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## Are We Really Going Back to Derry? Revisiting the 1980s Through Stephen King's *It* and Its Recent Adaptations

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As part of a recent trend in the Hollywood industry, a number of movies and TV series with adolescent characters and set in the 1980s have been produced lately, and Andy Muschietti's movies *It Chapter One* (2017) and *It Chapter Two* (2019), which are based on Stephen King's novel *It* (1986), follow the same tendency by evoking a melancholic longing for the 1980s. However, these movies provide mostly a flat and consumerist idea of that period which is based on the constant presence on screen of representative objects of the entertainment industry for adolescents of that time. The article compares Stephen King's *It* and Muschietti's movie adaptations in order to show how, in the movies, such a superficial portrayal of the past not only reduces the complexity and depth of the context as it is described in the novel, but also fails to represent more in general the cultural and political tensions that were part of the 1980s.

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*They weren't all found. No; they weren't all found. And from time to time wrong assumptions were made.*  
Stephen King, *It*

A renewed interest for the 1980s recently brought to the development of several successful movies and TV series, such as *Bumblebee* by Travis Knight (2018), *Ready Player One* by Steven Spielberg (2018, based on a 2011 novel by Ernest Cline), and the popular Netflix TV series *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers 2016-2020). These nostalgia trips<sup>1</sup> have in common a typical kid-driven movie atmosphere, with geeks as main characters who save the world thanks to a unique expertise in pop culture, which often represents their personal obsession. The idea of developing stories set in the 1980s in which the main characters are adolescents immersed in pop culture is by no means new, and some of the most acclaimed films from the 1980s represent the exact same dynamics, as in the case of cult movies such as *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg 1982), *The Goonies* (Donner 1985), and *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher 1987). Another popular treasure chest for recent movies and TV series set in the 1980s is Stephen King's mammoth novel *IT* (1986), which not only represents one of the main sources of inspiration for the already mentioned *Stranger Things*, but it has also been adapted recently by director Andy Muschietti in 2017 (*It Chapter One*) and 2019 (*It Chapter Two*). Before these two recent movies, King's book had already been adapted as an ABC miniseries by Tommy Lee Wallace in 1990, with the memorable acting of Tim Curry as Pennywise the Dancing Clown.

Given the sheer length of Stephen King's book (1,153 pages in the 2017 hardcover edition,) it is quite predictable that the adaptations would cut and rearrange parts of the novel to either adapt it for the small screen (as in the case of the 1990 miniseries) or for the movie theater with the 2017 and 2019 movies.<sup>2</sup> However, while Wallace's adaptation had to deal with both severe budget limitations and the fact that the miniseries would be broadcast on prime-time cable TV, the more recent adaptations are characterized by a (relatively) larger budget available and the use of CGI technology. Nevertheless, it took almost ten years for Warner Bros. (and later New Line Cinema) to come up with a viable adaptation of *IT* for the big screen. David Kajganich first and then Cary Fukunaga developed, between 2009 and 2015, several movie adaptation scripts; however, even the last attempt made by Fukunaga did not seem to meet the expectations of the producers.<sup>3</sup> The screenwriter explained his own version of the events that led to his leaving the job, highlighting the difficulties in dealing with adapting King's novel for the big screen:

I was trying to make an unconventional horror film. It didn't fit into the algorithm of what they knew they could spend and make money back on based on not offending their standard genre audience. Our budget was perfectly fine. We were always hovering at the \$32 million mark, which was their budget. It was the creative that we were really battling. It was two movies. They didn't care about

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<sup>1</sup> The pervasive role of cultural nostalgia in recent media products has been analyzed extensively by several scholars. See for example Niemeyer 2014, Leggatt 2017, and Rudaitytė 2018.

<sup>2</sup> See Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen 2013, and Sanders 2016 for a theoretical framework on adaptation studies. For a more specific focus on movie adaptations of literary works, see Stam 2005, Leitch 2007, and Slethaug 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of differences between Fukunaga's adaptation of *IT* and the final product, see Jones 2017.

that. In the first movie, what I was trying to do was an elevated horror film with actual characters. They didn't want any characters. They wanted archetypes and scares. I wrote the script. They wanted me to make a much more inoffensive, conventional script. But I don't think you can do proper Stephen King and make it inoffensive. (Setoodeh 2015, n.p.)

Based on Fukunaga's words, it would be easy to join those who participate in what Hutcheon explains as "the constant critical denigration of the general phenomenon of adaptation," by supporting the hackneyed tendency to consider adaptations like the recent *It* movies "as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original'" (Hutcheon 2013, XIII-XIV); nevertheless, with Fukunaga mentioning the idea that the producers did not want to offend "their standard genre audience," and the fact that they were looking for a "much more inoffensive, conventional script," it is possible to recognize what Stam refers to when he talks about "aesthetic mainstreaming" in relation to Hollywood adaptations of literary texts:

Many televisual or mainstream Hollywood adaptations perform what might be called an **aesthetic mainstreaming**. [...] Adaptation is seen as a kind of purge. In the name of mass-audience legibility, the novel is "cleansed" of moral ambiguity, narrative interruption, and reflexive meditation. Aesthetic mainstreaming dovetails with economic censorship, since the changes demanded in an adaptation are made in the name of the monies spent and box-office profits required. (Stam 2005, 43; bold in original text)

After Fukunaga left the project, Andy Muschietti was finally chosen to direct the movies. Both *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two* turned up to be enormously successful, with the first movie earning \$700 million worldwide and becoming the highest grossing R-rated horror film of all time (Wax 2019, 12),<sup>4</sup> and the second one earning relatively less while still becoming the second-best opening ever for a horror film (D'Alessandro 2020).

