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Looking Through the Upside Down:

Hyper-postmodernism and Trans-mediality in the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* series

Abstract

This article puts forward the argument that *Stranger Things* and *Stranger Things 2* are not only excellent examples of postmodern TV drama, but they take on what Valerie Wee has termed a 'hyper-postmodernism' through their heightened level of intertextual referencing that emerges 'as text.' Both series also extensively break down the boundaries between film, television, literature and 'geek' culture. This is done both within the text itself, and through the audience's invited interaction with the text, as the show demonstrates significant awareness of the trans-medial, Easter-egg hunting tendencies of its binge-watching followers.

Keywords

Stranger Things, Netflix, postmodernism, trans-mediality, intertextuality, 1980s, Spielberg, horror, science fiction

The *Stranger Things* Phenomenon

On 22 July 2017, *Netflix* launched the trailer for the second series of their original release, *Stranger Things 2*. Set to Michael Jackson's 'Thriller,' the clip went viral within hours, with audiences dissecting its content, eager for clues on the upcoming season. Both series of the show have had commercial and critical success, with commentators praising the show's homage to its 'source material' of 1980s popular culture (McNamara 2017: n.p.). They enjoy ratings of over 95 per cent on the popular review site *Rotten Tomatoes* and the first series earned the ensemble cast a prestigious Screen Actors Guild Award.

Stranger Things and *Stranger Things 2* follow the adventures of four boys in the 1980s; Mike (Finn Wolfhard) Will (Noah Schnapp), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), who come across a girl with telekinetic powers, named Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), whom they hide in Mike's basement. They also befriend another girl, Max (Sadie Sink) in the second season. When Will goes missing early in Season One, the kids discover the existence of a portal into another dimension in their hometown of Hawkins and reveal the dark intentions of the Department of Energy behind the portal's creation. Once Will is found in the other dimension by his Mother, Joyce (Winona Ryder) and Police Chief, Jim Hopper (David Harbour), it is discovered that his experience there has devastating

consequences for his health and for the town of Hawkins. Both series assume a high level of awareness of the generic conventions of 1970s and 1980s science fiction, horror and coming of age films.

However, the hype behind the trailer's release highlights a deeper phenomenon behind the series. *Stranger Things* not only engages in a nostalgic postmodern dialogue with the 1980s – it also takes on qualities of what Valerie Wee has labelled a 'hyper-postmodernism' (2005:11). It ignores the boundaries of its medium of television with self-reflection and utilization of the narrative conventions of 'geek' culture, including literature, gaming, 1990s cult teen drama and twenty-first century cult blockbusters. *Stranger Things* is also unique in the way this 'hyper-postmodern' narrative interacts with its web 2.0 audience. Mark Lawson has commented on the number of inter-textual references within the show, remarking that 'spotting them is a central pleasure' (2016). However, the expected interaction of *Stranger Things* audiences with the text goes beyond mere intertextual play. The show demonstrates a *hyper*awareness of the qualities of the web 2.0 audience and its tendencies towards trans-mediality and cinematic complex serial narratives (Marshall, 2009: 42; Dunleavy, 2017).

The Media, Nostalgia and Postmodernism

Complex serial television narratives have been at the heart of recent media debates on nostalgia. Indeed, Niemeyer and Wetz have illuminated the role of shows such as *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014) and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015) in their romanticisation of the past. (2014). However, the mediation of nostalgia is not a new phenomenon. Films such as *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Coppola, 1985) heavily feature culture from the early Cold War era, drawing on 'easily recognizable filmic histories and iconography' (Birchall 2004: 180).

Stranger Things is also not alone in its honouring of 1980s pop culture. Media commentators have noticed sentimentality for the era in many films and television programmes in the last six years. This arguably began with J.J. Abrams ode to Spielberg in the film *Super 8* (2011), and was popularized by the Marvel franchise release *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn, 2014). This nostalgic trend comprises of references to the music, films and political undertones of the decade, embracing the themes and cinematic language of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Thus, intertextuality is at the heart of the mediation of nostalgia through its 'recognition of the power of certain texts to capture the imagination' (Collins,

1992: 251). Rose Butler has suggested that *Stranger Things'* embrace of the 1980s reveals 'the terrifying similarities between the 1980s and now; speaking to the present as much as the past' (2017, 196).

This 'collapse of past and future into the moment of the present' unquestionably classifies *Stranger Things* as a postmodern media text (Tetzlaff, 1986: 90). While postmodernism is a problematic term with multiple definitions, in the realm of the televisual, scholars generally associate postmodernism with 'intertextual referencing, a propensity for ironic or parodic humour, as well as textual and generic mixing' (Wee, 2005: 46). Trisha Dunleavy has underlined *Stranger Things* connection to postmodern television with its propensity towards a 'cinematic' aesthetic and its 'innovative blending of 'coming of age', science fiction and horror traditions and tropes' (2017: 126-148).

However, in this article, I will argue that *Stranger Things* goes beyond what we might term the 'postmodern' and actually displays a *hyper-postmodernism* inherent in 1990s teen drama, with an updated and expanded referential framework of film, television and trans-media 'geek' culture.

