

If Nancy Doesn't Wake Up Screaming: The *Elm Street* Series as Recurring Nightmare

Steve Jones

Consisting of nine films to-date, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series (hereafter, *Elm Street*) has grossed over \$448m at the box office worldwide (*The Numbers*).¹ This financial success led some to dub the 1980s 'the decade of Freddy Krueger' (Lewis 1997, 251). The series' cultural impact is demonstrated via vernacular references in unexpected arenas, including sports commentary,² and computing.³ Given this scale, it is surprising that so little sustained scholarship is devoted to the series. That relative inattention arguably stems from the fact that the property is mainly comprised of sequels, and seriality has only recently attracted significant scholarly attention. Historically, sequels have been perceived as yielding diminishing returns in terms of both profit and quality (see Jess-Cooke 2009, 53-4). *Contra* to the latter, the *Elm Street* sequels are not simply 'inferior' addendums to an original standalone text.

This chapter will examine *Elm Street* as a multipart text. I begin by delineating the series' reputation for yielding diminishing returns. That attitude has been proliferated by *Elm Street's* creative staff, who express contempt about the series' "inconsistencies". Chief among these ostensible failings is *Elm Street's* supposedly haphazard approach to dreaming. As I will outline, long-standing producer Robert Shaye and creator Wes Craven both assert that the series' storyworld is governed by a firm separation between waking and dreaming. They propose that these two states adhere to discrete ontological rules (Ryan 2017), with *Elm Street's* waking-world conforming to the laws of space, time, geography, and physics, and the dream-world defying those laws. This distinction between waking and dreaming parallels our non-filmic, real-world experiences of those states (see Hobson et al 2011, 2). However, *Elm Street's* core premise confounds that distinction. In the series, being harmed in one's dream results in damage to the dreamer's physical body in the waking-world. The boundary between waking and dreaming realms supposedly becomes looser as *Elm Street* progresses, thereby purportedly weakening the series. However, I contend that even the first film fails to establish a firm boundary between waking and dreaming. Indeed, *Elm Street's* narrative is more satisfying when viewed as a recurring nightmare, based around persistent motifs and patterns. As such, the series is dream-like (oneiric) rather than realistic.

Elm Street flourishes as an oneiric text because it is comprised of multiple parts that riff on a core narrative shape. Various directors and writers contribute to the chapters, each adding new elements as they retroactively develop the ongoing story. Although Freddy is *Elm Street's* only consistent character, the series' unifying motifs prevent it from merely being nine tangentially-related tales. These motifs build because of the series' multipart structure. The narrative's focus on collective experiences (such as shared dreams) encourages one to engage with the series collectively, as a meta-text, rather than as isolated chapters. Moreover, *Elm Street's* oneiric qualities provide opportunities for innovation without abandoning narrative comprehensibility. As such, *Elm Street's* sequels do not exhibit diminishing narrative returns. Despite its critical reputation, *Elm Street's* seriality is its key strength.

¹ The original six-part series (1984-1991) followed by three additional films: *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), the *Friday the 13th* collaboration *Freddy vs Jason* (2003), and the 2010 remake of the original.

² The title denotes severe defeats (see Wilbon 1988; Ryan 1990).

³ A form of spyware ('Kruegerware') was named after the series' villain Freddy Krueger (see McFedries 2005, 72).

Bad Reputation: “Diminishing Returns” versus Oneiric Qualities

Sequels are broadly treated with disdain. The notion that film series consist of increasingly diluted iterations of original texts was concretised by multi-sequel ‘slasher’ series in the 1980s (see Tudor 2002, 106), and *Elm Street* is illustrative of this trend. The ‘general consensus’ among critics is that the series ‘deteriorated’ after several sequels (Schoell and Spencer 1992, 116), and that ‘the formula that made [*Elm Street*] so successful...severely mutated’ as the series progressed (Menell 1991). Thus, Wyrick claims that *Elm Street*’s ‘relentless sequels’ offer little more than ‘repetition’ and ‘pleasure in unoriginality’ (Wyrick 1998, 122-4), while Freeland proposes that *Elm Street*’s ‘seemingly endless sequels’ are uninteresting because (she alleges) they offer ‘mainly physical and not psychological’ horror (2000, 243-244).

