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*A Nightmare on Elm Street* Film Series

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'Evil never dies, right?' Monstrous mediation in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* Film Series

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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates images of mediation in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* film series, focusing primarily on its main antagonist, Freddy Krueger, and his monstrous uses of media. Employing Eugene Thacker’s concept of “dark media”, as well as Gary Heba’s reading of the *Nightmare series* as centering on the confrontation between youth and the dominant societal order of patriarchal capitalism, this article argues that the series articulates a highly ambivalent image of mediation, which is intimately connected to its thematic interest in issues concerning power and emancipation. Moreover, it argues that this ambivalent image of mediation ultimately constitutes a self-reflexive engagement with the potential cultural work of the *Nightmare series* itself.

**Introduction**

Although often grouped with the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* film series as part of the most popular slasher franchises of 1980s North American horror cinema, it is commonly recognized that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), and its various sequels, offer something quite different from many of their generic antecedents, and helped significantly to reshape and revitalize the slasher subgenre. Even at the time of the first film’s release, *The Washington Post*, for instance, described it as a mixture of exploitation cinema and classic surrealism, and early critical reception of a similar vein indicates at least to some degree the extent to which the *Nightmare series* deviates from the more conventional slasher film formula (Kendrick 2009, 18–19).

Among the most notable ways in which it does so is through its introduction of overtly fantastic elements, most prominently manifested in the figure of its main antagonist, Freddy Krueger. A child killer burnt alive by the parents of Elm Street, he returns as a spirit to stalk and kill the Elm Street teenagers in their dreams, often in ways that are rather more inventive than the average slashing. While he does dispatch many of his victims with the help of his infamous knives-for-fingers glove, a significant majority is killed through entirely other means, as Freddy frequently employs various forms of media either to manipulate and terrorize his victims, or as outright instruments of torture and death. Insofar as the slasher genre is defined etymologically by the killer’s use of slashing or stabbing weapons, therefore, the *Nightmare series* deviates at least to some degree from the more traditional formula, and Freddy might arguably be described best not as a “slasher killer”, strictly speaking, but rather as a kind of “multimedia killer”, whose playful and ultimately deadly use of media is a defining trait.

Indeed, Freddy is himself a kind of medium, that is, a point or channel of connection. Able to transgress the border between dream and reality, he has the power to inscribe (quite literally so) the supernatural upon the flesh of the natural. Freddy might therefore be thought of as a form of what Eugene Thacker (2013, 102) calls *dark media*, that is, a medium capable of mediating between different realities or ontological orders. Although locating such media across a wide range of cultural domains, Thacker finds many of his most instructive examples in stories of supernatural horror, wherein dark media often make possible “the mediation of that which cannot be mediated”, thereby producing moments in which “one communicates with or connects with that which is, by definition, inaccessible” (Thacker 2013, 81). Dark media thus paradoxically enable an effacement of the condition of separation making mediation possible in the first place, and in so doing not only efface mediation but make it horrific, since they enable a transgression of the basic laws of space and time which govern the physical world, as well as the categories of knowledge and identity through which we make sense of that world.
Dark media thus entail an understanding of media “not just as devices, tools, or even objects” but involves thinking about “communication, media, and mediation less in terms of technical artifacts or technical processes, and more in terms of the capacity of media to at once mediate between two points, while at the same time negating this very same form of mediation” (Thacker 2013, 81). While the concept of dark media thus encompasses “readily familiar media objects” (Thacker 2013, 92), it also expands the common notion of media to include not only the human body (demonic possession, divine ecstasy) and space (haunting), but thought and being themselves as possible points of mediation (Thacker 2013, 93–94). A primary rule of dark media, therefore, is that they produce instances in which “mediation functions at a level beyond that of traditional forms of human mediation” (Thacker 2013, 129). Indeed, as Thacker notes, modern ideas of mediation often presume a particular interplay of identity and difference, that is, they presume a fundamental distinction between sender, receiver and message as the a priori precondition of mediation (Thacker 2013, 89). Dark media entail a dissolution of such distinctions, threatening the supposed autonomy of the human subject whose state of difference is itself a precondition of mediation. Following Carol’s (1990) definition of the monstrous as a transgression of the order of reality as we understand it, one might therefore argue that dark media make mediation monstrous, insofar as they threaten a dissolution of many of the dominant dualisms in the history of Western thought: subject/object, self/other, natural/supernatural, illusion/reality.

Viewing Freddy Krueger as a dark medium, embodying precisely the kind of monstrous mediation which makes possible the connection of that which is understood as foundationally separate, this article will explore the formal and thematic significance of Freddy’s use of media, and his monstrous powers of mediation more generally. While this exploration will take place in dialogue with existing research on the Nightmare series, Gary Heba’s (1995) reading of the series as centering on the confrontation between youth and patriarchal capitalism is particularly important, and in general serves as an analytical framing device. While slasher films have often been interpreted in psychological terms as Freudian allegories of the return of the repressed, or in political terms as concerned primarily with issues concerning sexuality and gender, Heba employs a Marxist framework inspired by Robin Wood [1984] 2004 to argue that the Nightmare series concerns a wider set of ideological tensions relating to the confrontation between the dominant societal order of patriarchal capitalism and a range of cultural others, most prominently that of youth, as represented by the series’ various teenage protagonists.

According to Heba, this conflict centrally revolves around a continuous coding and re-coding of identities and identity positions, as the teenagers must remake and reshape themselves in order to combat not only Freddy but also the dominant social order which has produced him. Even while some teenagers manage to resist Freddy’s onslaught, however, they remain unable to change the social and cultural status quo. Because they so consistently focus on the possible emergence of alternative identities to those imposed by tradition and authority, that is, by the dominant order of patriarchal capitalism, however, Heba ultimately argues that the Nightmare films constitute a form of subversive cultural resistance which reveals “the closeted skeletons of the dominant culture in order to revise and improve it” (Heba 1995, 114).

Although Heba is entirely uninterested in mediation specifically, and only sparingly makes reference to Freddy’s particular powers and their capacity to destabilize dominant cultural distinctions, his analysis of the ideological tensions which permeate the series nonetheless provides a productive framework for exploring the role of media and mediation in relation to questions concerning power and ideology, particularly as relates to the sociohistorical context in which the Nightmare films were produced. As Kelly Bulkeley (1999, 110) reminds us, it is important to remember that the first Nightmare film was released at a time when the U.S. economy was booming, Wall Street was awash in merger-and-acquisition money, the Pentagon was busily amassing stockpiles of bombs and missiles to defend against the “Evil Empire” of the Soviet Union, and Ronald Reagan was gliding to a second presidential term on the reelection theme that “It’s Morning in America!”

More generally, the Nightmare series both emerged from and engages with a historical period characterized in cultural terms by a resurgence of conservative family values, coupled with a pronounced idealization of capitalism and military power (Sharrett 2015; Thompson and Reardon 2017). As Nelson (2013, 1030) notes: “The 80s are known largely as a time of greed and neoconservatism, where economic reforms and deregulation, conservative social agendas, and interventionist military policies overtook the more liberal social and economic policies of the 60s and 70s.” Consequently, Williams (2015, 203) argues that the Nightmare film series can perhaps best be understood as “a dark reaction to the supposedly benevolent Reagan era.”

Focusing on the Nightmare films released between 1984 and 1994, therefore, this article will expand upon Heba’s analysis of the confrontation between youth and patriarchal capitalism by exploring how
their images of mediation engage in various ways with a range of ideological tensions within this particular sociohistorical context. Indeed, it will argue that the images of mediation found in the *Nightmare* series participate to a significant degree in the articulation of a profound unease with the coalescence of commodification and authority characteristic of the neoconservative Reagan-Bush era of the 1980s and early 1990s.3

In this regard, furthermore, it will supplement Heba’s analysis with the proposition offered by Fredric Jameson (1991, 38–39) that contemporary cultural representations of technology often offer “a distorted figuration of […] the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism”, thereby serving as a kind of “representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new centered global network of the third stage of capital itself.” Although Jameson associates such representational figurations of technology most closely with literary science fiction, I want here to suggest that the image of mediation articulated in the *Nightmare* series, particularly as relates to the figure of Freddy Krueger, functions in much the same manner, that is, as a kind of cipher for the continued colonization and commodification of human life. Building on such an understanding of the image of mediation embodied in the figure of Freddy Krueger, it is possible to understand the monstrousness of dark mediation in terms more specifically related to the particular cultural context in which the *Nightmare* series emerged, that is, not as universal psychological terror, nor as generic abstraction, but rather as an expression of anxieties and concerns within a particular historical moment.

Close reading a selection of scenes across the seven *Nightmare* films released between 1984 and 1994, therefore, this article will explore in what way, and to what effect, Freddy’s use of media, and his powers of mediation, participate in the confrontation between youth and patriarchal capitalism, and what implications this has for the series’ cultural work in the late age of capitalism.

In order to trace the continually expanding and evolving engagement with images of mediation across the *Nightmare* films, moreover, this exploration will be structured chronologically. As Shimabukuro (2015, 56) notes, the series is characterized in terms of cultural production by a gradual transition from low-budget auteur film-making towards “being part of the Hollywood studio apparatus.” Nowell (2012, 72) similarly describes the *Nightmare* films as “the first commercially effective effort to repackage American teen slasher films for their principal US market”, as the film’s producer, New Line Cinema, developed the *Nightmare* property “from low-budget feature films to a multi-media enterprise […], resulting in its rise to unprecedented heights of cultural visibility.” Insofar as the series evolved from a single, contained narrative into cinematic pieces made within the context of a larger multimedia assemblage of offshoots and tie-ins, the *Nightmare* film series, and particularly the figure of Freddy Krueger, was arguably one of the first significant examples of the slasher genre’s transition from subculture to mainstream, as it both participated in and contributed to a shift towards franchise-thinking and synergetic commodification (Prince 2007, 6–7; Proctor and Mark 2022, 1–4). Indeed, by turning the *Nightmare* films into a “multimedia hit for a broad audience”, New Line Cinema arguably “helped transform the mainstream media industry and culture in the 1980s” (Herbert 2024, 77). Although the *Nightmare* films were thus ostensibly produced outside the studio system, on relatively small budgets, compared to major Hollywood productions, they were also part of the emergence of the high concept style of filmmaking and multimedia franchising that characterized what Schatz (1993) calls “The New Hollywood” of the 1980s.

