

## DECONSTRUCTING PRESENCE IN *STRANGER THINGS 4*: TRACE, SUPPLEMENT, HAUNTOLOGY, AND ITERABILITY

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines *Stranger Things 4* (ST4) as a case of how contemporary serial television manufactures presence from inherited signs. Using a Derridean framework—trace, supplement, hauntology, and iterability—it analyses four binaries (past/present, child/adult, real/monster, original/homage) and shows how each is destabilized through scenes, sounds, and props. Methodologically, the study combines deconstructive close reading with intertextual mapping, sound–image alignment, and motif tracking across episodes and paratexts. Sources include transcripts, promotional materials, and repeated viewings. Analytic steps comprise open coding of binary markers, axial clustering around Derridean mechanisms, and synthetic memoing checked against scholarship. Findings indicate that the ‘1980s’ functions as a trace that pre-organizes the present; that youth action supplements, and thereby exposes, adult authority; that reality appears haunted by what communities refuse to narrate; and that originality emerges from iterated citation rather than pure origin. Across these domains, analog devices and music do not merely decorate narrative time; they compose it, converting memory into method and fear into coordination. The thesis contributes to popular culture studies by showing how deconstruction operates as an analytic of production not a negation of meaning. It also offers a matrix for reading other nostalgia-led series and for understanding audience practices that transform homage into infrastructure. The study argues that ST4 advances an ethic of responsible repetition: reading traces, accepting supplements, listening to spectres, and reshaping inheritances into forms that sustain attention, care, and sense.

**Keywords:** Derrida; Deconstruction; *Stranger Things 4* (ST4); Presence; Hauntology

### DEKONSTRUKSI KEHADIRAN DALAM *STRANGER THINGS 4*: TRACE, SUPPLEMENT, HAUNTOLOGY, DAN ITERABILITY

**ABSTRAK.** Artikel ini mengkaji *Stranger Things 4* (ST4) sebagai sebuah kasus tentang bagaimana televisi serial kontemporer memproduksi kehadiran dari tanda-tanda yang diwariskan. Dengan menggunakan kerangka Derridean—trace, supplement, hauntology, dan iterability—artikel ini menganalisis empat biner (masa lalu/masa kini, anak/dewasa, nyata/monster, orisinal/homage) dan menunjukkan bagaimana masing-masing menjadi tidak stabil melalui adegan, suara, dan properti. Secara metodologis, studi ini menggabungkan pembacaan dekat dekonstruktif dengan pemetaan intertekstual, penyelarasan suara–gambar, serta pelacakan motif di seluruh episode dan parateks. Sumber data mencakup transkrip, materi promosi, dan penayangan berulang. Langkah analisis meliputi open coding terhadap penanda biner, pengelompokan aksial di sekitar mekanisme Derridean, serta synthetic memoing yang diverifikasi terhadap kajian ilmiah. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ‘1980-an’ berfungsi sebagai trace yang telah mengorganisasi masa kini; bahwa tindakan kaum muda menjadi supplement yang sekaligus mengungkap otoritas orang dewasa; bahwa realitas tampak dihaunui oleh apa yang ditolak untuk dinarasikan oleh komunitas; dan bahwa orisinalitas muncul dari sitasi yang diulang, bukan dari asal yang murni. Di seluruh ranah ini, perangkat analog dan musik tidak sekadar menghiasi waktu naratif; keduanya justru menyusunnya, mengubah ingatan menjadi metode dan ketakutan menjadi koordinasi. Tesis ini berkontribusi pada kajian budaya populer dengan menunjukkan bagaimana dekonstruksi beroperasi sebagai analitik produksi, bukan sekadar negasi makna. Selain itu, artikel ini menawarkan matriks untuk membaca serial lain yang digerakkan oleh nostalgia serta untuk memahami praktik audiens yang mengubah homage menjadi infrastruktur. Studi ini berargumen bahwa ST4 mengajukan etika repetisi yang bertanggung jawab: membaca trace, menerima supplement, mendengarkan spectre, dan membentuk ulang warisan menjadi bentuk-bentuk yang menopang perhatian, kepedulian, dan makna.

**Kata Kunci:** Derrida; Dekonstruksi; *Stranger Things 4* (ST4); Kehadiran; Hauntologi

### INTRODUCTION

In the age of retro revivals and algorithmic curation, nostalgia circulates not as a simple longing for origins but as a cultural technique for organizing the present (Boym, 2001). *Stranger Things 4* (ST4) exemplifies this shift, transforming 1980s textures—analogue devices, horror idioms, suburban iconography—into tools that pace perception, bind

friendships, and stage ethical choices. Rather than returning us to “what was,” the season re-engineers the now through carefully arranged echoes of then.

The present’s fixation on the past, as memory studies remind us, is less about faithful recall than about negotiating overload and anxiety in a media-saturated now (Huyssen, 2003). ST4 leverages this mnemonic economy: clocks toll before images appears, songs prefigure action, and haunted houses

pre-script routes of care and risk. Consequently, “the 1980s” functions less as a timeline and more as a grammar for making the present legible.

When viewers “remember” through media, they often acquire experiences they never personally lived—what film culture calls prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2004). *ST4* operationalizes this phenomenon by letting audiences inhabit adolescent fear and solidarity via cited sounds and images, so that recognition and first-time shock can co-exist. The result is an affective pedagogy in which borrowed memories become resources for present judgment.

Cultural memory theory further shows that communities sustain themselves by circulating shared signs whose meanings are renewed in each iteration (Assmann, 2011). In *ST4*, posters, playlists, and props act as mobile carriers of group identity, enabling youths to coordinate action even as adult authority stumbles. The series thus presents memory not as storage but as choreography, assembling fragments into workable futures.