One of the most remarkable changes in the 2017 and 2019 adaptations is that, while in Stephen King's book part of the original story is set in 1958 and part in 1985, with the same characters portrayed as both kids in the 1950s and adults in the 1980s, Muschietti's movies are set respectively in 1989 and 2017, which means that the adolescent characters are transferred from the 1950s to the 1980s, thus giving the two movie adaptations the possibility to join many other recent adolescent movies and TV series in celebrating the 1980s. Both *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two* provide an abundance of melancholic moments related to the 1980s, and at the same time they seem to portray mostly a flat and consumerist idea of that period, based on the constant presence on screen of some of the most representative objects of desire for tweens and teenagers of that time such as the Walkman, coin-op games, boomboxes, and so on. As a consequence, while both Xennials and younger generations seem to easily connect (or reconnect) emotionally with the past as portrayed in those commercially successful media products, at the same time these movies fail to represent the cultural and political tensions that were part of the 1980s, since they conspicuously reduce the complexity and depth of the context described in Stephen King's novel while taking advantage of the fetish value of some of the most popular objects related to the entertainment industry

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<sup>4</sup> Wax also reports that, "[t]hrough original IT screenwriters Cary Fukunaga and Chase Palmer were still given screenplay credit for the film, Andy [Muschietti] worked with Gary Dauberman (best known at the time for his scripts in New Line's *The Conjuring* universe) to adapt the preexisting script once again" (2019, 12).

for adolescents of the 1980s. This article compares Stephen King's *It* and its recent adaptations to understand the different representations of the 1980s and the recent attempts at redefining that period as a time of pure consumerist desire, with the not-too-secret hope of re-enacting such a consumerist fantasy in present days.

### **A closer look at Eddie Corcoran, Adrian Mellon, and George Denbrough's deaths**

As already mentioned, the plot of Stephen King's novel is rather complex, with multiple main characters and two different temporal settings interconnected. The story is set in the fictional town of Derry, Maine, a town that hosts an ancestral monster that feeds about every 27 years on human beings (preferably young and scared). The main characters of the novel, the seven members of the Losers Club, fight the monster twice, the first time when they are fifth-grade kids in the 1950s and the second time as adults in the 1980s. While the most threatening enemy of the members of the Losers Club is in fact the eponymous monster, the kids soon realize that the whole city of Derry is evil, and that they cannot trust the adults, who are usually indifferent to their requests for help and can be psychically manipulated by the monster. In addition, a vicious gang of bullies made by older schoolmates continuously chases the members of the Losers Club, with the result that the Losers are the only people who understand the threat posed by the monster and try to figure out how to defeat it.

Among the many characters whose stories did not make it to the screen there is Eddie Corcoran,<sup>5</sup> who only has a peripheral role in the novel, although his death is quite interesting for this discussion because it can help explain some of the principles with which the novel works in a way that might not be immediately clear to an audience that would exclusively watch the screen adaptations.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Eddie Corcoran is included in Chapter Six of the novel, titled "One of the Missing: A Tale from the Summer of '58". Half of the section of the chapter that directly refers to Corcoran's story is composed by newspaper articles from the *Derry News*, which inform the readers that the ten-year-old boy Edward L. Corcoran has been missing since the last day of school in the summer of 1958. While the boy is still missing, the police also reopen the investigation on the death of the younger brother of Eddie Corcoran, Dorsey, who died a year before at the age of four. Dorsey's death investigation was originally closed as an accident due to a fall from a ladder.

After Eddie Corcoran's disappearance, both Dorsey's former nursery school teacher and Eddie's elementary school teacher report to the local newspaper that the kids often went to school with severe bruises, to the point of being unable to join the class activities. While the kids' mother keeps dismissing any allegations against the boys' stepfather Richard Macklin ("Rich never beat Dorsey, and he never beat Eddie, either [...] I'm telling you that right now, and when I die I'll stand at the Throne of Judgment and look God right in the eye and tell Him the same thing"; King 1986, 254) the man eventually admits to having killed Dorsey with a recoilless hammer:

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<sup>5</sup> In Muschietti's 2017 adaptation, Eddie Corcoran is only mentioned as one of the missing kids from the same school attended by the members of the Losers Club.

<sup>6</sup> This might represent an example of the idea that, according to Bryant (2013), adaptations can be seen "not so much as a corruption but as the threat of amnesia, a forgetting of the original" (In Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen 2013, 50-1).

“I don’t know what came over me. I saw he was climbing on the damn ladder again and I grabbed the hammer from the bench where it was laying and I just started to use it on him. I didn’t mean to kill him. With God as my witness I never meant to kill him.”

“Did he say anything to you before he passed out?” [County Attorney] Whitsun asked.

“He said, ‘Stop daddy, I’m sorry, I love you,’ Macklin replied.

“Did you stop?”

