

# Heterotopian Spaces in 'Stranger Things'

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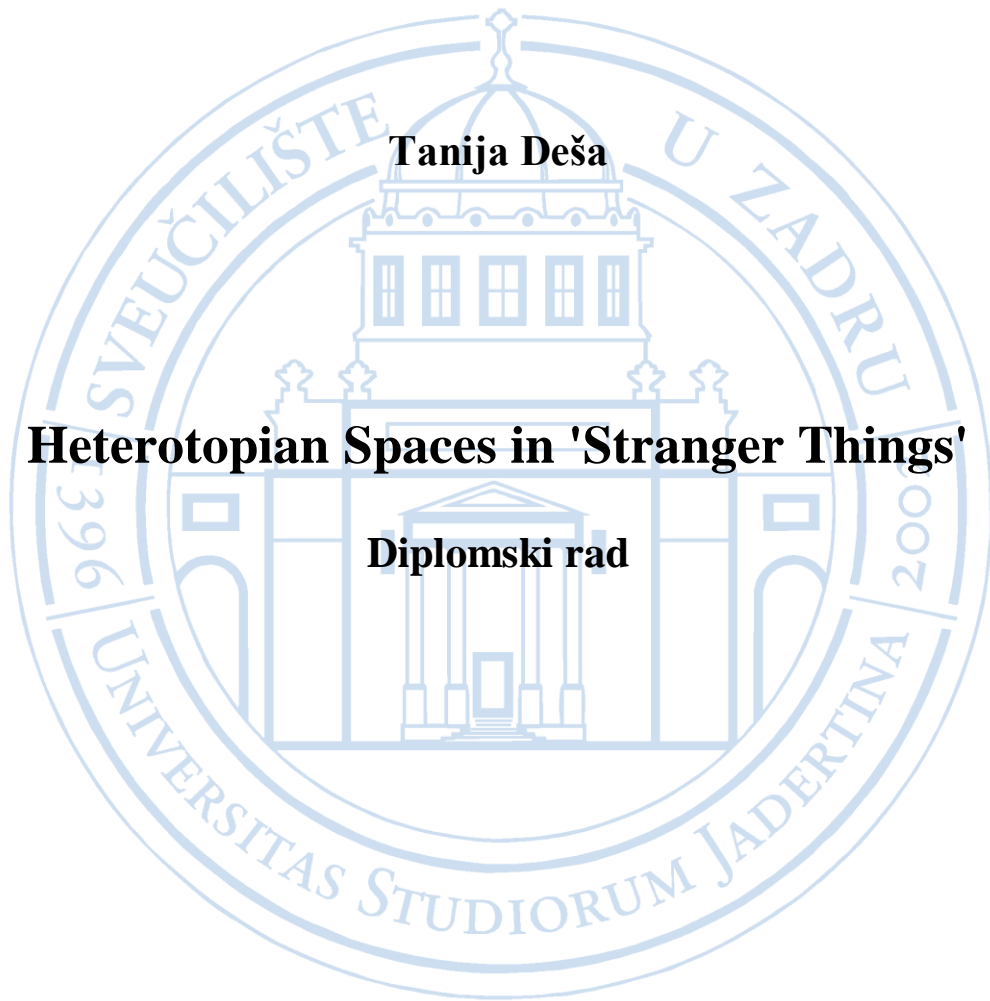
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Heterotopian Spaces in 'Stranger Things'

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Zadar, 2023.



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## 1. Introduction

The concept of space was generally overlooked for a long period of time and the word 'space', according to the opinion of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, possessed a 'strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area' (1).

However, the notion of space in the horror genre has always played an important role in creating a sense of dread and fear by using haunted houses, castles, abandoned churches and monasteries or even graveyards as the background setting necessary for the development of the plot (Lukić and Parezanović, 'Challenging the House' 23). Despite all that, the various analyses of the genre are brought to a halt at the descriptions of the spaces mentioned above without further analysing the concept of space itself. More often than not, the space is regarded only as a background that forms a solid starting point for the development of the narrative.

Thus, the aim of this diploma paper is to introduce and analyse Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopian spaces which will be used as the basic premise for the analysis of such spaces found in the nostalgia based television series *Stranger Things* directed by Matt and Ross Duffer. Moreover, this paper will seek to offer a definition and examples of a concept of a dark heterotopia and the subsequent notion of heterotopian incursion.

Finally, it will present the role of the house in American horror genre, its development from the European Gothic tradition of employing dark castles as the background for the stories and the transformation of its domestic space to a (dark) heterotopian site focusing on the work of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard titled *The Poetics of Space*.

## 2. Michel Foucault and heterotopia

The analysis of the spaces found in the TV series *Stranger Things* will stem from the theoretical part of this paper which will primarily be based on the works of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, and his analysis of the spaces that surround us or that we encounter in our everyday lives. More specifically, it will be based on his interpretations of heterotopian spaces. In the text titled *Of Other Spaces* that is based on his 1967 lecture, he states that:

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. [...] The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. (Foucault 22)

Wanting to describe, among all other spaces, the ones that are characterized by the possibility 'of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect', Foucault divides them into utopias and heterotopias (24).

For Foucault, utopias represent placeless places; the places that do not exist and are impossible to create since they are based on the image of perfection. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are their counterparts and the places that exist in reality since they form a part of the society. Foucault first mentioned heterotopias in his work *The Order of Things* in 1966 where he states that they are 'disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names,

because they destroy 'syntax' in advance [...] (xix). He then continues to explain the existence of a heterotopia by analysing the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, pointing out 'the role of the mirror and the issue of reflection in the heterotopian discourse' (Lukić 129). The metaphor of the mirror stands as a crucial element in the process of defining utopias and heterotopias since it represents the element of 'mixed, joint experience' (Foucault 24). The mirror is, in his opinion, a utopia because it represents a placeless place where a person is able to see his or her reflection in a place where they are actually absent. However, the mirror is also a 'perfect example of heterotopia because it is only due to the projected/reflected image that individuals can observe their body/reality/space and locate it in the here and now, while at the same time denying the possibility of actually crossing into this projected space/reality' (Lukić and Parezanović, 'Heterotopian Horrors' 1138).