As a series, the *Nightmare* films constitute a “multipart text” in which different writers and directors “riff on a core narrative shape” which is “based around persistent motifs and patterns” (Jones 2022, 81). Freddy’s use of media is one of the series’ central unifying motifs. Exploring the *Nightmare* films in chronological order, therefore, makes more clearly discernible the way in which the transition described above is mirrored both formally and thematically by an increasingly self-aware self-reflexivity. Whereas Shimabukuro (2015, 60–65) finds this self-reflexivity most prominently manifested in the *Nightmare* film’s use of various types of frames—such as doors, windows and mirrors—and Hutchings (2004, 210–211) associates it primarily with the elasticity of cinematic space, this article will instead foreground Freddy’s use of media, and his powers of dark mediation, as paramount to the series’ evolving self-reflexivity. Indeed, it will suggest that the series’ increasing interest in mediation is part of a self-reflexive negotiation of its own status as a commodity object within the larger ideological system of patriarchal capitalism, and thus constitutes an ambivalent and anxious negotiation of the series’ gradual integration into the Hollywood studio system and mainstream popular culture more generally. As such, the images of mediation explored in this article both reflect and engage with the changing cultural status of the *Nightmare* series itself.

As anyone familiar with the genre may well have observed, of course, horror cinema is riddled with representations of monstrous media. It is important to note, therefore, that the link established in the
Nightmare films between images of mediation and anxieties regarding patriarchal capitalism does not mark the series as unique, but rather suggests its participation in a long tradition within horror cinema arguably going back to the silent era. From the early trick films of Méliès to more contemporary films such as The Evil Dead (Raimi 1981), 976-Evil (Englund 1988), Pontypool (McDonald 2008), and The Babadook (Kent 2014), monstrous representations of media seem to be part of the genre’s established vocabulary, and thus part of the language through which horror films express and engage with the fears and anxieties within their particular historical and cultural contexts.4

Prior to the Nightmare film series, however, images of media and mediation have arguably tended to feature less frequently and prominently within the narrower context of the North American slasher subgenre, which has often displayed a somewhat “pre-technological” mindset within which mediation and technology (to the extent that they are made narratively relevant) most often simply fail to work (Clover 1992, 31). In many canonical slasher films, such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper 1974), Friday the 13th (Cunningham 1980), and Terror Train (Spottiswoode 1980), for instance, media simply do not seem to matter at all. At the same time, however, other canonical slasher films, such as Black Christmas (Clark 1974), Halloween (Carpenter 1978) and Prom Night (Lynch 1980), do display an interest in mediation, utilizing to various degrees the medium of the telephone as an engine of narrative suspense and thematic unfolding.5 Although mediation thus generally tended not to be a central object of explicit thematic concern in North American slasher cinema prior to the Nightmare series, it has nonetheless been lurking beneath the surface as a kind of thematic undercurrent, or technological unconscious, if you will, which has occasionally risen above the surface to become part of the genre’s representational fabric in both formal and thematic terms. Exploring images of mediation in the Nightmare series, therefore, will hopefully suggest the ways in which the series has contributed to the evolution of the slasher subgenre by significantly foregrounding and expanding upon an interest in mediation which in previous genre entries remained somewhat dormant. Indeed, the series’ highly self-reflexive interest in mediation seems significantly to anticipate the overtly media-centric meta-aesthetics of the Scream franchise (1996–2023) and the emergence of the so-called “meta”, “neo” or “postmodern” slasher in the mid to late-1990s (Conrich 2015; Hutchings 2004, 211–216; Jones 2024, 25–29; Petridis 2014; Thornley 2006; West 2018). Insofar as this article hopefully makes more clearly discernible the formal and thematic functions of the myriad images of mediation found in the Nightmare series, therefore, it may serve not only to cast new light on the series itself, but also to suggest new possible avenues of exploration within the slasher subgenre more generally, particularly as relates to its interest in mediation.

‘This is just a dream!’

Set in the fictional town of Springwood, Ohio, the first Nightmare film focuses on a group of Elm Street teenagers slowly uncovering not only how Freddy Krueger’s powers of mediation work but also the unique threat they pose to their lives. While initially unsure of the implications following the realization that they are all being stalked in their dreams by the same ominous figure, the teenagers soon learn the terrifying truth that any bodily violence inflicted upon them by Freddy in their dreams manifests in the real world. As her friends are brutally murdered one by one, protagonist, Nancy Thompson, must learn to navigate not only the increasingly diffuse border between dream and reality, but also the particular ways in which Freddy’s powers of mediation enable him to transgress it.

One scene which is particularly illustrative of these powers features Nancy attempting to warn her boyfriend, Glen, who she believes will be Freddy’s next victim. Confined to her bedroom by her parents, she calls him on the telephone but receives only a busy-signal. Within seconds of hanging up, however, the telephone rings. Picking it up, she hears the screeching sound of Freddy’s knives-for-fingers glove scratching against metal. Recognizing this particular sound from an earlier nightmare, she instantly rips the telephone’s electrical cord out of the wall. Despite no longer being connected to an electrical outlet, however, the telephone rings again only moments later. When Nancy hesitantly answers it, the ominous voice of Freddy Krueger sounds out in response: “I’m your boyfriend now, Nancy!” Before she has a chance to react, the telephone’s mouthpiece transforms into Freddy’s mouth, and his tongue emerges, licking her on the lips. Screaming at the top of her lungs, Nancy throws the telephone on the floor and stomps on it, breaking it into multiple pieces.

If ever there were a concrete image of the potential horror of mediation, Freddy Krueger’s phone-tongue is it. Indeed, the image of Freddy’s tongue emerging from the telephone forcefully concretizes his powers of mediation in one startling moment of transgression, suggesting a range of simultaneous transgressions all feeding into one another. First, it is important to note that while the film progressively destabilizes the border between dream and reality, this is the first example of Freddy crossing the border while his victim is still awake, thereby showcasing his powers of dark mediation at their most powerful, as
he instantiates a kind of “blending” of the two supposedly separate domains. In this one moment, therefore, the distinction between dream and reality is effectively erased, and the image of Freddy’s telephone-tongue serves both as a literalization of this erasure as well as a metaphor for the powers of mediation through which it is realized. Moreover, Freddy’s transgression of the border between dream and reality is mirrored by the transgression of the border between subject and object, that is, between technological artefact and user, as his “possession” of the telephone is instantiated through a literal melding together of his body with the body of the telephone. As a kind of machine-body assemblage, Freddy’s telephonic tongue literalizes the telephone’s traditional extension of the human sensorium through electrical signals (to use McLuhan’s terminology) in explicitly bodily terms, as Freddy here collapses entirely the distinction between sender and medium to literally become the telephone. In so doing, he further threatens the potential collapse of distinction between sender and receiver through mediation—a threat also literalized in bodily terms as an act of sexualized violence. Transforming the body of the telephone into his own body, Freddy thus transgresses the telephone’s conventional border between presence (voice) and absence (body) in order to commit an act of sexualized violence which implicitly suggests a more foundational violation of the human subject itself. Collapsing the distinction between Freddy’s body and the body of the telephone, moreover, the telephone’s status as a medium is effectively effaced since it no longer serves as a channel of communication but rather as a point of direct physical contact between the speaking mouths whose separation in this context preconditions mediation itself. In keeping with Thacker’s concept of dark media, mediation in this instance collapses and is replaced by a moment of pure monstrous presence in which “it is less the media object that is the source of horror, and more the fact of mediation itself that is horrific” (Thacker 2013: 92).

Finally, it is worth noting that the scene also gestures towards the capacity of media to structure not only our interactions with the specific technological object enabling mediation but social space itself. While she knows that a telephone cannot possibly ring without electrical power, and, moreover, that this fact makes Freddy the likely caller, Nancy nonetheless answers the telephone when it rings, as if the sound compels her to violate all the signs that tell her not to pick up. While this might easily be dismissed as merely a generic convention meant to propel the plot forward, it arguably works simultaneously as a kind of metaphorical replaying of the ways in which media call us into action both individually and collectively, structuring not only our actions and interactions but the fabric of social space itself. In a world where social interaction is increasingly mediated, Freddy’s phone-tongue thus calls attention not merely to the potential horror of mediation but to its pernicious ubiquity. Mediation, like Freddy, is everywhere.

In A Nightmare on Elm Street, moreover, the potential horror of mediation is always implicitly returned to the scene of the viewer’s own watching. Indeed, the image of Freddy’s phone-tongue implicitly suggests the possibility of other forms of medial transgression, namely the transgression of the border between the film’s storyworld and the outside reality in which the viewer is situated, i.e. the cinematic screen. Although the scene itself does not explicitly reference the cinematic screen, multiple earlier scenes help establish a pattern of resemblance between the different forms of medial transgression as one scene of transgression feeds into the next. One of the most noticeable scenes allegorically suggesting a transgression of the cinematic screen features Freddy pushing against a white bedroom wall, which yields just enough to make his facial features visible behind the wallpaper. Another similar moment occurs during the opening credit sequence, where the film’s title card is followed by a brief shot of Freddy’s knives-for-fingers-glove cutting through a white, semi-transparent sheet of cloth reminiscent of the cinematic screen. A scene featuring Nancy sitting in a bathtub with Freddy’s knives-for-fingers glove slowly emerging from the water is also worth mentioning insofar as the thin layer of white soap foam covering the water’s surface gestures towards the cinematic screen. Finally, the film’s climactic confrontation between Freddy and Nancy features the former ripping through and emerging from behind a white bedsheets—an item which furthermore features heavily in previous death scenes as Glen is sucked into a hole suddenly appearing in his bed while the character of Rodney is strangled with a bedsheets. Pointing to films such as Poltergeist (Hooper 1982), Demons (Bava 1985), and Ring (Nakata 1998), Thacker (2013, 108) argues that this kind of medial transgression is ultimately an example of dark mediation: “While many horror films point outside themselves to the real world of the audience, some films allegorize this through a scene in which some menacing, unknown force crosses the media threshold of the screen in the film, only to suggest a similar transgression of the screen of the very film the viewer is watching.” Unlike these films however, A Nightmare on Elm Street does not feature cinematic or televisual screens. Instead, it uses a variety of screens and surfaces to metaphorically invoke the cinematic screen, and thus the representational surface of the film itself.
A Nightmare on Elm Street thus allegorically suggests the possible violation of the border between the film’s storyworld and the viewer’s own world in order to imbue the cinematic screen itself with a sense of danger. While this is a relatively common trope in horror cinema—arguably going back all the way to the silent era’s so-called “cinema of attractions” (Gunning 1995)—the important point here is that Freddy’s dreamworld is thus fundamentally established as an allegory for cinematic illusion, and the various media through which he terrorizes his victims come to work as metonyms thereof. The affinity between Freddy’s dreamworld and cinematic illusion is suggested, furthermore, in a much early scene, prior to Freddy’s first on-screen appearance. As Nancy and her friends prepare for a sleepover, Glen calls home to tell his mother that he is visiting his aunt—a lie he chooses to augment with a tape recording of various sound effects. While the trick seems to work initially, however, things soon go off the rails, as the tape recording in quick succession replaces airport ambience with car engines aggressively accelerating, tires screeching, women screaming, gunfire and explosions. Caught off guard by this sudden turn of events, Glen is forced to continually modify his lie in order to align it with the increasingly outranked sound effects—a task which, of course, proves impossible. On a surface level, the scene plays primarily for comedy purposes, as the misalignment of Glen’s “everyday” narrative with sound effects more associated with high-octane Hollywood action films causes his lie to disintegrate in spectacular fashion. Beneath the surface, however, the scene simultaneously plays a self-reflexive game with the conventions of narrative cinema, in particular its goal of creating a credible mimetic imitation of reality by establishing a unified and cohesive diegetic space. Since the entire purpose of Glen’s phone call is essentially to fool his mother into believing that illusion is reality, moreover, the scene implicitly concerns the illusory powers of cinema and its power to destabilize the distinction between illusion and reality. As Katharina Rein (2012, 93) argues, the scene in this way implicitly articulates a foundational ontological problem, namely that of how to distinguish between what is real and what is illusion given the capacity of mediation to fool our senses.

