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NEW BODIES IN SUBURBAN FANTASTIC CINEMA

Pedro Lauria

After its first decades of consolidation, cinema began to produce media with increasingly elaborate narratives. As a natural consequence, movie theatre became a place where it is possible, for a few hours, to live great adventures, discover different places, and look at the world from new perspectives in an audiovisual experience shared with dozens or hundreds of other viewers. Despite its narrative power specific stories and perspectives have been largely ignored, particularly within mainstream western cinema. This is the case of the history of homosexuality, marked by invisibility as stated by Katharina Lindner in *Film Bodies* (2018). As Lindner points out, this perspective is prior to the idea of representativeness, stating that even though historically underrepresented, women were hypervisible in cinema, while queer bodies were practically absent (22). The historical difficulty with which queer professionals in the industry can be open about their identity has at times caused stories and representations of LGBTQIA+ bodies in mainstream cinema to be ignored or told primarily by people who do not identify as queer.

This ongoing under/misrepresentation has an important effect on the constitution of entire cinematographic genres and subgenres since they consolidate narrative, aesthetic, semantic and syntactic elements that define them. For example, many action and Western films are marked by androcentrism and heteronormative romance, as discussed by Barna Donovan in *Blood, Guns and Testosterone* (2009) and Roderic McGillis in *He Was Some Kind of a Man* (2009), as this is an intrinsic part of such genres. To this day, these (mainly the Western) are still recognised by elements such as the virile male hero and the 'damsel in distress,' with narrative and syntactic structures marked by violent problem solving, in which the protagonist proves his value by defeating the villain physically. Such elements are so tied into these genres that any text which does not repeat this pattern is usually considered innovative or subversive.

In the present work, my attention turns to a newly categorised cinematographic subgenre, the suburban fantastic cinema, to demonstrate how the narrative and syntactic elements were historically tied to a male and heterocentric narrative where the 'Other' was pushed to the periphery as an element that should be feared or assimilated. I demonstrate how productions from the last decade present horizons of change in the subgenre as new films and television (TV) series incorporate LBGBTQIA+ bodies into the suburban fantastic cinema for the first time, re-reading it through a more critical nostalgia. This is the case of the *Fear Street* (2021) trilogy, which shows, a black lesbian teen as the protagonist in a retelling of the story of another queer character who was treated as a villainous 'Other.' This article demonstrates how a queer reading of the classic suburban fantastic provides a change of perspective, aesthetic and syntactic elements which are taken as an inherent

part of the subgenre in its genesis. In so doing, I expose how this necessary freshness challenges the historical forms of representations of the subgenre and helps it to stay more relevant to contemporary contexts.

The Suburban Fantastic Cinema

The suburban fantastic cinema encompasses a set of films that begin to appear in the 1980s such as *ET – The Extraterrestrial*, (1982), *Gremlins* (1984), *Fright Night* (1985), *The Goonies*, (1985) and *Home Alone*, (1990). According to Angus McFadzean, who first proposed the subgenre in *Suburban Fantastic Cinema* (2019), it encompasses movies in which mostly pre-teen and teenage boys living within the suburbs are called upon to confront a disruptive fantastic force (1). Semantically, the subgenre is born from an amalgamation of elements linked to middle-class daily life and extraordinary events that affect the environment in which the protagonist lives (usually the suburbs).[1] Despite the name, these semantic elements do not necessarily need to be linked to the suburbs, and they do not even need to be fantastic (although they do have to confront some norms of the protagonist's daily life and/or environment). Such characterisation is mainly derived from the precursor film of the subgenre: *E.T.*; however, over the years, new texts have expanded its semantic range. Narratively, the subgenre usually fits in the American Monomyth structure analysed by Robert Jewett and John Lawrence (1977):

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity (215).

Syntactically, the subgenre usually links this structure to the protagonist's maturation narrative, typical of Bildungsroman dramas (which focus on the psychological growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood). In other words, the maturation in these films depends upon the protagonists performing heroic acts, such as saving aliens, the suburbs, or even the world, and not on their emotional development.