Hyper-postmodernism, T(w)een drama and 'geek' culture

Valerie Wee made the case for hyper-postmodernism within the 1990s cult slasher series *Scream,* arguing that it can be identified through:

> 'a heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue in cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual text of film [and]…a propensity for ignoring film specific boundaries by actively referencing, borrowing and influencing the styles and format of other media forms, including television and music videos.' (2005:44)

In the *Scream* films, the 'characters engage in highly self-reflexive sustained discussions and commentaries on the nature and conventions of the genre itself' (47). Cult TV dramas such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) also engage in a high level of intertextuality, paying homage to their 1980s teen movie predecessors through similar storylines and self-reflexive discussion (Wee, 2008). *Stranger Things* and *Stranger Things 2* reference their high school drama antecedents through shot re-enactments, character similarities, plot mirroring and generic mixing.

Sci fi and fantasy have a significant impact on teen drama (Moseley, 2001). Davis and Dickinson argue that the 'isolation adolescents experience finds reflection in the world of

monsters, vampires and aliens' (2004: 7). The high school setting has also had much influence on the fantasy film genre, particularly in cult blockbusters such as the *Harry Potter* series of films (2001-2011). Much like *Stranger Things*, these films focus on the 'teen horror of the magical world' (Driscoll 2011: 147). With the inclusion of monsters and superpowers, the avoidance of explicit sex scenes and the narrative focus on children, the series 'responds to changing definitions of childhood in Western society' (Brown 2017: 17). *Stranger Things* also shows engagement with some of the idealistic rites of passage shown in tween drama, such as the *High School Musical* series (2006-2010). This is further confirmed by the ages of the central characters in the show. The boys and Eleven are aged twelve in Season One and thirteen in Season Two, with a further three principal characters in their late teens.

Given that the narrative of *Stranger Things* contains elements of horror, science fiction, fantasy, tween *and* teen drama, Ross and Stein make the case that such 'transgenericism' classifies the show as belonging to the realm of 'cult' media (2008: 8). Indeed, *Stranger Things'* exploration of the 'mythical' dimension of the 'Upside Down' and the inclusion of a select individual with 'superpowers' aligns the show with *Lord of the Rings*, the *Star Wars* films and the *Harry Potter* series (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 217). Cult blockbusters such as these have an affinity with what these scholars have termed *Generation X*, due to their ironic, self aware code of address, creating an 'us versus them' mentality (Ibid: 230).

Cult television has since shown a trans-mediality in its adaptation for the digital age, largely due to acclaimed drama *Lost* (2004-2010). *Lost's* significant online fan-base pored over the narrative's extensive references to the Dharma Initiative, searching for clues to the central mystery of the show (Marshall, 2009), not unlike the behavior of *Stranger Things* fans following the Season Two trailer release. Such internet-based trans-medial Easter-egg hunting is central to the engagement of web 2.0 audiences with media products, particularly in the *Marvel* Cinematic Universe (Dixon and Graham, 2016; Flanagan et al, 2016).

Here, it is pertinent to note Kaveney's argument with regard to the importance of the study of popular culture. She argues that 'what is mocked as geek culture is art that people not only love, but think about and *through*' (2005: 6). This idea is intrinsic to a study of *Stranger Things* for two reasons and works to the two levels of the show's hyper-postmodern dialogue. Firstly, the show is itself an example of geek culture, with its heavy referencing of popular media and its cult following. More importantly, the show's main characters are shown to be a *part* of this geek culture, as members of the Hawkins AV Club, fans of *Star Wars,* avid players of the game 'Dungeons and Dragons' and readers of *Lord of the Rings*. I

would like to suggest that *Stranger Things* and *Stranger Things 2* are distinctive in their *application* and *discussion* of the narrative codes and conventions of 'geek' culture. The characters harness their knowledge to help solve the show's principal mysteries, adding this additional layer of hyper-awareness to the narrative. They consume popular culture in an 'active way', much like the audiences of *Stranger Things* (2005: 7).

Drawing on Timothy Shary's approach to an analysis of youth in twentieth century films, I will utilize genre analysis as method, analyzing 'patterns, motifs and trends' across both series of *Stranger Things* (2002: 11) In order to organize this analysis, I will highlight key narrative themes traceable to *Stranger Things'* generic foundations, highlighting the propensity for hyper-postmodernist narrative.

Monsters and Dimensions

What if it's the Demogorgon? We're so screwed if it's the Demogorgon.
-Dustin in *Stranger Things*, Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers

Stranger Things introduces two main 'types' of inter-dimensional monster to its audience. These monsters are all named after creatures from the boys' favourite board game, 'Dungeons and Dragons' (hereafter D&D) Season One's monster is named after the 'Demogorgon' and Season Two's principal threat is named after the 'Mind Flayer.' These introduced and challenged within the series in a way that highlights the series' embrace of the early work of Spielberg, Scott and Columbus. However the show's references to these creatures function 'as text' (Wee, 2005: 44) and the characters *engage* with these monsters by *using* 'geek' culture narratives.

The opening scene of the first season of *Stranger Things* immediately makes inroads into the horror and science fiction genres. We are introduced to the sinister atmosphere of the Hawkins Laboratory through an eerie Kubrick-ian symmetry to the lab's corridor and unsettling flickering lights. We see a scientist running for his life, away from an (as yet) unseen foe. The scientist reaches apparent safety in the elevator, however, a point-of-view shot and a monster's 'chittering' alert us to the fact that the scientist is being preyed upon. We do not yet see the monster itself, paying homage to the unseen terror in Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993). *Stranger Things* also plays into the generic conventions of Carroll's suggested horror plot structure, establishing the monster's presence by an attack and by immediately linking the children to its discovery (1981).