Elm Street’s creative personnel corroborate this stance. Returning star Robert Englund repeatedly indicated that the series (or his involvement in it) would soon end (see interviews in D’Angelo 1986, 32; Shapiro 1987, 39; Shapiro 1988, 68), implying that, despite its profitability, the series had become creatively moribund. The ‘increased frequency of the sequels’ release dates and...condensed production periods’ (Nutman 1989a, 53) did not help the filmmakers to maintain quality. *Elm Street* producer Bob Shaye retrospectively admits that the sequels suffered from several ‘bad idea[s]’ (*Never Sleep Again*). Screenplay writer and producer of the sixth instalment Michael de Luca contended that ‘horror sequels are the worst’ (in Shapiro 1992, 54), which is apt given that *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991) is arguably the series’ weakest entry. Original creator Wes Craven also theorised that ‘the series tended to wander’ as it progressed because writers were hired ‘to knock out a script’ rather than bringing a ‘distinctive vision’ to *Elm Street* (in Shapiro 1994, 35).

Each sequel differs because each was helmed by new directors and/or writers who were tasked with keeping the series fresh. For example, Sara Risher avers that New Line was ‘trying to do something different...original’ with the second film, *Freddy’s Revenge* (1985); Renny Harlin declares that he sought to ‘reinvent’ Freddy with the fourth entry *The Dream Master* (1988); and Bob Shaye suggests that the team sought to ‘revive’ the series with *Freddy’s Dead*, the sixth instalment (see *Never Sleep Again*). Simultaneously, innovations were constrained by the need to maintain the series’ established ideas. New Line were likely mindful of contemporaneous major slasher serials faltering when they deviated from their formulae: both *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (1982) and *Friday the 13th Part V* (1985) suffered critically and financially because those instalments forsook their core antagonists. Yet, as each new crew built upon the previous teams’ developments, *Elm Street*’s established premises transformed. For example, *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: Dream Warriors* (1987) explicitly introduces the notion that protagonists can collaborate in their dreams. This is heralded as protagonist Kristen’s unique ‘gift’ (her dream skill). By the sixth instalment, *Freddy’s Dead*, protagonist John is simply knocked out and enters Spencer’s dream. The skill is no longer a ‘very special talent’ belonging to Kristen: it becomes part of the series’ lore, applying to all characters therein.

The writers themselves refer to such developments as being illogical. For example, when asked how he would bridge from Part 2 into Part 3, Craven bluntly posited ‘I’m ignoring it’ (in Goldberg and McDonnell 1986, 52), and later stated that he could not write a direct sixth sequel with *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (1994) because he ‘looked at all the other films’ and could not ‘make any sense of [the series]’ (*Never Sleep Again*). From the writer’s perspective, the series’ inconsistencies are problems to overcome. Critics also characterise *Elm Street*’s variations as evidence of deterioration. For instance, James (1987) claims that Part 3 ‘loses direction’ by spiralling into ‘supernatural nonsense’, while Harrington (1989) describes Part 5’s plot as ‘more confusing than ever’, making ‘no sense at all’.

However, such complaints fail to account for the *Elm Street* series' distinguishing characteristic: its oneiric qualities. Although central to the series, dreaming has been overlooked in the scholarly literature on *Elm Street*.⁴ This is unsurprising given that scholarship on oneiric film typically focuses on art film rather than popular culture (see, for example, Botz-Bornstein 2008; Andrews 2004). Moreover, *Elm Street*'s creators disparage the series' approach to dreaming. Rachel Talalay—production manager, producer, storywriter and director on various *Elm Street* instalments—bemoans producer Bob Shaye's fixation on 'the rules' of dreaming; of showing protagonists falling asleep, of what could and could not happen in the dream-world (in Schoell and Spencer 1992, 148).

Regardless, those rules are applied inconsistently across the series. No-one appears to be asleep when Schneider is killed or a pet parakeet explodes in Part 2. In Part 3, Will witnesses that Phillip is 'wide awake' when he dies, even though Phillip is meant to be dreaming. Alice is asleep when Sheila is killed in Part 4, but it is unclear whether Sheila is also asleep, whether she somehow enters the dream because Alice is asleep, or whether the whole dream belongs only to Alice (i.e. Sheila does not experience the encounter with Freddy that Alice dreams about). Freddy can walk on the ceiling when he is supposedly brought into waking reality in *Freddy's Dead*, and unless protagonist Maggie harbours a hidden talent, her unexpected knife-throwing proficiency indicates that the waking/dreaming distinction has collapsed.