“Eventually,” Macklin said. (King 1986, 256)

A couple of months later, Richard Macklin releases an interview to the local newspaper in which he adds that,

“I beat [Eddie and Dorsey] both [...] I loved them but I beat them. I don’t know why, any more than I know why [their mother] let me, or why she covered up for me after Dorsey died. I guess I could have killed Eddie as easy as I did Dorsey, but I swear before God and Jesus and all the saints of heaven that I didn’t. I know how it looks, but I didn’t do it. I think he just ran away. If he did, that’s one thing I’ve got to thank God for.” (King 1986, 257)

The second part of Eddie Corcoran’s story follows the point of view of the boy during the first night he is missing. Soon readers learn more about Richard Macklin’s abusive behavior: for example, as a consequence of a severe beating due to the fact that one day Eddie woke his stepfather up by inadvertently slamming the house door, the boy remembers that “[t]he pain was mostly gone by the fifth day, but he had pissed blood for almost two weeks” (King 1986, 260). What readers quickly acknowledge is that, while Macklin is not directly responsible for his stepson’s death, it is because of the man’s violent behavior that the boy decides not to return home after the last day of school:

Eddie’s grades weren’t the best because he had missed a lot of school since his mother’s remarriage, but he was not a stupid boy by any means. He thought he knew what had happened to the Scotti recoilless hammer. He thought maybe his stepfather had used it on Dorsey and then buried it in the garden or maybe thrown it in the Canal. It was the sort of thing that happened frequently in the horror comics Eddie read, the ones he kept on the top shelf of his closet. (King 1986, 261)

Unfortunately, while he is walking along the Canal looking for a place to stay overnight, Eddie is caught by It. At first the monster appears to Eddie as his dead brother Dorsey and invites the boy to follow it, then It takes the final shape with which it will kill Eddie, the shape of the Gill-man from the movie *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Arnold 1954):

“You’re . . . not . . . real,” Eddie choked, but clouds of grayness were closing in now, and he realized faintly that it was real enough, this Creature. It was, after all, killing him.

And yet some rationality remained, even until the end: as the Creature hooked its claws into the soft meat of his neck, as his carotid artery let go in a warm and painless gout that splashed the thing’s reptilian plating, Eddie’s hands groped at the Creature’s back, feeling for a zipper. They fell away only when the Creature tore his head from his shoulders with a low satisfied grunt.

And as Eddie’s picture of what It was began to fade, It began promptly to change into something else. (King 1986, 266-67)

In Eddie Corcoran's story, the real horror comes primarily from a violent domestic environment, and while the boy is ultimately killed by It, readers understand that he could also have been easily killed by his father. As a matter of fact, Eddie is not respecting the 7 p.m. curfew that night (which was introduced due to the recent disappearances of other kids in Derry) because of his father's violent conduct. The cruelty encountered by Eddie at home is bloodcurdling, to the point that readers might even think that the Creature from the Black Lagoon gave the young boy a less painful death than his father would have given to him.

Eddie Corcoran's tragic story presents similarities with other stories included in the novel: Beverly Marsh, the only female member of the Losers Club, lives in a similar family environment, with an abusive father and a mother who pretends not to realize the violent behavior (this time with morbid sexual undertones) that Alvin Marsh has with his stepdaughter:

Eddie Corcoran was dead, all right.  
He died on the night of June 19th, [...] as Beverly Marsh's stepfather—a gent who bore, in temperament at least, a remarkable resemblance to Eddie and Dorsey Corcoran's stepfather—lifted a high-stepping kick into the girl's *derrière* and told her “to get out there and dry those goddam dishes like your mummer told you” [...] (King 1986, 258)<sup>7</sup>

As the son of another abusive father, Henry Bowers, the head of the gang of bullies that chases the Losers (and who will eventually be psychically controlled by It,) learns from his mentally instable father Butch how to hate women, the weak, and people of color like Mike Hanlon—another member of the Losers Club—who, on the other hand, has a lovely and supportive father.<sup>8</sup> The result is that, by reading the novel, it is possible to notice that horror and violence are integral part of the diegetic world, with It being just one of the many dangers the young kids of Derry have to deal with.

The same idea of widespread danger can be found in relation to Adrian Mellon's story, which is included in the 2019 movie *It Chapter Two*. The scene, which involves the homophobic assault and consequential murder of a young man (Xavier Dolan) in front of his partner, Don Hagarty (Taylor Frey), by a gang of bullies, has been considered by movie commentators as controversial since too brutal.<sup>9</sup> Both in the novel

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<sup>7</sup> Alvin Marsh's violent conduct toward his stepdaughter is also portrayed in Muschietti's movie adaptations. However, during the scene from the 2017 movie in which Alvin (Stephen Bogaert) attempts a sexual assault against Beverly (Sophia Lillis), the man is manifestly controlled by It, thus transforming a tangibly real threat for Beverly into a supernatural one, with the effect of potentially relieving the 2017 version of Alvin Marsh of any responsibility for his abusive actions.