Following the monster's introduction in the previous scene, Mike Wheeler provides a link to the boys' game of D&D by dramatically claiming, 'Something is coming, something hungry for blood.' He reveals that the monster prepared to strike at the boys in the game is the Demogorgon. This alludes to the fact that the boys' game of monsters and magic is coming to life in Hawkins, engaging with a 'defining characteristic of children's films': the presence of an alternative world from which the children must escape to return home (Wojik-Andrews 2000: 10). The end of this scene exhibits hyper-postmodern characteristics as following the game, Will tells Mike, 'The Demogorgon, it got me,' before proceeding to be captured by the monster itself.

In this first episode, in a scene reminiscent of the abduction of Barry in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977), Will is targeted by the monster, and taken into another dimension. Shortly after, upon going into the forest to look for their friend, the boys discover a girl with superpowers, Eleven, who claims she knows where Will is. While Will isn't taken inside the board game itself, the way in which the children frequently refer to the rules of D&D to make sense of what is happening suggests its centrality to the plot, echoing the Columbus film, *Jumanji* (1995). This alternative dimension of monsters is nicknamed the 'Upside Down' by the boys as El turns the D&D board upside down to explain where the alternative world is located. The boys also use the analogy of the Vale of Shadows from their game of D&D to try to understand this dimension, engaging in a hyper-awareness beyond what one would expect from a postmodernist TV drama. Their research is legitimized by cross-cuts between Dustin's description of the dimension with Chief Hopper's discovery of the 'tear' in time and space that leads to the Upside Down. ('Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat': 2016). The boys also refer to the place where Will went missing as 'Mirkwood' from *The Hobbit*, a name given legitimacy as it is adapted by Hopper later in the series.

While Mike, Dustin and Lucas aren't targeted by the Demogorgon or the Mind Flayer, both monsters specifically pray upon the sensitive youngster, Will Byers. With reference to the horror genre, Pomerance and Gateward have underlined that the young boy is 'an ideal victim…. and an equally ideal source of horror' (2005: 7). In *Stranger Things*, Will plays both of these roles. His innocence is underlined through his frequent attempts to contact his Mother and by showing him cold, frightened and alone in his childhood fort, Castle Byers ('Chapter Seven: The Bathtub', 2016). The monster's oral penetration of Will is also a staple for many horror films (Clover, 1992: 79). Much like the Xenomorphs in the *Alien* franchise (1979-1997), the Demogorgon plants creatures into its victims' mouths, spawning future

offspring. The first half of Season Two sees Will experiencing frightening visions of the 'Mind Flayer' monster, and frequent terrifying visits into the Upside Down dimension.

Stranger Things ignores film specific boundaries and exhibits trans-mediality in how Will confronts the Mind Flayer monster. Bob Newby (Sean Astin) tells Will about a nightmare he had when he was a child, growing up in Maine, concerning a clown named Mr. Baldo. The clown asked him 'Hey kiddo, would you like a balloon?' Bob shares with Will that the way in which he made the clown disappear was to tell him to 'Go away!'. Will's application of Bob's advice as he (unsuccessfully) confronts the Mind Flayer works to a number of hyper-postmodern characteristics. Firstly, Sean Astin's casting in itself is a reflexive choice, given Astin's well known connection to the *Lord of the Rings* franchise. Secondly, Bob references growing up in Maine, and an evil clown with a propensity for giving out balloons – an explicit nod to the Stephen King novel *It* (1986) which is set in Derry, Maine. Noah Schnapp's co-star in *Stranger Things*, Finn Wolfhard played the character of Richie Tozier in the most recent adaptation of the story (Muschetti, 2017). While Will is unsuccessful in confronting the Mind Flayer with Bob's advice, the confrontation itself emerges *as text*, blurring the boundaries between television, film and literature.

After confronting the monster, Will is 'infected' by its reach and transformed into the *source* of horror in *Stranger Things 2*, ending with his exorcism as Joyce attempts to sweat the monster out of him. This scene is a direct reference to the experience of Reagan in *The Exorcist* (1974) and the transformation in Will's personality mirrors that of her change from a 'sweet innocent child to a raving monster' (Wojik-Andrews, 2000, 10). This is particularly apparent when Will thrashes around violently on the bed he is tied to, and attempts to strangle his Mother ('Chapter Nine: The Gate', 2017). He is eventually saved through a 'reaffirmation of family and kinship' (Brown 2017: 13-14) as Joyce, his brother Jonathan (Charlie Heaton) and best friend, Mike, manage to extract information on how to kill the monster whilst reminding him of his most treasured memories ('Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer).

While children are able to triumph over the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer, some teenagers do not fare so well. In this regard, *Stranger Things* shows awareness of classic *and* revisionist horror trends of teen slashers in the 1980s and 1990s. Mike's sister, Nancy (Natalia Dyer) abandons her innocent friend Barbara to have sex with her boyfriend, Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) but *is* able to escape the monster herself, much like 'Final Girl' Sidney Prescott in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) (Shary 2002: 165). However, the immorality of Nancy's sex with Steve is clearly highlighted as the scene is juxtaposed with Barbara's murder at the hands of the Demogorgon. There is also some importance shown to music here,

as the song playing over the sex scene is Foreigner's 'Waiting for a Girl Like You', eerily reflective of both Steve's attraction to Nancy, and the Demogorgon's sinister hunt for its prey ('Chapter Three: Holly Jolly', 2016), further blurring the boundaries between media within the show.