Craven characterised such waking-world/dream-world blurring as a bastardisation of his original material, criticising the first sequel's script for allowing Freddy to crossover into the waking-world (in Gire 1988). However, writer David Chaskin contends that the series' 'rules' about waking and dreaming were not established 'at the time' because the series did not yet exist (*Never Sleep Again*). Chaskin's observation vindicates director Jack Sholder's admission that he did not have a grasp on *Elm Street*'s ontological rules while making Part 2 (in Schoell and Spencer 1992, 35). The unwritten 'rules' demarcating waking and dreaming as distinct yet interrelated states only became visible retrospectively, when unspoken assumptions about the boundaries between these realms were disrupted by new writers and directors.

The ontological distinctions between dream and waking realms were not firmly established in Craven's initial film. As several critics have noted, the first film is unsettling precisely because the waking/dreaming boundary is blurry (see Rathgeb 1991, 40; Paul 1994, 401-403; Robb 1998, 73).⁵ To illustrate, Tina is pinned by Freddy in her garden during the series' first fatal nightmare sequence. A blue blanket is present on the garden floor, and Tina pulls it over herself. The film then cuts to the bedroom, where she thrashes, asleep, under the same blue blanket. The blanket provides a transition between the two locales even though it is incongruous to the dream's garden setting. This fuzziness is pervasive. The later sequence in which a tongue protrudes from Nancy's telephone blurs the real-world/dream-world boundary in the same way later sequels do. Here, Nancy is supposedly awake, and the narrative viewpoint is ostensibly located in the waking-world. The film's murder sequences are equally problematic. As Hise observes, Rod appears to be awake when he is hanged by a bedsheet (1988, 17). Although one might argue that Rod is dreaming, Freddy's absence (or invisibility) suggests otherwise, since the camera's perspective is redolent of the earlier sequence in which Rod witnesses Tina's slaughter. Tina is asleep and Rod is awake, so Tina can see Freddy but Rod cannot. If Rod were asleep when murdered, he ought also to see Freddy, or else ought not to appear to be awake. More overtly, Glen's mother witnesses eighty gallons of gravity-defying blood erupting from her son's bed in a display that must be unreal, even though she is ostensibly awake. It is thus telling that

⁴ Scholarly textual interpretations of the series are typically rooted in psychoanalysis, focusing on gendered power rather than dreams (see Heba 1995; Humphries 2002; DeGraffenreid 2011).

⁵ Scholars have mainly ignored the sequels. Where they have been discussed, the same characteristic is observed (see Trencansky 2001, 70, for example).

Langenkamp's on-set requests for clarification about such occurrences were typically met with Craven's response: 'I can't explain it, it's just a dream' (*Never Sleep Again*). The sequels may have erred towards a more permeable border between waking/dreaming, but Craven mischaracterises his original film when criticising other creators' approaches to the storyworld's ontological rules.

Yet this "looseness" is *Elm Street's* core strength. Craven posits that the series is contextualised by a culture that valorises 'control, structure, and rationalism' (*Freddy Speaks*). Craven's view is echoed by *Elm Street's* adults who continually delegitimise the teens' concerns. For example, in Part 3, Dr Gordon initially places his faith in 'science', but he eventually realises that, within his rationalist worldview, 'nothing [happening to the teens] makes any sense'. In Part 4, Kristen's mother dismisses her daughter's anxiety over Freddy by proclaiming 'we went over this in therapy!'. Kristen's mother exerts control by dosing her daughter with sleeping pills, but Kristen's proclamation, 'you just murdered me', is borne out by the film. The narratives thus confirm the teens' fears and reject their guardians' calls to rationalism and attempts to control the situation. Moreover, because dreams are frequently non-rational and structurally fluid, *Elm Street's* playfulness with the dreaming/waking boundary undercuts the culture of 'control, structure, and rationalism' that Craven refers to. The non-extant is experienced as if it is real in dreams. When awake, individuals can exert some autonomous control because the surrounding conditions and physical laws are stable and predictable; that is, reasoned choices are facilitated by the waking-world's structures and are problematised by the dream-realm's relative instability. Dreams are not always outright 'bizarre', but they are typically 'non-logical' because they lack a stable 'space-time structure' (Hobson et al 2011, 12). That dreams sometimes appear to adhere to real-world physical laws makes it difficult to decipher between the realms, and the *Elm Street* series plays with that ambiguity. For example, in Part 3, the protagonists attempt to enter a shared dream-space via group hypnosis; they believe the hypnosis has failed until a perpetual motion toy in the therapy room spontaneously fragments and the pieces float away, defying gravity. They only realise they are in the dream-realm when they *perceive* that waking-world physical laws do not hold, and, at that point, Will realises he can leave his wheelchair and Taryn suddenly transforms into a 'beautiful and bad' leather-clad punk.