Glen’s telephone call, as well as the various scenes of medial transgression explored above, all implicitly return the viewer to this experience of ontological confusion, suggesting that the dividing line between cinematic illusion and reality—like that between dreaming and being awake—may not be as stable as we might think. It is significant, therefore, that Nancy ultimately defeats Freddy not through physical strength or violence, but by reasserting the distinction between reality and illusion otherwise destabilized by his powers of dark mediation. “I know the secret now,” she says to him. “This is just a dream! […] I take back every bit of energy I gave to you! You’re nothing! You’re shit!” Turning her back and walking away, she leaves Freddy to essentially disappear even as he attempts to attack her once again. Although arguably incoherent in narrative terms, the scene works primarily on a metaphorical level to suggest that Freddy loses his capacity to violently reshape reality, so to speak, when the “receiver” of his “message” understands that his illusions are precisely that, illusions, and not reality. Rejecting the ontological confusion otherwise imposed by Freddy’s powers of mediation, Nancy in this way re-establishes order, safeguarding the various cultural borders and distinctions hitherto destabilized through Freddy’s monstrous powers of mediation.

In so doing, of course, she also implicitly rejects not only the potential transgression of the cinematic screen suggested throughout the film, but the model of spectatorship it articulates, that is, a model in which the viewer is a passive consumer of cinematic illusion, and therefore also a victim of its powers. As Halberstam (1995, 146) argues, Nancy instead becomes an active participant, re-interpreting the figure of Freddy and the character of the threat he poses to her, thereby articulating a “powerful model of spectatorship” in which “watching must be an alert and self-conscious process as opposed to the conventional notions of spectatorship as a kind of escape into passive inertia.” Within this model of spectatorship, the viewer is not a passive victim of cinematic illusion, but is capable of maintaining the distinction between illusion and reality. As Halberstam (1995, 146) notes, therefore, the film suggests that “[k]eeping the appropriate distance between representations and reality is one way for a girl to survive […] a slasher film.” While the scenes of medial transgression thus repeatedly suggests that the cinematic screen constitutes a threat to the viewer, Nancy’s forceful rejection of Freddy instead establishes the viewer as capable not only of resisting but even of negating this threat by changing her understanding of its representational powers.

In thus containing the monstrous forces of diffusion and restoring order, the film might arguably belong to the category of what Andrew Tudor (1989) famously dubbed “safe” horror. Such a conclusion, however, is necessarily complicated by Freddy’s return in the film’s final scene, which both retains and foregrounds the highly unstable distinction between illusion and reality by instead suggesting that Nancy (and the viewer) is still trapped inside Freddy’s dreamworld. Juxtaposing two contradictory endings in this manner, the film not only suggests that the struggle to distinguish reality from illusion is a never-ending battle but also calls implicitly upon
the viewer to remain critical and conscious of the capacity of mediated illusions—specifically cinematic ones—to frame and shape our experiences and understandings of reality. Indeed, it suggests that despite our best efforts to do so, it may in fact not be possible to entirely escape from illusion into a realm of pure unmediated reality.

In ideological terms, moreover, the question of illusion versus reality is framed by the explicit confluence of Freddy’s monstrous violence and adult authority. Indeed, a key feature of the narrative is the gradual revelation of Freddy’s past and the role that the Elm Street parents played in his return. Establishing the parents as ultimately responsible for Freddy’s violence, the film suggests that the adult community is a direct threat to the children they are supposed to protect. Nancy’s struggle against Freddy, therefore, is also a struggle against an adult community which not only refuses to acknowledge his existence, but which actively endangers the lives of the teenage community through various repressive measures. As Humphries (2002, 161) notes, the parents of Elm Street are “keeping the children in the dark, withholding from them the very information that could help them, not to fight Freddy, but to understand what sort of society they are living in.”

In what Heba (1995, 109) describes as the “ideological plot” of the Nightmare films, Freddy’s violence is thus established as an extension of a larger societal system of control and discipline entailing that young people must fight not only Freddy “but also the rhetorical identities traditionally ascribed to them within the dominant culture.” Rather than submit to adult authority, therefore, the teenage protagonists in the Nightmare films must “undergo a rite of passage that enables them to take care of themselves in a world that cannot and will not do so” (Heba 1995, 109).

Heba, however, reads Freddy’s monstrous violence as enabling this transformation towards independence, and thus ultimately emancipation, because it instantiates “a breakdown or de-centering of the monoglossic, common-sense rationality machine that guides the status quo”, thereby ultimately making it possible for the Elm Street teenagers to “resist the codes of the dominant culture” (Heba 1995, 109).

While it is certainly true that Freddy’s monstrous powers of dark mediation contain the potential for subversive resistance to the reigning societal order, however, the function of this power within the story-world established across the various Nightmare films is ultimately always to reinforce that order. Freddy thus functions not primarily as an engine of subversive resistance, as Heba suggests, but as an extension not only of adult authority but of the larger societal system of patriarchal capitalism with which it is complicit. As Hutchings (2004, 210) suggests, Freddy is ultimately established as “the voice of monstrous parenthood”, whose violence serves to reinforce the reigning societal order. Serving as a form of social disciplining, Freddy’s killing of the Elm Street teenagers is ultimately predicated upon one simple rule: “Youngsters are to behave as their parents expect” (Humphries 2002, 159).

Although arguably more readily discernible in later sequels, Freddy’s allegiance with patriarchal capitalism is evident even in the first Nightmare film, wherein he is established as both “the repressive father-figure, the stern puritanical, social superego” as well as “pure drive, the drive for absolute and complete satisfaction of any and every whim imaginable” and therefore becomes “the epitome of the American way of life” (Humphries 2002, 160). Nancy’s rejection of Freddy’s illusions, and his subsequent return, can therefore be understood as the articulation of a profound ambivalence in regards to the possibility of emancipation not only from illusion but from the forms of social and ideological disciplining it entails.

‘Welcome to primetime, bitch!’

In A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge (Sholder 1985), the trope of medial transgression returns somewhat indirectly in the form of a more traditional possession plot, as Freddy attempts to regain his powers by using teenage protagonist, Jesse Walsh, as a medium through which to manifest physically in the real world. The film’s primary focus is Jesse’s attempts to resist Freddy’s increasing control over him, and as the narrative progresses, the two become increasingly intertwined to the point that Freddy manifests physically though Jesse’s body—a feat which ultimately entails the erasure of Jesse himself as Freddy rips out through Jesse’s chest, leaving his decimated body behind. “There is no Jesse!” Freddy mockingly tells Jesse’s potential girlfriend Lisa. “I’m Jesse now!” In this manner, the central plot of Freddy’s Revenge is built around dark mediation, as Freddy’s use of Jesse’s body as a medium through which to transgress the border between the supernatural and the natural ultimately entails his effacement and thus also an effacement of a mediation itself. While Freddy’s Revenge thus retains a focus on Freddy’s powers of dark mediation, however, these powers are neither concretized nor allegorized through the (implicit or explicit) use of, or reference to, specific technologies of communication or media processes, and the film arguably lends itself more easily to a more conventional Freudian approach as concerning the return of the repressed in monstrous form—a reading which ties in neatly with its much discussed sexual politics (Benshoff 1997, 246–249; DeGraffenreid 2011; Kaminski 2020; Scales 2014; Thorn 2022).
A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (Russell 1987), however, not only returns more explicitly to the scene of mediation, so to speak, but builds much of its narrative around it. Indeed, the film charts a somewhat new trajectory for the Nightmare film series, engaging much more extensively and explicitly with contemporary popular media culture while simultaneously suggesting a space of continuity between that culture and the reigning societal order of patriarchal capitalism. The film focuses on a group of Elm Street teenagers haunted by Freddy in their dreams. Suffering from various forms of sleep deprivation because of this, their parents have committed them to a local psychiatric hospital, where the doctors in charge dismiss any suggestion of the supernatural, insisting instead that their condition is “the byproduct of guilt […] stemming from moral conflicts and overt sexuality.” Much of the narrative subsequently centers on the conflict between the Elm Street teenagers and the doctors in charge, who, as symbolic representatives of modern scientific authority, cannot accept any explanatory model that threatens the integrity of the reigning ideological order, thereby leaving the teenagers even more vulnerable to the threat of Freddy’s monstrous violence (Heba 1995, 110).