Social practices of remembrance are always embodied and patterned, which is why routines and rituals so powerfully anchor belonging (Connerton, 1989). The season’s lifeline scenes—rewinding cassettes, drafting letters, rehearsing escape sequences—demonstrate how patterned acts transform fear into executable steps. In this sense, small gestures materialize big meanings, turning repetition into a survivable form.

From the standpoint of genre, horror gives audiences a safe method for handling what disturbs identity and order, staging fear as a structured, intelligible experience (Carroll, 1990). *ST4* harnesses that structure by rerouting classic fright grammars toward adolescent stakes, where possession set-pieces double as lessons in attention, timing, and mutual aid. Terror thereby becomes a medium for learning how to proceed when certainty fails.

Because youth on screen is never merely biological, studies of teen cinema stress how adolescent worlds manage risk collectively and inventively under structural limits (Driscoll, 2011). *ST4* amplifies this insight: kids convert “play” into planning, repurpose fan knowledge into modeling tools, and occupy leadership without abolishing care. In doing so, the show reframes maturity as practice rather than entitlement.

Fan scholarship highlights how participatory cultures convert texts into kits—heuristics, maps, and rituals that audiences adapt for everyday life (Hills, 2002). The Hellfire Club in *ST4* crystallizes this conversion, translating game lore into crisis protocols and transforming spectatorship into

governance. Thus, what looks like homage becomes infrastructure, enabling viewers to recognize strategy inside spectacle.

Musicology of cinema reminds us that soundtracks do more than decorate images; they steer attention, memory, and embodiment as viewers parse narrative space (Kassabian, 2001). *ST4*’s strategic needle-drops and patterned noise—hiss, chime, rumble—shape how time feels, when action is possible, and whom we follow. Sound, therefore, is an engine of meaning that moves ahead of, with, and sometimes against the image.

In platform-era television, distribution logics and paratexts co-produce story worlds, making serial novelty a matter of orchestration rather than pure invention (Lotz, 2017). *ST4*’s teasers, release pacing, and cross-media echoes prepare recognition and recalibration in equal measure, staging discovery as a managed rhythm. The series thereby turns industrial form into part of its narrative method.

Historically, moral panics translate ambient social fears into “explanations” that target the young, especially when new cultural forms are poorly understood (Victor, 1993). *ST4* remaps that history—satanic-panic scripts reappear in Hawkins—showing how misread youth practices manufacture the very crises adults fear. The show thus reads panic as a social technology that displaces responsibility while producing vulnerability.

At the level of ethics, care theorists argue that good action in messy conditions relies on attention, responsiveness, and shared labor rather than on abstract sovereignty (Tronto, 1993). *ST4* models this ethic concretely: friends curate lifelines, allocate tasks, and hold one another steady, composing a moral field from devices and gestures. In place of heroic certainty, the series foregrounds careful repetition and mutual adjustment.

Finally, philosophy of memory underscores that remembering is inseparable from narrating, which means every return to the past rewrites the present’s horizon of meaning (Ricoeur, 2004). *ST4* embraces this narrative labor, inviting viewers to read traces, accept supplements, and reframe inheritances so that uncertainty becomes livable. In short, the season treats memory as a practice of making now—crafting presence from remnants without pretending to recover a pure origin

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, deconstructive close-reading of *Stranger Things 4* (E1–E9) that is explicitly calibrated to the four binaries analyzed

in the Findings—Past/Present, Child/Adult, Real/Monster, and Original/Homage—and to the concluding synthesis that treats presence as an effect of trace, supplement, hauntology, and iterability (Derrida, 1994; Derrida, 1997). Practically, the corpus combines repeated viewings with publicly available transcripts and paratexts (e.g., interviews, teasers, posters) to enable shot-by-shot description, sound–image alignment, and motif tracking for key sites already discussed—“Dear Billy” and the Walkman/cassette routine, the Creel House, Hellfire Club and satanic-panic discourse, and Vecna’s possession grammar—so that temporal residues, youthful supplementation of adult authority, spectral breaches of “the real,” and citational recombination’s can be examined as form, not only theme (Chion, 1994; Mittell, 2015). Analytically, the procedure proceeds in three iterative passes that mirror the chapter structure: (1) open coding of moments where each binary becomes salient (nostalgic cues, decision loci across ages, uncanny domesticities, homage set-pieces); (2) axial coding that maps these moments to Derridean mechanisms (trace in clock chimes and tape hiss; supplement in youth-led problem-solving; hauntology in spatial sound and domestic architecture; iterability in horror citations and pacing); and (3) synthetic memoing to test how mechanisms travel across rows/columns of the final table, yielding claims about presence as constructed rather than given (Hutcheon, 2013; Allen, 2011). To strengthen trustworthiness, interpretations are triangulated with scholarship on nostalgia and postmodern citation, trauma/uncanny affect, and media remediation—ensuring the readings of music-as-lifeline, analog devices as prostheses, and homage-as-method remain theoretically anchored (Jameson, 1991; Caruth, 1996; Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Gray, 2010; van Dijck, 2007). Throughout, quotation is minimal and within fair use; analytic notes record decisions, negative cases (scenes that resist the pattern), and cross-references to the synthesis table, keeping the method commensurate with the argument that ST4’s meanings arise where traces are repeated-with-difference, supplements expose dependency, specters structure the “real,” and citations orchestrate the new

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Past vs Present: The Trace That Precedes Presenc

As Derrida reminds us, the “trace” precedes and conditions any presence, which means the past haunts the now rather than standing behind it as a stable origin (Derrida, 1994). In *Stranger Things 4* (ST4), the Reagan-era décor, analog tech, and

Spielberg/King echoes don’t function as a simple backdrop; they inscribe spectral leftovers that structure Hawkins in the present, from the school corridors to Max’s Walkman. Nostalgia, then, is not an additive mood but an ontological condition: the series’ “1980s” is already an apparition that organizes meaning before anything appears on screen.