Pace Freeland (2000, 244), then, *Elm Street's* horror is distinctly psychological. The series is not simply about one's physical vulnerability to attack while asleep. *Elm Street's* horror is rooted in protagonists' struggle for control as they wrestle to understand what is happening to them, to function in the dream-world despite its instability, and to distinguish between waking/dreaming states. The sequels increasingly blur these boundaries, thereby amplifying its psychological horror. Thus, the sequels enrich rather than dilute the original's premise, and the series' richness is most apparent when viewed as a multipart text.

Caught in a Dream: *Elm Street* as Recurring Nightmare

Elm Street mimics the feel of a recurring nightmare. To establish that premise, it is necessary to re-evaluate the initial film, viewing it as a section of a multipart text. When scholars refer to the first film's climax, they typically cast the final scene as a coda (in which Freddy 'reappears' as a car bearing his sweater's trademark red and green stripes). The sequence is understood as a hook for a sequel—a generic trait—tacked on to a story that finished with Nancy defeating Freddy (see Kendrick 2009, 29; Shary 2005, 60, for example). This view corroborates Craven's assertions that 'artistically...the first film was...intact, whole', and that Freddy's implied reappearance undermines Nancy's victory (in Gire 1988). Both for Craven, and writers like Kendrick and Shary, the final scene and subsequent sequels are unnecessary addendums that disrupt an otherwise self-contained and complete story. Such a

reading perceives the original as a standalone entity (as it was when first released), but since the sequels now exist, they should inform our interpretations of *Elm Street's* story.

Pace Craven's assertions, it is unclear whether Nancy defeated Freddy. Her ostensible victory is signalled by her declaration to Freddy in the penultimate scene: 'I take back every bit of energy I gave you. You're nothing'. Here she follows advice offered by her mother (Marge) and her boyfriend (Glen), who both suggest that Nancy has been fuelling her fears with her attention.⁶ However, both Marge and Glen deny that Freddy poses a threat, and both subsequently die. The advice does not protect them, and consequently, it is unclear why the same advice should save Nancy. Indeed, Nancy herself demonstrates that their advice is ineffective: earlier in the film, Nancy tries telling herself 'this is just a dream, he isn't real', only to be attacked by Freddy (in front of a snoozing Glen, no less).

In this light, it is worth reconsidering Nancy's strategy for defeating Freddy: pulling him out of her dream into the waking-world, thereby shifting the power balance between them. While asleep, she is physically vulnerable, whereas Freddy is not. He demonstrates his physical imperviousness by severing his own fingers to taunt Tina and slicing open his abdomen to intimidate Nancy. She presumes that the waking-world is stable (whereas the dream-realm is not), and so Nancy seeks to comprehend her situation by gathering information about the waking-world. She eventually comes to understand Freddy by piecing together his history, and consequently, his motives. Yet, she neglects how much information she gathers about Freddy within her dreams (including his appearance and name). By contextualising Freddy against the supposedly stable waking-world context, Nancy concludes that to defeat him, she should bring him into the waking-world, making him tangible so that he will be susceptible to injury (as she is). Alas, her gambit fails. After seemingly pulling Freddy out of her dream, Nancy tries to harm him using various booby traps (including a sledgehammer rigged to hit him in the abdomen), but he remains invulnerable. Although set ablaze, he still attacks Nancy's mother, Marge, and the pair vanish into her bed.