In his paper, *Placeless Places: Resolving the Paradox of Foucault's Heterotopia*, Kelvin T. Knight emphasizes the fact that Foucault's descriptions of heterotopias are contradictory at times since he explained the term on various occasions and presented heterotopias as impossible places which could only be found in and executed by employing the language, and 'as a kind of real place that somehow exists outside of all other space' (1). In Knight's opinion, the notion of heterotopia was never planned to be used as a means of studying real places, but the 'fictional representations of these semi-mythical places' (2). He also discusses the concept of utopias and says that while being imaginary, placeless places they can paradoxically be 'tied to a specific time and place' and 'with which children are all too familiar; in the spaces of their play, the attic, the garden or their parents' bed, they find the ocean, the sky or the Wild West' (Knight 6). However, this is



not only present in children's play, but adults as well transform the space through literature.

Based on the aforementioned definitions, in *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault offers six principles of the so-called heterotopology.

### **2.1. The first principle**

The first principle of heterotopology is the assumption that all of the cultures in the world are able to constitute heterotopias which take various forms. Foucault classifies them in two main categories: crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation. According to his opinion, crisis heterotopias are a part of primitive societies and they are 'privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.' (Foucault 24). As examples for those places, he offers boarding schools and honeymoon hotels.

However, nowadays the heterotopias of crisis are gradually disappearing and becoming substituted by what Foucault calls the heterotopias of deviation. Heterotopias of deviation represent the ones in which the 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' (Foucault 25). Examples of heterotopias of deviation would be prisons, rest homes and psychiatric hospitals.

### **2.2. The second principle**

In the second principle, Foucault explains that a society can make an already existing heterotopia function in a completely different manner as it progresses and changes through the time. The perfect example of this would be

the heterotopia of the cemetery. It represents a space that is connected with the different places in a city, a state or a society since every single person has some relatives buried in the cemetery. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the cemetery was always located in the centre of the city and next to the church, but from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they started to be moved outside of the cities. Death started to be perceived as an illness and the dead people considered as the ones who were supposed to spread that illness to the living and in this way the cemeteries stopped being a sacred place in the city and became the other city existing on its own and representing a dark resting place.

### **2.3. The third principle**

The heterotopia has the ability to juxtapose several different spaces in one real space. Such places of juxtaposition are cinemas and gardens. The cinema is able to juxtapose the real world where individuals are seated with the place that they are seeing projected on the screen as well as to project a number of different places at the same time. Gardens are seen as a heterotopia since they are capable of accumulating a variety of different plants or animal species (seen today in a form of a zoo) from every part of the world in the same place at the same time.

### **2.4. The fourth principle**

According to Foucault, 'heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time' (26). Such places are libraries and museums because in both cases they accumulate

time indefinitely by preserving tomes and artefacts from different periods of human history.

### **2.5. The fifth principle**

A very interesting fact about heterotopias is a fact that they 'always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (Foucault 26). Heterotopian spaces are not easily accessible and the entry can be forced or the one has to undergo different rituals and purifications to be allowed inside a heterotopia. Such is the hammam that includes the purification which is partly religious and partly hygienic.

### **2.6. The sixth principle**

Finally, the last characteristic of heterotopias is that 'they have a function in relation to all the space that remains' (Foucault 27). On the one hand, the role of heterotopias is to produce an illusory space that reveals every real space (such as brothels), or, on the other hand, their role is 'to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (Foucault 27). His example of this are the Jesuit colonies in Paraguay where the village was of a rectangular shape with the church at its foot and in front of it was a street that crossed with another at the right angles to finally form a shape of a cross. Each family had their own cabin and their daily routines were strictly organised where every single person living in the village would wake up, start work, have meals and go to bed at the same time each day.

Foucault finishes his thoughts with the statement that brothels and colonies represent 'two extreme types of heterotopia' and that the boat represents 'a

floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea' making it a 'heterotopia *par excellence*' (Foucault 27).

### 3. Heterotopia and social ordering

Particular interest in space, or more specifically, social space, has been shown in the field of social theory. In his book, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*, Kevin Hetherington offers a 'critique of static views of social order' mainly focusing on Foucault's notion of heterotopia, explaining it in further detail and offering his own examples of modern spaces that he considers heterotopian (vii).

Firstly, Hetherington begins with the definitions and origins of the terms heterotopia and utopia. The term *utopia* was first coined by Sir Thomas More who combined two words of Greek origin: *eu-topia* which means a good place and *ou-topia* which means nowhere or no-place. The combination of the two terms forms a new term of *utopia* which, according to More, is 'a good place that existed nowhere, except in the imagination' (Hetherington viii). Hetherington claims that Marin, 'who is neither concerned with *ou-topia* nor *eu-topia* directly but the gap between them', calls this gap *the neutral* which for Hetherington is the same as Foucault's heterotopia (11).

According to Hetherington, heterotopia represents a space of 'alternate ordering' that organizes 'a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them' (viii). This specific alternate ordering singles out the heterotopia as the Other which permits it to be viewed as a representative case of 'an alternative way of doing things' (Hetherington viii). In his opinion, heterotopias exist, but only in this gap between *ou-topia* and *eu-topia* or, as he claims, in the

relationship between the spaces. In addition to that opinion, Hetherington defines heterotopias not as ‘spaces of transition [...] but they are space of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve [...] social order, or control and freedom’ (ix). Compared with the two castles, one of which is de Sade’s castle in his work *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and the other is Kafka’s *Castle*, heterotopias are as well established to make us fascinated and horrified, making us use ‘the limits of our imagination, our desires, our fears and our sense of power/powerlessness’ (Hetherington 40).