Fisher’s account of hauntology clarifies why ST4’s retro textures feel less like historical realism and more like “lost futures” returning as atmosphere (Fisher, 2014). The show’s saturated neons and synth pads don’t restore an origin; they index paths foreclosed—suburban safety, linear growth, uncomplicated heroism. In this sense, Hawkins is a staging ground for what the present cannot fully live: the cozy home that keeps leaking the Upside Down.

Jameson’s theorization of postmodern nostalgia helps name the aesthetic logic: retro form becomes a “nostalgia mode,” a stylized present masquerading as past (Jameson, 1991). ST4’s spectacular malls, arcades, and movie allusions produce a glossy surface where reference displaces memory, and citation stands in for experience. The series, therefore, dramatizes a present addicted to the look of “then,” while the meaning of “then” dissolves into style.

Scholarship on *Stranger Things* consistently identifies nostalgia as the show’s key appeal, but also stresses how intertextuality complicates that appeal (Landrum as cited in Meneghelli, 2021). ST4 extends this by folding horror homage into character arcs, so that borrowed images (Elm Street, *Carrie*, *IT*) press on adolescent bodies rather than sit as decorative Easter eggs. The homage becomes a machine for making the present crack under the pressure of remembered images.

Kristeva’s intertextuality suggests every text is a mosaic of quotations, absorbed and transformed by another discourse (Kristeva, 1969/1986). ST4 makes this mosaic legible: the “’80s” is not recovered but produced through citations that both secure and undo identity—kids who are also cinephiles, suburbs that are already film sets. The binary past/present wobbles because the present is fabricated through the past’s textual debris.

Allen’s overview of intertextuality underscores that meaning emerges relationally across texts, not from any source’s “originality” (Allen, 2011). Thus, when ST4 evokes *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in Vecna’s dream-kill grammar, it neither copies nor transcends; it repositions a horror syntax to diagnose teen pain and small-town denial. The show’s “newness” depends on the choreography of already-there cinematic languages.

Mackay reads *Stranger Things* as collapsing temporal borders; this helps us see how ST4 uses “sideways” nostalgia rather than a simple look back (Mackay, 2020). The Upside Down literalizes a membrane where time curdles: posters decay, light flickers, and memories ossify into vines. In this membrane, the past is not behind but beside—co-present as residue that stains the now.

If suburbia promises safety, trauma names the leak that undoes that promise, and Caruth shows that trauma arrives belatedly, as a wound that “speaks” after the fact (Caruth, 1996). Max’s delayed flashbacks—Billy’s death, domestic precarity—surface as Vecna’s invasive summons, staging remembrance as compulsion rather than choice. The series therefore converts nostalgic surfaces into listening posts where unclaimed experience forces itself into speech.

Freud’s uncanny sharpens the affect: the most terrifying in ST4 is what is intimately familiar made strange—the house, the school, the bedroom ceiling (Freud, 1919). Vecna’s hauntings weaponize household fixtures and adolescent routines, insisting that the homely is already unhomely. The past returns not as history lesson but as the eerie surplus of what was domesticated.

Film/music studies note that sound design and scoring mediate how viewers feel time and memory (Oxford Bibliographies, 2023). ST4’s synth timbres, low-frequency rumbles, and needle-drops yoke spectators to the characters’ recollective states, suturing flashback textures to present danger. In this acoustic architecture, the “’80s” is less period than auditory trace that conditions how the present is sensed.

Recent cognitive work shows that music reliably cues autobiographical memories, often with vividness and positive bias (Belfi & Jakubowski, 2021). That mechanism explains why a song like “Running Up That Hill” can serve in ST4 as both talisman and tunnel: it opens a path into a felt past sturdy enough to deflect possession—for a moment. Music becomes a counter-trace, re-writing how the present is inhabited through remembered sound.

Large-sample studies further map which musical features predict the qualities of music-evoked memories—lower energeticness/higher acousticness tends to cue vivid, self-important recollection (Nawaz & Omigie, 2025). ST4 leverages precisely this relation, letting an emotionally distinct track bind Max’s self to a memory-scape capable of resisting Vecna’s narrative of doom. The show deconstructs the binary of past comfort vs present threat by making sound a tool that reorganizes what “now” can bear.

Diary and experience-sampling research confirms how ordinary listening situations trigger involuntary memory episodes across the lifespan (Jakubowski & Ghosh, 2020/2022). ST4 stylizes this everyday mechanism, turning a Walkman into a portal where involuntary recall can be mobilized for survival. The everyday trace—the song stuck in your head—becomes the hinge where presence is renegotiated.



Source: *Stranger Things 4* (Netflix, 2022)

**Figure 1. The Creel House.**

Positioned at the intersection of memory and materiality, the Creel House does not merely signify a haunted location but functions as a spatial inscription of temporality itself. The accumulation of decay—manifested through invasive organic growth, fractured architecture, and pervasive darkness—renders visible the persistence of what Derrida conceptualizes as the *trace*. Rather than presenting the past as an event that has concluded, the image suggests that prior occurrences continue to inhabit and organize the present in a non-linear fashion. Consequently, the house resists interpretation as a static remnant; instead, it operates as an active site in which absence becomes structurally productive. What is no longer present in a literal sense nonetheless exerts influence, shaping perception, atmosphere, and narrative possibility. Through this lens, the present moment in *Stranger Things 4* emerges as already mediated by what it ostensibly leaves behind.