Instead of bringing Freddy from the dream-world into the waking-world, Nancy further disrupts the boundary between those realms: rather than making him more real, she becomes less real, along with her waking-world. In their final exchange, Freddy and Nancy reach a stalemate. Thus, he dissolves when trying to attack her physically, falling through her. She verbally denies that he is real, but she does not fully rescind her fear; she cannot help looking back over her shoulder to check that he has gone. In the climax, the waking-world/dream-world boundary finally collapses, but it has been eroding throughout the film. When Freddy's tongue appears from Nancy's telephone even though she is awake, or when a hyperbolic torrent of gravity-defying blood signals Glen's death, these are not failures to adhere to ontological rules. These incidents indicate that the dream/reality boundary is fracturing, especially after Nancy brings Freddy's hat 'out of [her] dream'.

The "coda" represents a further shift. Having reached stalemate, Nancy steps through her bedroom door into daylight. Her mother and friends are seemingly alive, and so it initially appears as if Nancy has a fresh start. However, this is a new hybrid dream-reality context, and having already mastered the dream-realm, Freddy has significant advantage in this new environment. He demonstrates his mutability early in the film, taunting Tina by elongating his arms at will, and Freddy adapts that same malleability to the coda's new hybrid context. He manifests as the car that traps Nancy and her friends, and his arm simultaneously appears from within 1428 Elm Street to attack Marge. In contrast, Nancy remains limited to her corporeal form because she has not yet mastered the dream-skills Freddy utilises. The car driving away does not verify Freddy's victory; rather, it signals that Freddy has an advantage in a struggle that will continue beyond the first film's limits.

⁶ The literature on lucid dreaming seems to support their advice (see Jenkins 2012, 3; Harb, Brownlow and Ross 2016, 239; Stumbrys and Erlacher 2017, 44).

When Nancy reappears in Part 3, protagonist Kristen asks, ‘the man in my dreams...he’s real, isn’t he?’, to which Nancy flatly replies, ‘he’s real’. Her response indicates that—as per the later scene in which the protagonists believe the group hypnosis to have failed—Nancy does not yet realise that she is in a hybrid dream/reality context. She clings to her prior understanding that dream and reality are separate states. Part 3 thus concludes in another stalemate: Freddy stabs Nancy, then Nancy pierces Freddy with his own claw. Both “die”, only to return again in another form. They reach their next major transition point in the seventh film, *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, which blurs the lines between storyworld and real-world by depicting *Elm Street’s* creative personnel making a new sequel; Craven plays himself as writer-director, Langenkamp plays herself (an actor asked to return as Nancy), and so forth. Mimicking real-world events (see Robb 1998, 156), Langenkamp is depicted as being stalked by an *Elm Street* fanatic. As *New Nightmare* progresses, the borders between fiction and (the narrative version of) reality erode. Eventually, the line between Langenkamp and Nancy dissolves, and she faces Freddy again. This ontological shift follows from the first film’s conclusion. Having traversed the dream/waking boundary, the next phase of Nancy and Freddy’s battle is to disrupt the lines between fiction and fact. This trajectory elucidates the series’ undergirding mechanisms. Following Nancy’s failed gambit in the first film, the waking-world and dream-world are no longer separate realms with discrete ontological rules. *Elm Street’s* hybrid waking/dreaming context is characterised by “waking states” that sometimes exhibit oneiric qualities.

When she returns in Part 3, Nancy is a ‘grad school superstar’ who is ‘doing ground-breaking research on pattern nightmares’, and the latter aptly describes the *Elm Street* sequels. The terminology ‘pattern nightmare’ is not typically employed within psychological literature about dreaming, but the phrase captures the sense that recurring nightmares are formulated around ‘a script...a typical sequence of events [or images]’ (Spoomaker 2008, 16). *Elm Street* stands accused of being repetitive or prioritising spectacle over substance, but recurring nightmares themselves are ‘composed of...repetitive and perseverative content...vivid sensory imagery...intense emotional expression’ [and] ‘unrelenting threat’ (Carr et al 2016, 81). *Elm Street’s* horror is oneiric in the purest sense, mimicking the feel of recurring nightmares.