Engagement with 'geek' culture is necessary to truly understand the events of *Stranger Things*, both as an audience and within the text itself. Through Will's unsuccessful roll in the opening scene, the boys inadvertently activate D&D conventions to the narrative, therefore they must defeat the monsters as a 'Party' (the D&D term for a group of Allied warriors). The boys *live* by the rules of this culture, showing a hyper-awareness of 'geek' culture that goes beyond mere postmodern referencing**.** It is the children that acquire the most knowledge about the role of Hawkins Lab, the monsters and the Upside Down dimension. The children also play a major role in each monster's defeat. In Season One, Lucas successfully fires a wrist rocket at the Demogorgon, acknowledging the efficacy of the weapon against the evil clown Pennywise in *It* (Wallace, 1990). They also burn the roots of the Mind Flayer in Season Two's final episode. The privileging of the status of this 'geek' culture is underlined as their knowledge is central to understanding the Upside Down and to their final confrontations with these monsters.

Superpowers and Governments

The Bad Men are coming!
Lucas to Mike and Dustin, *Stranger Things*, Chapter 7: The Bathtub

While the boys acquire the most *knowledge* about each of the monsters, Eleven is the major force against them as she uses her mind to destroy the Demogorgon at the close of Season One and contain the Mind Flayer in the Upside Down dimension in the final episode of Season Two. Her supernatural powers echo those of *Carrie* (De Palma, 1978) and Charlie in Lester's *Firestarter* (1984). However, Eleven's sense of duty to save her friends give her much in common with the 1990s feminist heroine, Buffy Summers from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Kuzui, 1992; 1997-2003). Eleven and Buffy both inherited their powers and throughout the series, each must learn to harness their gifts to defeat the monsters that put their friends in danger. Both girls have a desire for independence and to live a 'normal' teenage life. However, their powers continually distance them from the 'other destinies of girlhood [they] might otherwise have adopted' (Bavidge, 2004: 48). This is particularly

evident for Eleven's narrative journey. She desires to be thought of as 'pretty' by Mike in Season One, even though she has boy-ish looks and little sense of sexuality, and in Season Two, she grows angry at being kept in hiding by Hopper as she cannot be with her friends.

Much like Buffy, Eleven also struggles with growing up throughout both series of *Stranger Things*. Raised in near isolation in a laboratory and forced to partake in experiments by her 'Papa', Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine), Eleven doesn't know who she is, still less about her identity as a young woman. One could argue for the existence of a puberty allegory here. Driscoll has claimed that in *Buffy*, the 'presence of vampires is signalled by pain resembling menstrual cramps' (2011: 97), whereas in *Stranger Things*, Eleven's nose bleeds whenever she has to use her superpowers, drawing the connection between her telekinesis and her journey into adolescence. This is also a familiar trope of cult blockbusters of the twenty-first century, which draw parallels between the characters' pubescent struggles and control over their superpowers (Brown 2017: 17), for example, Harry's feelings for Ginny Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (Yates, 2008) and Peter Parker's juggling of high school life with his alter ego Spider-Man (*Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Watts, 2017).

Eleven's characterization also places her within a familiar role in the horror genre. Much like Clover's 'Final Girl', Eleven has endured significant personal trauma. She is a 'protagonist in the true sense, combining the function of suffering victim and avenging hero' (1992: 17). As becomes evident at the end of Season Two, the brunt of her anger is directed against her chief tormentor, Dr. Brenner. Morris highlights the centrality of the government scientists as antagonists in *E.T.* in their position 'as impersonal adults, deeply misunderstanding of the needs of children' (2007: 81). Similarly, their role as the true monsters in *Stranger Things* is underlined when, mimicking the bicycle sequence in Spielberg's famous film, the boys and Eleven evade capture from Brenner and his team when El lifts a van into the air with her mind so they can get away ('Chapter Seven: The Bathtub', 2016). Eleven also *channels* her anger against Dr. Brenner to defeat the Mind Flayer in Season Two. This is shown to escalate her powers to the point where she is able to levitate and emit energy from her hands. This draws further parallels to Buffy, who advises a fellow Slayer to use her *emotions* to channel her superpowers ('What's My Line, Part Two', 1998) and has a father figure 'mentor' in Rupert Giles, mirroring Hopper's relationship with Eleven. Showing further awareness of horror genre tropes, the question of whether Brenner is alive is still unanswered at the end of Season Two (Driscoll 2011: 85).

Brenner's position as the primary antagonist is, however, representative of a wider mistrust of the government evident throughout both series of *Stranger Things*. It could be

argued that this is characteristic of many films of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era. Many shots throughout both series of *Stranger Things* remind audiences that the government is listening in on private conversations. The scientists working at Hawkins Lab plant a microphone in Hopper's house, resulting in the destruction of his living space in a scene reminiscent of the final breakdown of Harry Caul in Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). There are also numerous references to Vietnam, when Lucas presents a knife and binoculars from the conflict, and it is revealed that Hopper fought in Vietnam in Season Two.