As it was mentioned above, heterotopia is a place that is characterized by Otherness and this Otherness is set up ‘through a relationship of difference with other sites’ (Hetherington 8). Hetherington suggests that a number of things can fall under the term of Otherness, but more specifically it could mean ‘*something without* (defined as different to the norm either within a culture or between cultures [...]), *something excessive* or *something incongruous*, a hybrid combination of the incongruous’ and that the Otherness deals with various ways of ordering and not only with discrepancies found between order and resistance (8).

Following Foucault’s examples of heterotopian spaces such as prison (together with the concept of Bentham’s panopticon) or psychiatric hospitals, Hetherington agrees that they are the examples of heterotopian spaces ‘associated with the alternate ordering of deviance’, or in Foucault’s terms, heterotopias of deviation (42). What is more, heterotopias have been perceived as spaces that are correlated with the formation of identity, rather than social control. The term heterotopia is often used to indicate the importance of the marginal sites which are examples of transgression and resistance. However, Hetherington claims that ‘it would also be

wrong to associate heterotopia just with the marginal and powerless seeking to use 'Other places to articulate a voice that is usually denied them' (52). The paradox of heterotopias can be found in the fact that heterotopias as spaces of social ordering can be both spaces of absolute freedom and spaces of complete control. The conclusion that is drawn from this statement is that:

This paradox of freedom as control and control as freedom is the paradox of utopianism of modernity and the paradox that defines heterotopic conditions: no matter how much we wish to be free, we will always create conditions of ordering if not order itself. Equally, in devising conditions of social order we will always create positions of freedom from which to resist that order if not freedom from order. (Hetherington 52-53)

In his book, Hetherington also touches upon the Foucault's metaphor of the ship, the so-called heterotopia par excellence, that he also uses in *Madness and Civilization* where he discusses the connection between madness and reason brought with the rise of the Enlightenment. Foucault here uses the term 'Ship of Fools' which can be seen as an example of 'a heterotopic site that retains its difference and Otherness' (Hetherington 48). Foucault argues that 'the madman's *liminal* position' is 'symbolised and made real at the same time by the madman's privilege of being *confined* within the city *gates*: his exclusion must enclose him' (Hetherington 49). Continuing Foucault's thoughts, Hetherington claims that in order to 'cross a boundary or to be associated with boundaries is to become a form of moral pollution' (49). The 'Ship of Fools' that is navigating through the space of Europe during the period of Renaissance alludes to the marginality of the madman who stands as a figure that is representative of the social uncertainties. This madness can also be seen as a transgression, or in Foucault's words deviation,

which then places the madman in a space of a prison or a psychiatric hospital, that is, in the space of the heterotopia of deviation.

#### **4. Small town heterotopia and dark heterotopia in *Stranger Things***

The image of the peaceful and friendly small town has extensively been used in the horror genre narratives as the setting for unusual and often times horrifying events. In a vast amount of different horror films and television series, suburban areas with nice family houses surrounded by white picket fence and where everybody knows each other, serve as the background and also as a contrast to the gruesome events that usually follow this introductory scene. The small town presents itself to the viewers as a sort of a utopian site that offers its people safety and its houses offer an intimate shelter from the outside factors. However, more often than not, this utopia is being threatened by the existence of a heterotopia. Similar scene can be seen at the beginning of the first episode of the television series *Stranger Things* created by Matt and Ross Duffer and widely inspired by the works of Stephen King. The events that take place in the series are set in the 1980s, during a period in American history that is related with the geopolitical tensions between the United States of America and the Soviet Union in the times of Cold War. Set in a fictional small town of Hawkins, Indiana, the action takes off with scenes from November 6 1983 at the Hawkins National Laboratory which operates under the charge of the United States Department of Energy. In this part we can see the inside of the laboratory with its alarms blaring, lights flickering and a scientist running from something which we cannot see but it ends up taking the scientist. This scene, however, is instantly followed and contrasted by the night scene showing us the typical small town yard with the sprinklers and the house of

Mike Wheeler where he and his friends Will Byers, Lucas Sinclair and Dustin Henderson play *Dungeons & Dragons* board game. We can hear Mike saying: 'Something is coming. Something hungry for blood. A shadow grows on the wall behind you, swallowing you in darkness. It is almost here'(Season 1, Episode 1, 00:01:44 – 00:01:53). Even though unaware of the evil that the characters will soon encounter, with this line the viewers are in a way informed of the future events.

The later shots of the town showing us its school, family homes, shops and police station perfectly fit in the already established popular small town narratives. These 'normal' spaces are opposed by the Hawkins National Laboratory which is gated and secluded from the town and where suspicious researches on human subjects take place. Since the laboratory represents something that is opposed to normality and that is having its own rules inside it, it can be seen as a heterotopian space. We are later introduced to the activities that take place inside of the laboratory and we can see that there exists a gate to an alternate dimension which the USA could possibly try and use to spy on the Soviets. The first time that the viewers can become suspicious of the actions that take place in the laboratory is when Will Byers goes missing on his way home from the Wheeler house and when almost instantly a girl in a hospital gown and with a shaved head enters the scene. We find out that her name is Eleven by the tattooed number on her wrist and that she is running from some 'bad people' who, turns out, are the people working in the Hawkins laboratory, more specifically dr. Martin Brenner. Before he goes missing, Will sees a dark figure in the middle of the road and the light on his bicycle starts flickering until it finally goes out. Will attempts to run from the figure and goes inside a shed behind his house where he loads the gun and waits



for the figure to show up, but the next thing we see is that something gets him from behind and the scene ends with the shot of the empty shed.

