the term is best used not as a globalised postcolonial aesthetic category, but rather as a tool for understanding specific texts and contexts" (Warnes 12).

It is important to discuss genres within a framework of its predecessors and contemporaries as "a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination (Todorov, *The Origin of Genres* 161). It was the German art critic and historian Franz Roh who first coined the term *Magischer Realismus* in his 1925 book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Post-Expressionism, magical realism: Problems of the latest European Painting). As the title shows, the term was first used in relation to German post-expressionist paintings. Roh's book was an attempt to define this new post-expressionist style that carried the baggage of expressionism, but clearly constituted a new visual genre. Roh's term *Magischer Realismus* described the tension between the expressionistic emotional dreamscapes and the impressionistic objective reality. The term was first used in relation to literature when it was translated into Spanish in 1927. His article was published in the influential journal *Revista de Occidente*. After this publication, it was first used independently by Massimo Bontempelli in 1927 in an essay on modernist fiction. Roh and Bontempelli wrote their theses on magical realism just after World War I; its aftermath and the rise of modernism heavily influenced their views. According to Maryam Asayesh and Mehmet Arargüç, Bontempelli believed that through magical realism, some needed to create a new (fascist) myth "maybe because it could help bind people together" (32). He saw magical realist art "not as an imitation of reality but as an exploration of mystery and of daily life as a miraculous adventure" (Witt 109).

While its inception took place in interbellum Europe, with the publication of Roh's article in *Revista de Occidente*, magical realism soon firmly rooted in Latin American literary criticism. Some critics, such as Angel Flores in his essay *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* (1955) and J.E. Irby in his *La Influencia de William Faulkner en cuatro narradores hispanoamericanos* (1956), have even claimed that magical realism was and is distinctly and exclusively Latin American (Reeds 55-56). This would probably fall under the category of sweeping generalizations about a genre. Magical realism has indeed been an established postcolonial literary genre in Latin America and Europe, but more recently literary critics have been exploring other contexts in which magical realism plays an important role. Brenda Cooper's book *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (1998) is an exploration of the work of three West African writers whose work is "characterized by the powerful, restless reincarnations of myth into magic and history into the universal" (1) and Alexandra Berlina has argued for the existence of a Russian magical realism in her article *Russian Magical Realism and Pelevin as Its Exponent*. While different geological contexts have started to consider magical realism as a border-transcending genre, there has not been much recognition of the genre in North American fiction or much academic consideration of its forms and development. However, it has inevitably developed in postcolonial North America and still exists there today.

The North American post-settlement literature is deeply rooted in a much larger Anglo-Saxon tradition, having been influenced by European cultures in general. To establish the framework that is this larger tradition, I will present a short and chronological overview of the most important literary genres that have influenced North American magical realism starting with the Gothic and ending with Tzvetan Todorov's ideas on the fantastic. Staying true to their name "for the Puritans, there were no new understandings, only reaffirmations of old ones" (Ude 51) and their earliest literary traditions were similar if not arguably the same

as those of England. The Romance novel especially offered a way for the Americans to describe their new life in the new world. According to Wayne Ude, the three Romance elements that were most important to American writers and readers were the "idealization of rural life (which became frontier life in American Romantic development); their love, not of formal gardens but of the wild, irregular, strange, or even grotesque in nature (and in prose and verse); and their idealization of the primitive" (53). While there were similarities that allowed for the use of the Romance genre, the new settlement context provided different struggles and challenges that could not be captured by merely imitating English Romance. This forced Americans to develop their own modes of writing. A similar development can be seen with the Gothic, which was an immensely popular literary genre in eighteenth-century England. While not all scholars agree that the Gothic is a "brooding romantic style handed down, and across the ocean, from Lewis and Radcliffe to Hawthorne and Poe" (Maudlin & Peel), the connection between the early British tradition of Gothic fiction and its influences on American Gothic fiction are undeniable. The reason why this genre was exported with such success lies perhaps in the fact that the Gothic provided a literary vehicle to criticise Catholicism, such as Robert Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk: A Romance (1796).* Who would be more interested in such a genre than the Reformed Puritans who sought to cleanse the Church of England of its Catholic beliefs and rituals? But while the English Gothic relies heavily on civilized history – its setting were almost always castles or monasteries – American Gothic developed without such a shared civilization. Rather, their context existed of colonies, frontier wilderness and puritan imagery of hell and eternal damnation. American Gothic is therefore sometimes called Dark Romanticism and it is this mixture of genres (i.e. the Gothic and the Romantic) that Ude argues had "finally provided both an attitude and a set of techniques that could allow them [American writers] to report on frontier and wilderness and on human reactions to both" (Ude

53). Edgar Allan Poe and Nathanial Hawthorne, quintessential Dark Romance writers, formulated narratives that distort realist ideas of time, space and objective truth. Frequent themes included the human psyche and the effects of seemingly supernatural occurrences thereupon.

A distinct difference with the Gothic, however, is that magical realist narratives do not provide a resolution or explanation of the supernatural events. For example, *The Black Cat* (1843) an exemplary Gothic narrative and one of Poe's most frequently analysed short stories provides a murderer's confession in which he blames his actions on a stray cat he took home one night. The story includes several unexplained and supernatural occurrences but more careful examination shows that the story is indeed 'nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects' (Poe). Especially illuminating is Susan Amper's article in which she closely examines and minutely describes the events as told by the narrator and points out their incoherence and absurdity. She concludes, as have others, that the narrator is simply lying and that these supernatural occurrences are nothing more than a ploy to get out of a death sentence or a psychological coping mechanism to deal with the grizzly murder. Thus a hierarchy is established between the real and the unreal in which the former is placed above the latter. In magical realist narratives there is a distinct absence of hierarchy between the two worlds, both continuing to exist alongside one another, and of a resolution or explanation of the events occurring in either of the two worlds.

Poe and Hawthorne were not the only writers to engage with the supernatural. Their contemporary Emily Dickinson wrote about the juxtaposition between the natural and the supernatural both in her letters and her poetry. She too was influenced by "gothic romanticism and the growth of Spiritualism" and her work was "flanked by the growth and decline, or at least the tempering, of Puritanism and the spirituality of Transcendentalism" (Wright 1). Her writing mainly focussed on life and the afterlife and whether these were

separate states of being or whether they existed within one reality. Naturally, her exploration of these themes meant she was fascinated by death, heaven and the cycle of life and these motifs figure prominently in her poems (Wright 40). Dickinson is relevant in this discussion not only because of the subjects of her writing but because she argued that the "'Supernatural' was only the Natural disclosed" (Dickinson *Letters*, 423-24). Emily Dickinson undoubtedly read Thomas Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus" (1836) where she perhaps had encountered the term Natural Supernaturalism. In his novel, first published as a serial in the literary journal *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country,* Carlyle coins the term Natural Supernaturalism, which, according to Meyer Howard Abrams, tended "in diverse degrees and ways, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine" (68). Thus, fascinated and inspired by this juxtaposition of the magical made real and the real made magical, Emily Dickinson explored the idea that Heaven and Earth could be the same. She hints at the absence of hierarchy between the two realms which would later be seen as one of the defining characteristics of the magical realist genre: "But *that* was Heaven—*this* is but Earth, Earth so *like* to heaven that I would hesitate should the true one call away" (*Letters*, 195; italics in original).

As these ideas and movements developed continuously, it is not entirely possible to commit to a chronological overview. And as Carlyle was of course not the only European influence on Dickinson and others in America, we must now return to Europe and take a brief step back in time. The eighteenth century saw the rise of German Idealism which constituted another important influence and precursor to (North American) magical realism. It became closely interwoven with Transcendentalism, which in turn informed the writers discussed so far. Walt Whitman, for example, noted: "Only Hegel is fit for America — is large enough and free enough". The connection between this philosophical school of thought and the literary genre magical realism has been explored by Warnes in his article *Magical Realism*

and the Legacy of German Idealism. He discusses the philosophical work by Georg von Hardenberg who wrote under the pen name Novalis. Novalis, as many other philosophers at the time, developed ideas on truth, the object and the subject. For him there were two kinds of truth: *Naturwahrheit* and *Wunderwahrheit*. These two truths coexisted and one could not exist without the other, or as he himself wrote:

> *Alle Überzeugung ist unabhängig von der Naturwahrheit. Sie bezieht sich auf die magische, oder die Wunderwahrheit. Von der Naturwahrheit kann man nur überzeugt werden, insofern sie Wunderwahrheit wird. Aller Beweis fußt auf Überzeugung, und ist mithin nur ein Notbehelf im Zustand des Mangels an durchgängiger Wunderwahrheit. Alle Naturwahrheiten beruhen demnach ebenfalls auf Wunderwahrheit (Schriften II 556).*

Not only are the realms of *Natur* and *Wunder* intertwined – one cannot exist without the other and a person cannot be convinced of one kind of truth without also being convinced of the other kind of truth.

Lastly, I would move briefly from the historical framework to the larger literary framework magical realism is positioned in now, that is, as a subgenre of the much larger genre fantasy. While often the fantasy genre evokes ideas of other worlds and fantastical beasts it is much more than that. Richard Mathews argues that fantasy is a fiction that "evokes wonder, mystery or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live" (1-2). Additionally, according to Todorov, the fantastic is marked by the presence of fantastical or magical *events*. The definition of the genre, according to Todorov, lies in the way the (main) character(s) decide to deal with the magical events: "either [s]he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the

imagination [...] or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality" (25). In other words the fantastic is "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25). The word *apparently* is important here because it is in this space that magical realism manifests itself. While in the fantastic it is clear when something is a supernatural event and this supernatural event is either explained in some way or this event manifests itself in a wholly fantastical world, in magical realism, the supernatural is neither real and/or true nor magical and/or untrue. Magical realism undermines these juxtapositions as neither the "laws of nature" nor the "supernatural event" has a greater claim to the objective truth. As with any genre, the fact that it has been influenced by so many different movements and ideas both philosophical and literary make it hard, if not impossible, to come up with a clear and widely supported definition. As mentioned in the introduction, in this thesis magical realism will be defined as representing "both fantastic and real without allowing either a greater claim to truth" (Warnes 3).

Magical realism defined, I turn to the first cultural object that will be discussed in this thesis – Stephen King's *Insomnia*. King's work has divided critics, readers and reviewers. While King fancies himself the "literary equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries" (King, *Bag of Bones*), recently, there has been a renewed academic interest in his work. He has long been praised for best-selling works in horror, thriller and science fiction, but has up to now not been considered a magical realist. Perhaps because magical realism is traditionally considered to be "of a tropical lush" variety while the type of magical realism I am discussing here is of the "northerly spare variety" (Faris 27): not just gritty and at times cynical reality but also rough and dark magic. While there are many short stories and novels by King that I would consider as being part of the magical realist tradition like *It* (1986), *Needful Things* (1991), and *Hearts in Atlantis* (1999), this chapter will be limited to his almost 800 page long novel

Insomnia (1994). While 800 pages are not easily summarized, the plot in essence unfolds as follows. Ralph Roberts, a retired octogenarian widower living in the fictional town of Derry, Maine, develops a bad case of insomnia. His inability to sleep causes him to see colours, auras and creatures that are not there, or so he thinks. His neighbour Ed Deepneau a local pro-lifer and spousal abuser also seems to be seeing these things suggesting it is not (merely) caused by Ralph's insomnia. Another neighbour and friend, Lois Chasse, admits to Ralph that she too has been lacking sleep and has started to see things. They team up to find out what exactly is going on. In a confrontation with one of the beings they've been seeing, which they call "little bald doctors," they learn that each person's life either belongs to The Purpose or The Random. The agents of The Purpose (Clotho and Lachesis) cut people's life cord when it is their time to go while the agent of The Random (Atropos) is governed by pure chaos. Ed Deepneau belongs to neither of these and thus his life is up for grabs. A higher being – the Crimson King – has taken this chance to manipulate Deepneau to upset the entire order of things - explaining why he too can see these beings. Deepneau is planning to fly a plane into a civic centre where a pro-choice speaker will appear. The insomnia was merely a way to give Ralph and Lois access to these higher levels of consciousness so they could help The Purpose stop Ed from doing so. In the audience of this rally, a young boy sits that needs to be saved from this attack or the course of the future and all of reality will be altered. Ralph refuses to help unless he is allowed, one day when it is time, to save the daughter of Ed's wife whom he has befriended after she had been physically abused by Deepneau. The powers that be reluctantly agree and Ralph goes up to the higher plane. He ends up in the actual airplane where he fights both Ed and the Crimson King. He diverts the plane, but is unable to stop it from crashing. However, the kid is not among the casualties and Ralph has saved himself by moving up a level. He and Lois get married and over time start to question and even forget the events that have lead them here. Some years later Ralph once again suffers

from insomnia and realizes it is time to cash in on his promise to give his life for Natalie's. He saves Natalie by pushing her out of the way of an incoming car and he dies peacefully in Lois' arms.