From its emergence in the early 1980s until its decline in the mid-1990s, the subgenre privileged male protagonists, specifically white, cis, middle-class, and heterosexual ones. This scenario becomes even more poignant if we consider that such films, due to their presentation of the youth culture, are often tied in with nostalgic feelings. (McFadzean, 26). In general, queer experience is marked by contradictory feelings about the past. On a personal level, when an individual's trajectory may be marked by family trauma and experiences of violence, and also, on a historical level, when intolerance against LGBTQIA+ bodies were even more ubiquitous. In this regard, Gilad Padva's perspective on nostalgia in *Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture* (2014), is encouraging:

> The idea that the past is needlessly deterministic and that sometimes dreadful experiences can be nostalgically transformed into pleasurable fantasies has been revealed to me as inspiring and empowering. The power of queer nostalgia is the power of fantasy that creates better existentiality for queer in their quest for new horizons, somewhere over the rainbow (231).

The experience of finding emotional and nostalgic elements in the past can be an instrument to regain control over or strengthen your own narrative. Therefore, when a subgenre with nostalgic characteristics denies an entire social group the possibility of also starring in their stories, it allows us to infer that feeling nostalgia in these films is positioned as a heterosexual exclusivity. In addition to not considering that certain feelings are inherent to childhood and adolescence, the classic suburban fantastic cinema does not consider that the past for a queer person is a moment full of discoveries and understandings of their own identity – processes that are part of the subgenre's narrative.

The protagonist of the suburban fantastic cinema is crucially not compelled to transform society but rather returns it to its previous status. Such restitutive interests, in turn, are easily explained if we consider the protagonist's gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class since 'he' is privileged by the constitution of a white-centred and patriarchal society, whose reaffirmation (re)assures his privileges (McFadzean 56). It is worth pointing out that demographically post-war American suburbs were inhabited mainly by a white middle-class and the protagonists are rarely shown in severe financial difficulties or suffering serious social problems.[2] As John Ehrman explains in *The Eighties: America in the Age of Regan* (2005) "even suburbanites became connected to the wider world, they were expected to remain inward-looking in important ways" and "would not have much concern for addressing broader social issues" (30). Instead, the difficulties and dissatisfactions of the suburban fantastic protagonist are usually caused by feeling misunderstood by authority figures around them – whether family members, teachers, or police officers. Thus, 'his' journey involves establishing 'his' presence and reaffirming 'his' point of view, while gaining the respect of these figures.

To achieve 'his' goals, the protagonist of the classic suburban fantastic narratives must deal just with a disrupting 'Other' – annihilating, expelling, or assimilating it to the social order. That is why Ian Wojcik-Andrews (2000) posits a Marxist reading that the 'Other' (or the fantastic) in these films is a commodity with a narrative function linked to the realisation of certain patriarchal and capitalist rites to achieve what capitalist society privileges: heteronormativity, monogamous relationships, private property, class status or success (127). For example, at the end of *E.T.*, Elliot is recognised as a hero by his mother, friends, and even authorities, after being reprimanded by them during the film. The young man, who did not feel heard at home, is finally seen with respect and admiration, elevating his social status. Even more symbolic is Marty McFly's story in *Back to the Future* (1985), since he not only restores suburban normality but also manages to improve his financial condition by the end of the film. Despite having contact with fantastic elements – whether

an alien with regenerative abilities or a time machine – Elliot and Marty have no concerns about how their knowledge could positively impact society. A very different outcome happens in *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), in which Pointdexter (potentially the only black protagonist of this first decade of the suburban fantastic cinema) after defeating the villains, shares the riches with the community around him. In this way, classic suburban fantastic cinema does not just ignore the narrative of minorities, especially LGBTQIA+ bodies, but it also uses the figure of this 'Other' that does not comply with the hegemonic order of 1980s America and its patriarchal values as a commodity, as is the case of the queer body. As Chris Weedon suggests in *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (1999) the queer movement challenges the very ideas of normality which underpin social institutions and practices (73). After all, the queer body, when going against such strict codes of performativity, sexuality, and affection naturally clashes with these definitions.