<sup>8</sup> About the changes made to the storyline of Mike Hanlon in the two recent movie adaptations, Hamilton points out that “to transform the only black protagonist from the child of responsible, nurturing parents into the child of negligent crack cocaine addicts is far worse than lazy writing; it's to actively draw from a deeply racist set of cultural tropes. In the transition from book to film, Mike Hanlon has arguably gone from a victim of racism at the hands of Henry Bowers to a victim of racism at the hands of the filmmakers. I don't think that this was done with malicious intent, but I do think it is the product of the filmmakers not knowing how to wrestle with some of the novel's most challenging but crucial material. Not unlike the town in which it's set, Muschietti's *It* only sees what it wants to” (2019, n.p.).

<sup>9</sup> According to Kaitlin Reilly, “[t]he opening scene of *IT Chapter Two* may be the horror franchise's most disturbing—and so little of it is due to the presence of Bill Skarsgård's Pennywise the Dancing Clown” (2019, n.p.). See also Hunt 2019. It is important to point out that the scene is based on the murder

and in the movie, Adrian Mellon is savagely beaten and then thrown down a bridge which crosses the Kenduskeag River in Derry; after he falls from the bridge, Adrian is finally killed by It. However, in the original version included in the novel, before being thrown down the bridge, the man is also stabbed seven times, “including once in the left lung and twice in the testicles” (King 1986, 38). While this detail might suggest that Adrian’s life was in severe danger even before It’s lethal intervention, it is surely possible to point out that, based on the novel, the scene of the assault against Adrian Mellon by the homophobic gang in the 2019 movie could have been portrayed in an even more disturbing way. The second chapter of King’s book, which includes Adrian’s story and is titled “After the Festival (1984),” only briefly mentions It, while it focuses on the interrogation by the police of the three teenage members of the gang that assaulted Adrian. In addition, the chapter refers to Adrian and Don’s idea about leaving Derry in the near future, since the town might be too dangerously homophobic for them to stay safe:

in Derry [...] it always felt like thirteen o’clock. Adrian might think Derry was a great place, but it scared Don. It was not just the town’s tightly homophobic attitude, an attitude as clearly expressed by the town’s preachers as by the graffiti in Bassey Park,<sup>10</sup> but that was one thing he had been able to put his finger on. Adrian had laughed.  
 “Don, every town in America has a contingent that hates the gayfolk,” he said. “Don’t tell me you don’t know that. This is, after all, the era of Ronnie Moron and Phyllis Housefly.” (King 1986, 29)

By indirectly mentioning Ronald Reagan and Phyllis Schlafly and their homophobic political attitudes in the 1980s, this dialog offers a direct example of how Stephen King’s novel uses history and politics to give context information beyond the narrow boundaries of Derry. As a consequence, by reading this chapter it is possible to state that the violence against Adrian Mellon and his subsequent death are more the direct result of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people than of a supernatural monster, with the monster itself simply taking advantage of the inner evil in human beings.<sup>11</sup>

Historical and political references are also included in the first chapter of Stephen King’s novel, titled “After the Flood (1957),” which describes the death of the six-year-old boy George Denbrough, brother of Bill, the leader of the Losers Club. When Georgie is asked by his older brother to go to the cellar to get the paraffine to complete the

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of Charlie Howard which happened in Bangor, Maine, on July 7, 1984. See Burnham 2019 and Boothby 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The chapter mentions some despicably homophobic graffiti such as, “SHOW ME YOUR COCK QUEER AND I’LL CUT IT OFF YOU,” or “STICK NAILS IN EYES OF ALL FAGOTS (FOR GOD)” (King 1986, 29).

<sup>11</sup> Another example of horror coming from real people instead of coming from a supernatural character like It can be found in the story of Patrick Hockstetter, which is substantially different between the 2017 movie adaptation and the original novel. In both cases the member of Henry Bowers’ gang is brutally murdered by It; however, while in the adaptation his only role (portrayed by Owen Teague) is to help Henry Bowers (Nicholas Hamilton) chase Ben Hanscom (Jeremy Ray Taylor), one of the members of the Losers Club, to bully him, in the novel he is also the author of one of the most atrocious and inexplicable murders of the whole book. Hockstetter, in fact, apart from being a sociopath (and randomly torturing and killing animals), at the age of five he deliberately kills his newborn brother by suffocating him while the baby is sleeping in the crib. While of course this does not justify in any way Hockstetter’s murder by the monster, the boy’s story seems to be another instance from the novel in which it is suggested that, in the diegetic world of *It*, evil is really everywhere, and that the monster itself is only one of the dangers that the Losers (as well as any other person in Derry, but especially young kids) have to deal with.

preparation of the paper boat that will eventually bring the boy to an untimely death, Georgie gives himself courage by comparing his fears in going down the cellar with those coming from the world of the adults:

Stupid! There were no things with claws, all hairy and full of killing spite. Every now and then someone went crazy and killed a lot of people—sometimes Chet Huntley told about such things on the evening news—and of course there were Commies, but there was no weirdo monster living down in their cellar. Still, this idea lingered. (King 1986, 6)