Back at the laboratory doctor Brenner expects some people from the government and he leads them inside the laboratory. They walk through a hall with flickering lights and what seems to be ash floating in the air, towards a hole in the wall which has vines coming out of it and seems alive. The recurrent scene throughout the first season of the show is the image of the flickering lights which we can connect with what Yi-Fu Tuan says in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. He offers an example of being lost in a dark forest and says that even though he is now lost and disoriented, the space still remains organized in compliance with the sides of his body. However, that is not important because it does not make any sense to move left or right, but when a flickering light appears in the distance the 'space has dramatically regained its structure', or in other words 'the flickering light has established a goal' (Tuan 36). This goal, the light, disappears when Will encounters the dark figure on the road which in turn leaves him disoriented and scared. Another example of this is seen in Will Byers' house when Joyce, Will's mother, starts following the flickering lights that lead to her son's bedroom and they suddenly go out leaving her in complete darkness after which we see a figure trying to come out of the wall in the bedroom. In this case, the lights serve as a lead to a certain goal which is Will's bedroom, but when they go out, they leave the opportunity for a mysterious frightening figure to try and enter the until now safe space of Will's home. The disappearance of the light and of the border between domestic space of the Byers' house and the heterotopian space where the figure in the wall resides leads to 'the incursion of heterotopia upon the ordinary spatial reality' of their home (Lukić and Parezanović,

‘Challenging the House’ 31). The space where this monstrous figure (later named the Demogorgon) comes from can be called *dark heterotopia* which is a heterotopia that possesses ‘the capacity to invade ordinary places and transfigure them into equally threatening “other” spaces’ (Lukić and Parezanović, ‘Heterotopian Horrors’ 1140).

The predominant theme in small town horror narratives is certainly that of the occurrence of dark heterotopias and the following conflict between good and evil that stems from the realm of a dark heterotopia. The main characteristic of dark heterotopias is that they evoke a feeling of fear that something dangerous which could possibly lead to the destruction of ‘the conventional social order’ lurks inside them (Lukić and Parezanović, ‘Heterotopian Horrors’ 1146). In the case of *Stranger Things*, this danger is believed to be locked safely inside the Hawkins National Laboratory and kept as a secret from the townspeople of Hawkins, but as we see later in the show, that is not the case. After Nancy Wheeler’s friend Barbara disappears from the party at Steve Harrington’s house, Nancy decides to go back to the house the next day and look for her friend. When she arrives, she sees that Barbara’s car is still there where they have left it the night before and goes on to look around the Steve’s house. She wanders off into the forest but sees a dark figure and tries to convince herself that it was only a bear or some kind of animal, even though she is sure that the figure looked like a human but the interesting fact about it is that it had no face. She later discovers that what she saw in the forest was indeed a faceless creature because Will’s brother Jonathan, who was looking for his missing brother, snapped some shots of the house during the night of the party. After developing the photographs from that night, they see the creature that Nancy believes to have seen in the forest behind Steve’s house and

they realise that it is the same monster that Joyce Byers saw coming out of the wall in her son's bedroom. The night of Barbara's disappearance is the first time that we as viewers actually get to see the full image of the monster instead of the previous shots of the dark shadowy figure. At the same time, young boys find a girl named Eleven, who possesses psychokinetic powers, and decide to hide her in the basement of the Wheelers' house. While she is looking around the basement, she stumbles upon a photograph of the four boys and immediately recognises Will. Later on, Eleven recognises Will's *Dungeons & Dragons* figurine and flips the board upside down to tell the boys where Will is located and shows the Demogorgon figurine which indicates the evil that took Will and she tells them that he is hiding from it. Being the one who opened the gate between the normal world and this new alternate dimension and using her connection to it, Eleven tries to contact Will using the radio and succeeds. They can hear Will telling his mother that the place he is at is 'like home, but it's so dark...It's so dark and empty. And it's cold' (Season 1, Episode 4, 00:40:52 – 00:40:57). At the same instant we can see Joyce ripping the wallpaper in her house and finding an opening through which she can see Will inside this alternate dimension. The boys later realise that Eleven was trying to tell them that Will is in the version of their world which is turned upside down and they compare it to the Vale of Shadows which says that it is 'a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. [...] It is right next to you, and you don't even see it' (Season 1, Episode 5, 00:06:17 – 00:06:41). This dimension that they will call the Upside Down is a perfect example of a dark heterotopia. It is a place that reflects their normal space of the town of Hawkins, but it is a dark and distorted version of it, which makes it a source of the evil that threatens their lives

and town. In a scene where Barbara is seen in the Upside Down, we can see her in the pool by the Steve's house, however, this pool is covered in vines and everything around it is dark, grey and full of ashes floating in the air and when she calls for help, all that we can hear is the echo of her voice. These vines of evil are slowly spreading from the laboratory through the town like a contagion. On a few occasions the characters encounter temporary portals and get a glimpse of the Upside Down; such as Joyce while talking to Will through the portal in her wall which disappears when the monster approaches, or Nancy Wheeler who finds it in a trunk of a tree while searching through the forest for her friend Barbara. These temporary portals show us the unpredictable nature of the heterotopian space. The forest in the Upside Down looks the same as the forest in real life Hawkins except it is dark and full of vines and ashes. Luckily, she is able to escape with Jonathan's help and after she manages to exit, the portal disappears. In this particular scene we can see the injured deer, and later when Nancy enters the Upside Down she sees the monster feeding on it after which she concludes that it is drawn by blood since Barbara had a cut on her hand that night when she disappeared. Creatures that are drawn by blood and which come from the alternate dimension of a dark heterotopia to threaten normal people can be found in many small town horror narratives as a recurring trope of the genre.