Moreover, the visual logic of the Creel House destabilizes the binary opposition between past and present by collapsing temporal distance into spatial coexistence. The intrusion of the Upside Down into the architectural fabric suggests that time does not progress cleanly but rather accumulates, folds, and resurfaces within the same frame. In contrast to conventional flashback structures, where the past is narratively contained, this image demonstrates how memory becomes embedded within the environment itself, thereby eliminating the need for temporal transition. The result is a hauntological condition in which presence is continually deferred, as the past persists as a contaminating force within the now. Accordingly, the house becomes less a setting than

a mechanism of temporal disruption, exposing the instability of presence and reinforcing the idea that the present is always already structured by what it cannot fully contain or articulate.

A systematic review indicates MEAMs remain robust even in clinical populations, underscoring how familiar music scaffolds self and identity amid cognitive strain (Baird et al., 2023). ST4's set-pieces convert that robustness into narrative ethics: friends select, cue, and hold music as a form of care, translating cognitive science into diegetic solidarity. The past here is not escape but distributed memory-work in the present.

Cultural histories of the 1980s show that "Satanic Panic" media moralized youth culture and domesticated fear via tabloid logics (Hughes, 2016; 2021). ST4 folds that genealogy into the plot: Hawkins' adults misread trauma as deviance, casting D&D as demonic while missing institutional failure. The show thus deconstructs "the '80s" as stable moral frame, showing it to be a media apparatus still scripting our present reactions.

Film scholarship on *Stranger Things* emphasizes that its nostalgia is inseparable from contemporary branding and aesthetics—Eggo tie-ins, synth-wave look—rather than a faithful return (Journal of Film & Video, 2022). ST4 intensifies this split: the more immaculate the retro sheen, the more conspicuous the tears where grief and guilt seep through. A clean period surface becomes the stage on which contamination is most legible.

Finally, media theory of nostalgia argues that technologies are both platforms and objects of longing, binding cultural memory to devices and interfaces (Van der Heijden, 2023). ST4 literalizes this bond—the cassette tape, CRT monitor, and analog recorder are not props but prostheses of remembering—so that "past vs present" dissolves into circuits of storage and playback. In Derrida's terms, the trace inscribed on these media neither precedes nor follows time; it writes the present as such.

## 2. Child vs Adult: Innocence as Supplement, Authority as a Trace

As Derrida explains, what appears "primary" is often propped up by what it imagines as secondary—the supplement that both completes and exposes lack (Derrida, 1967/1997). In *Stranger Things 4* (ST4), adulthood's aura of mastery repeatedly leans on youthful initiative—Max's quick reasoning, Dustin's para-technical literacy, Nancy's investigative drive—so that "adult authority" is readable only through the child's compensatory labor. Thus, the series

frames childhood not as a deficient stage awaiting completion but as the very hinge that stabilizes, and simultaneously destabilizes, the adult's claim to competence.

Historically speaking, the child/adult split is not timeless, and Aries's social history shows "childhood" to be a relatively recent cultural construction rather than an eternal essence (Ariès, 1960/1962). ST4 taps this contingency: Hawkins's parents chase a vanished ideal of order—church potlucks, neat lawns, tidy schedules—while the kids navigate the real infrastructures of danger. The narrative therefore lets the young occupy knowledge-work that adults have outsourced to memory and myth, revealing adulthood as a posture curated by nostalgia.

Media studies on youth emphasize that screen cultures both discipline and empower adolescents, granting them interpretive and practical agency in everyday life (Buckingham, 2023). ST4 literalizes that lesson when teens coordinate plans across bedrooms, roller rinks, basements, and libraries, translating niche knowledges (D&D lore, radio tinkering) into survival. In doing so, the show renders "maturity" a function of situated know-how rather than biological age.

Legal-cultural scholarship names the structural downgrading of the young as adultism, a patterned bias that frames children as naturally less rational and less worthy of civic standing (Wall, 2023). Read through this lens, Hawkins's teachers, police, and parents repeatedly dismiss testimony from the kids until catastrophe forces recognition. The season thereby dramatizes adultism as a narrative obstacle and, paradoxically, the generative pressure that catalyzes adolescent agency.

Cultural analyses of girlhood further show that the "innocent child" is a regulating fantasy that often conceals classed and gendered labor (Walkerline, 1997). Max's toughness and Erica's verbal precision complicate the sentimental script: rather than "protected," these girls are required to read rooms, technologies, and threats faster than adults. Consequently, innocence functions less as an essence than as a mask that cracks under the weight of survival work.

Developmental-sociological work argues that "parental authority" is conceptually under-specified, often conflating power, care, and legitimacy in adolescence (Kuhar & Reiter, 2017). Hopper's captivity and Joyce's globe-trotting rescue blur any stable locus of rule, while surrogate constellations—friends-as-family—perform governance on the fly. ST4 thus reframes authority as a distributed practice rather than a property of adulthood.

Classic rite-of-passage theory describes liminality as a threshold where prior identities are suspended and communal improvisation becomes possible (Turner, 1969/1995). The teens' bunkered planning, encoded notes, and ad hoc rituals (music as lifeline, lights as semaphore) exemplify such communities, while adults oscillate between disbelief and belated support. In that shared threshold, "child" and "adult" cease to be fixed positions and become roles in a precarious choreography.

Contemporary elaborations of adolescent liminality additionally show how prolonged transition intensifies risk and inventiveness alike (Jaskulska, 2015). ST4 leans into this duration—drawn-out nights, layered flashbacks, cross-border detours—so that maturation is less a finish line than an ongoing practice of recalibration. Under such conditions, the young do not merely grow up; they prototype adulthood in real time.

