

“The Death of Small-town America:” Ruin Porn in *Stranger Things* Season 3 by Emma Cieslik

Death and decay pervade Hawkins, Indiana, the site of an interdimensional gateway that opened to the Upside Down. This putrescence present in the Upside Down, toxic fibers floating in the air, roots or rather tendrils emitting poisonous gasses, and man-eating Demogorgons and demo-dogs, is directly mirrored by the decay of Hawkins with the introduction of Starcourt Mall in season three of *Stranger Things*. These features, in some ways reflecting the dangers of factory work that largely built the Midwest, set the scene for the season. Given that this season is filled with imagery of empty storefronts, I argue that the show utilizes ruin porn and the “Death of Small-town America” to realize the horror of *Stranger Things*. In particular, I focus on three episodes where economic destabilization and narrative mirroring play a critical role: Episode 1 (“Suzie, do you copy”), Episode 2 (“The Mall Rats”), and Episode 8 (“The Battle of Starcourt”).

Season one and two of *Stranger Things* saved Will Byers (twice), closed the gate to the Upside Down, and killed off the demo-dogs, but season three presented more problems for Will, Mike, Max, Lucas, Dustin and Eleven. In this season, the Mind-Flayer, which was forced out of Will Byers by his mother Joyce, remained outside of the Upside Down and “flayed” Billy Hargrove. Billy is subsequently under the control of the Mind-Flyer and he kidnaps residents of Hawkins to build its army made literally out of the flesh and bones of its victims. The season starts with the return of Dustin from science camp over the summer, eager to reach out to his girlfriend Suzie via “the Cadillac of Ham Radios” in Episode 1, “Suzie, do you copy,” and the opening of the Starcourt Mall, a new supermall complex that is rapidly putting “mom and pops,” as termed by Bruce Lowe, a journalist for the *Hawkins Post*, mostly out of the business.

Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers are working for the *Post* as summer interns, with Nancy eager to break into the field of writing rather than picking up coffee and lunch for the misogynistic reporters. She explains how she passes many desolate stores on her way to work in the morning, which Bruce mocks as “the Death of Small-town America.” Cold, abandoned buildings, in juxtaposition to the pleasant, warm glow of the mall, invoke the emphasis on emptiness and scant attention to the lives affected by modern ruin that are the hallmarks of Ruin Porn. In downtown Hawkins, we see a closed town laundromat, signs for “blowout sales” at Melvald’s General Store where Joyce works and a flyer hanging on a lamppost, “Save Downtown! No to Mall. Town Hall Tuesday 6:00 pm, Say No to Starcourt.” This economic decay parallels a similar economic downturn in the Midwest during the 1980s, situating the series in its geographic and chronological heart. But it also serves as a horror trope. Hawkins has become a desolate “ghost town,” a husk of its former self. For example, when Hopper enters the convenient store seeking out Joyce’s advice on Mike and El’s relationship, he is greeted by a sarcastic, “you’re our first customer.”

Melvald’s General Store, which offered Joyce two weeks advance (despite stretching its pockets) when her son went missing in season one, serves as a reflection of Hawkins. While listening to Hopper ask for relationship advice about Mike and El, Joyce goes around the store and places clearance stickers on many items on the shelf, including planting one on Hopper himself as a joke. There are “bargain bin” signs, and Hopper initially finds Joyce hanging a large banner advertising “Discount 50-70% Off” in the window alongside many other “bargain” and “clearance” signs. While Hopper is discussing the boundaries of Mike and El’s relationship, he is doing so in the store that itself lies on the boundaries of Hawkins’s economic development. Hawkins is actively navigating how to create boundaries between itself and the encroaching mall, exemplified by the protests of local citizens in this first episode.

Mirroring continues throughout the series, as the introduction of Starcourt Mall and the destabilization of Hawkins's "mom and pop shops" mirrors the subsequent destabilization of perceived safety with Russians infiltrating Hawkins and working to reopen the gate to the Upside Down. The Starcourt mall parallels the introduction of new technological and cultural influences, whether it be Eleven's beloved clothing from the Gap, or the machine created by Alexi, a Russian engineer, and his ill-fated partner to reopen the gate that we see in the first scene of the series. The introduction of technology, which dooms the convenient store that Joyce works at, also dooms the town as the Mind-Flayer remains alive with the gate open until Hopper and Joyce close it. In this first episode, just like in the other two seasons, we are introduced into the primary problem of the protagonists—Will's disappearance in season one and subsequent "possession" by the Mind-Flayer in season two—but in season three, we are introduced to small-town economic decay in much the same way as supernatural terrors in the first two.

In episode two, "The Mall Rats," the first scene shows Billy fleeing Brimborn Steel Works after being "infected" by the Mind-Flayer. Another reference to the closing of factories across the Rust Belt during the 1980s and 1990s, this decrepit factory shows how ruin porn is used to visually intensify the horror in *Stranger Things*. Sites of supernatural and natural violence occur at sites of economic and social decay throughout this series, at Brimborn Steel Works where Hawkins residents are "flayed" and at Hess Farm where the Russians were constructing their machine. Isolated, abandoned farms on the outskirts of Hawkins, which could easily shift hands without people noticing, were targeted by the Russians for their purpose and actually facilitated one of the main horrors of the series—the attempted reopening of the gate to the Upside Down. At the end of the series, El and her friends are hiding in the Starcourt Mall, the last safe place they can find, which turns out to be the scene of the most violent acts, including Billy's death, El's removal of part of the Mind-Flayer in her leg and the loss of El's powers.