It is essential to position suburban fantastic origin within the context of Reaganite entertainment, defined by the production of high-concept works with striking visual elements that generated the 'excitement' of going to the cinema and criticised as part of the 'escapist entertainment' of the Reagan Era, as stated by Andrew Britton (101). The films of this conjecture usually did not delve into social and everyday issues but focused on grandiose and fanciful events. In the end, almost as a rule, the spectators went home feeling that everything was resolved and the world was safe, which could be true if they were part of the same demographic as the protagonist – typically middle-class, white, cis, heterosexual and male. This concept is particularly interesting because, as Robin Wood states in *Movies and Mass Culture* (1996), works from Reaganite entertainment presented a repetition of structures and elements that aimed "to diminish and disarm all the social movements that gained momentum in the 1970s: radical feminism, black militancy, LGBTQIA+ liberation and the attacks on patriarchy" (204). In short, by giving primacy to the repetition of the figure of the heterosexual white man as a hero, no space was given to the representation and subjectivity of other bodies. Considering that a large part of the works of suburban fantastic cinema was aimed at children and young people, this conservative and excluding culture was already instilled by this media since childhood. It is important to point out that this is a susceptible period in the formation of the identity of the queer individuals, which evidently impacts the development of certain perceptions about the world.

Suzan Jeffords explains in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) how the Reagan period was marked by blockbusters whose protagonists were the hyper-performative, cis and heteronormative conception of the male hero, which she calls the 'hard body' – the one who could physically solve all problems and save the world. Although most of her analysis delves mainly into films with 'one-man armies' *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Rambo* (1982), and *Die Hard* (1988), the author also cites suburban fantastic films in her argument. For example, she compares George McFly's 'training' in *Back to the Future* with Reagan's measures to teach America to stop being a coward in the face of communism and the Islamic revolution (70). Thus, even if Jeffords' book shows us the excess of male bodies as protagonists of the American cinema of the 1980s, it does not diminish the particularly intense machismo present in suburban fantastic cinema. For example, among more than sixty films from the 1980s and 1990s categorised in my PhD thesis (2022), only

five have female protagonists and, even so, they share their narratives with a male/masculine co-protagonist as is the case of *Short Circuit* (1986), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Karate Kid 4* (1994), *Casper* (1995) and *Casper and Wendy* (1998). Due to this scarcity of female narratives and protagonists, McFadzean claims that suburban fantastic cinema, at least in its origins, is an androcentric subgenre (52), a similar perspective to which Catherine Lester points out in *Horror Films for Children* (2021 107).

After the aforementioned decline of the subgenre in the 1990s, its return in the early 2010s emerged in a cycle that McFadzean calls "reflexive suburban fantastic cinema" (115) headed by nostalgic works set in the 1980s such as *Super 8* (2011), *It – Chapter 1* (2016), and *Stranger Things* (2016-present). The return of the subgenre can be read in several ways: as a decline in the traditional Fantasy franchises that marked the 2000s, such as the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), and the *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005-2010); as part of a nostalgic generational cycle where young people who watched suburban fantastic films in the 1980s are now old enough to produce their work – as is the case of J. J. Abrams (*Super 8*) and the Duffer Brothers (Stranger Things); and as a response to the 2008 housing crisis, as the suburban lifestyle was in real danger, and consequently, the suburbanite's desire to restore it to normalcy. As for this last reading, it is worth mentioning Donald Trump's successful reuse of Reagan's slogan, "Make America Great Again" as a nostalgic and restorative motto. However, even in the face of the greater influx of non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-male bodies in Hollywood these new suburban fantastic works continue to centre their narratives on hegemonic bodies; a process that can be explained, in part, due to the exclusion of non-hegemonic bodies from the subgenre in its first decade. Such a contemporary perspective questions whether these androcentric characteristics would be constitutive of the suburban fantastic cinema itself and not just a hallmark of films made in the Reaganite era.