Fan and participation studies argue that youth agency flourishes where audiences rework texts into tools—maps, heuristics, and social glue (Jenkins, 2012/1992). In Hawkins, D&D ceases to be just a pastime; it becomes a cognitive framework for modeling monsters, risks, and counter-moves that adults fail to imagine. Here, "childish play" supplements adult reason with a game-derived literacy fit for crisis.



Source: Stranger Things 4 (Netflix, 2022)

**Figure 2. The Nina's Project.**

Situated within a highly controlled technological environment, Eleven's body appears, at first glance, to be subordinated to an apparatus of adult design and authority. Yet this apparent hierarchy quickly unravels when the operational logic of the NINA project is examined more closely. The system does not generate knowledge autonomously; rather, it relies entirely upon Eleven's capacity to access, reconstruct, and reconfigure her own memories. In this respect, her subjectivity functions precisely as what Derrida terms the *supplement*: that which ostensibly serves as an addition, yet in doing so reveals the insufficiency of the structure it supports. The authority embodied by figures such as Dr. Brenner is therefore neither original nor self-

sustaining, as it depends upon the very element it seeks to regulate. Consequently, the distinction between controller and controlled becomes unstable, exposing authority as contingent upon what it excludes.

At the same time, the visual composition of the scene reinforces this conceptual inversion through its spatial and sensory design. The tank isolates Eleven physically, enclosing her within a bounded field; however, this containment paradoxically enables an expansion of cognitive and affective reach that exceeds institutional control. Rather than producing compliance, the environment facilitates a form of agency that operates through recollection, reinterpretation, and resistance. In contrast, adult authority appears increasingly as a residual formation—a *trace* sustained through repetition rather than grounded in inherent legitimacy. Thus, the scene does not simply invert the hierarchy between child and adult; instead, it demonstrates how both positions are co-constituted within a dynamic of dependence and disruption. Through this interplay, *Stranger Things 4* reframes innocence as an active, generative force that both sustains and destabilizes the very structures that attempt to define and contain it.

Horror scholarship on the "Final Girl" shows how youth, gender, and survival are staged through shifting conventions rather than natural hierarchies (Clover, 1992/2015). ST4 re-tools this trope across group dynamics, letting a teen girl's embodied memory work—Max's choreography of fear and flight—anchor communal survival. The result is not a single heroine replacing adult heroes, but a redistribution of courage against inherited scripts.

Psychoanalytic readings of *Stranger Things* suggest that the series externalizes the end of childhood through mourning and loss, sharpening how young protagonists shoulder affective labor (Lu, 2022). Max's letter-writing, Lucas's protective hesitation, and Eleven's conflicted recollections make the teens custodians of grief that adults cannot metabolize. Thus, adolescence appears as a frontline of meaning-making rather than a waiting room for responsibility.

Family and media research also documents how non-familial networks can provide primary social support when institutional care falters (Pellar, 2021). The Hellfire Club, a patchwork "found family," coordinates care, transport, and data-sharing while parents grasp for explanations. Consequently, the show converts "kids' hangouts" into infrastructures of welfare that adults end up relying on.

Historical analyses of the 1980s moral panic around Dungeons & Dragons show how youth cultural expertise was pathologized as deviance rather than recognized as skill (Wilson, 2019). ST4 mirrors and critiques that script when Hawkins's authorities misread the Hellfire Club as cultic, thereby outsourcing the investigative heavy lifting to those misrecognized teens. In effect, adult fear manufactures the very conditions in which young people must lead.

Youth-horror scholarship notes that *Stranger Things* reworks rites of passage into therapeutic, collaborative arcs that foreground diverse adolescent identities (Gupta, 2019). Across ST4, transitions are scaffolded by peers rather than paternal lectures, and successful action requires hybrid competencies—technical, emotional, ethical—rarely held by one adult figure. The series thus reimagines growing up as a collective intelligence.

Critical childhood studies synthesize how adultism intersects with gender, race, and disability to police voice and agency (Güngör & Güler-Yıldız, 2024). Read accordingly, ST4's teen protagonists negotiate not only monsters but also sedimented habits that discount youth testimony, making every decision both tactical and political. Consequently, their speech acts double as claims to epistemic standing.

Television scholarship on the American family shows that contemporary series often expose the “ideal family” as a myth while inventing alternative modes of care and authority (Fogel, 2012). ST4 sharpens this exposure through parental absence, error, or incapacity that is neither cruel nor villainous but structurally limited—leaving adolescents to organize logistics, ethics, and risk. In that sense, adulthood's legitimacy is shown to be contingent on youth collaboration.

Finally, the deconstructive wager is that the hierarchy adult>child cannot hold because “adulthood” is legible only by the supplement that it both needs and disavows (Derrida, 1967/1997). ST4 stages this paradox at scale: the season is propelled whenever young people supply perception, memory, and method where adult systems fall short. Rather than a sentimental inversion, the show reveals a structural interdependence that makes every rescue a duet across the age divide.

### 3. Real vs Monster: Hauntology of Trauma

Trauma does not arrive as a transparent event but as a belated inscription that fractures presence from within (Caruth, 1996). In *Stranger Things* 4 (ST4), Vecna's intrusions enact precisely this belatedness: the “real” of Hawkins is not a stable

ground assaulted by a monster but a surface already fissured by unassimilated memories that return as command performances. Consequently, the show frames monstrosity as the grammar through which deferred pain becomes legible in the present.