These anti-establishment themes are at the heart of Spielberg's *Jaws* and *E.T*. Hopper is deeply hostile towards the state's takeover of Will's disappearance, particularly when he discovers that the state did Will's 'autopsy', resulting in the discovery of a fake body. Nancy also remains frustrated with the fact that the people responsible for Barbara's death remain in the clear. In the pursuit of justice, Nancy and Jonathan visit an investigative journalist to implicate the government in Will's disappearance and in Barb's death ('Chapter Five: Dig, Dug', 2017).

Many of the team of government scientists are shown as cold and impersonal in their treatment of Will. Sci-fi savvy audiences would immediately suspect the motivations of Season Two's lead scientist, Dr. Owens (Paul Reiser). Reiser's antagonistic role in *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986) conditions audiences to despise his character, however Dr. Owens subverts genre expectations by being deeply sensitive towards Will's condition. At great personal risk, he offers to stay behind when the Demo-dogs break into Hawkins Lab, and eventually uses his government influence to allow Hopper to adopt Eleven.

Stranger Things and *Stranger Things 2* are set at the height of the Reagan era in 1984 and 1985. Traube has underlined the way in which Reagan's 'patriarchal masculinity' was largely embraced by the middle class (1992: 138). This political trend is aptly represented in the show by the Wheeler family, who are shown to have a 'Reagan-Bush '84' support sign in their front garden. While such support for Reagan was widespread, *Stranger Things* associates this political affiliation with two oblivious parents in the shape of Karen (Cara Buono) and Ted Wheeler (Joe Chrest). Butler has underlined the Wheelers' benefit from Reagan's policies through Mike's showcase of his family's household gadgets (2017: 193). Given the show's identification with its child protagonists, hostility towards this political ideology is particularly apparent when Eleven returns 'home' to Mike's house after being unintentionally left in the Upside Down. She looks upon the house, once a place of comfort and safety to her, to see it has been invaded by police cars and government vans – an unwelcome invasion of the home by institutional forces, again seen in Spielberg's *E.T*.

The separation of the 'patriotic' adults from the 'innocent' children is marked when the Wheelers are confronted over Eleven's presence in their house;

GOVERNMENT AGENT: The most important thing is for you to try and go on with your lives and to keep all of this-
TED WHEELER: Top secret. (He salutes). Understood. We're all patriots in this house.
The camera moves to Mike discussing Eleven with some other agents.
MIKE: I told you everything.
GOVERNMENT AGENT: I understand this is difficult, Michael.
MIKE: I don't know where she is! And even if I did, I would *never* tell you. I would *never* tell you.
('Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak', 2017)

Mike's complete repudiation of his father's patriotism constitutes a rejection of government authority, and of this uncompromising ideology. Government forces in *Stranger Things* are seen as heinous and destructive with devastating consequences for Eleven's childhood and sense of identity. They are charged with the corruption and loss of innocence of the families whose lives they enter, often without permission and with a lack of respect for human emotions such as love and friendship. This is further evidenced by the central narrative's sympathy with the Byers family, who are shown to be financially struggling under Reagan. This disparity between so-called 'patriotic' adults and children is also reflective of a wider trend of broken families within films and television dramas of the 1980s and 1990s.

Dysfunctional Families in Suburbia

Our children don't live here anymore, didn't you know that?
Ted Wheeler to Dustin, *Stranger Things 2*, Chapter Five: Dig Dug

More so than any other narrative theme, both series of *Stranger Things* embrace Spielberg's exploration of the life of the dysfunctional family in suburbia (Freer, 2001: 78). The show is set in the town of Hawkins, Indiana, which is labelled as the town where 'nothing ever happens.' Showing a hyper-awareness beyond mere intertextual referencing, Hopper *becomes* Hawkins' answer to Chief Martin Brody, identified for the Easter egg

hunting audience through his iconic typing of Will's missing person report (an echo of Brody's 'shark attack' report shot in *Jaws*). He drives in a startlingly similar police jeep, battles the system, is pivotal in the defeat of each monster and is identified as a 'Big City' cop in a small town.

The representation of the suburban family as a site of conflict and instability is central to the narrative of both series of *Stranger Things*. Peter Krämer has drawn attention to the absence of the father in many Spielberg and Lucas films, specifically Elliott's absent Father in *E.T.* and Luke Skywalker's problematic relationship with his Father in the *Star Wars* films (Lucas, 1977-1983) (1998: 295). This narrative trait is also common in most children's films of the 1990s, for example, *Mrs Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1992) deals with the absence of the father after the breakdown of a marriage and the Disney film, *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995) normalizes the single parent family (Brown 2017: 51).

Both Dustin's Mother and Joyce Byers are revealed to be single parents. Joyce works extremely hard to make ends meet for her two boys, Will and Jonathan. She is an incredibly devoted Mother, stopping at nothing to find her missing son. She is also very close to Will in Season Two, as he confides in her when the Mind Flayer starts to possess him. By contrast, the boys' Father, Lonnie, is shown to be unreliable and insensitive. Having moved away some years previous to the events of *Stranger Things,* he returns to Hawkins in pursuit of compensation money for Will's 'death'. Lonnie dismisses Joyce's beliefs about the monster and consistently berates her parenting in front of Jonathan. Jonathan defends his Mother and shows no desire to have a relationship with his Father.