Thus, the series’ continuing ‘pattern nightmare’ is characterised by persistent motifs, which transform over time. *Elm Street’s* key recurring motif, of course, is Freddy himself; Markovitz (2000, 215) refers to Freddy as ‘an ordering principle’ rather than a character *per se*. As a symbolic conduit, Freddy’s physicality is mutable: he morphs into various shapes, transitioning between hyper-muscular and foetus forms in Part 5, or a worm-like creature, an attractive nurse, and a television/Freddy amalgam in Part 3. Even in his standard form, his appearance (usually) remains scarred, but his visage changes with each film. Obviously, there are industrial reasons for these changes—different make-up artists are employed, a different actor takes over the role in the 2010 remake⁷—but these amendments enhance the series’ dreamlike feel. Moreover, the films’ colour schemes are marked by the red/green of Freddy’s sweater. Craven claims to have designed the sweater as a motif so that Freddy could shapeshift and still be recognised (in Hutson 2014, 95). Yet Freddy’s presence (signalled by this colour combination) permeates the set-design. From 1428 Elm Street’s exterior décor (its rose trellis, or its red door and green panelling in sequels) and the red/green of Kincaid’s dartboard or Joey’s stereo volume monitors in Part 4, to the anaglyph 3D utilised in the crescendo of *Freddy’s Dead*, the distinctive colour combination makes it seem as if Freddy is omnipresent whether the teens are nominally awake or asleep. This colour motif also ties *Elm Street* together, providing oneiric coherence.

⁷ Borrowing from the series’ established threads but being uncannily different in its aesthetics and characterisation, the remake is the ultimate echo.

Aside from the more obvious recurring motifs such as the boiler room location, 1428 Elm Street, little girls in white dresses skipping in slow motion, or the infamous nursery rhyme ('1, 2, Freddy's coming for you'), numerous other echoes provide a feeling of unity across the series, even where new story elements and characters are introduced. For instance, snakes appear in several films—Parts 1, 2, *New Nightmare* and *Freddy vs Jason* (2003)—and Freddy transforms into a snake shape in Part 3 (effects designer Kevin Yagher refers to the form as the 'Freddy-Snake' (*Nightmare Series Encyclopedia*)). Robert Shaye himself is something of a leitmotif: he cameos in five *Elm Street* films, and his voice is heard as a KRGR radio announcer in the first movie. Other recurrences are behavioural; Nancy asks Glen to 'stand...guard' while she sleeps and to 'wake [her] up' if she appears to be 'having a bad dream'. Jesse similarly asks Grady to 'watch me and if anything starts to happen...don't let me leave...and don't fall asleep' in Part 2. Alice requests the same favour from Mark in Part 5 ('I want you to stay awake and watch me').

Elsewhere the echoes are less direct, mutating as the series progresses. In Part 3, it is revealed that Amanda was Freddy's mother. In Part 5, we see a nightmare version of Freddy's birth, then it is revealed that Alice is pregnant, and Freddy uses the baby as a gateway to new victims. Alice's trait of daydreaming—her distinguishing characteristic in Part 4—is transferred to her foetus in Part 5 where it is noted that her unborn baby 'can spend up to 70% of its day in a dream-state'. Freddy's face appears in Alice's uterine wall during an ultrasound, and he declares that he is feeding the spirits of her deceased friends to the foetus, intimating his paternal interest in the baby ('soul food for my boy'). In *Freddy's Dead*, it is revealed that Freddy had a child (Maggie) while alive. The series' retroactive continuity is distinctly oneiric: an idea (here, about parenthood) is introduced and then morphs, applying to different individuals as the narrative develops. Freddy's conception is referred to, then he is depicted as a foetus, then he interacts with a foetus as a semi-parental figure, and then he is revealed to be a parent. In these regards, the series captures dreaming's mutable quality whereby core conceptual or thematic threads provide a semblance of coherence, while persons, locations and events unfold and merge in unexpected ways. *Elm Street's* recurring motifs provide the bedrock that allows new creative personnel to innovate without alienating the returning audience.