At the start of this episode, Billy runs away from Brimborn Steel Works and drives to a nearby telephone booth, where he calls 911 but instead the call drops, and he emerges into what appears to be the Upside Down, screaming "what do you want?" at a group of approaching citizens of Hawkins led by a vision of himself. "To build," the vision replies. Along with decay, artificial construction is a primary theme throughout the series, and Billy's own role in kidnapping and constructing the Mind-Flayer's physical body with the flesh and bones of the citizens of Hawkins mirrors just how the same "flesh and blood" of Hawkins is stolen from Hawkins's downtown storefronts and reconstructed the Starcourt Mall.

In episode two, we again return to Joyce and Hopper in Melvald's General Store, where we see the Kodak Processing Center is indefinitely closed, with the sign reading "Thank You for 34 Wonderful Years at Melvald's." The store hints at other economically doomed businesses in the coming fifty years because of technology introduced to Hawkins and to the United States. Film processing centers will soon be deserted as people turn to digital photography equipment and share photographs online instead of printing out hard copies. There is a sign on the wall for Radio Shack, and RadioShack Corporation filed for Chapter 11 protection under bankruptcy in 2015, almost exactly fifty years later chronologically than the time period in which the series is set. While at the store, Hopper receives a radio call that there is a protest in front of city hall with picketers carrying signs reading "Recall the Mall," setting the stage for future uproar about the mall before the final fight scene in the mall's court in episode three.

Stranger Things concludes its third season in episode eight at the Starcourt mall, where El, Mike and Max face off against Billy and the Mind-Flayer. While the Mind-Flayer's appearance situates the scandal surrounding the 30 lives lost to the Mind-Flayer at this recently

established shopping center, what's most significant for this discussion of economic decay and Midwestern identity is the last 20 minutes of the show, which includes a radio broadcast from WCPK-TV and a newspaper headline in the Indianapolis Gazette reading "Thirty Dead" with a photograph of the mall burning. While the commentator notes that "this was not the town's first brush with tragedy," the viewer is immediately introduced to the front of the Indiana Chronicler where we see a picture of the protestors in the second episode in front of town hall with the headline "Citizens Demand Justice." It appears to connect the tragedies of the mall with the tragedy of small store closures. In recounting the death of Barbara and Bob from the previous seasons of *Stranger Things*, the news reporter asks if these can all be connected, "is something more going in the heartland?" specifically referencing Hawkins's location in the Midwest and connecting the surroundings to the horror in the town. The radio station advertises a program at 8:00 pm for "Horror in the Heartland" on Cutting Edge.

This specific tie of the horror in *Stranger Things* to the wider American "Heartland" situates this discussion of ruin porn and economic decay along with other portrayals of the Midwest, especially relevant to our course focused on the narratives surrounding Midwest identity. Mirroring the decay of Hawkins's economic stability with the closure of small "mom and pop" shops build on trust and helping others with the decay of Hawkins's perception safety and serenity, the idea that nothing really happens there, is a commentary on the wider introduction of technology to the Midwestern United States during the 1980s when the series is set. Greater mechanization deprived many workers of their jobs in factories throughout the Midwest, so the introduction of Russian technology, albeit a stereotypical representation of something un-American that threatens the "Heartland," shows that the Midwest, that Hawkins, is extremely vulnerable to external threats, vulnerable to economic downturns that threatens the jobs of Joyce and others who are living paycheck to paycheck and violence because of the perceived innocence and isolation of this town.

The repeated appearance of ruin porn in *Stranger Things* in the first, second, and eighth episodes, notably, imagery of struggling storefronts, abandoned laundromats and angered townspeople about the mall, connect the destabilization of Hawkins's economy and safety, largely seen as unchanging in the previous two series. In making this choice to parallel the decay of these two aspects of Hawkins's reality, the creators of *Stranger Things* also portray the Midwest to those in different regions of the United States as doomed and abandoned. It's interesting to consider how this imagery impacts viewers' perceptions of the Midwest throughout the United States as well as how it also predicts the decline of malls throughout the United States in the twenty-first century. With the advent of online shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Starcourt mall is likely the next victim of economization that shifts spenders online, and the mall then becomes the creepy denizens of crime throughout the Midwest.

Stranger Things therefore offers a compelling example of how ruin porn has been included in Midwestern-centered horror television and how it can be used to situate "natural" horrors, like the economic decay of a small town, with the loss of safety and stability due to "supernatural" horrors coming from a place of death and decay—The Upside Down. This series offers a view of the Midwest that fits well with the Midwestern gothic image shared often by reporters from the coast documenting towns destroyed in the wake of factory closures. It would be interesting to see how Midwesterners react to this visual of a dead, or rather, dying "Heartland" in the United States. Just as Bruce comments at the beginning of the series, it is the "Death of Small-town America," and we end the series leaving the Midwest—as many have done before—with El, Will, Joyce and Jonathan for the Eastern Coast to escape its horrors.