While the conflict between adult authority and youth is also clearly present and thematically significant in the first two Nightmare films, Dream Warriors turns it into a more central engine of narrative unfoldment, using the explicitly institutional setting to establish a realm of confluence between adult authority and the larger societal order of patriarchal capitalism. In so doing, moreover, it further emphasizes Freddy’s role not primarily as a dangerous deviant, that is, an outsider to the reigning social order, but rather as a radicalized extension thereof. An illustrative example of this is Freddy’s murder of the teenager Phillip. An avid marionette-maker, Phillip is incensed by the hospital staff’s attempt to impede his work. As a form of free creativity, Phillip’s work as a marionette-maker is at odds with the interpretative and disciplining procedures of the reigning institutional authorities, who understand his creativity not as an expression of imagination and individuality, but rather as a potential risk to his life, that is, as a symptom of some form of psychological pathology. The scene of Phillip’s death metaphorically replays and radicalizes this conflict, as Freddy gains control of Phillip by essentially transforming him into a marionette puppet. Ripping out the tendons in Phillip’s arms and legs in order to use them as “strings”, Freddy forces Phillip to walk up into the hospital’s clock tower and onto a ledge where Freddy —seen hovering above the tower as a giant puppet master—cuts the tendons, causing Phillip to plummet to his death. Although all of the other teenagers understand that Freddy is responsible, the doctors deem it a suicide and even posthumously berate Phillip for being weak and cowardly. Freddy in this manner insidiously exasperates the conflict between the Elm Street teenagers and the hospital authorities, allowing the latter to falsely confirm their erroneous interpretation of the unfolding events and increase their dominance, as a strict routine of mandatory sedation is subsequently imposed. Replaying the conflict between creative freedom and adult institutional authority, the scene of Phillip’s death thus establishes Freddy as an extension of the latter.

Phillip’s death, moreover, is the first of many in the Nightmare series built around ironic reversal, as teenagers are killed by the means (or, rather, mediums) through which they seek to express themselves creatively, or through which they simply seek some form of escape from adult authority. Another example is Freddy’s killing of the character of Jennifer, who wants to become an actor—a dream met with sarcastic derision by the hospital staff. Watching late-night television alone in the hospital’s recreational room, specifically The Dick Cavett Show, featuring an interview with Zsa Zsa Gabor about how to become a successful actor, Jennifer sees Cavett suddenly transform into Freddy and attacking Zsa Zsa Gabor, split-seconds before the channel goes static. As she approaches the television, two mechanical arms abruptly emerge from it and grab her. Freddy’s head then emerges from the top of the television, sporting a pair of antennas on top. “This is it Jennifer!” he exclaims in a mocking voice. “Your big break in TV! Welcome to primetime, bitch!” Freddy then smashes Jennifer’s head into the screen, killing her instantly. For Jennifer, television is intimately associated with her dreams of becoming an actor and thus of actively shaping and determining her own future through creative work. Freddy’s use of the medium of television as a literal means of killing her, coupled with his mocking references to her dreams of celebrity, clearly repeats the ironic reversal of Phillip’s death, and further foregrounds the connection between Freddy and the reigning ideological order, as he once again instantiates a radicalization of its endeavor to curtail the freedom and creativity of the teenage protagonists.

Another important feature of the scene is the way in which it reworks the trope of medial transgression. While Freddy’s fusing of his body with that of the television clearly builds on the telephone-tongue scene from the series’ first film, his capacity for subversive appropriation is here expanded to include contemporary popular culture media genres, in this case the late-night television talk show. This is significant, not least in thematic terms, because it suggests a space of continuity between contemporary popular culture and the monstrous image of
mediation Freddy embodies. No longer is he merely a demonic father figure, but a kind of popular cultural cannibal whose regime of terror is established through the continual consumption and regurgitation of the discourses of popular media culture. While the scene of Jessica’s death does suggest that popular media culture may serve as a source of creative freedom, and thus ultimately of emancipation, it predominantly codes it as connected to a larger ideological system of discipline and control of which Freddy functions as a monstrous embodiment.

Following Freddy’s murder of Phillipp and Jennifer, the remaining Elm Street teenagers must band together and finally defeat Freddy through their own forms of creative collaboration. They do so with the help of Nancy Thompson, who has returned to Springwood as a psychiatrist. Fighting Freddy not only requires that she tells them the truth about Freddy’s past but also that she explains to them the rules of his dreamworld. In so doing, she not only enables the teenagers to place their disparate nightmares into a larger cohesive narrative, but also empowers them to change that narrative. Nancy particularly emphasizes not only the creative freedom associated with dreaming, insisting that all of them have the power to fight Freddy, but also that they must do so together in order to succeed: “All of you have this inner strength. Some special power that you’ve had in your most wonderful dreams. Together we can learn to use that power.”

Key in this regard is one particular member of the teenage community, Kristen Parker, who has the ability to pull other people into her dreams, essentially functioning as a medium through which the teenagers can enter the same dream space simultaneously. Kristen’s powers of mediation thus allow the teenagers to fight Freddy collectively, rather than individually, thereby becoming the “dream warriors” referred to in the film’s title. As a means of codifying and concretizing the confrontation of Freddy’s powers of dark mediation with the equally transgressive powers embodied in the character of Kristen, the film’s plot is built to a significant degree around the gameplay mechanics of roleplaying board games. Much as in such games, where players assume the roles of various characters in imagined (often fantastic) settings, each teenager must learn not only the particular skills of their dream avatar but also the rules that govern Freddy’s dreamworld. Most significantly, however, the film’s imitation of the ludic properties of roleplaying board games centers on the trope of magical language, which is employed as a means of foregrounding what in the previous installments remained rather more implicit, namely the power of language to rework and refashion reality. Nancy’s defeat of Freddy in A Nightmare on Elm Street, for instance, is essentially instantiated by her verbally declaring him to be meaningless. In Freddy’s Revenge, Lisa similarly divests Freddy of his powers by declaring her love for Jesse. “I love you! Come back to me!” As Freddy collapses on the ground following these words, Lisa continues: “He can’t hold you, Jesse! He’s losing his grip! You can get out!” Weakening Freddy further in this way, she is able finally to kiss him, causing him to catch on fire and set Jesse free. Dream Warriors significantly expands this trope by placing the transformative power of language front and center as the Elm Street teenagers attempt to defeat Freddy by creating idealized dream avatars of themselves. In this act of creative self-realization, or identity re-formation, language plays a significant role as a way not only of instantiating individual change but also as a way of making it into a shared social reality. “In my dreams, my legs are strong!” says the wheelchair-bound character of Will, for instance, as he fashions a dream-version of himself capable of walking, while the character of Taryn transforms into an idealized version of herself, saying “In my dreams I am beautiful, and bad!” Although both Will and Taryn ultimately perish in the fight against Freddy, the transformative power of language is succinctly illustrated in the final confrontation, which finds the Elm Street teenagers caught in a long hallway filled with mirrors. Using these mirrors, Freddy creates multiple mirror-image copies of himself which reach out through the mirrors and grab the teenagers, pulling them inside in an attempt to trap them. Initially, Freddy’s trick seems to work. Confronted by the possibility of his friends dying, however, the hitherto mute character of Joey finally becomes capable of speaking again, and yells out a booming “No!” which causes all of the mirrors to shatter and his friends to escape. As Joey’s voice thus becomes a literal means of saving his friends, Dream Warriors once again foregrounds the power of language, and by extension mediation, allegorically suggesting its capacity to shape both individual and social reality. If the first Nightmare film suggested a model of mediation in which the interpretive powers of the receiver served as a possible means of resistance to Freddy’s powers of dark mediation, Dream Warriors employs the medium of language as a way of concretizing this potential. Indeed, the film’s narrative focuses to a significant degree on the confrontation between Freddy’s powers of mediation and other forms of creative collective self-expression, ultimately epitomized in Joey’s voice, which literally breaks Freddy’s grasp on the teenagers. The combined creative powers of the Elm Street teenagers are thus set against Freddy’s powers of dark mediation, as the young community must engage in a kind of creative resistance to the strictures of the reigning ideological order of which Freddy serves as the monstrous extension.
Moreover, the film also returns implicitly to the scene of the viewer’s own watching as Freddy’s use of mirrors recalls the first Nightmare film’s use of different forms of medial transgression to self-reflexively gesture towards the relationship of the viewer to the cinematic screen. Building on the association between Freddy’s dreamworld and cinematic illusion established in the first film, the scene not only serves as yet another concretization of Freddy’s monstrous powers of dark mediation, but allegorically suggests a space of continuity between those powers and the representational machinery of the film itself. The image of Freddy reaching out through the mirror surfaces and pulling the Elm Street teenagers into the undefined space(s) beyond thus arguably serves as a metaphor for the illusory powers of cinema—the dangers of which are most succinctly established when Freddy finally kills Nancy by posing as her father and then stabbing her to death as she embraces him. Despite her clear-cut rejection of Freddy’s powers of illusion in the first Nightmare film, then, Nancy is ultimately killed precisely because she confuses illusion with reality. Much as the previous films, Dream Warriors thus ends on a highly ambivalent note, suggesting that although collective creative resistance is possible, Freddy’s monstrous powers of dark mediation remain a threat. And while it warns of the dangers of illusion much in the same manner as well, it does not posit safeguarding the distinction between illusion and reality as a possible solution. Instead it suggests that alternative forms of creative meaning-making and mediation are the only means by which Freddy’s insidious creativity may be countered and potentially defeated. While Dream Warriors thus expands the series’ exploration of mediation, connecting it much more explicitly to the sphere of popular media culture, it retains the interest in the role of cinematic illusion found in the first Nightmare film, allegorically suggesting that the cinematic screen may function as both a means for the reproduction of ideology as well as a source for resistance to it.

In many ways, therefore Dream Warriors constitutes a turning point for the Nightmare film series. While the conflict between youth and patriarchal capitalism is also present in the first two films, Dream Warriors links this conflict to the sphere of popular media culture in a way which profoundly informs the rest of the series. While the images of mediation in the first two films serve primarily as engines of psychological terror, replaying the trope of medial transgression in various ways in order to implicitly suggest a transgression of the cinematic screen, Dream Warriors and the subsequent films are more interested in the relationship between mediation and the dominant ideological system of patriarchal capitalism, as well as the relationship of the Nightmare series itself to that system.