In the final episodes of the first season of the series, Eleven tries to find Will and Barbara with the help of the sensory deprivation tank which is made for her on the grounds of Hawkins school. She finds Barbara dead with the vine protruding from her mouth and she sees Will hiding from the monster inside a heterotopian version of Castle Byers, a small shed made in the woods behind his house. Joyce and Sheriff Jim Hopper decide to break into the laboratory to enter the Upside

Down and save Will. They are seen wearing protective suits which are supposed to keep them safe from the toxic environment found inside the Upside Down while they look for Will. By entering this dark heterotopian space, both of them become witnesses of the existence of the mirrored space of death and decay that is slowly spreading through their reality and becoming an alternate version of that reality which presents a grave danger for the characters in the series. Another point that can be drawn from this is that the Upside Down could possibly represent a version of Foucault's heterotopia of deviation since the monster and the environment in the Upside Down can be seen as deviant when compared to the normality of Hawkins.

The incursion of a dark heterotopia over the established normality in the town of Hawkins is visible through the mentioned breaches of the monster into the real world. In doing so, it causes this dark heterotopia to 'become a new parallel reality' (Lukić and Parezanović, 'Heterotopian Horrors' 1147). In the second season of the television series, we follow the events after Will Byers returned home alive and as it seems, unharmed. However, already in the first episode Will is having flashbacks of the Upside Down at the arcade where he finds himself suddenly alone and the world turns dark and ashy and in the distance he sees a threatening dark cloud with a red storm inside it. These flashbacks, as it will later be determined, are not flashbacks at all, but so-called 'now memories'. Because of these episodes that Will keeps having, he is brought to the laboratory for therapy that is supposedly going to help him with his posttraumatic disorder. When he is asked to describe what he sees in the episodes he is having, he says that when he saw the storm he felt frozen just 'like how you feel when you're scared, and you can't breathe or talk or do anything' and he says that he felt this kind of evil

looking at him and wanting to kill not him, but everybody else (Season 2, Episode 1, 00:25:37 – 00:26:06). During the Halloween night when Will goes trick-or-treating with his friends, and brings a camera with him, he again experiences visions from the Upside Down and this time he sees a shadow that resembles a spider-like monster hovering over the red storm clouds. When his mother Joyce watches what was recorded that night, she also sees a monster in the background and decides to copy it from the television screen and compares it to Will's drawings which show the monster near their house. What Will sees in his visions are not flashbacks from the Upside Down, but it turns out that he sees what the monster sees because it possessed his body and mind the same day that Will tried to confront it during one of his episodes. This Will's ability to see what is happening inside the monster's mind and to enter its heterotopian realm, but at the same time be present and aware of the real world could be explained by the notion that Vidler calls the play of doubling, 'where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same' (3).

Almost simultaneously, Sheriff Jim Hopper receives reports of rotting pumpkin and vegetable patches around the town's fields. While townspeople believe that the rot is caused by their vengeful and jealous neighbours, Hopper discovers vines underneath the pumpkins and notices that this contagion of rot is spreading and that in its centre is the Hawkins National Laboratory where the scientists believe they are making progress at destroying this alternate dimension by burning its vines and its gate. In addition to that, when Joyce asks of Will to draw what he sees in his mind, he draws numerous images of vines that all connect to each other and once connected they represent the map of Hawkins. These vines form the

tunnels underneath the town of Hawkins and entering them, one enters the space of a dark heterotopia that is the Upside Down. In this season of the series, the contrast between the normal space represented by Hawkins and a dark heterotopian one formed by the Upside Down is no longer as strong as it was before. The present monster has his army of faceless monsters called the Demo-dogs, but also it has the ability to possess people and make them his helpers because through them he sees the space of the town and is able, as Will says, to reach deeper and deeper into Hawkins. With the help of Demo-dogs and vines that spread through the undergrounds of Hawkins, the monster that is constantly seen above the town is just waiting for the perfect opportunity to spread its heterotopian realm through Hawkins thus blurring or completely wiping out the border between the spaces. Once this border disappears, the normal space becomes a dark heterotopian one which then consequently becomes the new normality. However, in the end the characters manage to fight the monster and save their town, while Eleven, being the one who opened it in the first place, closes the gate to the Upside Down.

In the third season of the show we are introduced to a somewhat new monster which in the end turns out to be the same monster that left Will's body, only now it is seen getting its own shape instead of being a cloud of small particles. To create its body, the monster called the Mind Flayer, uses its ability to find new hosts that he can possess and attract to his hiding spot at an old warehouse. The Mind Flayer forces the possessed people and rats to feed on fertilizer, bleach and other chemicals before he melts and attaches the newly created substance to his ever growing body. Nearly simultaneously, the series shows us the Soviet soldiers and scientists creating a sort of a machine that they will use to try and open the gate to

the Upside Down in their laboratory under the newly opened Starcourt mall in Hawkins.