In this light, it is perhaps interesting to explore the character of Jonathan as a surrogate Father for Will in *Stranger Things*. Keating has argued that 'films dealing with mothers and sons tend to involve a son who must become the father replacement himself' (2005: 247). Jonathan Byers mirrors the character of Gilbert (Johnny Depp) in the film, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Hallström, 1993) as he assumes 'almost full responsibility for his brother, while still a teenager himself' (Keating 2005: 257). Jonathan is shown to be incredibly resourceful throughout the first series of *Stranger Things*. He works extra shifts to bring in more money for the family, he makes posters following Will's disappearance, and even organizes Will's funeral once his (fake) body is found. He also attempts to ensure Joyce eats properly, and tells her to sleep when it is clear she has been awake for several days. Furthermore, in flashback sequences, it is shown that he takes care of Will during a turbulent period of their parents' separation.

Present fathers are not shown to fare much better in *Stranger Things*. Bernstein has underlined the criminal neglect of parents in 1980s teen movies (1997). While this is perhaps too harsh a judgement on the parents in this series, what is unmistakable is the complete ignorance of the fathers to the lives of their children, particularly evident in the character of Ted Wheeler. When it is revealed that Mike has been acting out since Will's disappearance the previous year, Ted speaks to Mike in the alien language of football; 'Strike twenty. You're on the bench, son. If it'd have been my coach, you'd be lucky to still be on the team,' (Chapter One, Madmax, 2017). Mike has never shown any interest in sport, preferring to spend his time playing D&D and video games.

Ted's distance from the lives of his children becomes even more apparent when the government agents confront him and Karen over Eleven's presence in their home. He is adamant that Mike has nothing to do with it, replying, 'Our son with a girl? Trust me, if our son had a girl hiding in our basement, we'd know about it, wouldn't we?' ('Chapter Seven: The Bathtub', 2016) Ted's obliviousness is laughable, considering that at the time, Mike had been hiding (and feeding) Eleven for almost a week, and was developing a romantic relationship with her.

According to Traube, the function of the Dad in the 1980s was two fold; to provide 'good sex' for his wife and to 'inculcate children with their appropriate gender or sex roles' (1992: 140). Ted Wheeler fails in each of these functions. Nancy comments that she doesn't think her parents have ever loved each other, and Karen Wheeler's lack of sexual fulfillment is made obvious when she is shown reading an erotic novel in the bathtub and flirting with Max's brother, Billy (Dacre Montgomery) ('Chapter Nine: The Gate', 2017). Furthermore, Ted fails to be a point of contact for Mike when he develops romantic feelings for Eleven, and ties his tie too tight at Will's fake funeral.

While Karen Wheeler does attempt to connect with her children, and is a source of comfort to them at times, she is kept in the dark for the majority of *Stranger Things*. This also reflects trends in 1990s teen cult drama, which often show prominent emotional distances between teenagers and their parents. Most notably, this is shown in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as for the first two seasons, 'Joyce [Buffy's Mother] is completely ignorant of Buffy's identity as the Slayer' (Wee, 2008: 50). Similarly, the Wheelers remain ignorant of their children's involvement with the monsters and the Upside Down dimension, preferring instead to believe the lies of the authorities. Mike and Nancy spend very little time at home during Season Two, covering up their true whereabouts by using their friends as alibis.

It is important to note, however, that *Stranger Things* balances its neglectful parents with strong role models for the children. While only shown in a short scene in Season Two, Lucas Sinclair's family environment is nothing short of harmonious. His parents have a strong, loving relationship and Lucas is comfortable in confiding in them when he has problems in his romantic pursuit of Max. The series also depicts Jim Hopper as a devoted, protective Father. In the last episode of Season One, it is revealed that Hopper lost his daughter, Sara, to cancer. Sara's death haunts Hopper and he often talks about her in the present tense, pretending she is alive. His devastation at losing Sara causes him to be over protective in his parenting of Eleven in Season Two as he keeps her from her friends, and from Mike. This causes frequent arguments between the two and Eleven runs away to find her Mother. There is, however, the promise of salvation in their father-daughter bond, as each apologizes for their culpability in the breakdown of their relationship. This is most obvious at the close of Season Two, when Eleven finds strength in taking Hopper's hand as they close the 'gate' to the Upside Down dimension.

What is particularly important as a narrative device in *Stranger Things* is the existence of the so-called surrogate family (Charney, 1996: 20). While many of their individual families are deficient, the tweens and teens of *Stranger Things* find fulfillment in their family of friends and 'adoptive' parents. Joyce and Hopper act as surrogate parents for all the kids in the series, including Steve and Nancy, shown in the gathering of the 'family' to defeat the Demo-dogs in Chapter Eight of Season Two. In such a way, *Stranger Things* shows affiliation with children's films of the 1990s and 2000s including *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), in which surrogate families are central to narrative. This is also underlined given the suggestion of a romantic history between Hopper and Joyce as they frequently refer to their trysts in high school. Hopper also supports Joyce when they visit the lab for tests on Will, and Dr. Owens even refers to the pair as 'Mom and Pop.' The identity of Eleven's father is still unknown but by the end of the second series, it is shown that she has been adopted by Hopper, under the name of Jane, formalising her connection to the surrogate family.

Adolescence, Love and Sexuality

I never gave up on you, I called you every night.