Georgie's death, which happens a few pages later, is by far one of the most famous scenes not only of the whole book, but also of the 1990 miniseries and of the 2017 movie *It Chapter One*. It represents the first appearance, both in the novel and in the adaptations, of Pennywise the Dancing Clown—one of the preferred transformations of the monster—that lures Georgie from a sewer into taking back the boat that his brother made for the boy. Moreover, this is the only death scene that is quite faithfully described in both the TV miniseries and the movie, but with some interesting differences related to the renewed importance given to the supernatural features of Pennywise in killing the little boy in the 2017 adaptation. While the 1990 version with Tim Curry as Pennywise offers a mostly human representation of the clown, thus more directly suggesting a threatening menace from a human child predator, the 2017 adaptation presents a much more supernatural version of Pennywise, with the clown that not only completely transforms its face when it opens the monstrous mouth in order to bite Georgie's arm, but it also unnaturally elongates its own arm in order to grasp the poor boy's ankle when Georgie (Jackson Robert Scott) is desperately trying to escape. The supernatural rendition of this scene in the 2017 adaptation seems to betray to a certain extent the original intent of the scene from the novel, since the dialog that Pennywise has with Georgie is meant to eerily remind readers of the dialogs from the "stranger danger" campaign of the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> In other words, while it is true that the episode is originally set in the 1950s, it can as well be pointed out that King was quite obviously referring to the diffuse fear of children's abductions in the 1980s in the United States, and this idea is efficiently portrayed by Tim Curry; on the other hand, in the case of the new Pennywise interpreted by Bill Skarsgård, the supernatural features of *It* during the murder give preeminence to the idea of the clown as a supernatural monster, rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Renfro refers to the so-called "stranger danger" as a "moral panic": "Beginning with the Etan Patz disappearance in 1979, a spate of high-profile cases of missing children fueled Americans' anxieties about child kidnapping and exploitation. Publicized through an emergent twenty-four-hour news cycle, these cases supplied evidence of what some commentators dubbed 'a national epidemic' of child abductions and disappearances. The bereaved parents of missing or slain children [...] turned their grief into a movement and helped to propel a moral panic, warning Americans of a supposedly widespread and worsening child kidnapping threat. These child safety crusaders claimed that as many as 50,000 American children fell victim to stranger abductions annually, though the actual figure was (and remains) somewhere between one hundred and three hundred" (2020, 4). About the "stranger danger" myth, see also Wodda 2018. Bartholomew (2016) reports of recent sightings of alleged phantom clowns in the US as "nefarious figures [who] reportedly tried to lure youngsters into the woods with offers of candy and money." He explains that "stalking clown folklore appears to be part of the 'Stranger Danger' moral panic of the 1980s," mentioning Stephen King's *It* as one of the most influential examples of fictional killer clowns: "thanks to these images, the association between clowns and evil is ingrained in popular culture. [...] These outbreaks of bad clowns appear to be an outgrowth of the 1980s 'Stranger Danger' moral panic which function as cautionary tales. Don't go near the woods on your way home from school or the clowns could get you" (2016, n.p.). For a historical overview of "bad" clowns as a negative archetype in pop culture, see Radford 2016.



a seemingly human serial killer. The latter choice, which is also indirectly enhanced in Tim Curry's scene thanks to the absence of CGI technology, has the result of effectively blurring the boundaries between a fictional threat and a threat coming from the real world.

### Historical and pop culture memory in King's novel and its adaptations

Based on the examples mentioned above, in the death scenes involving Eddie Corcoran, Adrian Mellon, and George Denbrough, it is possible to find the continuous reference to historical context and horrors associated with the real world of 1958 (in the case of Eddie and Georgie) and 1985 (in the case of Adrian) rather than—or even more than—the supernaturally horrific nature of It. In addition, another strong link with the historical context in which the murders happen is between the nature of It as a monster and contemporary pop culture. As in the case of Eddie Corcoran's death, It chooses to be seen by the boy as the Creature from the Black Lagoon. However, Eddie does not believe that the Gill-man that is chasing him is real, and his last thought before dying is about the fact that he cannot find the zipper behind the monster's back, which is the only way he can think of while he is dying to prove himself that what is killing him is not a real monster.

In Stephen King's novel, the pop culture of the 1950s helps the members of the Losers Club devise strategies and weapons to defeat It, in a way that is practically absent in the 2017-2019 adaptations, as in the case of Eddie's understanding of what might have happened to the hammer that his stepfather used to kill Dorsey, which is based on the boy's familiarity with typical plots in comic books. Another example can be found in Chapter Five of the novel, titled "Bill Denbrough Beats the Devil (1)," in which one of the members of the Losers Club, Eddie Kaspbrak, has an asthma attack while he is far from the town pharmacy, and Bill immediately decides to run with his bike to get a new aspirator for him. He is afraid that his friend Eddie might die:

Don't be such an asshole! He's not going to die!  
No, probably not. But what if he came back and found Eddie in a comber? Bill knew all about combers; he had even deduced they were named after those great big waves guys surfed on in Hawaii, and that seemed right enough—after all, what was a comber but a wave that drowned your brain? On doctor shows like *Ben Casey*, people were always going into combers, and sometimes they stayed there in spite of all Ben Casey's ill-tempered shouting. (King 1986, 230)

In this scene from the novel, it is through pop culture that Bill understands the dangerousness of the situation and the need to "beat the devil" by running on his bike as fast as he can in order to get some new medicine for his friend.<sup>13</sup>