Rather than simply representing suffering, cultural texts oscillate between working-through and acting-out, staging the repetitive temporality of trauma as structure, not accident (LaCapra, 2001). ST4's cycles—ticking clocks, looping flashbacks, ritualized possessions—depict a town caught in performative repetition, where each “attack” reprises what institutions failed to narrate. Thus, the distinction between reality and incursion collapses into a temporality of compulsive returns.

Haunting, in Derrida's sense, precedes ontology: the specter marks presence as always already cohabited by absence (Derrida, 1994). Vecna does not simply cross from the Upside Down into “our” world; he exposes that our world was spectral to begin with—its houses resonant with unsaid griefs, its streets scored by losses that never had a witness. Hence, the monster is not outside reality but the name of its constitutive remainder.



Source: *Stranger Things* 4 (Netflix, 2022).

Figure 3. Max's levitating body.

At this critical juncture, the image of Max's levitating body within Vecna's psychic terrain renders visible the collapse of the ontological distinction between the real and the monstrous. Rather than depicting a transition into a separate, fantastical realm, the scene articulates a condition in which reality itself is reconfigured through the persistence of unresolved trauma. The fractured red environment, suspended temporality, and the absence of stable spatial coordinates collectively signal that what appears as “monstrous” is not external to the real but emerges from within its very structure. In Derridean terms, this configuration aligns with *hauntology*, where presence is never self-identical but always inhabited by what it excludes. Consequently, the figure of Vecna does not invade reality; instead, he exposes its constitutive instability, revealing that the real has always been contingent upon what it cannot fully assimilate.

Simultaneously, the visual logic of suspension—Max’s body held between ground and void—intensifies the sense that subjectivity itself is caught within a field of forces that exceed rational comprehension. This is not merely a representation of fear, but a staging of how trauma reorganizes perception, embodiment, and temporality. In contrast to classical horror paradigms that position the monster as an external threat to be confronted or expelled, the scene demonstrates that monstrosity operates as a mode of internal articulation, translating psychic rupture into perceptible form. Moreover, the environment functions less as a setting than as an extension of affect, where space itself becomes saturated with memory, guilt, and loss. Through this convergence, *Stranger Things 4* reframes horror as an epistemological condition, wherein reality is continuously negotiated through the spectral residues that inhabit it, rendering any clear separation between the real and the monstrous ultimately untenable.

Gordon’s sociology of haunting helps clarify why Hawkins reads as a landscape of “something-to-be-done,” where unresolved violence organizes everyday life (Gordon, 2008). The grandfather clock’s dislocated chime, the sudden hush in school hallways, and the Creel house’s breathless air operate like social symptoms, insisting on debts the town cannot pay. ST4 therefore treats haunting as a civic diagnosis rather than a supernatural garnish.

Architecture mediates the uncanny when familiar dwellings disclose their unhomey cores, folding interior safety into external threat (Vidler, 1992). ST4’s domestic spaces—attics, basements, children’s rooms—become hinge-zones where wallpaper peels into portals and stairwells conduct dread like wiring. In that spatial dramaturgy, “home” is not breached by the monster but revealed as its echo chamber.

Affect is not private here; it circulates, adheres, and shapes bodies’ orientations toward danger and care (Ahmed, 2004). Panic sticks to teenagers’ routines, while wary solidarity clings to their improvised protocols—mixtapes, torches, salt circles—so that emotion itself redraws what counts as real. Consequently, the monster manifests as the contour of shared atmosphere rather than a purely individual hallucination.

Screen cultures of catastrophe long ago taught viewers to parse disaster as a politics of loss, where spectacle and mourning entangle (Kaplan, 2005). ST4 harnesses that pedagogy: slow-motion ruptures and intimate close-ups intertwine public crisis with private bereavement, compelling us to read Vecna’s set-pieces as rituals for distributing grief. Reality is

thereby staged as a media of loss—edited, scored, and collectively felt.

Embodied spectatorship theory suggests that cinema writes on the body, making sensation a site of knowledge rather than mere reaction (Sobchack, 2004). ST4’s low rumbles, pulse-synced cuts, and breathy soundscapes enlist viewers’ muscles and skins, letting us “know” possession as a kinaesthetic event. The real, accordingly, is experienced not as neutral index but as a felt field shaped by monstrous pressure.

Cognitive film theory further shows that horror’s emotions are patterned, intelligible responses fostered by cues and schemas rather than irrational excess (Plantinga, 2009). In ST4, the investigative beats—clue, hypothesis, test—train audiences to treat terror as solvable, even as the solution keeps sliding toward the uncanny. Thus, reality and monstrosity entwine as a problem-space where emotions guide practical reason.

Pinedo argues that contemporary horror teaches viewers to inhabit “recreational terror,” a zone of controlled transgression and learned resilience (Pinedo, 1997). The Hellfire Club’s tabletop imaginaries retool this pedagogy: kids script contingency plans with game-derived logics, meeting the monstrous on a terrain of rule-bending play. Reality, then, is managed as a repertoire of tactics learned at the threshold of fear.

Abjection marks those border materials that must be expelled to protect identity and order, though they never fully stay outside (Kristeva, 1982). Vecna’s residues—ooze, spores, exposed tendons—stage abjection as a loop, where the town’s “clean” surfaces depend on what they cannot keep down. In revealing that loop, ST4 frames the monster as the return of what sustains the real by being disavowed.

Creed’s analysis of the monstrous-feminine clarifies how horror visualizes threatened boundaries—of bodies, kinship, and reproduction—through taboo imagery (Creed, 1993). ST4 remaps this insight onto adolescent thresholds: the fear of unruly becoming (shame, desire, rage) condenses into Vecna’s parasitic grips on teen bodies and memories. The monster thus indexes anxieties about growth the community refuses to name.