This summary outlines the mostly magical events that take place as those are seen as most significant. However, this does not do justice to the realist setting of King's novel. Not only in this book but in his entire (somewhat overwhelming) oeuvre of over 200 novels and short stories, King "has given form and substance to almost every dark facet of contemporary American life: AIDS and abortion, rape and rock 'n' roll, child abuse and the shadow of Vietnam, baseball and cocaine. There are happy marriages, divorces, and wife beatings; alien abductions and alcoholism; the death penalty and political assassinations; serial killers and cell phones; tabloid journalism and all the endless miseries of childhood" (Douthat).

Some critics have argued that King's novels are long-winded and that there is an unnecessary level of character development and scene description. I, however, would argue it is these characteristics that make some of King's novels more akin to the magical realist genre than they are to science fiction.[1] Granted, not all parts of *Insomnia* are necessary, believable or even particularly interesting. The shelter scene, for instance, where allies of Deepneau set fire to a women's shelter has no function in the overall plot which makes it tedious to read. Ralph's energy karate chops and Lois' finger pistol energy shots are kitschy science fiction tropes that harm and undermine the overall suspense between the magical and the real. To some extent therefore I must agree with these critics. However, there is a function to the length and (sometimes) tediousness of the novel. As Douthat outlined, King deals in the lives of everyday Americans. Their elaborate backstories contribute to their "realness" – the reader knows these people, either in their own life or in their community. The reader feels like they understand the motives for the way in which characters act and for the choices

[1] There is also an interesting parallel to be made between not being able to put a book down night after night, losing sleep because it is just too good and the symptoms of *Insomnia*.

characters make. The “long-winded” descriptions of rural life and the people in it establish an intimate relationship between the narrator and the reader. This is a plot device often used by King, like in his novel *Needful Things* that starts with:

"You've been here before."

A brilliant opening line. Not only have you been here (Castle Rock) before because you are an avid King reader and have read all stories that were set in this fictional Maine town, but you have been here before because you have been in rural America. Because you know your own town and if not you know the towns as they have been portrayed in the media. This plot device can be compared to hyperrealism in visual arts; in which every minute detail is made visible and the longer you look at it (or in this case the longer you read) the more details are revealed.

These realistic settings and descriptions combined with an ever present intertextuality, referencing popular culture through brands, films, music, celebrities and TV shows, grounds King’s narratives deep within the American Culture of the average Joe and Jane. Stringing all the supernatural events together in a summary is also reductive in the sense that it underplays the larger themes that King is confronting in this book. *Insomnia* is a novel that seeks to interact with the ideas of the purpose and/or the randomness of life and death. Seen within the larger Stephen King multiverse, King creates an intricate underlying structure that governs life and death, perhaps in an attempt to have readers engage with the ‘realities’ of both.

The power of life and the power of death together are what Foucault terms *biopower*. Michel Foucault coined this term in the first volume of his book *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Neither this book nor subsequent lectures have provided one clear definition of what biopower is, but a meaning can be distilled from his writings on the subject. Generally biopower is regarded as the use of power in any way shape or form to regulate, control and subjugate the population or the individual. It is both a positive power “that endeavours to

administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" and a power of death in the form of executions, wars and genocide (Foucault 137).

Biopower is by no means a new concept, while the term is fairly recent. People have been controlled in some form or another from the moment group size required it. Whether something is considered a form of biopower lies of course in the subjective classification of something as being controlling or not. Certain religious dogma surrounding virginity and monogamy, for instance, can be seen as a way to control relationships, sexuality and reproduction. Capitalism too can be considered, as Marx did, a form of controlling and subjugating certain parts of the population, in this case the proletariat, through exclusion from property ownership and limitations on reproduction through sheer poverty. According to Foucault, another nineteenth-century phenomenon that resulted in a form of biopower was "the emergence of "population" as an economic and political problem" (25-26). What he means by this is that the whole of the people, the population, were commodified and monetized as a labour force or as a means of productions. Sex was, according to Foucault, at the centre of these issues. It became necessary to keep demographic records via a national census. These records were meticulous and, one might even say, invasive. Among the analysed information were: "the birth-rate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them [people] fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, [and] the impact of contraceptive practices" (Foucault 25-26). This resulted in "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (Foucault 140). Or in other words, it resulted in a new form of biopower – sex as a means of control. When more bodies were needed to supplement the labour force, sexuality was promoted, when there were too many people it was discouraged. The way in which this sexuality was expressed or conducted by the population

needed to be controlled for economic gain. It was also at this time that sexuality was established as the singular most important part of a person's identity and the idea emerged that all external expressions of one's identity could somehow be inferred back to one's sexuality.

While the above described biopower can be seen as a the power over life, another important aspect is the power of death. As Foucault outlines, "one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death" (135 Foucault). Governments not only took control of who is allowed to live and the ways in which it is legitimate to create life, they also took control of the way in which people were allowed to die. Thus, "the individual and private right to die" was in direct opposition of the sovereign power of death (Foucault 139). Foucault argues that this control was exerted through viewing the body as a machine, or as something that should function in an economically productive way.

Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes more recently coined a fitting term for this power of death – *Necropolitics.* I deliberetly use Mbembé & Meintjes' Necropolitics as opposed to Stuart Murray's Thanatopolitics because King's novel draws heavily on a metaphor of a nation state which is where Mbembé & Meintjes locate this biopower, while thanatopolitics is used to "refer to an oppositional politics that uses death as a means of resistance to the biopolitical as such" (Frey & Ruch 8). Mbembé & Meintjes' term is based on Foucault's notion of biopower, but it encompasses more than that - it is the act of subjugation of people to this power of death and the ways in which this happens in modern states. They argue that "[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembé & Meintjes 12). Thus, this act of subjugation is pivotal to the nation state's sovereignty and it is because we struggle against death, instead of accepting it, that we "become a subject" to various (bio)powers

(Mbembé & Meintjes 14). Underpinning human's eternal struggle with death is ultimately fear. This fear is multifaceted – it can be a primal fear, a struggle to survive, or it can be deeply complex such as the fear of not leaving a mark. The latter is in turn a drive for many people to employ their individual power of life by reproducing.

The power of life and the power of death are thus always connected and are both at least partially driven by fear. To explore these fears and to give shape to them, King employs the literary device of the uncanny. The uncanny is a concept first described and discussed by Sigmund Freud. The uncanny is a feeling of dread and even of horror induced by a very specific type of event or occurrence (219), namely a situation in which something, someone, or somewhere is simultaneously recognizable (*Heimlich*) and unrecognizable (*Unheimlich*). According to Freud, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). Freud further distinguishes two sources of the uncanny. One source is repressed childhood traumas and events that resurface in a different, yet eerily recognizable, shape. The second source is old or ancient forms of thought or ideology that we, as humankind, have long since surmounted that are once again confirmed (250). Freud also calls this the omnipotence of thought – the idea that somehow our thoughts can have real effects the world. Superstitions about telepathy belong to a distant past, but when something happens right after we have thought about this very thing happening – an uncanny feeling arises; our superstitions have been confirmed. An example from my own childhood was a song I used to sing to any red light:

"Stoplicht, stoplicht spring op groen. Wil je dat, wil je dat voor me doen?
Abracadabra spring op groen?"

The song was just long enough for most red lights to magically turn green, reinforcing the idea that I had the uncanny ability to influence the colour of a traffic light. Most people would agree that this is a childish notion, something most grown ups think they have

surmounted. Yet it would not be hard for most to come up with an instance where they thought something and not long after something eerily related happened.

Freud himself argues that the uncanny cannot arise in a purely fantastical narrative. He takes as his example the fairy tale. All the elements that could fill one with uncanniness in real life (animation of inanimate objects, omnipotence of thought) cannot do so in a fairy tale because "that feeling cannot arise unless there is a conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been 'surmounted' and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible; and this problem is eliminated from the outset by the postulates of the world of fairy tales" (Freud 249). Thus the uncanny cannot arise in fantasy novels like fairy tales because there is no reality within the narrative to provide a counternarrative to the magical aspects. Therefore, anything that happens in a fantasy novel is by definition fantastical and the reader must accept all events as being part of this fantastical world. In contrast, Freud argues, when a writer "pretends to move in the world of common reality" such as King does in his novel, the reader must accept the presence of parallel worlds and the uncertainty of which elements belong to what world can bring about uncanniness. While Freud never explicitly uses the term magical realism, he is surely hinting at it when he argues that the author keeps "us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based, or he can cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last" (250). This is clearly echoed in Warnes' definition of magical realism as representing the "fantastic and real without allowing either a greater claim to truth" (3).

What role does the uncanny have in magical realist novels, such as King's, that centre on fear? I specifically mention that King's novel centres on fear, because not all magical realist novels do. *Insomnia*, however, is most of the time classed as a horror story and what is horror without fear? "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, […] the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" and there is no greater unknown known to man

than death (Lovecraft). Though animals experience fear, it is mankind only that is simultaneously repelled by and attracted to fear. *Insomnia*, quite overtly, is about the fear of death. While the protagonists are not afraid of their own deaths – they are octogenarians quite ready for the inevitable event – they are (made) afraid of the deaths of a large group of innocent people. By attributing the choice of who lives and dies to a higher entity as well as by creating an intricate power structure within All-World (King's multiverse), King attempts to give shape to abstract fears of death and the unknown.

This multiverse can be read as a metaphor for a disciplinary society. Foucault argued that disciplinary societies operated on the basis of a network of apparatuses or enclosed spaces. These enclosed spaces are governed by rules and regulations and thus the subjects within these spaces are also governed by these rules and regulations. Each life phase consists of a different space: from the family to school, to college and university, to the workplace and eventually to the hospital or elderly home. According to Foucault, the three primary techniques of control within these spaces are: hierarchical observation (watching what people do and do not do), normalizing judgment (make explicit what is to be considered the norm and thus what is not) and examination (the combination of observation and judgement).

Chapter 3 will provide an in-depth analysis of the sources of fear and horror in King's *Insomnia* as they relate to the (bio)powers of life and death, the disciplinary society and how they interact with the uncanny. But first, we must examine the recent developments within magical realism, the second cultural object *Stranger Things*, and provide definitions of biotechnology, society of control and the abject.

Chapter 2 – The Duffer Brother's Realist Magic: Society of Control, Biotechnology and the Abject

As we move beyond the ideas of Warnes and Reeds we enter a new age of magical realism at least in North America. There is a notable switch between the external fears of ghosts and ghouls representing external power structures such as government and the internal fears of monsters, and defects within the body – possibly a matter of the abject – representing power structures such as science and biotechnology.

The serious academic consideration of magical realism as a literary genre begins with Irlemar Chiampi in 1980 who was the first to present a narratological theory of magical realism in *El realismo maravilloso: forma e ideología en la novela hispanoamericana*. According to Faris, whose definition will be discussed further on, Chiampi defines magical realism as the "coexistence of the natural and the supernatural in a narrative that presents them in a nondisjunctive way, in which the natural appears strange, and the supernatural pedestrian" (11). Around the same time, Amaryll Chanady, in her thesis (1982), establishes a reader-response based definition that seems closely related tot Todorov's fantastic as discussed previously. She argues that, in the fantastic, "the natural must be pre-supposed by the text, asserted by the narrator, and accepted by the implied reader, while [...] the supernatural, is rejected as inconsistent with our normal perspective and structuring of reality" (14). She argues that while in both the fantastic and the magical realist narrative the reader is aware that these two worlds exist independently of each other, the reader of the fantastic is "disturbed by the ostensibly conflicting logical codes" while the reader of magical realism "must abandon this usual perspective of reality and adopt one in which the natural and the supernatural are part of a single interpretative code" (iv). In terms of narratology, she

argues that "the same phenomena that are portrayed as problematic by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist" (23-24).