As suggested previously, this transition towards an increasing self-aware focus on mediation mirrors the series’ transition towards popular mainstream culture. As Herbert (2024, 59) notes, the transition of the Nightmare series from a single film into a multimedia franchise already began with Freddy’s Revenge, which was supported by “an extravagant promotional campaign that brought Freddy into a wider public arena and helped establish [A Nightmare on Elm Street] as a multimedia franchise” by extending Freddy “far beyond the textual bounds of the two feature films, placing him widely into everyday cultural life.” Dream Warriors was an attempt to further expand this process. Not only was it the first Nightmare film to receive a nationwide release, but it was also supported by a five million dollar promotional campaign and myriad cross-promotional efforts such as television appearances by Freddy, a title song recorded and released by heavy metal band Dokken, as well as various merchandising and licensing deals which resulted not only in Halloween costumes and blow-up figures but also in board games, watches, skateboards, wall hangings, pillowcases and much more (Herbert 2024, 62–63). If Freddy’s Revenge signaled the intention of New Line Cinema to turn the films into a full-fledged multimedia franchise, Dream Warriors was the realization of that intention, as it transformed the Elm Street property “from convincingly Hollywood-like independent movies into a multimedia brand befitting a largely imagined American popular cultural mainstream of the late 1980s” (Nowell 2012, 81). With Dream Warriors, however, the Nightmare franchise not only reached new heights of popularity, but also became much more overtly self-reflexive. Indeed, the link established in Dream Warriors between Freddy’s powers of dark mediation and popular media culture is a central part of an anxious exploration of the series’ increasing popularity, and thus an exploration of its status as a commodity object within the very same system of cultural production underpinning and reinforcing the dominant order of patriarchal capitalism.

‘Now no one sleeps!’

Dream Warriors’ combination of medial transgression and ironic reversal established a template that would serve not only as Freddy’s modus operandi in the rest of the series but also as the central means through which it would continue its self-reflexive exploration of contemporary popular media culture and its relationship to the dominant societal order of patriarchal capitalism. This is evident in A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (Harlin 1988), which finds Freddy setting his sights on a new teenage girl, Alice Johnson, after finally dispatching the
surviving teenagers from the previous film. Indeed, the film’s opening act finds Freddy not only killing Kristen, but appropriating her powers of mediation to expand his reign of terror. “Now, no one sleeps!” he triumphantly exclaims. Before she dies, however, Kristen manages to pass her dream powers onto Alice, who therefore becomes an object of Freddy’s terror as well as a source of hope for the teenagers in danger.

Using Alice as a medium, Freddy sets his sights on her high school friends, and his first victim is the character of Sheila. During a math test in school, Sheila falls asleep, and the mathematical equations written on the paper in front of her begin moving, eventually reforming into a handwritten message from Freddy: “Learning is fun with Freddy!” Suddenly, the pen in Sheila’s hand starts dripping blood, and when she attempts to wipe the blood off of the paper, a robotic hand reaches out and grabs her. Although Sheila is able to escape its grip, Freddy soon appears and kisses her, appearing to literally suck the life out of her. In the real world, Sheila appears to succumb to an asthma attack and dies. Dreaming of becoming a doctor, Sheila is highly intelligent, interested in math and science as well as a talented inventor. Freddy’s manipulation of the math equations as well as the bloody pen indicates his appropriation of a medium highly central to Sheila, namely that of writing, which for her is a medium of self-expression and self-realization. Using this medium as an instrument of terror in the manner here portrayed indicates once again the way in which Freddy appropriates the teenagers’ means of self-expression and creative freedom. And, of course, the image of Freddy reaching out of the surface of the paper in order to grab Sheila repeats the trope of medial transgression found in the earlier films, gesturing once again towards the affinity between Freddy’s dreamworld and cinematic illusion.

Realizing her own part in Sheila’s death, Alice sets out to stop Freddy. A significant plot point in this regard is that Alice’s evolving powers of mediation allow her to inherit or absorb particular attributes or character traits of her dead friends. When Sheila dies, for instance, Alice inherits her intelligence and inventiveness, consequently realizing that defeating Freddy requires a new level of mental focus and determination. “This is it,” she says, repeating words previously uttered by Sheila. “Mind over matter!” When her brother Rick is killed, she inherits his martial arts skills as well as his physical agility; and when her friend Debbie dies, she inherits her assertiveness and courage. In so doing, Alice gradually transforms from the shy and socially awkward girl initially introduced to the viewer into a more courageous, intelligent and physically imposing person, becoming more and more in control of her dreams and slowly transforming into the “Dream Master” referenced in the film’s title. Alice’s powers of mediation thus enable her to gradually reshape her own identity, essentially becoming an assemblage or network of other people’s powers and strengths (Trencansky 2001, 65–66), and this process of transformation is tellingly visualized in specifically medial terms. At home in her room, Alice has a mirror completely covered by photographs of her friends. As her friends die, she removes their photographs, slowly being able to see more and more of herself in the mirror. Photography in this way becomes a medium of remembrance and commemoration, allegorically replaying the collapse of distinction between past and present as well as self and other enabled by Alice’s powers and her absorption of the traits of her dead friends. In turn, the mirror, which in Dream Warrior’s served as a metaphorical double of cinematic illusion, here becomes a way of visually concretizing Alice’s journey of self-discovery, that is, the reshaping and reforming of her identity. As Alice uses her powers of mediation to remake her own identity, mediation is established not only as potentially dangerous and monstrous, but as intimately connected to identity and the possible remaking thereof. Alice’s use of the photographs and the mirror not only literalizes this process by making it visually legible to the viewer, but also suggests the extent to which media participate in processes of identity formation.

Consequently, Alice’s final confrontation with Freddy also occurs in a context that finds media playing a central part, as she is finally able to recall a nursery rhyme once taught to her by her dead mother. Holding up a shard of window glass in front of Freddy, she chants the rhyme: “Now I lay me down to sleep, the master of dreams my soul I’ll keep/In the reflection of my mind’s eye, evil will see itself, and it shall die.” Combining the spoken words of the rhyme with Freddy’s sudden view of himself in the reflection of the broken glass, Alice finally manages to weaken Freddy to the point that he is no longer able to contain the trapped souls of the Elm Street teenagers, who literally begin teeing his body apart before finally escaping. As with the previous films in the series, The Dream Master thus suggests once again the potential of language—in this case the specific genre of the nursery rhyme—to combat Freddy’s monstrous powers of mediation. Indeed, Alice’s use of the mirror as a means of turning these powers back onto himself succinctly underscores the point that the way to defeat Freddy is not to escape mediation, or to somehow re-establish the distinction between mediation and reality, but rather to mobilize different forms of creative counter-mediation.
In focusing on Alice’s re-making of her own identity through mediation as key to defeating Freddy, furthermore, the film suggests more directly than Dream Warriors a model of mediation which entails a foundational interpenetration of mediation and human subjectivity. While it does not entirely disregard the traditional autonomous and centered subject of Western modernity, Dream Master gestures toward an alternative subject which is highly malleable and emergent, that is, a subject which has the capacity to continually reform and refashion itself through different forms of mediation. In The Dream Master the centered subject therefore exists in an uneasy relationship with a distributed, emergent and highly relational subject. Because this subject is depicted as capable of remaking and refashioning itself, however, it does seem that some notion of relative autonomy remains. Although it cannot escape mediation, because it is to some extent constituted by it, the human subject nonetheless retains some inner core of autonomous agency enabling it to control mediation, rather than being controlled by it—a point which the film’s title seems implicitly to suggest.

Using Freddy and Alice as embodiments of the various qualities, potentials and dangers of mediation, The Dream Master thus codes the foundational interpenetration of human subjectivity and mediation neither as outright dangerous nor as a utopian source of emancipation but as highly ambivalent. Much as the previous films, furthermore, this exploration of mediation also turns self-reflexively towards the powers of cinematic illusion itself. Perhaps most obviously, a dream sequence which finds Alice entering a movie theatre returns to the scene of the viewer’s own watching in a much more explicit manner than previously seen in the series. Inside the theatre, an on-screen wind crosses into the theater space, quickly building in force and eventually blowing Alice through the screen and into a dream version of the diner where she works. Here, she is soon confronted by Freddy who—in a highly surreal scenario—eats a pizza garnished with miniature versions of her dead friends. Although of little consequence in narrative terms, as it essentially serves only as a framework for Freddy’s spectacular pizza, the scene of Alice getting blown into the screen nonetheless establishes a clear link between cinematic illusion and Freddy’s dreamworld by repeating the familiar trope of medial transgression in a now explicitly cinematic context. Serving both as a source of seductive and potentially dangerous illusions, as well as a source for the creative re-imaging and reshaping of both individual and collective social reality, the image of mediation found in The Dream Master thus implicitly articulates a highly ambivalent stance towards cinema itself.

‘This boy feels a need for speed!’

A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child (Hopkins 1989) picks up a few years later with Freddy once again returning from the dead just as Alice and her boyfriend Dan are about to graduate from high school. While his return is initially presented as something of a mystery, it is eventually revealed that Alice is pregnant, and that Freddy is using her unborn child as a medium through which to regain his powers. Since becoming a “Dream Master” in the previous film, Alice has been able to control her own dreams and thereby keep Freddy at bay. Her child, however, possesses all of Alice’s powers but none of her conscious control, meaning that Freddy can use the sleeping child’s dreams to re-establish his connection with the “real” world.

Much as the previous films in the series, the basic plot of Dream Child thus revolves around Freddy’s monstrous powers of dark mediation, and the confrontation between these powers and the Elm Street teenagers. One significant example of the thematic implications of this confrontation is the death of Dan. Racing to Alice’s rescue in his car, Dan is trapped by Freddy within a dream-loop which renders him unable to get where he wants to go as he is continually returned to his point of departure. In his efforts to break out of the loop, Dan eventually finds himself racing along the freeway on a motorcycle, when electrical wires suddenly emerge from the motorcycle’s handlebars and penetrate his skin before forcefully working their way into his hands and arms. As Dan screams in pain, Freddy’s face manifests in the mechanics of the motorcycle’s control panel. “This boy feels a need for speed!” he mockingly shouts, before proceeding to force even more wires, tubes and coils into Dan’s body, eventually disfiguring him to such an extent that he becomes essentially unrecognizable. Freddy releases Dan from this nightmare only split-seconds before his car crashes into oncoming traffic, killing Dan instantly.