Halberstam reads monsters as cultural technologies that materialize historically specific fears in mutable forms (Halberstam, 1995). Vecna’s vine-wired anatomy—half-organic, half-networked—renders trauma as infrastructural, threading through houses, institutions, and media. The real, accordingly, is a system whose nerves the monster merely illuminates.

Luckhurst tracks how “trauma culture” generalizes clinical metaphors into everyday explanation, turning rupture into a shared discourse (Luckhurst, 2008). ST4 participates in and reflects on this broadening: teenagers speak of triggers, coping, and safe anchors, while the narrative both employs and troubles those terms. Reality becomes legible as a common of injury—and monstrosity the figure that stresses its language.

Seltzer’s “wound culture” names a public sphere riveted by spectacle, confession, and the circulation of injury (Seltzer, 1998). The moral panic around the Hellfire Club reprises that economy: fear becomes currency, and adolescent pain, a stage for adult projection. In that market of wounds, the monster is profitable because reality is already organized around exposure.

Shaviro emphasizes cinematic affect as pre-personal intensity that reorganizes bodies before cognition completes the scene (Shaviro, 1993). ST4’s possession montages—spasms, eye-rolls, weightlessness—strike first as shock vectors, only afterward settling into interpretable signs. Hence, “the real” is not what precedes feeling; it is what those intensities stamp into experience.

Memory studies remind us that narration methods shape whether the past returns as testimony, symptom, or collective project (Radstone, 2000). ST4 culminates in distributed caretaking—friends as archivists, playlists as lifelines—turning haunted reality into a collaborative practice of remembering otherwise. If monstrosity endures, it is because reality continues to be co-authored by what it cannot integrate.

#### 4. Original vs Homage: Iterability and the Production of the New

As Hutcheon argues, parody and homage do not simply copy; they “signal difference at the heart of repetition,” generating meaning through ironic reaccentuation (Hutcheon, 2000). In *Stranger Things 4* (ST4), the revoicing of 1980s horror idioms—dream incursions, rubbery prosthetics, synth stingers—does not annul originality so much as stage it as a function of how difference is threaded into recognizable forms. Consequently, the season’s “newness” appears where citation swerves, compresses, or redistributes older codes across adolescent bodies and suburban space.

Genette’s intertextual “palimpsest” clarifies this labor: a later text overwrites an earlier script while leaving its grain legible as echo and resistance (Genette, 1997). ST4 writes over *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Hellraiser* with teen grief, turning nightmare-grammar into an ethics of care in which

friends curate music and memory as counter-spells. Thus, homage functions as a pressure-sensitive overlay—revealing previous inscriptions even as it engraves another path.

Verevis notes that remakes and returns are not failures of invention but industrialized modes of thought that reframe memory as method (Verevis, 2006). Read through ST4, the so-called derivative elements become infrastructural: prosthetics, matte textures, and creature logics catalyze narrative economies of recognition, suspense, and communal problem-solving. Hence, originality is relocated from invention *ex nihilo* to the orchestration of shared archives.

Baudrillard’s account of simulacra underscores how late-modern images circulate as copies without originals, where reality-effect arises from density of signs rather than anchoring referents (Baudrillard, 1994). ST4 knowingly leans into this surface plenitude—arcade glows, VHS grain, prom lights—yet moors it in specific, embodied stakes (Max’s survival), thereby tempering simulation with situated affect. The series manufactures authenticity at the level of consequence, not origin.

Reynolds cautions that “retromania” can trap creativity in curatorial loops, yet he concedes that recombination yields hybrid energies under certain pressures (Reynolds, 2011). ST4 exemplifies that productive loop by suturing vintage horror tropes to contemporary pacing, gendered perspective, and sound design, letting acceleration and tenderness cohabit the same set piece. The result is a kinetic classicism—recognizable, yet recalibrated for new sensibilities.

Leitch describes adaptation as “a swarm of intentions,” in which fidelity myths obscure the diverse uses to which source materials are put (Leitch, 2007). In practice, ST4 treats the 1980s archive as tool rather than temple: borrowed motifs solve present problems—mapping monsters, negotiating panic, organizing friendship—while the show refuses a museum-like piety. Therefore, the authority of the past is instrumentalized, not idolized.

Hutcheon’s later work on adaptation insists that repetition “without replication” is the rule, because every medium and context inevitably transforms what it carries (Hutcheon, 2013). ST4’s filmic remixing—needle-drops against possession, Steadicam through crumbling attics, color palettes that bruise—converts horror’s narrative beats into affective protocols of care. Consequently, the “original” resides in the choreography of transfer rather than the purity of source.



Source: *Stranger Things 4* (Netflix, 2022)

**Figure 4. Max's escape sequence, underscored by Running Up That Hill.**

At this point, repetition ceases to operate as a backward-looking gesture and instead emerges as a generative principle embedded within the narrative itself. The deployment of “Running Up That Hill” does not simply evoke the 1980s as a historical reference; rather, it reactivates a pre-existing cultural sign within a radically different affective and narrative configuration. In doing so, the scene exemplifies Derrida’s concept of *iterability*, whereby every repetition necessarily entails alteration, displacement, and re-inscription. The song, once situated within a particular musical and cultural context, is here transformed into a mechanism of survival, acquiring a function that exceeds its original frame. Consequently, the notion of homage becomes unstable, as what appears to be citation reveals itself as a productive reconfiguration that generates new meaning through difference.