Entering the 21st century, there are a few notable scholars who have attempted to provide a definition of the genre. I will limit myself to discussing the following: Faris, Warnes and Reeds, the latter being fairly critical of the former. As Todorov and Chanady, Faris too focuses her definition of magical realism on the reaction of the reader to the supernatural events. For her, belief and hesitation is central to magical realism: "this hesitation frequently stemming from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative, which moves toward belief in extrasensory phenomena but narrates from the post-Enlightenment perspective and in the realistic mode that traditionally exclude them" (Faris 17). This post-Enlightenment perspective is heightened by the often extremely realistic settings; doubt and hesitation about what is real and what is not can only occur if the real and the magic are hardly distinguishable. These realistic settings thus provide "a fictional world that resembles the one we live in" (Faris 14). This resemblance of the real gives the narrative, as Roland Barthes claims, an *"effet de réel"* (realistic effect), which evokes the sense in the reader that the story they are reading is indeed real (Faris 14). Another interesting concept that Faris touches on is the difference between southern and northern magical realism: "Geographical stylistics are problematic, but one might speculate about the existence of a tropical lush and a northerly spare variety of the magical realist plant" (Faris 27). This might more firmly establish the inclusion of the discussed texts within the magical realist tradition as one would not immediately think of the narratives discussed in this thesis when thinking of magical realism. This distinction is also made by Jean Weisgerber who distinguishes a scholarly (or European) type, which "loses itself in art and conjecture to illuminate or construct a speculative universe," and "the mythic or folkloric type, found mainly in Latin America". I would argue that this scholarly type is the type also found in North America.

In 2005, Christopher Warnes attempted to find a clear definition among the sea of definitions in what he terms Vagueness. He argues for a clear approach to counteract the vagueness that recent magical realist criticism has been inflicted with. Though the term is surrounded by vagueness, Warnes still believes, and I agree, that "magical realism is the only term in wide critical circulation that is capable of providing a name for this category of literature" (3). From his review of multiple essays and texts on magical realism he distils one key-defining characteristic of the genre: "it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth" (Warnes 3). This means that the real and the magical co-exist, but their relationship is not hierarchical. Even more than co-exist they commingle – most of the time it is hard to distinguish what is real and what is magical, or in Warnes' words it "naturalizes the supernatural, presenting real and fantastic coherently and in a state of equivalence with one another" (3). Warnes also discusses the previously mentioned lack of resolution in magical realist texts. For him it is a defining characteristic of the genre because as soon as there is a resolution a hierarchy is established (Warnes 6-7).

One of the most recent books that looks at magical realism as a genre is Kenneth Reeds' *What Is Magical Realism?* In the introductory chapter, he is especially critical of Faris accusing her of not dedicating "more of her study to the relationship between history and magical realism" (26). This lacuna, according to Reed, undermines the importance of history and the past in the realism part of magical realism. Magical realism does not rewrite history but rather it tells the story from the viewpoint of marginalized people in order to "augment our understanding of the past by representing little-heard voices and juxtaposes them with established understandings of history" (Reeds 26). While I agree that magical realism is exceptionally suited for the purpose of recasting traditional histories and elevating marginalized narratives, to say that all magical realism must do so is a blatant overgeneralization. The latter is an interesting observation seeing as he himself seems to

accuse Faris of just that. While I disagree with Reeds' narrow definition of the genre, he rightly points out that many critics have focused their attention towards a non-text based analysis, rather looking at the writing of other critics and discussing their definitions. While I realize this is exactly what I have done in the above chapters, I hope that this serves as a referential framework of the ideas that have been formulated up till now.

To explore how and why the ontology of the magic in magical realism has changed from the 1980s to more recent iterations, this thesis will analyse *Stranger Things*. *Stranger Things* is an award winning Netflix original series directed by Matt and Ross Duffer also known as The Duffer Brothers (first aired on 15 July 2016). As mentioned before, the series bears a striking resemblance to King's novels, but the series is also comparable in terms of its reach and viewership. *Stranger Things* reached a whopping 8.2 million people in the first 16 days of airing (McAlone) and remains one of the most popular Netflix originals to date. This on-demand series has cultivated a loyal following who have created, as King fans did before them, a large body of fanfiction, theories, analyses and speculations on the *Stranger Things* realm. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I will limit my discussion to the first season.

After an evening of playing Dungeons & Dragons with his friends, Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) disappears when biking home through the woods. A large search party is set up and his mother Joyce (Winona Ryder) and big brother Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) are at their wits end. While the town continues the search for Will, another person, Barb (Shannon Purser), disappears from a party. When Will's friends, Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), are searching for him they stumble upon a strange girl who seems to be lost. They take her home to Mike's house where they discover her name is Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) after the small tattoo on her wrist "011." She seems to know more about Will and about where he is. Her speaking is stunted but she has telekinetic "superpowers." Through a series of flashbacks the viewer learns that she has

escaped from The Hawkins National Laboratory where she was being held, observed and trained supposedly to be used as a weapon against the Russians. Eleven is able to listen to conversations that happen in a different place by accessing a shadow world in which she can move – but something awful is lurking in this other world. While she is spying on a Russian agent a portal is accidentally created that allows these shadow dwellers to enter our world. It is this monster, which they call the Demogorgon, that is responsible for the disappearance of both Will and Barb. The boys ask Eleven to use her powers to try and contact Will via the radio. They discover that he is still alive but in a different world that is like our world but dark – they call it the "Upside Down". The boys team up with Will's mother and brother and local police Commissioner Hopper (David Harbour) to ask Eleven to contact Will and find out where he is exactly. Eleven, suspended in a makeshift sensory deprivation tank, finds Will barely alive in the Upside Down, Barb unfortunately is dead and has been used as an incubator of some sorts. Eleven eventually defeats the Demagorgon disappearing in the process. Joyce and Harper make their way to the portal inside Hawkins Lab and find Will who has been intubated with one of the creature's tentacles. They save him and after a short stay in the hospital he is home for Christmas and all seems to end well until he throws up a baby Demogorgon. The season ends with Will's world flashing between the Upside Down and the normal world.

The similarities to King's work are striking, not so much in the type of magic/science fiction, but rather in the classic small town America that is being depicted. It is reminiscent also of King's novel *The Body* and the film adaptation *Stand by Me*, in which a group of friends go on adventures and find themselves vastly out of their depth when they start looking for a dead body. While most often characterised as a science-fiction horror series, I believe it is a prime example of modern magical realism. It is particularly interesting to consider *Stranger Things* within this framework because, according to Tom Hawking, people are

getting increasingly frustrated with their social reality. The genre allows scriptwriters (and novelists) to "emphasize an aspect of society that would be impossible when bound by the restrictions of an entirely "realistic" world" (Hawking). It is further interesting that while the viewer watches the show in the here and now it is indeed set in the same time as King's novel was. This causes the technology that is being shown to be reimagined as groundbreaking and science fiction-like while in fact some of these technologies might already be a reality or are close to becoming a reality.

Due to the rapid advancement of technology, it is becoming increasingly harder for governments to control what is being researched and developed and more importantly how these developments are being used or are going to be used. The disciplinary society as described in Chapter 1 is no longer a viable option for control in a global and highly technical society. Instead of people being confined to enclosures such as schools and offices (or cities and countries) where they can be disciplined by a central power figure, people can move freely within the cyberspace. This, however, does not mean that there is no longer any form of control. Instead of Foucault's Panopticon (a round building in which one guard is able to observe all inmates) we now live in a Synopticon where everyone is being observed by everyone (including and especially the government and corporations) (Mathiesen 217). The means of control in this new society, termed the society of control by Deleuze, is no longer external through a series of controlled enclosures but rather internal via a network of entangled systems, hyper surveillance and data mining. The society of control thus paradoxically offers its citizens both more freedom and while controlling them at the same time.

Netflix itself can be considered as an integral part of the society of control. Even though Netflix offers a wide variety of films, series and documentaries, which could arguably broaden people's view instead of curtailing it, there is still an underlying selection process.

Moreover, viewers are further restricted to watching what Netflix has made available in their current location. Deleuze used the example of the highway. People are not confined by a highway, “but by making highways, you multiply the means of control, people can travel infinitely and “freely” without being confined while being perfectly controlled” (Deleuze). Thus people can watch Netflix as much as they want, whenever they want but they are controlled by Netflix’s boundaries.

The shift from a disciplinary society to a society of control constitutes a shift in power structures and means of exerting power. As discussed in Chapter 1, a disciplinary society uses biopower in the forms of the power of life and the power of death as its primary form of power. In this new society of control, power rests not with the governments exclusive rights to life and death but rather with biotechnology. Biotechnology is undeniably linked to the concept of biopower in the sense that biotechnology can be seen as a form of biopower, or at the very least, a tool for wielding biopower. So what is biotechnology? According to the minutes of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, biotechnology is defined as "any technological application that uses biological systems, living organisms, or derivatives thereof, to make or modify products or processes for specific use” (Art. 2 1993). More generally it is also “the manipulation [...] of living organisms or their components to produce useful usually commercial products” (Merriam-Webster). But these manipulations will not only be used for production in the narrow sense of the word (food, commodities, vehicles and weapons), “the main products of the 21st century will be bodies, brains and minds” (Harari 319). While some definitions include the idea that these modifications must lead to the advancement of the human condition, whether they actually will is not certain. The discussion on whether biotechnology will advance the human condition is often used as a setting of (science) fiction and while “science fiction is overwhelmingly positive about the possibility of transforming the human” there are many popular and mainstream texts that rely

on “thriller conventions of conspiracy and disaster” (Clayton 319).

The idea that biotechnology could lead to disastrous consequences is not far-fetched. One of the precursors to modern day biotechnology was eugenics, a term originally coined by Charles Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton, but most famously known in relation to the practices of WWII doctors. The atrocities of on the one hand a genocide aimed at removing a complete race from the gene pool of the world and on the other hand of illegal and unethical medical experiments on that same race have lead to the widespread rejection of eugenics especially state mandated eugenics. But, while eugenics is deemed a dirty word, biotechnology is concerned with and successfully uses many similar manipulations. In fact, “the development of biotechnological techniques for analysing and manipulating genetic material” is arguably one of the most radical ways in which humans can change themselves (Thomsen 67). While genetic manipulation might still be too radical (and unaffordable) for most people, the invention of biometric apps and measuring devices such as the Fitbit has allowed even Joe and Jane Average to gain insight into the inner workings of their own body. Not only are we able to see how our bodies perform, something which was until now invisible to anyone but the doctor, we can adjust and improve its performance.

This increased surveillance of our own bodies is also part of the society of control. We control ourselves by giving up this data freely and willingly. Expectations, real or imagined, keep us in check by the mere fact that meeting them must be made visible through social media. By this act we make our data and thus by extension our lives available for audit by others. This data can then be used on the individual level to control our own bodies, but it is also invaluable to governments and big corporations who seek control and power over our bodies and wallets. The idea that these metrics can be used to exert control undoubtedly gives rise to angst and fear. Of course this fear of emerging technology is not a new phenomenon. All advancements (technological or otherwise) have been both revered and feared since the

onset of human civilization. With each technological advancement the gap between the real and the imaginable seems to become smaller and smaller. It is not unthinkable that the world will become so malleable that (almost) anything will become possible. In such a world, magic may soon become a thing of the past.

The world is certainly not at this (somewhat depressing) point yet; there is still a place for magical realism. However, it has become apparent that the ontology of the magic has already had to change. In particular, a shift can be seen from external threats given literary form by the use of the uncanny to internal threats in the form of the abject. The abject, described by Julia Kristeva, is neither the Object nor the Subject, but is the in-between. Things that are a part of us are subject and things that are separated from us are object - the abject is at once part of us and not part of us. The abject, according to Kristeva, "disturbs identity, system, order [...] does not respect borders, positions, rules" it is the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Just as the uncanny, the abject creates a sense of cognitive dissonance. Kristeva argues that to resolve the discomfort of cognitive dissonance between what is part of us and what is not one must expel the abject to preserve the Id. If one cannot expel the abject it will corrupt them from the inside out. Even when the abject is expelled, it does not cease to have control over the person who has expelled it (Kristeva 2). Thus it remains both external and internal and therefore it remains in-between. Kristeva explains: "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva 9). *Stranger Things* presents this in-between or abject state in several different ways, most notably in the power structures, the means of control and in their characters and setting. The following chapter will trace, in further detail, the literary shifts from *Insomnia* to *Stranger Things* and explain what these shifts mean for magical realism.