Even while the merging of Dan’s body with the motorcycle’s electrical and fuel systems metaphorically suggests the violent usurpation of human agency by technology, another way of reading the scene is to view the motorcycle not only as closed mediating system of electrical signals and combustible liquids, but as a signifying object within a larger cultural system of commodified consumption. Viewing the motorcycle as a medium in this much wider sense, it is worth noting that the motorcycle presented on-screen is a modified 1989 Yamaha V-Max. First released in 1985, the V-Max featured a computer-supported fuel injection system (called “V-boost”) allowing for bursts of higher acceleration. Heavily marketed as an engineering revolution, allowing for a more aggressive and potent driving style, the
V-Max relayed certain attitudes and ideas concerning issues such as masculinity and power. As Miyake (2020, 3) argues, motorcycle imagery and narratives have generally tended to reproduce the dominant ideology of patriarchal capitalism (particularly its conventional gender roles), even while masking this reproduction “by the ideological illusion of the motorcycle as representing freedom, independence, empowerment, mobility, agency and alternative lifestyles.” Indeed, the motorcycle has often been characterized by a paradoxical double-bind in which it offers freedom through consumption while simultaneously re-containing consumers “back into the patriarchal economic system which subjugates, objectifies and commodifies them” (Miyake 2020, 73). Building on such an understanding of the Yamaha V-Max, Freddy’s possession of it arguably constitutes another instance of ironic reversal, signaling his implicit allegiance with the dominant ideological system of patriarchal capitalism as he appropriates the media through which it propagates in order to exacerbate its disciplining effects. The scene is thus highly illustrative not only of the way in which Freddy uses media to usurp human agency, but also of the way in which he radicalizes the cultural logic through which patriarchal capitalism controls youth, implicitly suggesting that the very media through which youth seeks to assert its independence and establish its identity are not only part of the dominant order but actively reproduce it.

In metaphorically replaying this particular cultural logic, the scene also implicitly gestures self-reflexively towards the larger system of cultural reproduction in which the Nightmare series is itself embedded. Key in this regard is the use of the famous “I feel a need for speed” phrase from the Tom Cruise blockbuster Top Gun (Scott 1986) as a thematic framing device. As previously mentioned, Freddy mockingly utters the phrase to Dan during his possession of the motorcycle, rephrasing it slightly: “This boy feels a need for speed!” However, the first person to utter this specific phrase in The Dream Child is Dan’s father, who does so during the high school graduation ceremony part of the film’s first act. While Dan is unsure about his own future, his father proclaims that his son is going to be a star football player and uses the line to assure all in attendance not only that this is a certainty but that it is Dan’s own wish. Freddy’s repetition of the phrase during his attack thus not only mimics parental authority but points self-reflexively to his violence as a radicalization thereof. As Williams (2015, 196, 204) points out, the Nightmare series often depicts teenagers discovering that “submission to a parental figure brings death, not liberation”, thereby clearly revealing masochism as “a key structure within the patriarchal unconscious.” In Top Gun, furthermore, the phrase functions as a celebration of the speed associated with military technology in the form of the American-made fighter jets that are the film’s central spectacle. The use of the line by Dan’s father works not only to amplify the objectification of his son by effectively turning him into a commodity (i.e. a human “machine” capable of producing speed) but also links that objectification to a larger ideological system, that is, the militarized conservatism of the Reagan era so explicitly celebrated in Top Gun. The scene of Dan’s death thus articulates a complex mingling of parental authority, militarized technology, and capitalist consumerism, which threatens both individual and collective agency. Referring to a Hollywood production such as Top Gun, moreover, the scene also alludes to mainstream cinema’s complicity with this system, arguably establishing mainstream Hollywood as an ideological extension thereof.

Another significant example of Freddy’s use of media in The Dream Child is his murder of Mark Grey. An avid comic book reader and talented comic book artist, Mark is working on a comic book of his own invention, featuring an idealized self-portrait in the form of a superhero named “The Phantom Prowler”. The scene of Mark’s death begins with Mark looking through a pile of comic books strewn on his studio floor, among which he finds an unfamiliar issue featuring a front-cover illustration of Freddy’s knives-for-fingers glove. In a familiar meta-aesthetic scenario, the illustrations inside the issue tell the story of the film itself, and as Mark continues reading he ultimately comes across an illustration of himself reading the comic. In this moment, as both film and comic temporally coalesce, the familiar motif of medial transgression returns as Mark is transformed into an animated figure and sucked into the comic, where he is attacked by Freddy. In response, Mark transforms into “The Phantom Prowler” and attacks Freddy, who, although temporarily succumbing to the onslaught, eventually transforms into “Super Freddy”, a super-villain comic book version of himself. Now impervious to any attack, he begins paraphrasing lines from various well-known iterations of the Superman figure, most notably Fleischer Studio’s 1940s animated short series Superman (1941–1943) and the later live-action television series Adventures of Superman (1952–1958): “Faster than a bastard maniac! More powerful than a local madman! It’s Super Freddy!” Once Freddy finishes toying with Mark in this manner, he transforms him into a paper figure and then cuts him to pieces while laughing maniacally: “Told you! Comic books was bad for you!” In the real world, Mark dies
from the wounds inflicted upon his paper avatar, which are transposed onto his physical body.

In another instance of ironic reversal, Freddy here appropriates a medial space explicitly established as Mark’s territory of competence—a space, moreover, through which he works not only to express his individuality but also to assert his freedom from parental authority. This manipulative subversion of the comic book superhero genre is perhaps most succinctly illustrated in Freddy’s taunting paraphrasing of the famous Superman lines, and his final punch line, furthermore, aligns his powers of mediation with adult authority by satirically referencing contemporary adult fears concerning the potentially damaging effects of comic books and other popular media on youth. As with the scene of Dan’s death, therefore, Freddy’s murder of Mark implicitly articulates a coalescence of popular media culture and adult authority which implicitly establishes Freddy not as a radical aberration from the dominant social order but rather as an extension of it.

Although Alice ultimately manages to defeat Freddy and save her unborn child, *The Dream Child* does not place as much narrative emphasis on her powers of mediation as did the previous films. Instead, it significantly expands the series’ interest in popular media culture and the ambivalent role it plays in regards to both the reproduction and the possible subversion of the reigning ideological order of patriarchal capitalism. All of the death scenes explored above clearly establish Freddy as the embodiment of that order, and effectively serve as allegories of the rampant commodification of human life in the age of late capitalism. In so doing, they suggest a space of continuity between popular media culture and patriarchal capitalism, wherein the first is implicitly positioned as an ideological extension of the latter. Even while Alice’s defeat of Freddy in the final battle does allow for the possibility of resistance, *The Dream Child* arguably paints the as-of-yet most bleak and pessimistic picture of a contemporary culture thoroughly colonized by patriarchal capitalism.

*‘Now I’m playing with power!’*

Disregarding entirely the character of Alice, the plot of *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Talalay 1991) instead focuses on Freddy’s attempt to regain his powers and escape the confines of Springwood by using his long lost daughter, Maggie, as a medium. Working as a psychiatrist at a shelter for troubled youth in a nearby town, Maggie is lured back to Springwood by Freddy, where he attacks both her and the group of teenagers in her charge. While Freddy manages to kill all of the teenagers bar one and then subsequently escape Springwood via Maggie’s mind, however, he is ultimately defeated by Maggie with the help of “dream psychiatrist”, “Doc”, and the last surviving teenager, Tracy.

Although discarding the character of Alice, as well as the particular image of mediation she embodied, the sixth installment in the series offers plenty of further examples of Freddy’s monstrous use of media. Among them, the most illustrative example is arguably Freddy’s killing of the character of Spencer. When first introduced, he is seen engrossed in a videogame while being simultaneously berated by his father. Defiantly ignoring the ongoing reprimand, Spencer keeps his attention squarely on the videogame, and the act of playing videogames is thereby presented as a way for Spencer to signal his disregard for the authority of his father and his attempt to control Spencer’s life. “All he wants me to do is to grow up to be like him,” he later complains. “An exact copy.” Videogames are in this way associated with a reluctance towards conformity and a rejection of adult authority by youth, and Spencer’s eventual death at the hands of Freddy takes on particular significance within this specific context, as he traps Spencer within a dream space modeled upon a 1980s platform videogame. In an undefined space outside of the game, Freddy simultaneously assumes control of Spencer via a joystick, forcing him through the game world, where a videogame version of his father soon attacks him while repeating the phrase “Be like me!” Laughing manically, Freddy underscores the theme of adult authority: “Father knows best!” Although Spencer is able to defeat the videogame version of his father, a videogame version of Freddy soon appears instead, and assaults Spencer with even greater force. “Now I’m playing with power!” Freddy enthusiastically exclaims. Outside in the real world, Spencer’s friends find him contorting in pain on the floor, and quickly devise a plan to stop Freddy by entering the dream and stealing his joystick. Although this briefly enables Spencer to strike down Freddy’s videogame avatar, Freddy soon regains control by switching to a modified remote control version of his knives-for-fingers glove—an obvious spoof on the so-called “Power Glove” released for the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System console in 1989. With the glove, Freddy eventually forces Spencer to the top of a staircase from which he throws him into a deep hole at the bottom of the stairs. “Oh yeah!” Freddy exclaims as Spencer finally dies. “Great to be back in business!”

The scene of Spencer’s death replays many of the familiar strategies discussed previously, as Freddy once again uses a medium associated by his victim with freedom and independence as a tool of control and torture. In allegorical terms, moreover, the scene also posits videogame playing not as a form cultural resistance but rather as an extension of patriarchal capitalism. If, as Heba (1995, 109) suggests, the Elm
Street teenagers must reshape their identities in order to resist the oppression of the reigning ideological system, the scene of Spencer’s death metaphorically suggests that videogames do not serve this function. Instead, Freddy’s use of the videogame medium as a means of manipulating, torturing and finally killing Spencer suggests that it is an extension of the existing order. Whereas the earlier scene of Spencer playing the handheld videogame implicitly suggests that videogames are a way for youth to establish a sense of individuality and self-determination outside the domain of adult authority, Freddy’s killing of Spencer instead suggests that videogames function as an extension of that domain. Indeed, Freddy’s appropriation of the videogame medium might be said to function as an allegorical instantiation of the familiar cultural logic by which initially subversive cultural forms are eventually appropriated, neutralized and transformed into extensions of the dominant ideological order. Arguably, Freddy’s final words, “It’s great to be back in business”, more than hint towards this space of continuity between videogames and patriarchal capitalism.

Sconce (1993, 112) reads the scene as a “highly self-reflexive and comic meditation on the spectator relations of the series as a whole” which serves as “an ironic commentary on the film’s presumed viewership.” Even so, its parodic features do not entirely preclude ideological interpellation but rather gestures towards the way in which parody itself constitutes another instantiation thereof. Sconce (1993, 112) suggest this when he asks:

Does this self-reflexive model of viewership [...] force the film’s viewers to assess their ideological position as teenage consumers of visual narrative in the 20th century? Probably not. Does this scene encourage teenage viewers to identify with Freddy, even as he dedicates himself to the eventual extermination of all living teens? Perversely, the answer would seem to be yes.