Moreover, the presence of analog media—particularly the cassette player and headphones—foregrounds the material conditions that enable this transformation to occur. These objects do not merely signify a bygone era; instead, they act as mediating interfaces through which repetition becomes operational. Through their use, cultural memory is not preserved intact but is selectively activated, reorganized, and mobilized in response to present conditions. In this respect, originality is no longer understood as the emergence of something entirely new, but as the effect of iterative processes that continually reshape existing forms. *Stranger Things 4*, therefore, reframes homage as a site of production rather than imitation, demonstrating that the new is constituted through the differential reworking of what already exists. The boundary between original and derivative collapses into a dynamic field of repetition, where meaning is perpetually deferred and reconstituted through acts of citation.

Mittell’s account of “Complex TV” shows how contemporary serials cultivate originality via long-arc intricacy, oscillating focalization, and density of

lore (Mittell, 2015). *ST4* scales up homage within serial design—cross-cut set pieces, multi-threaded quests, and recursive clues—so that recognition propels, rather than replaces, discovery. Originality thus becomes a property of serial world-building that metabolizes its own citations.

Gray’s work on paratexts reminds us that trailers, posters, playlists, and title sequences pre-shape how we read the main text (Gray, 2010). In *ST4*, marketing teasers and in-world ephemera (posters, mixtapes, yearbook photos) hardwire the intertextual frame before the plot unfolds, priming viewers to read citation as promise and test. The show’s “new” emerges where those expectations are bent or redeemed in the encounter with scenes.

Bolter and Grusin argue that media “remediate” each other, producing novelty by refashioning earlier forms through transparency/immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). *ST4*’s cine-horror is perpetually remediated by music-video montage, arcade gameplay logics, and pulp paperback covers, yielding a layered sensorium that feels both dated and freshly tactile. Newness appears in the friction between these modes as they jostle for control of attention.

Barthes’s notion of the “text of pleasure” and “bliss” helps parse how familiarity and rupture co-compose viewer experience (Barthes, 1975). *ST4* leverages pleasure in recognition—the warm click of a trope—and punctures it with the bliss of disorientation when angles, edits, or moral outcomes refuse to settle. In that alternation, homage primes the system while originality sparks at the breakpoints.

Dyer defines pastiche as citation without satiric bite, yet he acknowledges that affective coloration can tilt pastiche toward critical reframing (Dyer, 2007). When *ST4* stages satanic-panic hysteria through present-day empathy with misread teens, it coats stylistic borrowing with evaluative warmth, reassigning moral weight. Consequently, even “straight” homage becomes an ethical commentary by tone alone.

Eco contends that postmodern art “quotes” with love and awareness, inviting readers to enjoy invention inside repetition (Eco, 1985). *ST4* exploits precisely this double address—winking to fans of Carpenter and Craven while inviting newcomers to inhabit the thrill without prerequisite literacy. Thus, the series models an inclusive originality: it welcomes different entry points into the same citational maze.

Clover’s reevaluation of horror’s gender codes shows how reworking stock conventions can produce new forms of identification (Clover, 1992/2015). *ST4* transposes the “final girl” logic into a collective—

Max's embodied memory work anchored by peers—transforming an individual survival trope into a communal practice. In doing so, the show converts homage to a 1980s convention into a contemporary ethics of shared endurance.

Phillips's cultural history of American horror emphasizes how cycles retool national anxieties for each generation (Phillips, 2005). *ST4* inherits Cold War and satanic-panic textures yet rewrites them through today's worries—mental health, institutional mistrust, and digital rumor—so that old signs carry new freight. The past is not a destination here; it is a vocabulary repurposed for current speech.

Hutcheon's theory of parody also stresses audience competence: novelty happens in the relay between textual cues and readerly uptake (Hutcheon, 2000). Accordingly, *ST4* designs "recognition moments" that double as learning moments—viewers infer rules, test hypotheses, and adjust sympathies—so originality is co-authored by spectators. In this model, homage is not parasitic but pedagogical.

In sum, Derrida's concept of iterability grounds the paradox: every sign must be repeatable across contexts, yet each repetition necessarily alters it (Derrida, 1988). *ST4*'s originality therefore lies in this necessary drift—the show repeats the 1980s so differently that difference becomes its engine, not its accident. The "original" is thus revealed as the afterglow of successful recontextualization, a future made from carefully bent pasts.

## CONCLUSION

As Derrida's concepts of trace, supplement, hauntology, and iterability indicate, presence is never an origin but an effect of differences that precede and exceed it (Derrida, 1988; Derrida, 1994). Read through this grammar, *Stranger Things 4* does not merely depict the 1980s; it manufactures the present from residual sounds, recycled images, and repeatable signs whose returns are always altered, thereby collapsing the binaries of past/present, adult/child, real/monster, and original/homage into relational circuits. Consequently, what seems foundational—nostalgic time, adult authority, objective reality, authorial originality—appears only insofar as it is co-authored by what it excludes: youthful supplementation, spectral remainder, and citational drift. The show's cultural work, therefore, is to demonstrate that stability is a performance sustained by devices, friendships, and memories rather than a given essence.

From a Derridean view, *Stranger Things 4* does not present fixed meanings; it stages meaning as a

play of differences. The past arrives as a trace that organizes the present, "adult authority" depends on youthful supplement, the "real" shows its cracks through spectral hauntings, and "originality" appears through iterability—repetition that always alters. The season makes these moves visible in scenes, sounds, and props, so presence feels less like a source and more like something composed, revised, and held together. Consequently, the show suggests an ethic: live with what returns by repeating it responsibly. Music, analog devices, and friendship networks model how to turn residue into resources—how to pace fear, share attention, and act with care. Rather than restoring a pure origin, *ST4* teaches viewers to work inside uncertainty: to read traces, accept supplements, listen to spectres, and reshape what we inherit into forms that sustain meaning and one another.

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