Chapter 3 – Magical Realism in Flux: Shifting from the External to the Internal

This chapter will compare and contrast King's *Insomnia* and the Duffer Brother's *Stranger Things* to elucidate a number of shifts within in the framework of magical realism. In particular, I will consider a shift from power structures based on biopower to power structures based on biotechnology and a shift from representations of a disciplinary society to representations of a society of control. These shifts underlay the third, and most important shift within the ontology of the magic within magical realism from the uncanny to the abject. This shift from a representation of societal angst by an external, uncanny, threat to an internal, abject, threat is indicative of a larger shift within society in which certain powers seems to have shifted from classical governmental structures of power to scientific and academic power structures where science is always miles ahead of (governmental) regulations. By comparing and contrasting *Insomnia* with *Stranger Things* I hope to show how these shifts have taken place, and more importantly why and what this means for the ontology of magic, at least in these two cultural objects and perhaps as a starting point for more extensive research on the ontology of magic in North American magical realism.

From Biopower to Biotechnology

There is a shift from the use of biopower as a form of control in *Insomnia* to the use of biotechnology as a form of control in *Stranger Things*. This shift can be seen in two different ways: in the control over the female body and in the control over the human in general. While both cultural objects represent control over the female body there is a shift from the biopolitical control of birth rates through pro and anti-abortion rhetoric in *Insomnia* to a biotechnological control over foetal life through genetic manipulation in *Stranger Things*. This represents a shift from biopower to biotechnology in magical realism. Control here is

used in the sense of "change in behaviour or attitude in a wide sense, following from the influence of others" (Mathiesen 228). It is more than surveillance, which will be discussed in the next section.

Curtailing or broadening reproductive rights can be seen as a form of external control, control over the women who carry the foetus, while the manipulation of foetuses can be seen as an internal form of control, within the body. *Insomnia* has an interesting subplot centred on feminist issues, including domestic abuse and reproductive rights. At first glance, and as some critics have argued, this subplot seems superfluous.[2] However, I would argue that it is an integral part of King's story and a fascinating literary representation and example of Foucault's biopower. Some critics have tried to find out from this novel what King's stance is on reproductive rights, but giving his opinion about this issue is not the reason for this subplot. I would argue that the subplot should be read as a parallel of the power structures within the multiverse that King has created in an attempt to further explain it instead of a political pamphlet. This multiverse is King's attempt at creating an alternative and intricate origin story to the world as we know it. In short, it begins with Prim or the "darkness behind everything" from which Gan, a God-like figure and creative force, arose. Gan's metaphysical form is the Dark Tower and the six beams that hold it up. The six beams are protected by twelve Guardians. One of these Guardians is Maturin The Turtle. It is said that it had a stomach ache that caused him to vomit out the "real" world – or our world.

[2] While King has never commented on this specifically, it is important to note that just before the publication of *Insomnia* in September 1994 two doctors, David Gunn (March 10 1993) and John Britton (July 29 1994) were murdered by pro-life terrorists.

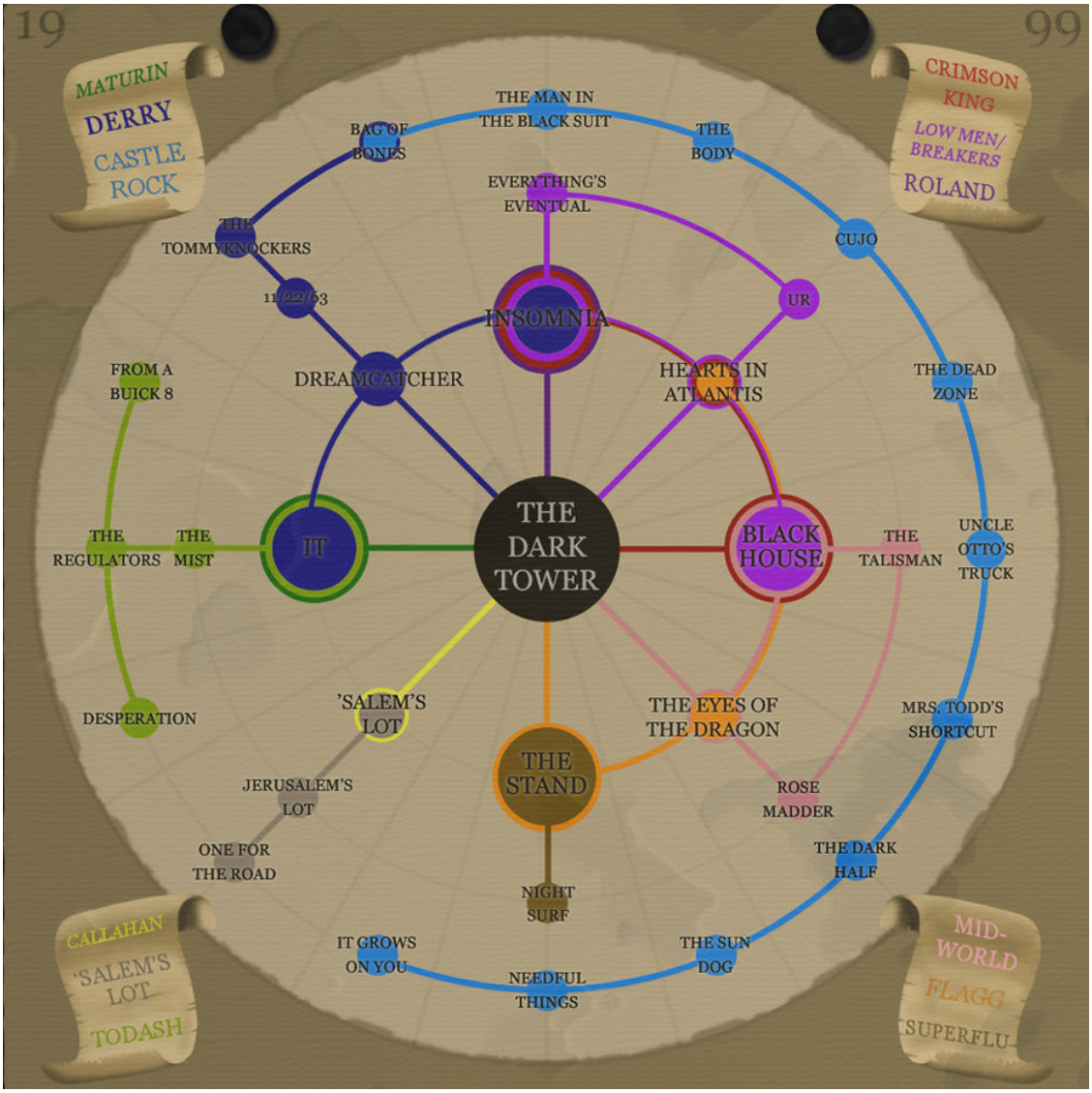

Figure 1 - The King Multiverse. Checkman111; Stephen King Fandom; https://stephenking.fandom.com/wiki/Multiverse

While this might sound ridiculous it is really no more ridiculous than the Judeo-Christian origin story of Genesis or the Greek origin story of Chaos and the Twelve Titans. In this origin story the real world thus already comes from a magical place, or one could argue, it is not made clear which world is more real and which is more magical. It depends on whether you consider that which came before something else as more real than that which it has produced. Perhaps both worlds are equally real, but it is the reader who judges something to be unreal or magical. To understand how the subplot of reproductive rights is created as a parable to King's origin story and the dark tower, we must look at the multiverse in a graphic

representation. Figure 1 shows a selection of King's novels and their relation to one another as well as their setting (Checkman111). The Dark Tower is at the centre as it is connected either directly or indirectly to all of King's novels.

In this reading the female represents the Tower, Gan or Gaia – that which creates. Because her purpose seems to be to give birth and reproduce, abortions form a threat to or disrupt this Purpose and can thus be considered Random. Just like the Purpose and Random both have a function in the multiverse, both reproduction and abortion have a place and function in our "real world". This reading is further underlined by the fact that the agents of the Purpose and the Random are doctors or at least resemble doctors. Most births happen at hospitals under the supervision of doctors and (legal) abortions are also performed by doctors or at the least medically trained staff. Furthermore, King uses reproductive jargon as well as birth-related similes and metaphors. The balloon strings coming from people's heads are compared to "umbilical cords" (King Chapter 11) and when the doctors sever someone's balloon string it is referred to as "cutting the cord" (King Chapter 14). Those whose cords have been cut are enveloped by a death bag "like a poisonous placental sac" before they actually die (King Chapter 13). Ralph himself comments on the parallel saying that these visions triggered something that Ed Deepneau had said: "the Centurions were ripping babies from the wombs of their mothers and taking them away in covered trucks" (King Chapter 13).

Another argument to read the subplot as a parable instead of a political rant about reproductive rights is that the novel does not represent either a clear pro-life or a pro-choice argument. Instead arguments for both can be found. While all pro-lifers in this narrative are condemned or insane, discrediting their opinion through discrediting their character, there are some events that can be interpreted as pro-life. In the end, only Patrick has to be saved from the impending doom, as he will play a pivotal role in King's *Dark Tower* series. By saving

him, King seems to say that you cannot know beforehand how important a person can be for the course of history. This can be interpreted as a popular pro-life argument: What if you kill the person who is going to cure cancer or AIDS? Furthermore, Susan Day "America's most famous feminist" is "decapitated by a jagged chunk of flying glass. Her head went flying into the sixth row like some strange white bowling ball with a blonde wig pasted on it" (King Chapter 30). While King has thus created a very intricate parable for his multiverse in the form of the reproductive rights subplot, it does seem to fail or at least leave some things unexplained. One of the most glaring lacunas is the question that is pivotal within the reproductive rights discussion: when does a foetus become a human being? King does not answer this question, nor seems to have particularly thought about it in creating his system. There is a mention of a baby whose balloon string seems corrupt and diseased but there is no mention of pregnant women, and he does come across them, as having two strings above their head. While the baby's are apparently part of the system of Random and Purpose, foetuses do not seem to be as there is no mention of them belonging to the Random, the Purpose or whether they are undesignated – up for grabs until the moment they are born. The question of when people are assigned to the respective groups is also left out. Nonetheless, the subplot forms a clear parable to King's intricate and sometimes confusing multiverse.

In *Stranger Things*, reproductive issues also form an important part of the plot, but rather than control over the female it seems to suggest a more biological/technological control over foetal life through genetic manipulation. This shows a shift from wanting to control the bodies that house the next generation to controlling the next generation itself through manipulation and control. This idea is developed through the character of Eleven. This small child (neither distinctly male or female) seems to appear out of nowhere without a mother or a father. The viewer learns, through a series of flashbacks that she has escaped the Hawkins Laboratory. The man she calls papa is obviously not her father in the biological

sense of the word. Rather, he is presented as a modern day Professor Frankenstein. This is further underlined by the fact that Eleven is as unworldly and dumb as Frankenstein's monster. Once found by the boys she wants to be accepted by them but her powers make her an outcast which incites fear in friend and foe. In "Chapter Six: The Monster" Joyce and Hopper try to find more information about what kinds of experiments are taking place in the Hawkins laboratory and they find a woman named Terry. Terry is catatonic and cannot speak, her sister explains that she was administered LSD during her participation in project MKUltra. Project MKUltra, also called the CIA mind control program was a real (illegal) operation by the US government that lasted from the 50s all the way to the 70s.[3] The CIA wanted to create a truth serum that would allow them to force Soviet spies to defect and confess as well as explore the options of mind control in general. They not only gave LSD[4] to non-consenting participants like criminals, drug addicts and sex workers, they also dosed several CIA employees without their knowledge and even members of the general public. Terry did not know, when signing up for the study, that she was pregnant and supposedly miscarried in the third trimester. The viewer, however, comes to the same conclusion as Joyce and Hopper – Eleven is Terry's daughter Jane. While not explicitly stated, it is suggested that Eleven has acquired her powers by being exposed to LSD in the womb. Thus, while it becomes clear that Ralph's insomnia is caused by something wholly supernatural, the fact that Terry has been exposed to LSD firmly roots Eleven's abilities in science and not the supernatural. The subject and indeed the magic of *Stranger Things* is thus biotechnological, instead of biopolitical.