The Starcourt mall can also be seen as a form of a heterotopia or, as Marc Augé says, *a non-place*. According to his opinion, 'if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé 77-78). The new mall is destroying the small businesses in Hawkins causing people to close their shops because everyone now wants a glimpse of this new capitalistic wonder where they go and spend hours and hours walking through different shops, reading labels and browsing the items through numerous aisles which in turn leads them to lose their own identity as they now just blend in with the others, making no contacts with them except maybe with the salesperson who knows nothing about them. In that way, Augé argues, 'the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it)' (101). The proof that this contract is respected is shown when the customer actually has to present his identity while paying using a cheque or a credit card, since 'the contract always relates to the individual identity of the contracting party' (Augé 101). According to Margaret Kohn, shopping malls fall under the 'paradigmatic heterotopias of contemporary America' and they represent 'places where some of our culture's other real sites are represented, inverted, sanitized or demonized in order to highlight their mythic properties' (508). Following Foucault's principles, the shopping mall represents the effectively enacted utopia, or in other words, a heterotopia because it is able to juxtapose several different sites at the same time and at the same place offering the customers a multitude of different shops, food courts and even cinemas. Similar point of view is offered by Kern in her essay



*Heterotopia of the Theme Park Street* where she states that shopping malls are heterotopias where 'social homogeneity and social order' exist (106). At the same time some of the malls require certain rituals to be performed in order to enter them, such as having to obtain a ticket to enter its parking space or going through a security which makes 'sure that 'undesirables' are escorted out of the mall, protecting those deemed worthy through their behaviour and their appearance from having to encounter those portions of society that may be disturbing' (Kern 106). Having the ability to make the consumers forget about the real time by having no windows in their shops or any possibility to understand what is happening outside, shopping malls could also be considered heterochronies because they cause the people to 'arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time' (Foucault 26). What is more, shopping malls can be seen as places that are always well organised, clean and perfect therefore opposing the real world which, according to Foucault, is usually 'messy, ill constructed and jumbled' (27).

Another example of a heterotopia is a gulag in Kamchatka where Sheriff Jim Hopper is taken by the Soviet army after he and Joyce tried to destroy the machine used to open the gate and stop its progress. The gulag is a heterotopia of deviation, where everyone who, according to Soviets, deviates from the normal behaviour or in any way breaks or opposes their rules is sent. To enter such an institution one must be forced inside it, but there are also rituals that have to be followed. Jim Hopper is washed by the soldiers with a hose and cold water, his hair is shaved off almost completely and he gets a uniform with his name, or in this case a nickname that he has been given by the Soviets, calling him *Американец* (the American). Inside this heterotopian site, Soviets are keeping a Demogorgon, Demo-dogs and the fragments of the Mind Flayer that they took from Hawkins and the Upside

Down therefore allowing the parts of a dark heterotopia to enter the real world. When someone breaks the rules that are set inside the gulag they are moved to the cells and taken to a feast which is supposed to make them more interesting to the Demogorgon since they will be closed inside the pit and forced to fight the monster only to get killed by it.

The fourth season of the television series presents us a new monster named Vecna who appears to be the real ruler of the heterotopian realm of the Upside Down. After failed attempts to overtake the town of Hawkins by the help of the Demogorgon, Demo-dogs and even the Mind Flayer, Vecna, now stronger than before, decides to take the town on his own. To achieve this, he takes four victims whose deaths will allow him to open four gates in different parts of Hawkins which will result in the incursion of a dark heterotopia, except that this time the incursion will happen not only over the domestic spaces, but over the space of the whole town. While inside the minds of his victims, Vecna makes them see and hear the chimes of the grandfather clock and every time it chimes four times. This way he has been telling them his plan from the beginning. Four chimes of the grandfather clock symbolize the four deaths that are necessary to open the four gates which will lead to complete destruction of the town and its conversion to a dark heterotopia. The number four can also be viewed as the symbolism for Biblical story of the four horsemen of the apocalypse that will bring conquest, famine, war and death upon the human race. In the final scenes of the season, we are able to see that the spreading of a dark heterotopia through the town of Hawkins is causing the plants to dry out and wither and the town turns dark and grey helped by the red storm that looms over it together with the ashes that start to fall from the sky. The now slowly disappearing boundary between the spaces

could possibly lead to a complete transformation of the once normal space of Hawkins into a dark heterotopia.

## **5. House as a heterotopian site**

One prominent among the numerous other spaces employed by the horror genre (more specifically the American horror) to serve as the background or a main setting of the plot is the (haunted) house. European Gothic/horror tradition achieved causing the feelings of anxiety or fear in its readers mostly by using dark castles as the setting of mysterious and often times gruesome events. According to Fred Botting, the word *Gothic* 'signified the lack of reason, morality, and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs, and works' and therefore 'resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past' (13-14). The newly introduced concept of a house as the setting for the horror genre can be viewed as 'a natural and unavoidable extension of the European castle, but instead of simply replicating the narrative/experiential patterns, it adopts a variety of previously existing features, only to exponentially expand them in a multitude of other directions' (Lukić 90). House as the background of action is primarily based on the fact that it represents a shelter offering an individual a feeling of safety, intimacy and domesticity. The dark image of the European Gothic castle opposes the house not only in regards to its architectural and atmospheric characteristics, but also 'the storylines presented within it did not infer a sense of connectedness between the characters, the described activities, and the space itself' (Lukić 91). The stories of the mythical castle that offers no possibility for the characters to interact with it or inflict any changes to it slowly becomes substituted by the concept of the house which due to

its characteristic of being a confined space causes the characters to interact with each other and the space of the house itself in one way or another. In this way by achieving the 'familiarity of this "new" space' the readers, and later on the viewers as well, were able to identify with the space of the house which is more realistic and closer to them than the space of the Gothic castle that may or may not exist in reality (Lukić 91).

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his book named *The Poetics of Space* argues that the house represents 'a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space' (3). According to his beliefs, 'our house is our corner of the world', or in other words 'it is our first universe' (Bachelard 4). This means that even after a person moves to another house, they are still bringing the memories of their first house with them and they will most likely compare every other space to the space of their first home because that is where they grew up and developed their identities and opinions of the outside world. Moreover, it means that 'memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams' (Bachelard 6). The most important asset of the house is the fact that it 'shelters daydreaming' as well as it 'protects the dreamer' and 'allows one to dream in peace' which is why all of 'the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time' (Bachelard 6). The house is therefore responsible for 'housing' our memories and the more rooms, halls and nooks and crannies it has, 'our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated' (Bachelard 8). For Bachelard, memories represent *alveoli of space*

which contain 'compressed time' and that is the exact purpose of the space (8). The ability of a person to revisit the house in their memory or in their dreams reveals the type of a house which is 'rich in unalterable oneirism' (Bachelard 13). Furthermore, Bachelard argues that every person has their very own 'oneiric house' which is, in other words, 'a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past' (15).