-Mike to Eleven in *Stranger Things 2*, Chapter Nine: The Gate

Both series of *Stranger Things* continually privilege the experience of their young protagonists. Much like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Stranger Things* engages in generic blending, and could be classified as a science fiction series, a horror series, a coming of age series *and* a teen drama (Wee 2008: 55). This is also characteristic of recent cult blockbuster movies, including *Twilight* and the *Harry Potter* series. Whilst engaging with horrific monsters and the evil government authorities, *Stranger Things* deals with themes central to teen film and television including intense peer friendships, heterosexual relationships, makeovers and rites of passage (Driscoll, 2011). Central to its narrative is the changing adolescent dynamic between the four boys, the *tween* romance between Mike and Eleven and the *teen* love triangle between Nancy, Jonathan and Steve.

The characterization of the boys' friendship group has its roots in the children's ensemble narratives of the 1980s, including the Stephen King novel *It* and its subsequent adaptations for the screen (Butler, 2017), *The Goonies* (Donner, 1985) and *Stand By Me* (Reiner, 1986). Indeed, the show's reverence of the latter two films is such that they are directly referenced in ensemble shots in both series. Dustin even takes on many of the qualities of the 'fat boy' in American coming of age ensemble films (Mosher 2005: 62). He brings snacks when the boys go on their expeditions to find Will, is obsessed with finding chocolate pudding at school and uncovers a love for nougat in Season Two. He also inherits the intelligence of Piggy in *Lord of the Flies* (Mosher 2005: 70) and Ben Hanscomb in *It* (1986, 1990 and 2017).

Each of these films illuminate the importance of the passage to manhood and a loss of innocence, both central to *Stranger Things'* narrative (Driscoll, 2011: 168). Each of the boys must adjust to their journey into adolescence, the trials and tribulations of high school and emotional maturity. As girls, El and Max cause significant transformations to the dynamic of the boys' friendship group. However, how *Stranger Things* differs from generic conventions is in its insistence that the boys themselves do *not* change. Shary highlights that in many teen movies, most school nerds are told to transform (2002: 40), further underlining the privileged status of the consumption of 'geek' culture, both for the audience, and the boys themselves. Despite the fact that the boys are frequently bullied in the first series, they do not change their outlook or their culture. Furthermore, the boys are not shown as becoming a part of the in-crowd at the series end. Much like cult teen dramas *Buffy* and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007), the show 'takes aim most obviously at the violent and dangerous world of the in crowd' (Bolte 2008: 100). Dustin is rejected by a group of popular girls at the Snow Ball and the boys, Max and Eleven remain in their own isolated gang. However, these 'nerds' do conform

to some stereotypes of the high school film, as they attain liberation through falling in love (Shary 2002: 32).

The relationship between Mike and Eleven has already gained a significant following on the internet, further underlining the show's cult appeal to its web 2.0 audience (Gallagher, 2017; Kickham, 2017). The boys' discovery of El causes major problems for the dynamic of 'the Party'. Eleven, unaware of the problematic nature of her sex, starts to undress in front of the boys and Dustin continually worries about her being naked in Mike's house ('Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street', 2016). Lucas is particularly hostile towards El's presence, calling her a 'weirdo', and not permitting her access into the Party, until she proves herself loyal. Dustin and Lucas immediately notice Mike's attraction to El, mocking him for his attitude towards her. Mike tries to impress her with the commodities in his home and with his knowledge of popular culture, much like Dawson's wooing of Jen in *Dawson's Creek*, again allowing this intertextual reference to function 'as text'. But what brings the two together is Mike's understanding and empathy with her feeling of isolation and lack of experience, common to cult teen drama (Wee 2008). Due to her limited vocabulary, he explains the terms 'friend' and 'promise' and normalizes her clinical name of Eleven, by calling her 'El.' When El is somewhat ashamed of her boy-like appearance, Mike consistently calls her 'pretty.'

The importance of their romance to the plot is further underlined by Eleven's numerous makeovers, resulting in amorous glances from Mike. As Driscoll has underlined, the 'makeover' is central to the high school romance film, making appearances in teen drama, *Dawson's Creek*, as well as high school movie films such as *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995) and *She's All That* (Iscove, 1999). For example, in Season One, the boys need to take El into school with them to give her access to the equipment in the AV Club, and thus give her a makeover to make her look more normal ('Chapter Four: The Body', 2016). The makeover is also utilized again in the finale of the second season. Eleven arrives at the Snow Ball in a dress, wearing makeup, having shed her previous punk rock look. She shares a romantic dance with Mike, underlining the importance of 'the prom' as a rite of passage in teen films (Bernstein, 1997; Hentges, 2009). The show again shows a willingness to break down the barriers between film and television, as the songs played at the kids' Snow Ball are instantly recognizable from John Hughes' significant contributions to the 1980s teenage film paradigm.

Much like the shared home of Dawson's bedroom for Dawson and Joey in *Dawson's Creek*, El's home is her den in Mike's basement. Following her defeat of the Demogorgon in

Season One and her subsequent disappearance, Mike continually looks at and sits in the den and tries to contact her, hoping she is still alive. The importance of the coupling is also enhanced by their separation throughout Season Two. When El is taken in by Hopper, she is forbidden from seeing Mike in real life, and is forced to visit him in her mind. However, much like star crossed lovers, Buffy and Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Mike and El can *feel* each other's presence, even when they cannot see each other. Due to this prolonged separation, their reunion in the penultimate episode of Season Two is a dramatic moment, enhanced by the fact that it is filmed in slow motion.