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[3] A year later, Netflix released a docudrama miniseries on Frank Olson a CIA researcher who jumped from a hotel window after unwittingly having been given a dose of LSD nine days before.

[4] There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between these LSD testing and *Insomnia*. Ralph's condition is, on multiple occasions, compared to an LSD trip. LSD alters the mind, it broadens its horizons and allows the unreal, the hallucinatory to enter the real world of the subject. In this way, the effects of LSD can be seen as a metaphor for magical realism itself.

Stranger Things, like King, uses (visual) metaphors and similes related to the female body and reproductive system to enhance and underline this narrative, though it is much more focused on the biological/technological side of reproduction than on the political debate surrounding it. Eleven was born and raised not to be a human being but to be a trans-human weapon against the Russians. She has been dehumanized by shaving off her hair, putting her in a hospital gown and keeping her in a small room only to be brought out to be experimented on. She almost resembles King's faceless doctors, an agent and a tool of control with the power to kill. She does not accept this fate however, for when she is confronted with a cat and asked to kill it with her mind, she refuses. They try to punish her, but she kills the two guards who are taking her back to her cell – indicating that she is indeed capable of killing at least in self-defence (S1E3). Conversely, this scene shows her father grabbing her head "affectionately" exclaiming "Incredible". While Eleven's expression indicates that she takes this gesture as a form of acceptance, the viewer knows it is just the exaltations of a man who has found a powerful, biotechnological weapon. The disastrous effects of this biotechnological need to control seem to suggest that experiments without an ethical basis result in something unnatural and evil.

This is not the only form of biopower and biotechnology. While both cultural objects discuss control over humans within a system, there is a shift from control over the physical body in the form of power of life and death in *Insomnia* to control over the mind in *Stranger Things* in the form of mind control and telekinesis. This too represents the shift from biopower to biotechnology in magical realism. According to Foucault the power of life and the power of death are "the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed" (139). Thus both these powers are used to control the lives of the citizens or in other words, this biopower "characteristically entails a relation between 'letting die' (*laissez mourir*) and making live (*faire vivre*)—that is to say strategies for the governing of life"

(Rabinow & Rose 195). First, making live in *Insomnia* is represented by the reproductive rights subplot, which as mentioned before has a pivotal role in King's novel. The pro-life argument is that we must make everyone, including embryos and foetuses, live. Usually this argument goes hand in hand with an anti-euthanasia stance as well as the idea that everyone must be healthy or made healthy at all cost (unless of course you are unable to afford it). Within this argument there is no room for self-determination and all biological decisions are relegated to someone else – in most cases the state. This also seems to be the case in King's novel, though in a different form. While in a context in which abortion and/or euthanasia is prohibited by law, decisions on life and death are made (or prevented from being made) at the actual moment itself, King suggests in his novel that life and death are preordained at least to a certain extent. This stance then, is neither pro-life nor pro-choice as it suggests that we, as short-timers, are not in control of these things anyway. More importantly, whether the characters in the book are pro-life or pro-choice does not matter as it is the underlying structure, the powers that govern the Dark Tower that decide ultimately who lives and dies. The subplot therefore provides, as argued before, a parable to the main plot.

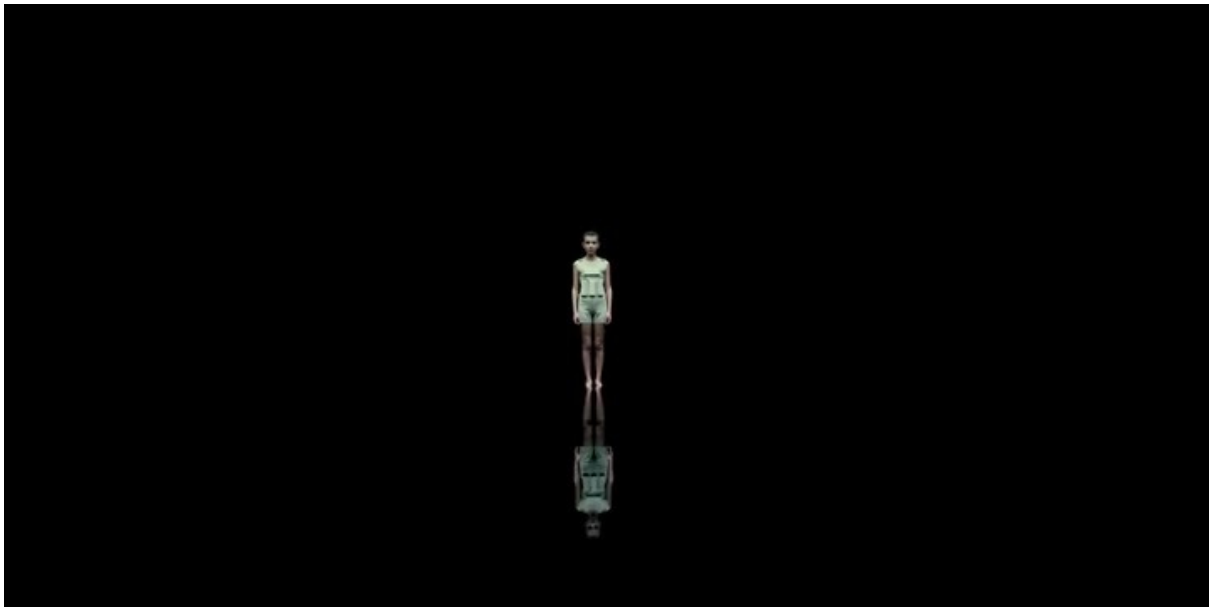
The main plot revolves around the systematization of life and death through the Dark Tower and the agents of The Purpose and The Random. Here King strays from the ideas of *laissez mourir* as death is no longer a passive, but inevitable event. The death of the physical body is actively caused by someone – namely the doctors. When it is time to die, the doctors cut your chord, the death sack envelops you and you die shortly after. Your spirit, which presumably resides in the chord is sent to "everywhere / to other worlds than these" (King Chapter 17). This echoes Foucault's theories on biopolitics: '[f]or capitalist society biopolitics is what is most important, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal" (145). Citizens are controlled by exerting control over their physical body through the powers of life and death. Through this biopower, Giorgio Agamben argues, "the biological life of subjects

enters politics and belongs entirely to the State" (171). Not only that, but he, building on Foucault's ideas on the power of death, argues that "all power rests ultimately on the ability of one to take the life of another" (Downey 111). Thus all power in *Insomnia* seems to lie with The Purpose and The Random though it is never made clear how this power is used and whether these forces are working together or against one another nor whether they have a common goal or aim. King therefore does not provide a clear answer to who exactly holds the power in this multiverse.

The obscurity of the sovereign in the form of the Dark Tower and its agents and thus the obscurity of the power dynamics within King's multiverse result in the uncanny. Something is frightening only when it is neither shrouded in darkness nor wholly illuminated. Edmund Burke first claimed that "to make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary." Freud himself underlines this when he writes about the uncanny when he quotes Friedrich Schelling's definition of the Unheimlich as "everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open." Here, it is important to note that while the Dark Tower and its agents are obscured it is not hidden. It exists on top of our realm; it is just not (always) visible. The fact that Ralph and Lois (and thus the reader) are made aware of it results in the uncanny. This obscurity can also be read as King's critique on the obscurity of the systems of "our" world like the government. It would not be the first time that he is critical of the US Government and its subsidiaries such as the military and law enforcement. Some of his novels centre around (fictional) government projects gone awry such as the Arrowhead Project that caused *The Mist*, and Project Blue which caused a super-flu in *The Stand*, though a more obvious King inspiration is perhaps his 1980s novel *Firestarter* in which the protagonists are given a hallucinogenic drug (Lot 6) resulting in them developing telekinetic powers.

In *Stranger Things*, Eleven has also been subjected to hallucinogenic drugs while in the womb, a reference to actual real world government experiments during the CIA mind control program, which has resulted in both telepathic and telekinetic abilities. While King uses a form of telepathy in *Insomnia* where Ralph and Lois can communicate with one another without speech while they are on the higher level, it is different from the telepathy in *Stranger Things*. Ralph and Lois use telepathy as a form of communication; Eleven, however, is forced to weaponise her telepathy as a form of control. Eleven is used as a test subject for the use of mind control to listen in on Soviet soldiers as well as telekinesis as a way to kill people with her mind. In *Stranger Things*, mind control and telekinesis are used as a biotechnological means of control.

However, it is important to note that this attempt at control ultimately fails. The scientists try to control Eleven while she controls the Russian spies, but ultimately she cannot be controlled. First, by refusing to kill the cat she has shown that she might be manipulated but will not be controlled. Second, Eleven loses control over herself through the act of telepathy. While telepathy and telekinesis is often presented as an upgrade to the human species, or at least that is how the Hawkins Lab frames it, it often comes at a cost. For Eleven, the cost is a total breakdown of the self as well as a breakdown of the borders between the real world and the Upside Down. Telepathy, as Thomsen has argued, "presents a vision that alters the idea of selfhood" (183). He continues: while "the desirability of being able to access other minds and share the world, the idea of the loss of selfhood and clear borders between individual minds and the world is almost unimaginable" (183). This unimaginable breakdown is represented in *Stranger Things* by The Void. A pitch black room without walls (borders) and a floor covered with a thin layer of water which results in an eerie mirror effect which presents a perfect metaphor for the duality of the self within the state of telepathy.



Eleven "standing" in The Void when forced to listen in on a Soviet Spy (S1E6)

Telepathy, like the abject "disturbs identity, system, order [...] does not respect borders, positions, rules" it breaks down the dividing lines within the mind of the Other and the Self. Eleven's reaction to this breakdown is the same as that of the viewer – pure horror. Another reading is that the Demogorgon is a physical manifestation of the abject resulting from her identity breakdown. The moment she realizes that this being is no longer a part of her, the moment that she touches it, the rift to the Upside Down is opened and the border between the worlds has permanently been dissolved.

From a Disciplinary Society to a Society of Control

Both cultural objects present homologous structures of power as discussed in the previous section, however, there is a shift in setting from a system that resembles a disciplinary society in *Insomnia*, to a setting that resembles society of control in *Stranger Things*. While observation is a key theme in both cultural objects, *Insomnia* relies on a system of hierarchical observation – a Panopticon represented by the tower while *Stranger Things* relies

on a system of omnipresent observation – a Synopticon represented by the government, its agencies and the citizens themselves.

Observation plays a pivotal role in *Insomnia*, because sight and seeing is the yardstick of what is considered real and what is considered unreal or magical. King actively plays with the boundaries between the real and the unreal by first discrediting that which has been seen by Ralph. In the beginning of the novel, the colourful auras and the life strings are presented as side effects from Ralph's insomnia. This explanation is underlined by a pharmacist who compares this "hyper reality" caused by insomnia to "taking an LSD trip without having to ingest any chemicals" (King Chapter 5) and by a book that Ralph has found which states that "deprivation . . . causes disorganization of the waking personality [...] early dream-deprivation studies also raised the exciting speculation that schizophrenia might be a disorder in which deprivation of dreaming at night led to a breakthrough of the dream process into everyday waking life" (King Chapter 7). Science is thus used to legitimize what Ralph is seeing as being "real" because it is causally linked to a mental illness. Without this link, these phenomena would not be considered real, which is of course in some ways completely arbitrary. Hypothetically, if research now showed that these occurrences cannot be linked with any illness, would that retrospectively cancel them as being "real"? And why would something be more real because it is caused by an illness? Would it not then be less real because you cannot observe it with a healthy mind?