Even more important for the development of the main plot in the novel is the fact that, since the monster takes the shape of the worst fears of its potential victims, the Losers Club take advantage of their knowledge about monsters as featured in horror movies and comic books that were popular in the 1950s in order to make plans to try to kill It. In one case, It appears to Richie Tozier, one of the members of the Losers Club, as a werewolf based on the movie *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Fowler Jr. 1957), because the monster knows that Richie would find a werewolf particularly terrifying. As a result,

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<sup>13</sup> While it is true that this passage contains a goof, since the scene in the novel is set in 1958 and the *Ben Casey* series (Moser 1961-1966) was only aired starting from 1961, the importance given to pop culture for the advancement of the plot remains absolutely relevant.

the seven kids decide to make silver slugs out of a silver dollar so that they can use them to attack the monster (in its werewolf version) with a slingshot. When they encounter It again, the members of the Losers Club manage to harm the monster with the silver slugs.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in the novel, the Losers use their knowledge of pop culture to understand the monster and try to defeat it, and while they continuously refer to pop culture in the book, readers can at the same time get a better idea of the context in which the story happens by taking advantage of their own pop culture knowledge as it is evoked by the characters in the novel. In comparison, while also the 1990 miniseries adaptation includes this specific reference to werewolves from pop culture (by having the kids use round-shaped silver earrings instead of silver slugs,) the 2017 movie makes no such reference to pop culture, and instead the members of the Losers Club arm themselves with rusty spikes coming from an old fence nearby to fight the monster.<sup>15</sup>

Even though it might sound as an overgeneralization, it is possible to argue that Stephen King's novel *It* contains two different types of memory: historical memory and pop culture-related memory, both of them important to develop the nightmarish setting in which the story unfolds. Pop culture is often specifically addressed to offer analogies and metaphors employed by the characters to understand and interpret what is happening in the story, while readers can take advantage of their own knowledge of pop culture by imagining more vividly the diegetic context. Simultaneously, also historical memory is constantly recalled as part of the background of the story, from the fictional newspaper articles related to Eddie Corcoran's disappearance (which remind readers of the real newspaper articles about disappearances of children in the 1980s) to the political references to intolerance against the LGBTQ+ community in the Reagan years as in the case of Adrian Mellon's death (as well as the communist threat which even a six-year-old boy like Georgie Denbrough could be easily aware of in the 1950s.) In Stephen King's novel, both pop culture-related memory and historical memory are consequently used at the same time to help readers experience a suspension of disbelief, since they blur the boundaries between natural and supernatural events, real world and fictional world, real horrors and literary horrors.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, in the recent movie adaptations of the novel, pop culture-related memory and historical memory of the 1980s end up having only a limited role in terms of plot development.

As an attempt at further categorizing the use of pop culture in Stephen King's novel with the goal of better understanding its relevance for the story, it is possible to state that it has three functions: 1) pop culture influences the main characters in the story by helping them decide how to act in the diegetic world; 2) it also helps them on a linguistic

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<sup>14</sup> The Losers will eventually understand that using weapons such as silver slugs to kill It can only work if they really believe in the existence of the monster (whatever form it assumes) and in the efficacy of the weapons they have at their disposal in that moment to kill it. In other words, pop culture can practically help them kill It.

<sup>15</sup> In the 2017 movie, the only member of the Losers Club who carries a different weapon—his grandfather's bolt gun—is Mike Hanlon. Caitlin Busch suggests that Mike's weapon of choice, a bolt gun used in the family farm to kill sheep, has a symbolic meaning: "the kids refuse to be sheep in It's game. By using the weapon meant to kill sheep against Pennywise, the kids (or, rather, the supposed 'sheep') are taking back control of their lives" (2017, n.p.).

<sup>16</sup> See also Zizza who effectively traces the connections between child abuse, memory and the role of history in another novel by Stephen King, *Gerald's Game* (1992): "an attentive close reading of *Gerald's Game* offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the specific moment in American history from which it originates, besides raising important questions about the diverse ways in which contemporary horror literature manages to catalyze sociological tensions in narrative form" (Zizza 2014, n.p.).

level, since it becomes a shared language that the characters in the novel use to try to understand It and figure out how to defeat the monster; 3) finally, it represents a bridge for the readers who can use their own pop culture knowledge to imagine the context in which the story happens. The situation becomes quite different in the case of the two recent movies based on Stephen King's novel, since it seems that the pop culture of the 1980s evoked in those movies can only be related to the third function, because neither does it help the members of the Losers Club linguistically conceptualize the horror they are experiencing, nor gives them pragmatic suggestions on how to act in the diegetic world in order to stop the monster.