Nevertheless, other works conceived during the return of the suburban fantastic cinema of the 2010s go against this maxim, presenting new possibilities of protagonists for the subgenre. This is the case in films like *Kin* (2018), *See You Yesterday*, (2019) and *Vampires vs. The Bronx* (2020) that move female, black, Latino, and LGBTQIA+ bodies to the centre. In so doing, these films also migrate their settings from middle-class suburbs to urban peripheries, bringing new elements (police violence, gangs, greater sense of community) to the fore.[3] Such representations raise questions about the syntax of suburban fantastic cinema, which is no longer restricted to restorative narratives dominated by a suburban and white American middle-class and start to highlight other perspectives and possibilities. Consequently, I will delve into three of these works: *Fear Street 1994*, *1978* and *1666* (2021), a trilogy of films which bring a black lesbian woman to the centre and frames sexuality as an intrinsic part of their identity and maturation process. By reading the trilogy in relation to both Gothic and queer criticism and comparing its elements to others from classic suburban fantastic films, I demonstrate how contemporary iterations assist in a re-visiting the subgenre's original conservative ideologies. In such a way, it is feasible to study the narrative and syntactic possibilities allowed by the entry of these new bodies into the subgenre and ascertain by going against the idea of androcentrism, heteronormativity, and whiteness as constitutive elements of suburban fantastic cinema as pointed by McFadzean in 2019.[4] Thereby, this work aims to prevent such characteristics become intrinsic to the suburban fantastic, avoiding the phenomenon that happened with the Western. After all, it is challenging to dissociate the genre today from its androcentrism and

heteronormative characteristics. This argument becomes even more valuable if we consider the potential of the suburban fantastic to show and celebrate the underrepresented childhood and adolescence of non-hegemonic bodies.

Fear Street: Ancestry and Reparation

In 2021, Netflix released in the same month the Fear Street Horror trilogy: *Fear Street: 1994*, *Fear Street: 1978*, and *Fear Street: 1666*. Each film permeates a different subgenre: the suburban fantastic cinema, the slasher, and the American Gothic respectively. A larger narrative connects all these movies: the story of Shadyside, a working-class suburb in Ohio, and the curse of Sarah Fier, a woman killed in the seventeenth century, based on an accusation of witchcraft. According to the legend, Fier left a curse before her execution in which every fifteen years her vengeful spirit would take possession of a Shadyside dweller, beginning a killing spree. The curse makes Shadyside unable to develop economically, unlike its wealthy neighbour, Sunnyvale. The first film's story begins in 1994, with the most recent murders in Shadyside. The protagonist, Deena, is a black and lesbian teenager that becomes involved in the plot when her ex-girlfriend, Sam, becomes the target of Fier's curse. By itself, the choice to opt for a queer and black protagonist is undoubtedly significant considering the history of the subgenre as there is no other suburban fantastic film with a protagonist with this profile among more than a hundred works that I have analysed since its origin. Furthermore, the choice of Deena as the protagonist brings semantic, syntactic, and narrative innovations – since both the ethnicity and the sexuality of the character are important in the course of the plot, bringing up a series of subjects never discussed with such a focus by the subgenre. The trilogy addresses such topics as racism, police violence, social inequality, bigotry, and homophobia, contributing to a Gothic perspective where the suburbs are already dangerous for the protagonist. As Ashley Carranza explains in *The Rebirth of the King's Children* (2018), these narratives show a "world where young people are savagely murdered and their parents are unable (or unwilling) to do anything about it" making the protagonists "learn to rely on one another protect themselves and future victims" (15). This construction is almost antithetical to classic suburban fantastic cinema, where the world is calm and predictable before the disruption caused by the 'Other.' Importantly, this tone is typical of more contemporary and violent suburban fantastic works like *It*, *Stranger Things*, and *Summer of 84'* (2018) that have a more suburban Gothic world-building. This subgenre is categorised by Bernice Murphy in T*he Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) as:

> A subgenre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighborhood, or house, or family, has some- thing to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident. (2)

In comparison, while suburban Gothic brings a more critical reading of the suburban middle-class, suburban fantastic generally focuses on a more light-hearted perspective in which restoring the

situation to a previous moment of order and harmony is possible. As much as there are these tonal differences between the suburban Gothic and the suburban fantastic, it also has narrative similarities. McFadzean explains that it is not uncommon for films to mix both subgenres, such as *Poltergeist* (1982), *The Burb's* (1989), and *It* (1990) in which the initial portrait of the suburbs is already disharmonious, but it is the fantastic element that forces the protagonist to act (12). In such a way, even when the disruption is resolved at the end of the narrative, the suburb does not become peaceful – because it never was in the first place. Alexandra Warwick explains in "Feeling Gothicky?" (2007) this possibility of proximity between Gothic and other genres, pointing out that "Gothic is a mode rather than a genre" and "that its defining characteristics are its mobility and continued capacity for reinvention'' (6). In such a way, it is expected that as suburban fantastic productions abandon a more innocent perception of the suburbs and begin to look at it more critically, they start to use more Gothic tones in their narrative. This perspective was still developing in the 1980s, but became a trend in the 2010s as these films speak to a millennial generation that is no longer a child.

Victoria Carrington states in *The Contemporary Gothic: Literacy and Childhood in Unsettled Times* (2011) how the Gothic approach is efficient in showing how contemporary childhoods are not lived in a glow of innocence and "often there is no more innocence to recapture" (306). This Gothic perspective opposes the escapism of Hollywood cinema and the first suburban fantastic films in the context of the Reagan era. Despite showing a nostalgic portrait of the past, these contemporary works also point out how the inefficiency of parents and authorities can lead children and adolescents to death. The difference is that in *Fear Street*, by focusing on a black and lesbian woman, the authoritarian disregard is no longer seen only from a neoliberal perspective of state inefficiency but also from a perspective of social violence. For example, showing the police corruption in arresting and framing a black man for a crime he did not commit or the homophobia suffered by queer characters in different generations. Nonetheless, in the case of the *Fear Street* trilogy, it becomes impossible to separate the violence suffered by the protagonist and her friends from the history of violence against non-hegemonic bodies. In *Fear Street 1978*, we are introduced to Ziggy, a survivor of a massacre at a summer camp in the 1970s. To tell the story of how she survived, the director, Leigh Janiak, chooses to migrate from the suburban fantastic to a slasher, highlighting the proximity between the two subgenres. After all, as Isabel Pineda points out in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film* (1997), the slasher is also primarily a suburban subgenre marked by the disruption of everyday experience and the protagonist's attempt to restore normalcy (72). In addition, the slasher also brings the 'Other' as the disruptive force that does not fit within a hegemonic model and puts it at risk. Crucially, David Green's queer reading in T*he Finalizing Woman: Horror, Femininity and Queer Monsters* (2011) proposes that the slasher villain could be understood as "an enemy of the heterosexual order, which the Final Girl […] rises up to protect" (173). Green brings up this perspective by stating that slasher's villains are usually male figures who do not fit the heteronormativity model and primarily kill young teenagers at the height of their sex lives (167). In the end, like the gremlins, vampires, and killer clowns of classic suburban fantastic narratives, the slasher's antagonist must be annihilated since his existence cannot be accepted within that social order of which the protagonist is a part.