It seems that just seeing in itself is not enough for something to be considered real in the magical realist novel – instead the characters must give themselves permission to believe what they are seeing.[5] Ralph gives himself permission to believe his eyes when he sees a dog sniffing at a trail left behind by one of the Doctors, but "it was a permission he might revoke

[5] Another series *Happy!* (December 6, 2017) completely relies on belief as the means of observation of the magical. The main character is an imaginary friend who is on the one hand inhibited by human boundaries such as doors and windows, but on the other can only be interacted with when the person actually believes in the imaginary friend.

once the sun was up, but for now he knew exactly what he was seeing" (King Chapter 8). Furthermore, when observation as a means of truth finding fails, feeling and sensing seem to take over. Ralph no longer speaks of something being real or not real, instead he says: "This feels like real life to me" (King Chapter 19). Second, King uses third party sightings of several phenomena to simultaneously legitimize and discredit their realness both for characters in the book and the reader. When Lois starts to see the auras, it legitimizes Ralph's hallucinations as a shared experience, however they are both suffering from insomnia so it is still rooted in illness. With each additional person, however, that which seems magical in the beginning of the novel starts to become more real. This also begs the question: how many people need to see or observe a phenomenon before it becomes real? However, everyone that sees the colours is an unreliable narrator in some way. Ralph and Lois suffer from insomnia, Dorance is a crazy homeless man, Ed is a mentally deranged wife beater, Natalie is a baby and Rosie is a dog. Another important question is who decides who has or can have access to the magic. One of the doctors explains that Short-Timers normally cannot observe the other levels even though "Short-Timers and Long-Timers live in overlapping spheres of existence" (Chapter 18). He compares it to "connected floors of the same building" and of course one cannot see both floors at the same time, instead one must "go up a level" as Ralph and Lois are eventually able to do. And there are even more floors in this "building": "above these floors, inaccessible to us but very much a part of the same tower of existence, live other beings" and above these floors "there are yet other levels. These are inhabited by creatures we could call All-Timers, beings which are either eternal or so close to it as to make no difference." (Chapter 18) This building with connected floors undoubtedly is the Dark Tower. Again the Tower is presented as a parable or visualisation of these connecting worlds. The fact that one floor lies above the other implies a hierarchy in importance but not in realness.

In this way, the Tower can even be seen as a representation of magical realism itself in which several floors each present their own “reality” none having greater claim to the truth.

Insomnia, or perhaps even the entire King multiverse, can be said to represent a disciplinary society in which the Tower, set in the centre of this multiverse, represents Foucault’s Panopticon; from Greek *pan* "all" + *optikon*, neuter of *optikos* "of or for sight" (Harper). Foucault argued that within this system observation alone, real or suggested, can “constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to clam, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to observation of the regulations” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). This ever-present suggestion of observation eliminated the need for violence as those that were being observed internalized this surveillance and started to regulate their own behaviour. All Short-timers are observed from within the panoptic tower, they cannot see the tower, but they are seen by it constantly. Likewise, when Ralph and Lois move up a level they are able to see everyone in the broadest sense of the word, they know their past, present and future. It is a true Panopticon because while they are able to observe everyone, they themselves become invisible to the Short-timers. How then does the Tower control the Short-timers? The somewhat disappointing answer is; it does not. While the Tower might in theory work as a Panopticon, there is one crucial aspect missing; the Short-timers do not know they are being watched. Thus it does control Ralph and Lois and even employs them as their agents by showing them that they are being kept in check, but Short-timers do not regulate their own behaviour due to the Tower because they do not know of its existence. Perhaps it is only the readers of *Insomnia* (and the other novels in the *Dark Tower* series) that are being controlled by it now that they know of its existence. The fact that Ed has been recruited by the Crimson King, as well as the fact that Ralph and Lois have to be recruited by the Doctors to stop him show that the system is fallible.

Observation is, as in *Insomnia*, an important theme in *Stranger Things*. This observation is omnipresent and permeates "entirely the consciousnesses and bodies of individuals, to the point of treating and organizing them in the totality of their activities" (Negri 24). This observation can be seen as a Synopticon which comes from the "Greek word *Syn* which stands for 'together' or 'at the same time', and *opticon*, which, again has to do with the visual" and means that the many can see and contemplate the few (Mathiesen 219). This Synopticon is represented by the government, its agencies and the citizens themselves and is characteristic of Deleuze's society of control. This observation thus permeates every aspect of Hawkins' citizens – not even people's own minds are safe from observation and control. This is underlined by the fact that *Stranger Things* is set in 1983; the same year that Ronald Reagan held the 'Evil Empire' speech to the National Association of Evangelicals. It marks a period of constant observation of each other's behaviour to sniff out any potential communists. This observation results in a constant tension between hiding and seeking; between observing and being observed. Will is known for retreating from his environment to hide in a hut in the forest and for the first few hours that he is missing everyone is convinced that he is just hiding. Of course, it becomes clear that in some way he is hiding – on a different plane of existence. In fact, he is hiding in plain sight as he remains in the Upside Down version of this world, but he cannot be seen or observed by those that cannot see the Upside Down. Conversely, Will is also the subject of everyone's seeking gaze because he is missing and everyone is looking for him. When they finally find him, and thus finally *see* him, it is not really him. Again, like *Insomnia*, seeing something does not automatically make it real - it is the belief that makes it real and Joyce does not for one second believe that this is her son. This is a good example of Synopticism in *Stranger Things* in which a large group of people, or many smaller groups of people, are watching and looking for just one person. The same is true for Eleven, who is being chased by a horde of Hawkin's employees and her

"father". They seem to be able to find her everywhere she runs to, not because they have fitted her with a tracking device, but rather because of Hawkins' grapevine. As Efe Basturk has argued, individuals are established as subjects not by routine surveillance but rather by "interiorizing the cultural practice of surveillance" (Basturk 10). Thus, there is a "shift of monitoring from a specific technique (Panopticon) and brought to a normalized practice performed by everyone' (Basturk 10). The already hyper vigilant citizens talk amongst themselves about every strange occurrence allowing the employees to easily track down Eleven.

More importantly, "[s]urveillance in control societies focuses on monitoring movements or acts in flows" (Basturk 8). This is also true for *Stranger Things* where the Hawkins researchers try to find Eleven by tracking her movements and by visiting any place where she has been seen which forms a parallel to the search for Will where officers and villager are trying to track Will down by following his last known movements. Like Will, Elven is both the observed and the observer. She is the subject of an experiment, observed as a common test animal in a research lab. But she is also the observer because she can enter other people's minds and observe what they are doing and saying. When she breaks free from the facility she becomes a hider, hiding in the woods and eventually hiding at Mike's house. But she is also a seeker as she sets out to help the boys find Will and she seeks out the Demogorgon to defeat him. Thus, the events in *Stranger Things* form a representation of a synoptic system in which the many observe and watch the few. The Synopticon is a crucial part of the society of control that *Stranger Things* represents. The Synopticon is important in the discussion of how the ontology and the use of the magic in magical realism changed.

As Thomas Mathiesen has argued, the Synopticon and the Panopticon were born in the same period (between 1750 and 1830) and have since developed alongside one another. It is important to note that Mathiesen does not argue that Foucault's Panopticon did not exist or

was not important, but rather that the Synopticon existed, expanded and developed in tandem with the Panopticon and was and is as important. Mathiesen takes as his example of the Synopticon mass media, in which he describes five different waves (mass press, film, radio, television and video/cable) to which I would add a sixth wave: streaming media. Streaming media is different from traditional media in that it is available at all times. It is both continually presented to and ready to be received by the end-user. While newspapers provide news value for no longer than a day and TV programmes are scheduled at set times, streaming media allows the viewer to consume the content 24/7. Netflix, as the most popular streaming media at this moment, can thus be considered an example of a Synopticon, in which the many, that is around 139 million people globally (Fiegermann), watch the few. These few are the characters in the multitude of films, series and documentaries that Netflix offers. I would argue in line with Mathiesen that these characters are not "ornamental figures without power" (226), but rather that "great power is located in concrete individuals and concrete delimited groups as represented in our mass media" (226). The way in which this power has affected magical realism will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

From Uncanny magic to Abject magic

All of the abovementioned shifts are part of the largest and most important shift in the ontology of the magic in magical realism from *Insomnia* to *Stranger Things* – from uncanny magic to abject magic.[6] This then is where the parallel can be drawn: like the biopolitical means of control in a disciplinary society the way that society was structured when King wrote his book, the uncanny in *Insomnia* is represented by external entities. While the uncanny originates from ourselves, it is things outside of ourselves that remind us of this *Heim* and make us feel *Unheimlich*. Conversely, like the biotechnological means of control in

[6] Magic here may sounds positive, like rainbows and unicorns, but seeing as these magical realist objects are part of the horror genre it should here be considered as Dark magic – scary, weird, unsettling.

a society of control, the way that society is structured now and that informed *Stranger Things*, the abject is represented by internal threats. Similar to the uncanny, the abject originates from the subject. However, the abject is actively cast off by the subject with the aim of externalizing it and turning it into an object. This however, as Kristeva has argued, fails and the abject becomes neither the S or the O but rather an in-between. While cast off from the self, it does not cease to exert power over the self.

This last part will be subdivided into two discussions of two particular literary aspects: setting and characters. Though these aspects will be discussed separately they often intersect and converge. First, the setting of *Insomnia* and *Stranger Things* are similar in that they both include a different structure of reality. King has crafted a multiverse the centre of which is formed by The Tower; an external and hierarchical 'building' consisting of different levels. I would argue that therefore, the Tower can be considered an uncanny structure. In contract, the Duffer Brothers have conceptualized the real world and the other world, the Upside Down, as two sides of the same coin – the worlds exist simultaneously within one another. The Upside Down then is an internal and abject structure.

External here is not meant in the sense that the magic is completely separated from the real, but it is used in the sense of other yet alike. The uncanny object is at once the same or like the subject, but not part of the subject. The Tower is thus a representation of the reader's world and is in some aspects alike, but it exists externally - in this case on a "higher level". It is important to note that while it is not made clear in *Insomnia* whether the Tower is a "real" building or if it is just a way for King to visualize his ungraspable concept of how the world is structured, this distinction is made in the other novels in the *Dark Tower* series. Ralph and Lois only gain access to one level above their own during the novel. This level is in itself uncanny in that it is probably closest to the reader's world of all the Tower's levels. It is eerily like our own world, it looks the same save for the colourful auras and umbilical

cords poking out of people's head, and many of the natural laws still apply. For instance, they have to take an elevator to actually move up the floors of a hospital building. It is thus so recognizable that it evokes an *Unheimlich* feeling. Of course the idea of something existing within our world that we cannot see has always been subject of horror stories. But *Insomnia* is no horror story. It is a magical realist story because the magic comes from the uncanny, not from the horrific. Thus auras, life strings and coloured footprints can inspire an uncanny sensation just as ghosts, ghouls and spirits can, but the former will not horrify the reader as the latter could.

The system of The Purpose and The Random itself is a source of the uncanny as it is an ancient ideology that we, as humankind, have long since lost our belief in but are once again confirmed. The Purpose and the Random is a modern reiteration of the Greek Moirai. Ralph aptly names the three Doctors after the three Fates: Clotho and Lachesis, the two agents of the Purpose, and Atropos, the agent of the Random. "The story was about three sisters – the Greek Sisters, maybe, or maybe it was the Weird Sisters [...] One of them spun the thread, one of them decided how long it would be'" (Chapter 16; King). Atropos, finally, cuts the thread, choosing the way in which people will die. It is an incomplete metaphor as all three of the agents cut the threads of life, not just Atropos, and it is not Lachesis who decides when the threads will be cut. Nonetheless, it is a clear intertextual allusion to an ancient wisdom, once considered true not only in Greece but also in many other cultures within and outside of Europe, that has long since been dubbed a myth, but that is now, at least for Ralph and Lois, confirmed as true. The Purpose and The Random are therefore a source of the uncanny in *Insomnia*.

The Upside Down is also uncanny in that it is the same world, not something wholly different or unrecognizable. When Will is stuck in the wall he described the Upside Down: "It's like home, but it's so dark. It's so dark and empty. And it's cold!" (S1E4). However, the

conception of reality in *Stranger Things* differs from that of *Insomnia* because it is internal. First, it is internal because both worlds exist within one another; they are not separate entities but rather two sides of the same coin. Second, while Ralph and Lois disappear from the "real" world when they go up a level, in *Stranger Things* it is possible to coexist in both worlds at the same time. This is first demonstrated when Will shows up in the wall and Joyce can interact with him while he resides in the Upside Down. Second, at the end of the series, Will flashes in and out of the Upside Down. He does not disappear from the real world but rather the real world is replaced by the Upside Down. Thus, while he desperately wants to expel the Upside Down it has become wholly internalized.