To give a practical example, it might be useful to compare the use of pop culture from the 1980s in the two recent movie adaptations of *It* and in the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. As already mentioned, the TV series produced by Netflix has many commonalities with Muschietti's movies, since the Duffer Brothers' series also refers to Stephen King's 1986 novel as an important source of inspiration (not as directly as in Muschietti's *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two*, but still quite relevant.)<sup>17</sup> *Stranger Things* features as main characters a group of heroic kids who, in the 1980s, use their geek expertise to (repeatedly) save the world from monstrous aliens. The first season of the series starts with a group of four young characters who are playing Dungeons & Dragons in a house basement. When one of them mysteriously disappears, the other kids apply their deep knowledge about the archetypal role-play game they used to play together in order to understand the features of the alien that abducted their friend and learn how to fight it.<sup>18</sup> In the second season of *Stranger Things*, one of the video games that the kids play at the arcade, the 1982 Namco hit *Dig Dug*, represents a clear analogy with the challenge they have to face in order to defeat one more time the alien that is threatening the small town of Hawkins, Indiana.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the only video game repeatedly mentioned in Muschietti's *It Chapter One* is another hit from the 1980s, the 1987 Capcom video game *Street Fighter*, which merely represents in the movie an escapist activity for Richie Tozier (Finn Wolfhard) during the summer break:

Eddie: Hey, what do you guys wanna do tomorrow?  
 Richie: I start my training.  
 Eddie: Wait, what training?  
 Richie: Street Fighter.  
 Eddie: Is that how you wanna spend your summer? Inside of an arcade? (Muschietti 2017)

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Vogel 2018.

<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, a clear example of the important role of King's novel as a source of inspiration for the Duffer Brothers TV series can be found in the presence, in both *It* and *Stranger Things*, of the "stranger danger" fear: according to Kutner (2016), at the 2016 San Diego Comic-Con it was possible to find a marketing stunt with missing person fliers about Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), the young character mysteriously abducted at the beginning of the first season. Needless to say, in the first season of the TV series, the circumstances of the abduction and the search for the boy skillfully replicate the "stranger danger" dynamics of the 1980s.

<sup>19</sup> The analogy is based on the fact that, in the case of the maze arcade game *Dig Dug*, the player excavates underground tunnels in order to hit and defeat the enemies. In *Stranger Things*, an alien monster coming from another dimension creates an underground tunnel system beneath the town of Hawkins as an attempt to invade the area and kill every living being.

As already mentioned, apart from pop-culture related memory, Stephen King's novel also heavily relies on historical memory. In relation to the latter, the 1986 novel offers two types of references to history: 1) the "real" history shared by both the diegetic world and the readers' world; 2) the fictional history of the monster, which is also intertwined with the violent history of the United States. In the recent movie adaptations, there seems to be almost no direct reference to the history of the US in the 1980s, apart from indirectly referring to the "stranger danger" campaign (with missing person posters and pictures of missing people on milk cartons) and one cursory reference to AIDS. In a similar way, in relation to the fictional history of the monster, the movies include only limited references to its past massacres in the city of Derry, without offering any connections with the history of the United States in general. Conversely, the novel gives much greater importance to the connections between the fictional history of *It* and the history of the US.

It has already been observed that the character of Mike Hanlon, the only African American member of the Losers' Club, has a much more limited role in the recent adaptations compared to the original novel. In addition to being the only member of the Losers Club who remains in Derry between 1989 and 2017, the movie version of Mike (interpreted by Chosen Jacobs as a child and Isaiah Mustafa as an adult) does very little apart from calling the members of the Club back to Derry to fight the monster again, and then suggesting that they use an ineffective Native American ritual to try to defeat the monster. In the novel, thanks to his interest in the history of Derry, Mike has a much more important role: he represents the historian in the Losers Club, and he traces all the instances in which, every 27 years or so, *It* fed on the people of the town. With Mike reconstructing the history of *It* through the atrocities experienced by the population of Derry, the novel also includes explicit parallels between the fictional history of Derry and the history of the United States, starting from the first recorded disappearance of 300 white settlers in 1741 as the equivalent of the mysterious disappearance of the Roanoke colony. Other relevant moments of death and horror in Derry are related to a racist attack by the Legion of White Decency (a fictional equivalent of the Klu Klux Klan) against an African American nightclub in 1930—in which the nightclub was burned down with hundreds of patrons inside—and the gratuitous slaughter perpetrated by the townspeople of a band of gangsters who were hiding nearby Derry a year before.

Since *It* uses the inner fears of its potential victims to scare them, it is possible to state that, in the novel, *It* is a monster that is especially related to the past because it feeds on fearful memories. In the recent movies, *It* continues to be related to past memories, but these memories are mostly associated with the individual fears of the characters, which are no longer related to pop culture, hence they are not so easily shared by the audience. The result is that Andy Muschietti's movies aim at scaring the spectators by surprising them, rather than by mixing reality (either pop-culture based or historically based) and supernatural as in King's novel. In other words, since the spectators tend not to share any scary memory of the past with the characters of the two movie adaptations of *It*, the memories of the 1980s evoked in these movies can freely represent positive and superficial memories because they are not meant to scare anyone. In this way, while surrounding the characters with consumerist objects and memories from the 1980s, the two movies do not need to obsessively rely at the same time also on the world's horrors from the 1980s, with the result that the movies can become a more carefree, escapist experience for the audience.