There is, however, a gender bias that needs to be considered between both subgenres. If suburban fantastic protagonists are primarily male, slashers almost always have female heroines. Moreover, this gender difference has implications in the syntax of the subgenres as the protagonist's journey to restore the *status quo* is not done through a coming-of-age narrative but through survival and counterattacking (or becoming active). Carol Clover, in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (2015) explains how this narrative is an attempt to impose on women a kind of 'masculinisation's journey' in the slasher films as "the moment at which the Final Girl is effectively phallicised is the moment that the plot halts and horror ceases" (50). Thereby, both suburban fantastic and slasher are marked by narratives in which the protagonist needs to 'become' a man, either through maturation or through masculinisation. However, in *Fear Street 1978*, Janiak manages to subvert this narrative by changing the expected outcome of the film, as she does not propose an escapist narrative in which the protagonist emerges victorious after reproducing violence against her stalker. On the contrary, the film ends with a tragedy in which Ziggy's sister sacrifices herself to save her in an act of fraternal love – a non-heteronormative kind of love that makes a thematic link with another sacrifice that occurs in *Fear Street 1666*.

In the third film, set in 1666, the story behind Fier is revealed when Deena is transported to her body one day before her death. The audience discover that Fier was a lesbian teenager used as a scapegoat by a man, Solomon Goode, who made a satanic pact to achieve economic success for himself and his heirs. To get rid of the blame for the tragedies in the settlement where he lives, Goode accuses Fier of witchcraft, taking advantage of the settlers' prejudice against her sexuality. To save her girlfriend from the same fate, Fier accepts the accusation and claims that she was bewitching her partner. The revelation of the real cause of Fier's death and the necessity to tell her story is what makes Deena's maturing process complete in the second part of the film – set back in 1994. As Padva states, "retelling the past is a major part of the creation of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender heritage with its own role models, icons, symbols, emblems, and glorified imageries" (6). After all, Deena, as a lesbian teenager, is inspired by the discovery that Fier was a romantic and tragic heroine to save her girlfriend from having the same fate. Deena understands herself alongside Fier as an 'Other' to a white, patriarchal, heteronormative society that she has to face to tell their own stories. In this sense, *Fear Street* diverges the classic narrative of *Back to the Future* as if in the 1980's film it is necessary to go to the past to change the present, in *Fear Street*, going to the past is essential to rather *understand* the present. In *Back to the Fifties* (2015) Michael Dwyer draws attention to how Marty McFly learns "to quickly navigate geographically and socially through the 1950s, suggesting that generations become superior to antecedents" (39). Marty indeed teaches his father how to deal with his problems and even steals the Rock'n'roll authorship from a black musician. In contrast, Deena does not follow the fanciful narrative of altering the past, let alone demonstrating superiority to her predecessors. On the contrary, she uses the opportunity to learn from them and change her present. Likewise at the end of *Back to the Future*, Marty, a cis, heterosexual, white boy, alters the past to make financial gains for himself and his family in the present. In parallel *Fear Street*'s villain is precisely a cis, heterosexual, white man who curses the following generations to ensure financial gains for himself and his heirs. This shift in perspective

demonstrates how both films have different judgments between comparable actions from similar figures. In *Fear Street*, the white man's act of mischievously altering his social status is not considered harmless or innocent. On the contrary, Salomon Goode's curse can be seen as an allegory for the colonisation process and its consequences, establishing a system where hegemonic bodies had better resources to the detriment of other communities.