Second, the Upside Down is portrayed using womblike imagery and as Barbara Creed has argued, "[t]he womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination - blood, afterbirth, faeces" (Creed). In the second episode the Demogorgon tries to penetrate the real world via the walls that strongly resembles an entity within a uterus, pushing against it (see fig. 2). It is that same wall that Will shows up in two episodes later trying to communicate with his mother about where he is. The resemblance to the womb is even more striking as the wall now appears clear, slimy, red and even veined (see fig. 3). However, it is a corrupted womb – a uterus that suffocates and brings death not life. Eleven too was mutated while she was in her mother's womb. Her mother was also in a sort of womb – the sensory deprivation tank. When Eleven is placed back into the tank, which the viewer sees as a flashback, in "Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat" she is violently expulsed from it, including bloodshed, mimicking the trauma of being born (see fig. 4). Something that should have been so safe like a mother's womb has become corrupted for her; something to be feared like the poisonous placental sac from King's novel.

Figure 2. The Demogorgon trying to push through the wall into the "real" world (S1E2)

Figure 3. The same wall, but now with Will trying to communicate with his mother (S1E4)

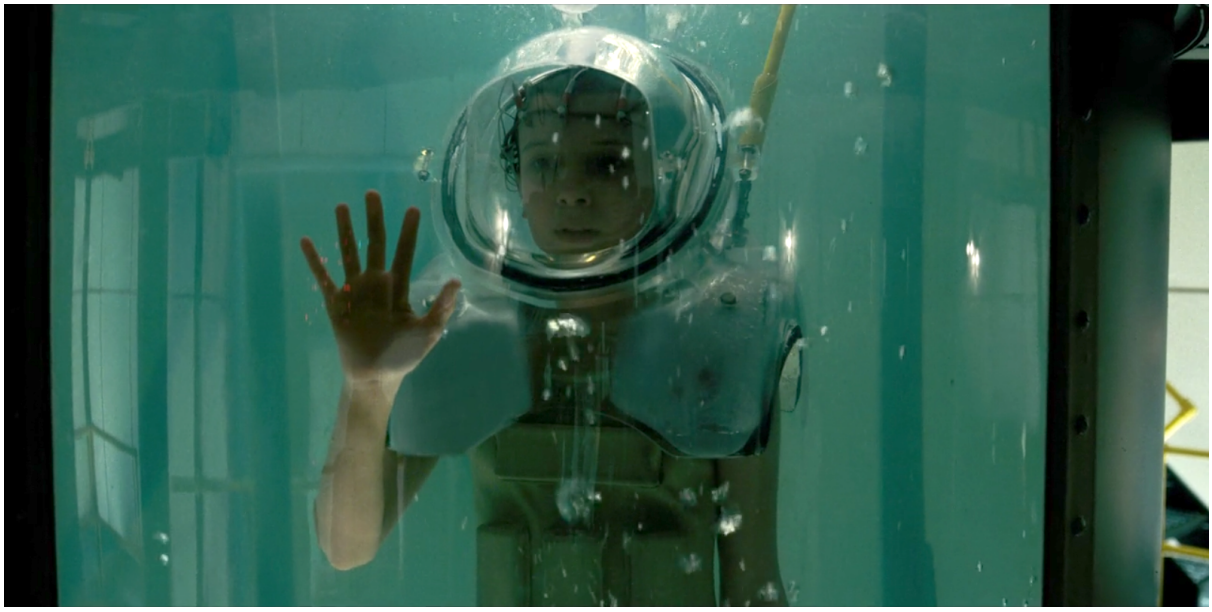


Figure 4. Eleven in the sensory deprivation tank (S1E6)

Once the Upside Down has expelled the bodies, or has given birth to death, the corpses form an even greater abjection. For Kristeva, "the corpse represents fundamental pollution (Kristeva 109). The corpse is the greatest abjection because it is a physical manifestation of corporeality or one's own mortality, which causes a break down between the Self and the Other. The corpse also forms the antithesis to life – "without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 3). This is further underlined by the way these corpses are presented: wet and slimy like a corrupted new born baby who has yet to be washed and placed in the Mother's arms (see fig. 5). Again Eleven experiences the same dread and horror that the viewer does. As she finds Barb's body she screams "Gone! Gone! Gone! Gone! Gone!" (S1E7).

Figure 5. Barbara's abject corpse inside the Upside Down (S1E7)

Second, in regards to characters, King's Doctors can be read as a double and are thus uncanny figures, as is the Crimson King, while Will and the Demogorgon are abject figures. The doctors are placed in parallel with humans and, in doing so, undermine the classic narrative stability and order. Character doubling is often associated with the literary figure of the Doppelgänger (Živković 126). The double, then, is an antithetical self that undermines the idea of the self as "a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole" (Živković 126). The Doppelgänger provides both a contrast to and a likeness of the protagonist and is thus the embodiment of the uncanny (Fonesca 191). The Doctors are a double figure, recognizable as being human but also different enough to evoke an *Unheimlich* feeling. They resemble humans in a few different ways. First, they look like people; "They had faces, yes – eyes, noses, mouths" (King Chapter 8). However, they also lack any lines or wrinkles or any distinguishable features in those faces. Second, they dress like people, wearing a white smock and "midget-sized blue jeans" (King Chapter 11). Third, when Ralph attacks Atropos with his own scalpel he cuts into real flesh and he bleeds. And last, they are mortal. Clotho explains

that they are Long-Timers and thus live longer than humans, who are Short-Timers, but not as long as the Higher Purpose and the Higher Random that he describes as All-Timers. Ralph concludes: "The only real difference between them and us is that they live longer and they're a little harder to see" (King Chapter 26). Another uncanny figure in *Insomnia* is the Crimson King. He can be seen as a monarchical figure, one who rules and controls with violence rather than through the Panopticon or Synopticon. He is a figure from past times, a reiteration of the devil. Like the devil, the Crimson King shape shifts; first into Ralph's mother and then into a massive pregnant catfish. Ralph describes these things as being "horridly familiar" – they are uncanny and external representations of past events. Furthermore, the way in which Ralph attacks the Crimson King, by sticking an earring in one of his eyes, echoes E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1816), which is used by Freud as an example of the uncanny. The Sand-man is thought to tear out the eyes of children which, according to Freud, taps into man's castration fears and confirmation of these fears results in the uncanny.

The main characters in *Stranger Things* are abject figures. While Eleven and the boys can all be seen as abject in the sense that they are social cast offs, the most abject figures in the series are undoubtedly Will and the Demogorgon. Will is perhaps even further removed from society than his friends: he is bullied by his peers in school, he is bullied by his dad for being different[7] and he even physically removes himself from society when he retreats to his hut (Castle Byers) in the woods. In the Episode "The Body"[8] Will's corpse is dredged up from a nearby creek. Here the corpse again confronts the viewer with the abject. However, the corpse is not really a corpse. The viewer is uncertain about whether this really is Will or not; the corpse presents Will as a sort of Schrödinger's cat – both dead and not dead. When Hopper decides to find out the truth, the viewer feels a sense of real abjection – will he slit

[7] There is also a homophobic undertone as the dad rejects his son because he is into feminine things like reading and forces him to partake in masculine events such as baseball (S1E2).

[8] A clever reference to Stephen King's book *The Body* in which a group of young boys go on a coming-of-age adventure to find a dead body.

open and desecrate the body of a child unveiling his bloody innards or is this in fact a fake body, as Joyce believes? The corpse turns out to be a doll stuffed with cotton balls. The moment that this is unveiled, the figure stops being abject and instead can be considered uncanny. The inanimate doll looks like Will in every single detail (except the birth mark on his arm), but it is not Will. Going back to "real" Will, he is neither the Object nor the Subject and thus represents the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). He is both part of this world and part of the Upside Down. The Upside Down, in turn, exists both as an external reality and as an integral part of him. This is underlined by the fact that he is "an individual who appears clean on the outside" but "may be corrupted on the inside" (Creed). When all seems well again in Hawkins and Christmas celebrations are in full swing, recently recovered Will goes to the bathroom to cough up what seems to be Demogorgon larvae. Will has been rescued from the Upside Down, but the Upside Down has penetrated him, impregnated him and initiated him in way that is inescapable. It is both a part of him and not a part of him – he has internalized the abject and thus becomes the abject.

If we consider the Upside Down as an abject setting it is inevitable to consider its inhabitants as anything less than abject. The Demogorgon has fingers, his body resembles that of a human and it is bipedal but the resemblance stops there. Especially egregious is the face which, when closed, has the shape of a human skull without any facial features (no eyes, nose or mouth) and when opened is nothing but five flaps of flesh covered in teeth that resemble a corrupted and dangerous flower. It is definitely reminiscent of *Alien* and, as Creed, has argued, though the form of the monster differs "the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens stability" (Creed). Like *Alien*, the Demogorgon is an abject figure mainly because it represents the corrupted, abject mother. The monster is presented as sexless (as are the Doctors) but there are indications for reading the monster as feminine. First, its mouth is

shaped like a fleshy orchid filled with teeth: an all-devouring *vagina dentata* (Butcher).[9] It is Creed's "voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that signifies female genitalia which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path" (27). Second, its lair, or the place where Will and Barb are kept, can be viewed as its womb (Butcher). Daisy Butcher argues that when Joyce and Hopper enter the lair it "represents a caesarean procedure whereby they aim to extract Will Byers from the evil womb of the *vagina dentata*." It is the place where it at once feeds off the corpses and where it impregnates them. It is not a life-giving womb, but rather a corrupted womb like the poisonous placental sack in King's novel – birthing only death. It is the "presence of the gestating, all-devouring womb of the archaic mother" that generates horror (Creed 27). Third, it preys on humans, though not exclusively. We never see the monster actually eat a human though it is heavily suggested that it does feed off human flesh. This underlines the Demogorgon as the mother who "is both a force of creation and a force of destruction and is therefore presented as abject to protect the subject from the mother's force both creative and destructive" (Creed). However, it is ultimately not the devouring, eating or corrupting that creates the horror in *Stranger Things*, rather it is "[f]ear of the archaic mother" that "turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (Kristeva 77). The viewer fears not the destruction by the monster, but rather what it has put inside Will. This is the continued, productive horror by the abject mother figure. We fear the lineage the monster has created – how many of these babies will result from this larvae? Though the monster has been destroyed by Eleven – it will live on in its progeny.

[9] Interestingly, King has said that his greatest sexual fear is the fear of castration by "[t]he *vagina dentata*, the vagina with teeth. A story where you were making love to a woman and it just slammed shut and cut your penis off. That'd do it" (Bare Bones).

Chapter 4 – The Sliding Scale: from Magical Realism to Realist Magic

The shifts discussed so far are part of a larger shift from magical realism that places the magic in conjunction with the realistic to realist magic[10] that places reality and magical within one another. Important here is to go back to Chanady's reader-response based definition of magical realism, in which "the supernatural, is rejected as inconsistent with our normal perspective and structuring of reality" (14). The key difference with the fantastic is that the reader of magical realism is not disturbed by these "conflicting logical codes" but rather accepts that both these worlds are "are part of a single interpretative code" (iv). This is true for both cultural objects, but the characters in *Stranger Things* find it much easier to "abandon this usual perspective of reality" (iv).