Viewer identification with Freddy, however, is not contingent upon his status as a character, but rather upon his function as “a facilitator, the dynamic ‘source’ of the phantasmagoric imagery” (Sconce 1993, 114). Although the scene of Spencer’s death is thus undoubtedly parodic, it is structured around the viewer identifying with Freddy as a dark medium, that is, as a creator of fantastic illusions. Although it thus contains the possibility of opposition through self-reflexive distancing, the scene suggests an image of mediation which once again returns the viewer to the dangerous power of spectacle. By way of its obvious self-reflexivity, moreover, this image of mediation is ultimately returned, as is so often the case in the Nightmare film series, to the cinematic screen itself. Writes Sconce (1993, 114):

The self-reflexivity of the scene (and others in the series) does call attention to the film’s process of enunciation, but ironically, it focuses this attention onto the character of Freddy, who serves the unique function of a cinematic enunciator actually contained within the film’s story world.

As argued previously, the figure of Freddy, and his dark powers of mediation, thus ultimately function as a metaphorical stand-in for the cinematic medium itself—a medium which is posited in decidedly ambivalent terms.

Apart from the scene of Spencer’s death, the formal and thematic significance of media is perhaps most clearly evident in the film’s climatic battle, as Maggie defeats Freddy by using a pair of 3-D glasses. As part of a marketing strategy, the last ten minutes of Freddy’s Dead were shot using contemporary 3-D technology. In order to cue the theater audience to put on their 3-D glasses, Maggie is seen putting on a similar pair of 3-D glasses; and in order for this act to make sense within the context of the film’s narrative, the character of “Doc” presents the glasses specifically as a way to defeat Freddy. Having studied dreams, and the power that imagination has within them, he essentially conceives of the glasses as a medium of creative meaning-making and thus as a way through which to reshape and rework the dreamworld otherwise controlled by Freddy. “Out here they mean nothing, but in the dream they can mean absolutely anything.” Building on this principle, Maggie uses her imagination to transform the glasses into a medium capable of seeing through Freddy’s illusions, and thus ultimately allowing her the time and opportunity to defeat him.

Although arguably motivated primarily by commercial reasons, the use of the 3-D glasses is significant since it metaphorically turns the cinematic apparatus (of which the glasses are an obvious metonymy) into a tool of Freddy’s ultimate destruction. In this way, one might say that Freddy’s Dead turns Freddy’s strategies of ironic reversal and medial transgression back on himself, as the very medium through which he asserts his power (at least allegorically) here becomes a way of defeating him. Even without conceiving of the glasses in this manner, however, it is still possible to read the scene as a reversal of the established pattern, as the “multimedia killer” himself becomes a victim of mediation.

As Taylor (2020, 69–70) argues, Freddy’s Dead is characterized by a “conspicuous self-reflexivity, by which the film’s own narrative devices [...] suggest a metatextual awareness of the film franchise.” Using the 3-D glasses to defeat Freddy is arguably a significant example of this type of awareness. Casting Freddy as a victim of mediation rather than a wielder of its power turns the established pattern of medial transgression on its head—a reversal tellingly mirrored as Maggie finally kills Freddy by using his infamous glove against him, thereby challenging “the patriarchal order that Freddy represents” (Taylor 2020, 77). Although
Taylor primarily sees this overt self-awareness manifested in the narrative’s reworking of Freddy’s origin story, and in its use of humor, it is more succinctly and significantly manifested through Freddy’s use of media and particularly Maggie’s creative repurposing and reimagining of the 3-D glasses.

Adherent to the ambivalent image of mediation found in the *Nightmare* series, mediation is thus both terrifying and terrific, both an instrument of ideology and control, and a tool for creative meaning-making and emancipation. In keeping with the more metaphorical reading of the scene, however, it is possible to understand the glasses as specifically addressing these capacities or potentialities in relation to cinema. Indeed, one might argue that the glasses implicitly presents cinema itself as a way of "disenchancing" the dangerous powers of mediated illusion embodied in the figure of Freddy, and thus ultimately to function not as a tool of ideology but as a means of critiquing and possibly subverting it. Putting on the 3-D glasses thus becomes not just a means of participating in Freddy’s final defeat, but also a way of engaging with the capacity of cinema to subvert rather than enforce illusion. Perhaps no greater illustration of the *Nightmare* series’ ambivalent image of mediation exists than this use of an obvious commercial gimmick as a means of ultimately killing Freddy. On the one hand, it demonstrates the potential of mediation to act as a source of empowerment and emancipation; on the other, it also links it to the logic of commodification. As such, it engages self-reflexively with the *Nightmare* films themselves and their continued integration into the cultural mainstream via a concerted and highly systematized multimedia marketing effort which included an ever-expanding array of cross-promotions and licensing deals throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s (Herbert 2024, 65–67). Freddy’s defeat by way of the 3-D glasses metaphorically casts this process as a source of hope and empowerment for its teenage audience, while simultaneously suggesting its potential complicity with the very system of oppression it ostensibly opposes.

‘Evil never dies, right?’

Although the seventh film in the *Nightmare* series is significantly different from the previous entries, it continues the series’ exploration of the intersection of ideology and mediation within the context of a contemporary popular culture ultimately underpinned by patriarchal capitalism. Rather than building on the series’ existing storyline, however, *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Craven 1994) tells the story of Freddy Krueger’s escape from the *Nightmare* film series itself. In so doing, it turns the trope of medial transgression so often present in the previous films into an explicit narrative focal point, just as it further foregrounds the affinity between Freddy’s dreamworld and cinematic illusion. In this way, the film is perhaps the logical conclusion to the series, insofar as it transforms the implicit (and sometimes explicit) exploration of cinematic illusion present throughout the series into a central plot point. Although the film features no teenagers or young adults, moreover, it does not completely efface the ideological plot described by Heba as inherent to the *Nightmare* films, but self-reflexively transposes it onto the film itself. Instead of teenagers versus patriarchal capitalism, in other words, New *Nightmare* presents an ideological plot in which the film itself (and the figure of Freddy) is placed in an oppositional relationship to contemporary consumer capitalism.

The film’s narrative focuses on actor Heather Langenkamp (Nancy Thompson in *Nightmare 1 and 3*) playing a fictional version of herself. Unbeknownst to her, director Wes Craven, also playing a fictional version of himself, has begun working on a script for a new and final *Nightmare* film. This, in turn, has somehow enabled Freddy to escape the fictional realm of the films and manifest outside in the real world, where he first strikes by killing Heather’s husband. Following this setup, the narrative focuses primarily on Heather’s struggle to understand what is going on in order to defeat Freddy and protect her son.

As this narrative structure suggests, New *Nightmare* is an overtly self-reflexive film. Indeed, Phillips (2012, 86) notes that, “[c]asting the film […] within the world of film production affords Craven the opportunity to reflect upon the practice and morality of making the kinds of films he has made.” A central thematic feature in this regard is the film’s defense of cinematic horror against the forces of capitalist commercialization and commodification. In a scene featuring Heather in conversation with the film’s producer, New Line Cinema CEO Bob Shaye, also playing himself, the basic premise against which the film revolts is explicated. Asking Heather to play Nancy one final time in order to revive the franchise, Heather responds with skepticism: “I thought you killed Freddy off?” Bob Shaye’s reply is telling: “We did. Bad mistake. The fans are clamoring for more. So, evil never dies, right?” Here the script explicitly articulates precisely the kind of capitalist logic of commodification against which it ostensibly positions itself. Moreover, it explicitly juxtaposes the concept of evil with the capitalist logic of commodified repetition. Within the dominant system of patriarchal capitalism, evil can never die as long as there is a demand for it. Perhaps the most succinct and significant critique of capitalist commodification, however, is captured in a scene wherein Heather meets with director Wes Craven. Discussing his work on the script for the new film, Craven begins speaking on the nature of evil:
It can be captured sometimes. By storytellers, of all things. Every so often, they imagine a story good enough to sort of catch its essence, and then for a while it’s held prisoner in the story. The problem comes when the story dies. And that can happen in a lot of ways. It can get too familiar to people, or somebody waters it down to make it an easier sell. Or maybe it it’s just so upsetting to society that it’s banned outright. However it happens, when the story dies, the evil is set free.

Within the framework of thinking here presented, horror cinema, and other forms of storytelling, function as a kind of concretization of evil, which can allow society to confront and deal with it. Representations of evil in both cinema and other forms of storytelling allow for a critical and conscious exploration of its nature and its effect upon ourselves both individually and collectively. As such, they make it possible to overcome evil. When stories about evil are no longer able to be told, or when those stories lose their impact or meaning, evil can regain the power it had before storytelling divested it of its hold over society. Of course, this is very much a kind of Freudian understanding of evil and the cultural work of cinema in general. In the view presented, representations of horror and evil, including cinematic ones, are essentially a kind of cultural therapy, that is, a way through which society can confront and possibly overcome evil. As such, the scene implicitly works as a defense of Craven’s original concept—and of horror cinema more generally—against the forces of commercialization that would render its powers of cultural catharsis mute. Both intra- and extra-diegetically, the scene implicitly comments upon the dramatic transformation of the Nightmare film series itself into a mainstream horror commodity during the latter half of the 1980s, positioning Craven’s first film as an authentic engagement with evil and the remaining films as inauthentic derivatives. Moreover, it implicitly returns the viewer to the scene of Nancy’s rejection of Freddy in the first Nightmare film, re-articulating and repeating the model of mediation established therein and once again suggesting that the conscious and critical separation of reality and illusion is central to divesting the latter of its potentially dangerous effects. As with the first Nightmare film, this is a somewhat paradoxical stance, since representation, that is, mediated illusion, is essentially cast as means of overcoming illusion. What is critical is not to confuse mediated illusion and reality, but to use mediation as a way through which to explore reality. Mediation, then, should not be confused with reality, but instead understood and used as a tool through which we can critically explore reality and the tensions which mark it. Within this model of mediation, then, the human subject is ascribed enough agency to be consciously in control of the mediating process, rather than simply a passive receiver of whatever is mediated. Mediation is in the hands of the subject, not the other way around, and can be used actively as a means of emancipation. Whereas the previous Nightmare films—perhaps most notably Dream Master and Dream Child – established a more anxious and ambivalent model of mediation, in which the centered subject of modernity was tangentially destabilized, New Nightmare thus returns much more squarely to a model of mediation in which the subject retains its autonomy and critical agency.