The pairing's prominence is also underlined by the fact that their kisses are always shared at the end of the narrative, much like iconic pairing Dawson and Joey in *Dawson's Creek*, and Bill and Beverly in *It* (Muschetti, 2017). Mike asks El to the Snow Ball and kisses her in Season One's final episode and the pair share their second kiss at the Snow Ball in Season Two's final episode. In the spirit of high school tween romance, their love for each other is shown to be pure and unbreakable (Shary, 2002: 214). However, Mike and El's epic tween romance is not the only way in which *Stranger Things* engages in a hyper-awareness of cult teen drama.

The show utilizes a familiar narrative technique with the introduction of a love triangle between Mike's sister Nancy, high school jock, Steve Harrington and Will's sensitive brother, Jonathan Byers. The love triangle has been a staple of screen narrative since its inception, but finds a particular prominence in cult 1990s television dramas. For example, the play between Buffy, Spike and Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Dawson, Joey and Pacey in *Dawson's Creek*. This narrative device also proved effective in cult blockbusters of the 2000s through the vampire versus werewolf conflict in the *Twilight* saga and the implied love triangle between Harry, Ron and Hermione in *Harry Potter*.

The way in which the drama plays out between Nancy, Jonathan and Steve leans on traditions from each of these media, further playing into *Stranger Things'* intertextuality. As underlined by Berridge, the 'starting point of most female teens is innocent' (2013: 334) and Nancy's position at the start of *Stranger Things* is no different. Her room is strikingly similar to Buffy's in the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and much like Angel's continued visits and Joey's famous admittance to Dawson's room in *Dawson's Creek*, evening guests through the window to the left of the bed are expected in *Stranger Things.* The window becomes the sight of much drama, as Steve sneaks into Nancy's room through the window in the first episode and later sees her with Jonathan *through* the window, again allowing these references to function as *text*, mirroring frequent dramatic points in these teen dramas.

While Steve is sensitive towards Nancy's feelings when she chooses to lose her virginity to him, he is unwilling to discuss Barb's disappearance and Nancy's sighting of the Demogorgon. She turns to the sensitive outsider, Jonathan, for help, and the two have an instant connection. Following a frightening encounter with the Demogorgon, Nancy asks Jonathan to share her bed. In this scene, *Stranger Things* plays with a common camera angle in *Dawson's Creek*, taking an aerial viewpoint and pulling slowly away from the pair, lying awkwardly beside each other.

However, while many of the love triangles of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s show the prospective love interests as being quite different, Steve becomes more sensitive and likeable throughout Season Two and Jonathan becomes more confident**.** Both Jonathan and Steve share tropes with what Banks has labelled the new emotional male protagonist, foregrounded in 1990s dramas such as *Roswell* (2004). While many high school jocks are shown to be rough and crass (for example, Steve Stifler in *American Pie*), Shary has drawn attention to the sensitive and emotional jock (2002: 31). Steve Harrington is, at first, shown to be the former, but transforms into the latter, making Nancy's choice a little more difficult. While Nancy does 'choose' Steve at the end of Season One, by Season Two it is shown that she is unhappy and unfulfilled in the relationship.

In her previous outings with Jonathan in Season One, Nancy proclaimed her disgust for her parents' suburban life. Steve begins to plan such a life for the two of them, expressing a willingness to forget the traumas of the previous year. Nancy, however, seeks out Jonathan to bring down Hawkins Lab. The two enlist the help of investigative journalist, Murray Bowman, who confronts them on their relationship, berating Nancy for 'retreating' to Steve, when she truly loves Jonathan. In a scene directly lifted from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and Indy's romance with Willie, Jonathan and Nancy finally spend the night together, finalizing her choice. Again, *Stranger Things* embraces the experience of the exiled, favouring the outsiders and the underdogs (Kaveney, 2006, 3) by allowing Nancy to choose love over popularity.

Conclusion

Stranger Things and *Stranger Things 2* go beyond what audiences would expect from a postmodern hybridised television drama. They show significant engagement with Valerie Wee's adjusted concept of 'hyper-postmodernism' extending their frame of reference to include not only film and television, but music, literature and gaming. The show breaks down

trans-medial boundaries within the text itself, but also in the way audiences can choose to interact with the text.

The boys, Hopper and Joyce (sometimes unknowingly) engage with and *apply* conventions from an array of trans-medial sources to the central dramas in the show, celebrating 'geek' culture within the narrative. However, the first two seasons of *Stranger Things* also embrace the way in which culture is consumed by rewarding their audience with this extensive intertextual referencing. Combining narrative conventions from 1980s horror, coming of age and sci-fi films, as well 1990s cult teen drama and twenty-first century cult blockbusters, *Stranger Things* invites its audiences to understand the show *through* their love for popular culture. This is demonstrated by the way these textual references are planted within the narrative, playing into the 'Easter egg' hunting tendencies of *Stranger Things*' trans-medial 'binge-watching' audience (Brunsdon, 2009; Flanagan et al., 2016).

The way in which both seasons celebrate popular culture both in and *since* the 1980s plays into the show's narrative *and* the way in which audiences can interact with that narrative. Ironically, while *Stranger Things* and *Stranger Things 2* have attracted attention for their mediation of 1980s nostalgia, both seasons of the show (thusfar) are perhaps more aware of their twenty-first century status than any other contemporary television narrative in the post-broadcast era.

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