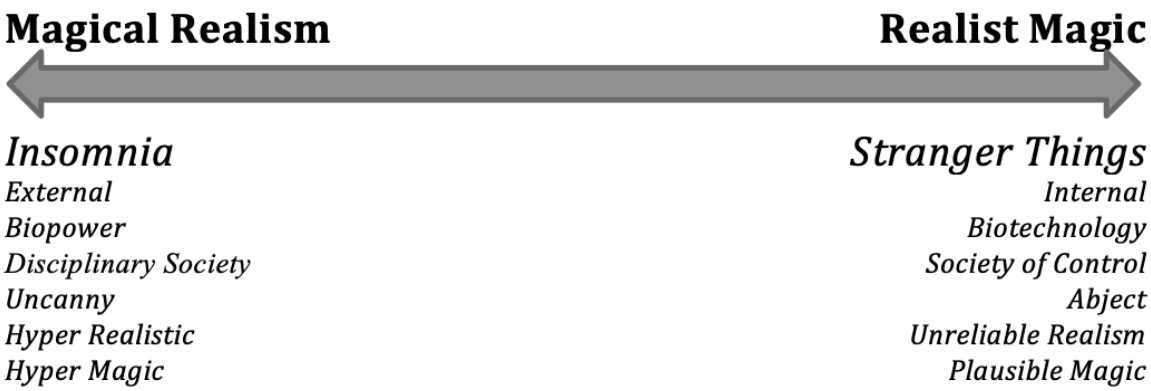


Figure 6. The sliding scale of magical realism

This results in the idea of a sliding scale of magical realism (see fig. 6). On one end of the scale, we have *magical realism* which is characterized by: the hyper realistic, the hyper magical and external threats. On the other end of the scale, we have *realist magic* characterized by: unreliable realism, plausible magic and internal threats. The realistic parts

[10] Not to be confused with Thimothy Morton's ideas of realist magic in his book on causality, Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and aesthetics.

of King's novel *Insomnia*, and arguably most of his novels, can be considered hyper realistic. In a sense, it is a literary counterpart of photorealism - an example:

> The music was coming from a boombox on the Cape Cod's postage stamp-sized porch. A sprinkler twirled on the lawn, making a hisha-hisha-hisha sound as it cast rainbows in the air and deposited a shiny wet patch on the sidewalk. Ed Deepneau, shirtless, was sitting in a lawn-chair to the left of the concrete walk with his legs crossed, looking up at the sky with the bemused expression of a man trying to decide if the cloud passing overhead looks more like a horse or a unicorn. One bare foot bopped up and down in time to the music. An all but perfect summer vignette; a scene of small-town serenity Norman Rockwell might have painted and then titled Afternoon Off. All you had to overlook was the blood on Ed's knuckles and the drop on the left lens of his round John Lennon specs. (King Chapter 3)

Every single detail of the scene is described; the reader can almost hear the music, almost feel the heat and almost smell the blood.[11] As with most of his novels, there are numerous references to American music, brands and television shows all contributing to the photorealistic picture King is trying to paint of the lives of the average Americans. Even his protagonists are as real as they get. Ralph and Lois are old, widowed and retired, which is far from the usual beautiful, young, American hero and heroin. King's hyperrealism offers the perfect background for the magical. As the real seems more real due to the way it is described, the magic feels more magical in contrast. Thus, the magic in *Insomnia* can be considered hypermagical – so magical that it is almost, but not quite completely,

[11] Which partly explains the 800 pages it took King to tell this story.

unbelievable.[12] This term, hypermagical, is even more apt if we consider *hyper* in the literal sense as "1: above : beyond" (merriam-webster). It is the levels above the "real" ground level that are the source of magic in the novel.

In *Stranger Things*, the real might resemble King's small-town American setting but as Myke Bartlett has rightly argued it is important to note that it is set in the 80s but written and filmed in 2016. The real then, in *Stranger Things*, is unreliable – seen through what Bartlett calls the "rose-coloured rear-view" (16). It is not a reflection of the 80s but rather a story about the 80s in which the Duffer Brother's have cherry-picked only "the most recognisable elements of the 1980s – the best of the best" (21). Especially, egregious is, according to Bartlett, the erasure of social justice issues such as racism and sexism, which were an inherent part of the 80s as they still are now. This erasure "does the past and the present a disservice, because it creates a narrative in which social progress is seen as an inevitable force, rather than a hard-won and ongoing battle" (Bartlett 23). In this respect, the Duffer Brothers clearly deviate from King, who has never shied away from using violence, discrimination and sexism to lend verisimilitude to his stories. This filtered version of the real also results in a different form of magic. Because the real does not seem so real, especially to those viewers that have lived through the 80s, the magic also does not seem as magic; the hypermagic becomes plausible magic. Though mind reading, telekinesis and opening a portal to a different dimension are still by our scientific standards impossible, it nonetheless fits within our frame of reference of things that could perhaps one day with the rapid advancement of technology become possible.

That the magic is more plausible is certainly visible in the way that the characters

[12] Here, is where modern (Western) bias perhaps influences my analysis, as I would agree with Harari that "[m]odern culture rejects this belief in a great cosmic plan. We are not actors in any larger-than-life drama. Life has no script, no playwrights, no director, no producer – and no meaning. To the best of our scientific understanding, the universe is blind and purposeless process, full of sound and fury signifying nothing" (Harari 234).

react to it. While King spends almost six chapters crafting Ralph's internal debates on whether or not the colours he is seeing are real, most characters in *Stranger Things* accept the magic at face value. The boys readily accept Eleven's telepathy as a superpower and Joyce needs no convincing that the flickering lights in her apartment is her son trying to communicate with her.

As mentioned before, the magic in *Insomnia* is external. It is important to reiterate this point here because it also affects the way in which the magic and the real are positioned in relation to one another. We can consider *Insomnia* as a form of orthodoxy, in which the author and the reader both operate under the same reality that we have all agreed upon, the ground floor. In this reality, as Mathiesen has argued, "the answers to the basic questions are taken for granted" (230). If we all accept this reality then anything that is magic or deviant must exist outside of it. In this way, no matter how much evidence is presented in the novel, in the end the magic remains magical and thus external: "By the following week they were gone, and Ralph began to wonder if perhaps the whole thing hadn't been some strange dream. He knew that wasn't so, but it became harder and harder to believe what he did know" (King Chapter 30). *Stranger Things*, however, ends very differently. At the end of the season nobody doubts that these magical events actually happened. For most people, the events have ended and while the evil, in the form of the Demogorgon, has been expelled it remains part of their shared experience. The Upside Down does not cease to exist; rather the characters are just no longer confronted by it. Thus reality has changed to make room for the magic, implying that unlike in *Insomnia*, reality in *Stranger Things* is not set in stone, but rather malleable and flexible. The magic and the real exist within one another.

This change, from the magic next to the real to the magic within the real (and vice versa), can be explained in part by the birth and development of Streaming Media. Streaming Media is a form of disruptive innovation, a term first coined by Clay Christensen from the

Harvard Business School, which means an innovation that destroys existing models. In this case, Streaming media is continually presented to and ready to be received by the end-user 24/7 thereby destroying scheduled models of media such as television and rental media such as Blockbusters. The difference with even earlier forms of media such as the novel lies not in the fact that Streaming Media is available at all times, as in theory, once you have acquired a book you can read it 24/7, but rather in the ease and convenience of acquiring the media: you log in and it is all there for the taking (or rather watching). Netflix in particular has proven to be one such disruptive force, and has changed the movie industry, documentary filmmaking and arguably the entire entertainment industry (McDonald & Smith-Rowsey). Thus, in a world where information is so readily available, magic must be more realistic for it to even slightly unsettle the reader. As Harari has argued, "Modern culture is the most powerful in history, and it is ceaselessly researching, inventing, discovering and growing. At the same time, it is plagued by more existential angst than any previous culture" (Harari 235). The magic inches closer to reality, which makes it harder and harder to successfully present it as an external threat. Thus when the magic can no longer originate in external structures it must then turn inward and become abject and tap into everyone's ever-growing existential angst.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the question: how has the ontology and the use of the magic in magical realism changed with the invention of Streaming Media? I compared and contrasted two cultural objects: Stephen King's novel *Insomnia* and The Duffer Brother's Netflix original series *Stranger Things*. I have argued that the ontology of the magic in magical realism has shifted from representations of external threats to internal ones since the onset and popularization of Streaming Media. Furthermore, I have argued that these shifts are part of a larger shift from magical realism that places the magic in conjunction with the real to

realist magic that places magic within the real and the real within the magic. My main findings as presented in Chapter 3 and 4 can be summed up as following. Part one of Chapter 3 showed that, there is a shift from the use of biopower as a form of control in *Insomnia* to the use of biotechnology as a form of control in *Stranger Things*. There are two different ways in which this shift can be seen. First, while both cultural objects engage with control over the female body there is a shift from the biopolitical control of birth rates through pro- and anti-abortion rhetoric in *Insomnia* to a biotechnological control over foetal life through genetic manipulation in *Stranger Things*. Second, control over humans shifts from the physical body in the form of power of life & death in *Insomnia* to control over the mind in Stranger things in the form of Mind control & Telekinesis. Part two of Chapter 3 showed that there is a shift in setting from a system that represents a disciplinary society in *Insomnia*, characterized by hierarchical observation, to a setting that resembles society of control in *Stranger Things*, characterized by omnipresent observation. Thus, while observation is an important theme in both, *Insomnia* relies on a system of hierarchical observation – a Panopticon represented by the tower while *Stranger Things* relies on a system of omnipresent observation – a Synopticon represented by the government, its agencies and the citizens themselves. Part three of Chapter 3 argued that these shifts are part of the largest and most important shift in the ontology of the magic in magical realism– from uncanny magic to abject magic. Two parallels were drawn: 1) like the biopolitical means of control in a disciplinary society the way that society was structured when King wrote his book, the uncanny is represented by external threats and 2) like the biotechnological means of control in a society of control the way that society is structured now and that has informed *Stranger Things*, the abject is presented as internal. By diving deeper into the setting of both objects I showed that King has crafted a multiverse the centre of which is formed by The Tower, an external and hierarchical 'building' consisting of different levels. I consider this to be an

uncanny setting. I further argued that the Duffer Brothers have conceptualized the real world and the other world as two sides of the same coin – the worlds exist simultaneously within one another. Therefore, I consider the Upside Down to be an internal and abject structure. By closely analysing the characters of *Insomnia* and *Stranger Things*, I showed that King's Little Bald Doctors can be read as a double and the Crimson King as a representation of Freud's castration fear and are thus both uncanny figures. I further described how Will and the Demogorgon are abject figures, the former because of his function as an in-between figure and the latter because it is a representation of the abject mother. Finally, in Chapter 4, I presented the idea of a sliding scale of magical realism. On one end of the scale, we have *magical realism* which is characterized by: the hyper realistic, the hyper magical and external threats. On the other end of the scale, we have *realist magic* characterized by: unreliable realism, plausible magic and internal threats. I argued that, unlike *Insomnia*, an example of a "traditional" medium and of magical realism, in which the magic is represented by an external threat resulting in the uncanny, *Stranger Things* is a part of a disruptive force and an example of realist magic, in which the magic originates from us and is at once a part of us and not resulting in the abject.

With this thesis, I hope to have made a valuable contribution to the field of magical realism. I have attempted to show that on the one hand magical realism is definitely not confined to one continent as some critics have argued, and on the other hand that there have been some significant changes in the genre, specifically since the 1990s and since the birth of Streaming Media. The insights presented in this thesis may also be interesting for future literary critical work done in the rapidly expanding and changing field of Streaming Media. As mentioned in the introduction, I believe it is important to consider that I am reading, interpreting and analysing the cultural objects with an Anglocentric viewpoint due to my (academic) background as an English graduate specialized in American popular culture.

Therefore, it would be interesting to include, for instance, a series like *Dark* (2017), which was the first German-language Netflix original series. Especially interesting would be to relate the magical realism in *Dark* back to Roh's first usage of *Magischer Realismus* and how Streaming Media has changed the genre since it was used in relation to German post-expressionist paintings.

Netflix offers a variety of cultural objects, analysis of which would provide further insights on how magical realism behaves in this new 24/7 on-demand viewing landscape. *Happy!* being perhaps the most overtly magical realistic with magical themes such as: imaginary friends, telekinesis, telepathy and starkly realistic themes such as: violence, death, rape and alcoholism. It also has very interesting cinematography and special effects. Furthermore, I would recommend any new work done on *Stranger Things* to include the second season and I would also suggest that *Needful Things* be taken into consideration as another magical realist novel by King. If these were added to the current study I feel there would have been a more solid basis for the conclusions drawn, but the scope of this thesis did not allow for the discussion of so many cultural objects without the text becoming convoluted or the argument made diluted.

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