It is telling, therefore, that Heather ultimately defeats Freddy by using a trick from the fairy tale of Hansel & Gretel, which she had previously read to her son. Pushing Freddy into a furnace just as he reaches out for her, Heather repeats the famous ruse of pushing the wicked witch into the oven. Employing a violent fairy tale in this manner, the film seems to suggest that such narratives serve a significant cultural role as a means through which to curtail or overcome evil. As Phillips (2012, 87) suggests, the film in this way “provides an interesting reflection on the place of violent narratives in contemporary society.” New Nightmare can be understood, in other words, as an attempt to reclaim the subversive potential and cultural relevance of horror as a form storytelling outside of its purely commercial potential. The film suggests that there is still something serious and possibly subversive about the Freddy figure, and about horror cinema more generally, but that it needs to be separated from commercial interests; that is, from the grip of capitalism. Freddy’s escape into the real world works as an escape from the franchise, back to reality—a metaphorical journey through which Freddy can transform from being a kind of capitalist jokester to a serious threat.

New Nightmare in this way forcefully foregrounds its self-reflexive interest in its own function within the reigning order of capitalist commodification, offering Freddy’s terrifying escape from the films as a kind of counter-image to an entirely different kind of escape:

The Nightmare films have been largely successful through their ability to maintain a seduction of the subject, that is, of the spectator and consumer. This has predominantly been achieved through Freddy, the cultural object, who seduces the subject through a combination of his power and personality and a supporting series of clever images and stimulating visuals. This seduction continues with the associated merchandising, where popular culture allows for the successful release of Freddy from the fictional world of the film into a consumer society reality. (Conrich 1997, 119)

New Nightmare metaphorically suggests a different kind of escape to the viewer. Freddy is no longer a figure of capitalist spectacle; no longer an object to be safely consumed and enjoyed as entertainment; instead, he is simultaneously a symptom of, and a threat to, the cultural landscape which has produced him. While the other
films in the Nightmare series are distinctly more ambivalent, New Nightmare thus positions horror cinema in direct opposition to the reigning capitalist order. Because the film is firmly situated in all aspects of narrative, development, production and distribution within a commercial framework, and thereby intimately part of the mainstream Hollywood system, this, of course, is highly ambivalent exercise, to say the least. Consequently, one might reasonably view the film’s critique of the commercialization of horror cinema, and specifically the figure of Freddy and the Nightmare series, with more than a little skepticism. Indeed, New Nightmare arguably represents not an escape from the logic of commodification but rather a continuation and expansion thereof, foregrounding the supposed subversive potential of the Freddy figure in order to intensify his commodification by establishing him as a cult object. Writes Nowell (2012, 93): “Bestowing cult status upon an object involves drawing rhetorically powerful yet conceptually unsustainable oppositions between a demonized caricature of the ‘mainstream’ and a valorized alternative.”

Casting Freddy as a dangerous outsider, attempting to reclaim his subversive potential, thus arguably serves as a way of discursively re-establishing his status as a cult object following the critical and commercial failure of the overtly campy Freddy’s Dead. As Nowell (2012, 94) discusses, the effort to imbue the Nightmare films, and the Freddy figure in particular, with “subcultural authenticity” precedes New Nightmare, and was a conscious and “commercially motivated” strategy on New Line Cinema’s part going back at least to Dream Warriors. Within this context, New Nightmare’s explicit articulation of a counter-cultural position arguably works implicitly to extend the commodification of the series. As Mee (2022, 66) notes, New Nightmare “ultimately provides an opportunity to reaffirm Krueger’s iconic status and to canonize the franchise in the annals of contemporary American horror cinema.”

Abandoning ambivalence in order to articulate a more explicitly anti-commercialist stance, New Nightmare thus arguably disregards, or at least radically downplays, the ways in which horror cinema, and mediation more generally, participates in the dominant culture of patriarchal capitalism, thus ironically reinforcing and expanding the very cultural logic it seemingly opposes.

Conclusions

In the figure of Freddy Krueger, as well as the various teenage protagonists who attempt to fight him, the A Nightmare on Elm Street film series continually juxtaposes and intertwines two possible models of mediation. As embodied in the figure of Freddy Krueger, mediation is established as capable of instantiating a morally suspect usurpation of human agency and is repeatedly associated, furthermore, with the cultural logic of capitalism, whose disciplining and dehumanizing effects it continually reproduces and reinforces. Indeed, many of the scenes explored in this article work as allegories of the defeat of potentially subversive creativity against capitalism’s ever-adaptive and ever-expanding colonization of human life through mediation.

As noted earlier, there is in this regard a slight disagreement between myself and Heba (1995, 112), who emphasizes Freddy’s goal to “dismantle the master narrative” and therefore understands him as a threat to the dominant culture of patriarchal capital. While it is true that Freddy’s powers of mediation allow for the potential destabilization of various cultural borders and boundaries underpinning patriarchal capitalism, the effect of his border-crossing antics is paradoxically always to affirm and even to reinforce those borders, thereby preserving the status quo. Although Freddy’s powers of dark mediation undoubtedly allow for the kind of border-crossing dissolutions and ontological destabilizations described by Thacker, that is, for a kind of transcendent experience of pure continuum which violates all manner of ideological distinctions and strictures, they always work in the service of affirming and fortifying existing social hierarchies of power and oppression. As such, Freddy is not so much a figure of subversive deviance but is rather an embodiment of capitalism’s capacity for absorbing, colonizing and recuperating deviance. Freddy’s transgressive potential is thus not only continually recuperated by the reigning ideological system but even operationalized as an engine of its reproduction and expansion. Freddy does not simply replicate the logic of late capitalism, but reinforces, intensifies and reproduces it. In the world of the Nightmare series, therefore, not even a dangerous deviant like Freddy Krueger can escape the cultural logic of late-capitalism. Indeed, Freddy is arguably himself not only a cipher of capitalism, but in some sense the ultimate commodified subject, without center, stripped of any depth, constantly in flux, changeable and malleable; a surface upon which the spectacle of capitalism can endlessly reproduce. Insofar as Thacker’s concept of dark media suggests a space of possible experience which does not conform to, and cannot be absorbed by, the logic of capitalist commodification, the image of mediation established in the A Nightmare on Elm Street film series instead suggests that even dark mediation (embodied in the figure of Freddy Krueger) cannot escape capitalism’s ever-expanding grasp but rather serves to radicalize its disciplining effects.

Against this almost dystopian image of mediation, however, the series simultaneously suggests another. Embodied in the various teenage protagonists, this model is established as a source of potentially subversive creativity and thus ultimately emancipation.
from the strictures of the reigning ideological order. Many of the previously analyzed scenes center on teenagers who attempt in various ways to resist Freddy’s diabolic and destructive powers of mediation through their own forms of mediation, thereby establishing alternative meanings and narratives to combat the prolific and nefarious meaning-making machine that is Freddy Krueger. It is important to note, however, that this latter model exists in two variants. While Nightmare 1 and 7 articulate a model of mediation in which the separation of illusion from reality is paramount, the other films articulate a model of mediation in which the human subject and its experience of reality is itself constituted through mediation. Within this model of mediation, reality is always already mediated, so to speak, and the solution to the problem of mediated illusion is therefore not to somehow escape it and return to some kind of pure unmediated reality, but instead to counter it with different and more emancipatory forms of mediation. Instead of a utopian escape from mediation into pure unmediated reality, these films suggest a critical and conscious investigation of the medial underpinnings of reality itself. In so doing, they do not entirely discard the centered subject of modernity, but attempt instead to come to terms with its complex intermingling with mediation—an intermingling which is variously coded both as a foundational threat and as a path towards emancipation.

Finally, this ambivalent image of mediation also serves as a self-reflexive exploration of the A Nightmare on Elm Street series’ own place in the cultural landscape of 1980s and 1990s popular media culture. A Nightmare on Elm Street, therefore, is not only a “metacinematic exploration” of how the slasher genre “became part of the landscape of the American subconscious throughout the late 1970s and 1980s” (Kendrick 2009, 32), but an uneasy and highly ambivalent exploration of the possible ideological implications of this process. Ultimately, the expanding and evolving images of mediation found across the Nightmare films mirror the increasing popularity of the series as it transitioned from low-budget, independent auteur filmmaking to become a mainstream Hollywood franchise. While Freddy’s ever-expanding dialogue with, and appropriation of, various forms of popular culture media, thus undoubtedly reflect New Line Cinema’s intention to appeal to a youth audience, serving as a way of integrating the figure of Freddy, and the Nightmare franchise, into a popular culture mainstream, a profound ambivalence and anxiety is simultaneously present within this dialogue and the images of mediation through which it is manifested; an anxiety which primarily concerns the confluence of popular culture media and the societal order of patriarchal capitalism. In this sense, the increasingly overt self-reflexivity evident in the series, that is, the turn towards exploring popular media culture and its affinity with various forms of authority, might best be understood as an attempt to come to terms with the increasingly intense commodification of the figure of Freddy and the Nightmare series as a whole.

While New Nightmare deals with the problem of commodification head-on, but in doing so reverts to a traditional counter-cultural position which is arguably implicitly complicit with the reigning societal order, the remainder of the films in the series offers to the viewer a much more ambivalent stance, anxiously exploring their own connection to capitalism without arriving at any clear-cut conclusions or solutions. Much of the ideological tension found in these films, that is, the uncertainty with which they approach their own complicity with the dominant ideological order of patriarchal capitalism, results directly from the highly ambivalent and monstrous image of mediation found in the films—an image which simultaneously embodies both the strictures of ideology and the possibility of freedom.

Notes


3. Consequently, it should be noted that this article will not explore the crossover Jason vs Freddy (Yu 2003) or the A Nightmare on Elm Street (Bayer 2010) remake. Although part of the Nightmare franchise, these films were made in a significantly different historical context, following not only the resurgence of the teen slasher and youth cinema more generally in the late 1990s (Wee 2010; West 2018), but also the rapid political, technological and economic developments of the early twenty-first century (Corrigan 2012; Kellner 2010), and therefore reflect and respond to a different set of cultural concerns and anxieties.

4. I have explored representations of mediation in The Babadook, particularly as relates to the films of Méliès, elsewhere. See Thomsen (2019)
5. I have explored the formal and thematic function of the telephone in Black Christmas (Clark 1974) elsewhere. See Thomsen (2021).

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