We Dream the Same Dream

Elm Street's recurrent motifs chime with its ongoing story, which is based around characters and their shared experiences. The root story is that a band of parents conspired to kill Freddy, and a group of teenagers (in Springwood and, later, beyond) are targeted by and then collectively seek to vanquish Freddy. The series begins with Nancy revealing the community's shared secrets, and then being slowly isolated from her friends as they are slain. The sequels unveil a population of 'Elm Street children', including those (such as Jesse and Dan) who move into the area long after Freddy's (initial) demise. From Part 3 onwards, Freddy's targets share dreams; as a corrective to Dr Gordon's assertion that the dreams are a 'group delusion', Nancy clarifies that 'the nightmares are the common thread' that bring the teens together.

One individual's experience is not distinctly separated from another's here. Just as the boundaries between waking/dreaming are indistinct in the series, so too are the borders between individual and communal. This approach may seem counterintuitive inasmuch as dreaming is typically considered a private phenomenon. However, dreams are also 'often shared with others' verbally upon awakening (Schredl, Henley-Einion, and Blagrove 2016, 64). This is particularly true of nightmares, because a dream's 'emotional intensity...increases the probability' of recounting the experience (Schredl, Henley-Einion, and Blagrove 2016, 65). Moreover, other studies indicate that lucid dreams are socially-

oriented insofar as the 'self-other...distinction is obliterated' under those conditions (Stumbrys and Erlacher 2017, 41).

Since the series is based on shared experiences, it is also beneficial to envisage the films as a collective whole. Viewed as a multipart text, *Elm Street* is created by multiple contributors. The series even reflects on those conditions by including creative personnel within Freddy's target-base in the meta-sequel *New Nightmare*. Stepping back further still, Robert Englund posits that 'the appeal of this whole series' is rooted in dreaming's universality, since 'everybody has a bad dream or nightmare in common' (in Blair 1989). Film viewing itself has been conceived of as a collective experience—a shared delusion—that has dreamlike qualities (see Ebert 1997; Metz 1982; Cook 2011). Craven concurs, theorising that there is 'very little difference between nightmares and...horror movies', inasmuch as both are based in fantastical perceptual experiences.⁸ That it is commonplace for viewers to have nightmares after watching horror (see Hoekstra, Harris, and Helmick, 1999. 125-126) anchors the connection between horror film and dreaming. Indeed, Schagen et al's definition of nightmares as 'complex and story-like series of dream images that inflict dysphoric emotion' (2017: 65) could be just as readily applied to the *Elm Street* series. The continuing *Elm Street* story does not simply mimic a recurring nightmare via its oneiric qualities and multipart structure, then. These elements underscore that it is beneficial to account for the films as a collection, rather than as isolated chapters.

In conclusion, *Elm Street* is a prime example of serial filmmaking. The series has been received as exhibiting serial film's worst aspects, epitomising the supposed law of diminishing returns. However, *Elm Street* is formidably lucrative and culturally impactful, and the sequels were integral to its success on those fronts. Moreover, when taken seriously (rather than summarily dismissed), the sequels enrich the story that began with the initial movie. As is typical of serial texts (see Proctor 2017, 233), the ongoing storyline is revised to account for Freddy being vanquished then returning in the next sequel. An uncharitable reading might suggest that the series is repetitive, and that neither audiences nor creators are concerned with the ongoing story's cohesiveness or its in-universe ontological rules. Freddy being resurrected by flaming dog urine in Part 4 certainly implies a degree of irreverence, for example. That Part 4 is the series' second-highest grossing entry (adjusted, *Box Office Mojo*) indicates that audiences were not put off by the seemingly bizarre plot point. Rather than exemplifying "diminishing returns" however, this incident highlights that the dream premise permits enormous creative freedom. Recurring nightmares are based within a 'repetitive storyline' that provides space for 'continuous presentation of novel and unexpected elements' (Spoomaker 2008, 15-16), and *Elm Street* revels in the creative freedom its oneiric setting provides. Inconsistencies may be perceived as flaws from a critical perspective, but they can also provide pleasurable surprises for returning audiences. Craven and Shayne may have envisaged particular ontological rules as the basis for consistency in the series, but dreaming itself naturalises the kinds of discontinuity that are inherent to serial properties. More broadly, new creative personnel retcon the ongoing story, introducing fresh ideas that expand upon the established premises. As *Elm Street* demonstrates, the multipart text's storyworld and its ontological rules are built during this process, not just by the original film in isolation.

⁸ In commentary for the 1999 New Line Home Video release of *New Nightmare*.

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