Apart from the fact that the representation of the 1980s as included in *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two* holds very limited importance in terms of plot development, another way in which the structure of the recent movie adaptations of *It* appears as an escapist entertainment compared to the original novel is to consider the movies as character-driven stories in which there is only one evil character, and that character is recognizably (actually literally) alien and non-human. A second enemy in the movies—that represents a real danger for the members of the Losers Club only when he is psychically controlled by the monster—is the already mentioned Henry Bowers, who is practically a monster’s puppet. Bowers is mentally forced by the monster to chase the Losers and kill them, and, as in his case, the vast majority of the other evil characters in the two movies are always controlled by the monster. This means that, in the movies, once *It* is eventually killed, order can be finally restored, and that typically satisfactory happy ending that every fan of Hollywood movies usually looks forward to can be obtained at last. In addition, this also means that, in the diegetic world of *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two*, violence and brutality can almost unilaterally be ascribed to the monster, with the result that the whole community becomes like a collective victim of *It*, thus it can be ultimately relieved of any responsibility for the evil that plagues the city of Derry.<sup>20</sup>

However, Stephen King’s novel does not allow such a simplistic polarization of the story in terms of good and evil, and it does not even seem to offer a safe ending, since it suggests from the very first lines that the monster might have managed to survive.<sup>21</sup> Even more problematic is the fact that *It*’s death in the novel would by no means free the world from homophobia, racism, sexism, and all the other real horrors that permeate the book and seem to exist without any need to be supported and fueled by the monster. The past history of the United States and the current society as fictionally represented by Derry contain evil that cannot be so easily eradicated. As a consequence, the attempt at remembering the 1980s by focusing on only some aspects (the most innocuous and entertaining ones) as the movies *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two* seem to suggest is only the illusory result of a manipulative mechanism that tries to avoid hurtful memories by selectively choosing for the spectators a set of consumerist memories as the only part of the past they really need to remember. In this sense, the selective cultural amnesia that governs the representation of the 1980s in Muschietti’s adaptations of Stephen King’s novel seems to effectively conform to Fredric Jameson’s description of “nostalgia/pastiche” which, in Michael D. Dwyer’s words, “is that of a representational practice that *flattens, evacuates, and eventually elides* the authentic past. This, [Jameson] argues, is a cultural process that facilitates the perpetuation of late capitalism” (Dwyer 2015, 8; italics in original text).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In discussing the 2017 movie in relation to the current political context, Geller argues that the final message of the movie “is not to face one’s fears by understanding their historical, geographic, and socio-cultural origins but rather to come together as a collective to destroy the thing (‘it’) that is figured as the locus of those fears, without discussion or explanation. *It* affirms the narrative of meeting fear with violence [...] The Losers come to look less like a ‘club’ (to which they are relegated by their victimisation) than yet another gang” (Geller 2019, 36).

<sup>21</sup> “The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain” (King 1986, 3).

<sup>22</sup> While King’s novel might also be considered a reaction to the nostalgia for the Tranquilized Fifties which characterizes popular 1980s movies such as *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis 1985) and TV series like *Happy Days* (Marshall 1974–1984), on the other hand Muschietti’s movies seem to be an attempt at

In conclusion, the choice made in *It Chapter One* and *It Chapter Two* to set part of the story in the 1980s instead of the 1950s seems to represent a marketing solution that affects the story only superficially, with the result that all the pop culture-related references to the '80s included in the movies become nothing more than a "cool" addition to the story. In comparison, King's novel prevents its readers from ignoring the historical context in which the story is set while it blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the idea of letting the plot interact continuously with the realistic (and extremely violent) context in which the story is set helps readers experience the suspension of disbelief that is necessary for a full immersion into the horror of the novel. In addition, the choice made in King's book to develop a story with two different temporal settings represents an attempt at rethinking the violence and evil that affect the US society from a generational perspective, thus suggesting the haunting idea that people often get through their violent and abusive childhood years without really having the possibility to protect future generations of children from experiencing the same horrors. On the other hand, the two recent movie adaptations of King's novel evoke childhood memories from the 1980s as a myopic attempt to let the audience savor again the light-heartedness of adolescence, which is brought to mind in the movies thanks to typical consumerist objects connected with the entertainment industry of the time. However, these objects are just palliatives meant to help (former or new) adolescents turn their thoughts from the problems that affect their lives, which explains why a melancholic feeling for the consumerist carelessness of the 1980s can become one of the main reasons behind the popularity and appeal of contemporary kid-driven movies set in the 1980s such as the recent adaptations of Stephen King's *It*.

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recreating, with their deceptively innocent representation of the 1980s, a contemporary equivalent to the above-mentioned sanitizing nostalgia for the 1950s.

<sup>23</sup> The role of history and the socio-political context in which Stephen King's stories are set has already been pointed out before. See for example Magistrale, who writes that: "[t]he narratives of Stephen King are not merely excursions into a world that never was and never could be, but also a serious social fiction. The latter comprises a commentary on, and a critique of, postmodern America's value system—our politics, interpersonal relationships, our most revered and trusted institutions. His work describes a particular matrix in time; it bears a direct association with significant aspects of American culture and the types of human relationships it has engendered" (2010, 59).

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### **Films - TV Series - Videogames**

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- Bumblebee*. Dir. Travis Knight. Paramount Pictures, 2018.
- Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Dir. Jack Arnold. Universal Pictures, 1954.
- Dig Dug*. Id. Shouichi Fukatani. Namco. Namco Galaga, 1982.
- E.T. the Extraterrestrial*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures, 1982.
- Happy Days*. Prod. Garry Marshall. CBS Television, 1974-1984.
- I Was a Teenage Werewolf*. Dir. Gene Fowler Jr. American International Pictures, 1957.
- It Chapter One*. Dir. Andy Muschietti. Warner Bros, 2017.
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