Bachelard later analyses the house as a 'vertical being' and this verticality helps it to differentiate itself from its surroundings (17). The verticality of the house is 'ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic' with cellar representing the irrational '*dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces' and attic stands as a rational part of the house which with its roof offers one a shelter from the outside conditions and 'fears' (Bachelard 18). When he talks about fears he claims that 'fears are easily "rationalized"' in the attic because of the presence of the light, while on the other hand, cellar remains the irrational space because of the lack of light since inside of the cellar 'darkness prevails both day and night' and even if we are able to bring in some light, it will still cast terrifying shadows on the walls of the cellar (Bachelard 19).

The substitution of the Gothic castle with the (haunted) house in the American horror genre tradition did not completely abandon the dark and terrifying features of the castle, but instead it modified them to suit the concept of the house. In a vast number of horror stories and films the action and the following terrors take place inside Victorian mansions. Victorian houses, usually being spacious and tall buildings, with their towers and turrets, and even the façade itself may look like it might belong to a castle. The perfect description of a Victorian manor as a setting

for a horror story can be found in Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House* published in 1959:

No Human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance of meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice. [...] It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. (Jackson 30)

A very similar house can be found in the fourth season of the television series *Stranger Things* where we are introduced to Vecna's childhood home and the place where he first developed his psychokinetic powers. After the mysterious and terrifying murder of one of the Hawkins High School students, Chrissy Cunningham, Nancy Wheeler goes together with her fellow reporter Fred Benson to investigate the crime scene and interview the possible witnesses. There Nancy talks to Wayne Munson who is the uncle of the supposed Chrissy's murderer Eddie Munson. Eddie's uncle believes that his nephew is not guilty and according to the state in which Chrissy's body was found, he believes that this must be a work of a killer named Victor Creel who is supposed to be locked away at the Pennhurst mental hospital. According to reports and stories, Victor Creel apparently killed his wife and children, but because he claimed that his house was possessed and the murders were a work of a demon, he was proclaimed not sane and sent to the Pennhurst asylum. Intrigued by the stories they found on Victor, Nancy and Robin disguise themselves as university students and visit the asylum with the intention of interviewing him in order to possibly understand what or who

is responsible for the murders occurring in Hawkins. Victor Creel tells them the story starting from the day when he and his family first moved into the new home. After being back home from war for 14 years, his wife's great-uncle left them a significant amount of money after his death which was now 'enough to buy a new home, a new life' (Season 4, Episode 4 00:51:24 – 00:51:25). The new house was a beautiful and spacious Victorian mansion and Victor's daughter Alice said that it looked like it belonged to a fairy tale or a dream. However, he says that his son Henry was able to feel that something was wrong and after a month of living in the new house, dead and mutilated animals started to appear near their house. The police claimed that this was a wildcat's doing, but Victor felt that it was some evil demonic force because his wife, daughter and even he himself started experiencing hallucinations and having visions and nightmares of past things that unconsciously bothered them or made them feel guilty of their actions. On one occasion this evil entity made his wife see the spiders in a bathtub, but when Victor came to have a look, there was only water inside it, while Victor, on a different occasion, experienced visions of a baby crying in a burning cradle. Convinced that every evil entity must have its own home, Victor decided to search the attic where he found nothing except for some random objects like a stroller, a wheelchair and an old piano. However, he felt that this evil was always present and inside their home even though he was unable to explain it or find some evidence of its existence. This inexplicable feeling coming from the 'uncanny place' that represents itself as 'sinister, disturbing, suspect, strange' derives 'its force from its very inexplicability' and from 'its sense of lurking unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear – an uncomfortable sense of haunting rather than a present apparition' (Vidler 23). The mysterious events culminated one evening while the

Creel family was having dinner when the radio started playing music and changing stations which it appeared to do on its own. When Victor tried to turn the radio off, the lights in the house started flickering all at once and this was the moment when this invisible demon took and killed his wife. He then tried to take the kids and escape from the house but the doors would not open and suddenly he found himself transported to a memory from the time when he was in the war in France. This memory showed him the time when he ordered the shelling of a house because he was convinced that German soldiers were inside and this is where the vision of a crying baby in its burning cradle comes from. He was able to return to reality when he heard *Dream a Little Dream of Me* playing in the distance only to find his daughter dead and his son unconscious who ended up being in a coma. This demon's victims were killed in the same way as the victims from Hawkins; they all had their eyes removed and limbs broken.

The real identity of this demon that murdered the members of the Creel family is revealed later in the season when Vecna possesses Nancy while she was trying to leave the Upside Down. Vecna decides to show her his real identity revealing himself as Henry Creel, Victor's son. After the murders Henry was taken by doctor Brenner who was interested in his powers and tried to replicate them on his new subjects. Henry thus became One, or in other words, Brenner's first subject and the base for his research. During his time in the Hawkins National Laboratory, Henry met Eleven and got closer to her in order to persuade her to remove his tracking device that prevented him from leaving the premises of the laboratory. He decided to show her how to escape from the laboratory and wanted her to join him on his murderous journey which she refused after she found out that he murdered all of the other kids that were still inside the laboratory. He tried to attack her as well,



but she managed to overpower him and sent him into the Upside Down closing the gate after him. This is how he became Vecna and the ruler of the heterotopian dimension of the Upside Down. Once in the Upside Down, Vecna formed his lair inside the heterotopian version of his house's attic where he used to spend his days as a child collecting, researching and drawing spiders. After he built his world, the time in the Upside Down stopped on November 6 1983, which is the date when Will Byers went missing and the day when Eleven opened the gate to the Upside Down allowing him to send his monsters into the real and peaceful town of Hawkins while he was gaining strength to seek his revenge.