The solution offered by the narrative to oppose the oppressive structures solidified in time is given precisely by understanding how they began. In this sense, it is interesting to relate the witch's figure as a scapegoat of this colonisation process as described by Silvia Federici in *O Calibã e a Bruxa* (2017). Federici points out how witch hunts were part of a predatory colonial expropriation project that laid the foundations of capitalism. Among its methods of appropriation of the female body were the attempts to control her reproductive process (203). As Lester explains, the onset of puberty is usually treated as the moment when girls start to develop the "monstrous feminine" qualities that dominant patriarchal ideology considers abject and frightening (108). In *Fear Street: 1666*, it is precisely when Fier matures by asserting her sexual identity that she starts to be treated as a witch which is a visible double standard given that this is the moment when the heterosexual protagonist of classic suburban fantastic films starts to be treated as a hero. In *E.T.*, for example, this occurs in a scene when Elliot decides to act against his school, freeing the frogs from his science class and, in the end, kissing his love interest. Crucially, Fier chooses not to 'pass' as straight, asserting her queer identity even if it puts her at risk by making it clear that she does not want to be controlled by a husband and, consequently, subjugated to being a mother against her will. As Cheryl Clarke notes in *El Lesbianismo* (1988), being a lesbian in a country such as the United States is an act of resistance because "women cannot be colonised when they cannot limit their sexual, productive, reproductive prerogatives and their energies" (99). Fier confronts all forms of patriarchal control over her body, being punished with her execution. Moreover, despite having her destiny set by a straight white man, the director Janiak gives Fier some agency over her destiny – such as when she refuses to become Solomon's wife, denying the subjugation of her body to the heteronormative institution, and when she chooses to save her beloved, Hannah Miller, from the same fate as her. Thus, in the second part of *Fear Street: 1666*, set back in 1994, Deena also understands that it is not enough to end the fantastic element to restore harmony as in classic suburban fantastic films. In Janiak's trilogy, the protagonist must break with the structures and cycles of oppression that allowed the fantastic element to appear in the first place, a process anchored in the erasure of narratives of non-hegemonic bodies and the naturalisation of a system of legal and socioeconomic inequality, where certain subjects are doomed to have less access to rights and resources.[5] An objective that, in a representative way, Deena achieves alongside a group formed entirely by other black people and other women.

The trilogy demonstrates that, contrary to what the suburban fantastic films released in the Reagan period showed, American society was never in harmony – at least for certain bodies. Even so, it is necessary to discuss *Fear Street* from the perspective of a dispute over nostalgia. After all, even if the periods portrayed in the films were not peaceful for non-hegemonic bodies (arguably, no period ever was) – they still bring iconic moments and happy feelings that should be

remembered. As Padva states, "nostalgia does not necessarily hide or underestimate painful history but rather plays its part in mediating and modifying the past in order to make it more bearable" (228). In this sense, the suburban fantastic as an inherent nostalgic subgenre seems ideal for telling queer narratives as, according to Padva, "nostalgia like queerness is informal, unfixed, dynamic, transgressive, and negate dominant classifications and structures of meaning (229)." For this reason, it is representative that the *Fear Street* trilogy portrays past decades through the eyes of bodies that were excluded from these narratives in this very past, as is the case of the suburban fantastic films from 1980s. However, this nostalgia is not the same 'simple and pleasant' historical perspective of the past that Dwyer points out in the *Back to the Future* trilogy, which excluded any panorama of social tensions and civil movements (21). As Janelle Wilson states in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (2014), choosing what you want to be remembered for results in an erasure of memories – causing past decades sometimes to be remembered as less 'troubled' times (42). This nostalgia also is not the utopian past that Reagan evoked from his slogan "Make America Great Again." The past on *Fear Street* is a place of inequality, violence, and confrontation, but also of identification, empathy, and resistance. A past whose stories of peripheral bodies need to be retold as Janiak provides by bringing these bodies to star her films.

Final Considerations

If Eric Lars Olson wrote about the "great expectations" (2011) that exist on the protagonists from suburban fantastic cinema, the spectator must place them in the context that they were, for decades, almost entirely white, young, and heterosexual men. The protagonist's maturation of these films turns out to be closely linked to the maintenance of the privileges of their class and social group. By performing as heroes, they also concretise the myths of supremacy that serve as flimsy justifications for the meritocratic discourse of the middle-class that inhabits the American suburbs and that were inflated during the Reagan years. That is why, by concluding their journeys and re-establishing the *status quo*, these heroes reaffirm the perpetuity of the 'American Dream' that consolidated these suburbs since the post-war period.