Vecna's (haunted) house is somewhat different from Bachelard's description of intimate and domestic spaces where he states that the cellar of the house is a space where all the fears and irrationalities come from. Instead of the house's cellar, in this specific case the attic gains the irrationality and serves as the source of evil thus failing to conform to Bachelard's definition of the attic as a space where our fears become easily rationalized. At first it appears that the house is haunted and a real cause of the hallucinations that the family members were experiencing, which would make it the perfect example of a stereotypical image of a haunted Victorian mansion within the American horror genre. However, the evildoing is not coming from the house, but from Henry, although the house can be seen as a partial culprit because it is the place that helped Henry to develop his powers. It is possibly this connection with the house that he brought with him to the Upside Down version of the same house because it makes him feel sheltered from the outside forces that allows him to recover and gain strength. Another interesting fact is that when Vecna/Henry possesses his victims he takes them to a dimension inside his mind where he shows them the fragments of his house flying in the air and the rest of the

ruins on the ground, which can easily be connected to Bachelard's oneiric house which an individual is able to revisit in his memories and dreams. When he is attacking the victims inside his mind, he can be found in a sort of a trance or a daydream in which he recalls these images or *spatial alveoli* of his childhood home. This dimension inside his own mind where Vecna takes his victims before killing them, specifically his parents, making his mother see spiders inside their house or taking his father to his memories of the war, can be regarded as a realm of a dark heterotopia that threatens their safe homely space. Placing these memories, hallucinations and murders inside their home, Vecna eliminates the boundary that divides the domestic space of their home from the dark heterotopian space of the realm that he creates in his mind and by doing so allows the incursion of a dark heterotopia over their home. In the real space of Hawkins the Creel house is now seen in a dilapidated state and with its doors and windows barred, therefore perfectly conforming to the stereotype of the haunted house. Its windows are closed preventing any curious wanderers from peering inside, but also to try and keep the evil inside it from escaping.

Completely different from the image of a Victorian mansion is Eddie Munson's trailer where Vecna murdered Chrissy. Although small and not considered a house according to the basic definition of the word *house*, Eddie's trailer does offer him and his uncle a safe homely space up until the moment of the murder. After Chrissy was killed, a gate to the Upside Down started to open in the roof of Eddie's trailer which also led to his uncle's evacuation from the place by the American government. Therefore, the incursion of a dark heterotopia over the once safe and domestic space is fully achieved because of the gate in the roof which allows ordinary people to enter the Upside Down through the alternate

version of the trailer, but also the creatures from the heterotopian dimension now have the ability to enter the real town of Hawkins.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of the present diploma paper has been to provide a theoretical background using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, offer different readings and understandings of his work presented by Kelvin T. Knight as well as Kevin Hetherington and to apply this theoretical framework in the analysis of the television series *Stranger Things*. In a chapter on Michel Foucault and heterotopia I have focused on providing the detailed summary of Foucault's thoughts and principles presented in his work titled *Of Other Spaces* which served as the base of this paper.

The next step has been to offer the analysis of heterotopian spaces found in *Stranger Things* while concentrating on the afore mentioned theoretical base and focusing on notions of small town heterotopias, dark heterotopias and heterotopian incursion. Set in a small town in the 1980s and heavily inspired by the works of Stephen King, *Stranger Things* offers a wide array of examples of dark heterotopian spaces that can be easily traced to and explained by Foucault's work as well as to well-researched articles by Lukić and Parezanović which provide definitions of a dark heterotopia and heterotopian incursion.

As a last point of this paper, I have offered the analysis of the house as a heterotopian site based on Gaston Bachelard's work *The Poetics of Space* as well as the development of the house from the traditional European Gothic castles to a haunted (Victorian) mansion which has served as the base for the analysis of

Vecna's/Henry Creel's childhood home. I have also provided the examples of transformation of the same domestic space into a dark heterotopian one.

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## **HETEROTOPIAN SPACES IN ‘STRANGER THINGS’: Summary and key words**

This diploma paper researches Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, their development and use within the American horror genre, more specifically in the television series *Stranger Things*. In the analysis of heterotopian spaces in *Stranger Things* the focus is on the application of Foucault’s principles to the spaces found in the series as well as on the explanation of the terms such as dark heterotopia and heterotopian incursion. Analysing the notion of a (haunted) house the paper is based on Gaston Bachelard’s work *The Poetics of Space* and it is explained how a once domestic and intimate space becomes a heterotopian space and a setting of the plot in the horror narratives.

Key words: heterotopia, dark heterotopia, heterotopian incursion, haunted house

## **HETEROTOPIJA PROSTORA U SERIJI ‘STRANGER THINGS’: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Ovaj diplomski rad istražuje koncept heterotopija Michela Foucaulta, njihov razvoj i upotrebu unutar američkog horor žanra, točnije u televizijskoj seriji *Stranger Things*. U analizi heterotopskih prostora u seriji *Stranger Things* fokus je na primjeni Foucaultovih principa na prostore koji se mogu pronaći u seriji, kao i na objašnjenju pojmova poput tamne heterotopije i inkurzije heterotopije. Pri analizi pojma (uklete) kuće, rad se temelji na knjizi Gastona Bachelarda *Poetika prostora*, te je objašnjeno na koji način intimni prostor kuće postaje heterotopski prostor i mjesto radnje u narativima horor žanra.

Ključne riječi: heterotopija, tamna heterotopija, inkurzija heterotopije, ukleta kuća