However, this 'dream' and the suburb have always been based on excluding other bodies. As Jonathan Keane argues in *Aids, identity and the Space of Desire* (1993), black, Latino, and queer bodies are constantly positioned by cultural hegemony as its negative element (the 'Other') and never have the possibility to live in an imaginary realm of coherence that the middle-class suburbs historically are claimed to be by the hegemonic media (382). In this sense, *Fear Street* represents a step in the process of historically claiming their voices. By placing a lesbian, black woman as protagonist of a suburban fantastic film, the director begins to meet a social demand of these groups to occupy prominent roles in such narratives. As Janiak claims, the films "were an opportunity to tell a story where a queer romance drove the events of the narrative" and that the very base material, R. L. Stine's stories "were very white and very straight" (Frederick 2022). It is important to note that these changes are also present behind the scenes of these productions themselves, as is the case of Janiak and her concern in scaling a cast not only ethnically but also sexually diverse.

As Teresa De Lauretis explains in *Technologies of Gender* (1971), some activities and behaviours are seen by the "unconscious of the patriarchy" as masculine (1). On a more metalinguistic analysis, by understanding gender technologies as practices and discourses we realise how the film genres and subgenres itself are part of this mechanism. After all, as it happened with the Western, the suburban fantastic has consolidated itself as being 'unconsciously' androcentric and, thus, associating man with the ideal of heroism. That is why the very existence of a queer woman as protagonist claims the right of non-male and non-heterosexual characters to be part of a subgenre so tied to masculinity and heterosexuality and – more than that – helps to dissolve the capacity of a film industry to impose such dichotomies. The trilogy appears in a conjuncture where the 'Others' claims the hegemonic means to tell what terrifies them. The use of the Gothic tone helped to bring a less naive and more heterogeneous perspective of the world, reflecting its ability to mirror contemporary tensions felt by the non-hegemonic groups. No wonder these works deal with topics that are unusual in the history of suburban fantastic cinema as prejudice, gender violence, and police corruption.

Importantly, these changes are not punctual but part of the film and TV industry natural transformation. A process that seems very similar to what is happening in a still timid way with the superhero genre in series such as *Ms. Marvel* (2022) and the later *Echo* (2024). In addition to being an inclusive measure, it can also provide the necessary narrative depth so that the subgenre remains relevant, unlike what happened in the late 1990s. However, beyond these questions of identification and representation, familiar to contemporary cultural discussions, the reflexive suburban fantastic has a rare opportunity: the power to "reinsert in the past" the non-hegemonic bodies it ignored in its classic films. In other words, giving the voice to those generations of non-hegemonic bodies that were silenced by Hollywood cinema during the boastful Reagan years. Groups that have been under-represented and misrepresented by entire film genres and sub-genres for decades. As it must be our concern as spectators, researchers, and, above all, members of society to prevent this exclusion from still occurring in the coming decades, we should also see in films and TV series the possibility of restoring some of the rights that were taken from previous generations. In this way, Deena's journey could serve as an example that repairing the present injustices may only be possible after dealing with the injustices committed in the past.

NOTES

1. In these movies, the suburban ambiance is usually significant, given that, much like the stage of adolescence, the suburb is a liminal space "always separated from, but adjacent to, the larger adult world" (McFadzean, 13).

2. As Berenice Murphy points out in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009), there is a diversity of genres that bring the perspective of suburban families beset by financial problems. Particularly Horror films involving haunted houses, which show the anxieties involving financial losses relating to owning doomed homes.

3. Despite the name, suburban fantastic films are not restricted to suburban or small-town locations. Movies like **batteries not included* (1987) and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992) are set in New York, while *Back to the Future 3* (1990) is set in the wild west.

4. It is important to note that such characterisation of the subgenre by McFadzean took place in a book released in the year in which the main works featuring non-hegemonic bodies as protagonists began to appear. In such a way, it would be impossible for him to have, at that time, the most contemporary reading proposed by this article.

5. *Fear Street 1994* takes place in a working-class suburb that makes the economic context crucial to note, especially as there seems to be a more widespread concern among recent works in the subgenre – such as *Super 8*, *It*, and *Stranger Things* – which also feature characters from these areas. McFadzean ponders these portraits may chime with broader audiences, especially after the 2007-8 crash (116).

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BIONOTE

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