

# Demogorgons, Death Stars and Difference: Masculinity and Geek Culture in *Stranger Things*

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**Abstract:** Following David Harbour's anti-Trump speech at the SAG Awards 2017, *Stranger Things* positions itself as a text that derides neo-conservatism and embraces difference. However, this inclusive veneer is problematized by the 1980s texts it nostalgizes, particularly their concern with white hegemonic masculinity and their marginalization of women and people of colour. Such values were at the heart of the GamerGate scandal of 2014, which seemed to underline contemporary geek culture as an intolerant, prejudiced space. *Stranger Things* thus attempts to renegotiate the identity of the geek in more positive and inclusive terms, enacting a conditional nostalgia, one that tries to fulfil the expectations of 1980s narratives whilst acknowledging the need for diversification and nuanced performances of gender roles.

## Introduction

At the SAG (Screen Actors Guild) Awards in January 2017, David Harbour took the stage with his fellow cast members from *Stranger Things* (Netflix 2016-present) to accept the award for "Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Drama Series," declaring, "As we act in the continuing narrative of *Stranger Things*, we 1980s mid-westerners will repel bullies. We will shelter freaks and outcasts, those who have no home. We will get past the lies. We will hunt monsters!" (qtd. in Li). Harbour's speech, which was greeted with wild applause from the audience of A-listers, drew connections between the show's themes and contemporary politics. Contextualized by President Trump's recent effort to ban citizens from Muslim countries from entering the United States, it positioned *Stranger Things* as a text that champions difference and derides neo-conservative ideologies, "speaking to the present as much to the past" (Butler, "Welcome to the Upside Down," 200). Set against a backdrop of 1980s Cold War anxiety, *Stranger Things* simultaneously nostalgizes Reagan-era childhood and popular culture, whilst strongly critiquing President Reagan's administration and policies, currently echoed by those of President Trump. Harbour's address emphasizes the liberalism and inclusivity of *Stranger Things* with its focus on "freaks and outcasts," a representation immediately relevant to its engagement with "nerd" and "geek" cultures, especially through its characterization of the adolescent boys who call themselves The Party. This discussion focuses on how, through their characterization as "freaks and outcasts," *Stranger Things* works to nostalgically renegotiate geek identity and geek masculinity.



Figure 1: David Harbour's SAG speech, January 30, 2017, a "reminder to folks that when they feel broken, and afraid, and tired, they are not alone! Copyright: TNT

*Stranger Things* follows the adventures of four boys, Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard), Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin) and Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo) who, as ardent gamers, refer to themselves as The Party—the Dungeons and Dragons term for a group of allied warriors. In Season One, they join forces with Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), a girl with telekinetic powers who has escaped from the government-run Hawkins Laboratory. In Season Two, they befriend a female skateboarder and arcade champion, Maxine "Max" Mayfield (Sadie Sink). Working with Police Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour) and Will's mother Joyce (Winona Ryder), The Party reveals the dark intentions of Hawkins Lab and its lead scientist, Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine) whose experiments in ESP and telekinesis have opened a gate to an alternative dimension of monsters the boys nickname the Upside Down. Aligned against government forces and the creatures in this realm, The Party fights monstrous difference, but they are themselves likewise different. Specifically, the boys personify Kendall's definition of the "nerd" (262-263), a now familiar term popularized in the 1970s by the nostalgia sitcom *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984) and given its own gendered narrative in the 1980s cult classic *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew, 1984). Likewise, they fit the profile of the "geek," a term mainstreamed in twenty-first century media cultures, its popular currency confirmed by shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS 2007-2018). While "geek" and "nerd" can be used interchangeably, the "geek" is commonly characterized by "intelligence, obsessiveness and male gender," while the "nerd" is a social outcast who is often bullied yet desires to be popular and who, like the geek, is associated with expert knowledge (Lane 3-8). The boys in *Stranger Things* are identified as "nerds" (2.02) by the fact that they love and excel at science, have expert knowledge of media and technology as the sole members of Hawkins A.V. Club, and are often bullied. Within twenty-first century popular cultures, they are also easily identifiable as "geeks," especially due to their engagement with media fandoms. In addition to their status as Dungeons and Dragons aficionados, they love science-fiction and fantasy as well as science, especially *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977-1983) and *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954). In acknowledgement of how these characters signify both in the past and present, this discussion will refer to the boys interchangeably as both nerds and geeks.

While underlining "their difference from dominant hegemony" especially in terms of gender (Lane 5), the show also frames the boys as the focus of heartfelt nostalgia. As precursors of the twenty-first century geek, Mike, Will, Lucas, and Dustin are figures through which *Stranger Things* celebrates 1980s popular culture, its films, novels and games. But the show also uses them to invoke the nerd or geek as a figure of difference. Specifically, in its characterization of the boys and their friends Eleven and Max, *Stranger Things* remakes and revives the "Loser's Club" from Stephen King's 1986 novel *It*. Like the misfit members of this ensemble, the young protagonists of *Stranger Things* are narratively pitted against an evil force; they must work together, embracing their difference, in order to defeat their foes. This focus on inclusivity and an appreciation of difference stands in contrast to the contentiously gendered nature of contemporary geek cultures. Whereas the well-meaning nerds of Hawkins Middle School are the inevitable target of bullies, currently geek masculinity

is itself associated with bullying, abuses of power, misogyny and intolerance such as that demonstrated by the GamerGate scandal of 2014 (Stuart). Likewise complicating its focus on inclusivity and its celebration of difference is the way that the nostalgia of the series is directed to films that marginalize women and people of color.

This examination of *Stranger Things* uncovers an attempt to forge a positive identity for the 1980s nerd and by doing so, offers a reparative representation of the twenty-first century geek. This compensatory narrative pits the boys against hegemonic masculinity epitomized by the Reagan-era military industrial complex (also the hyper-masculinity that typifies much of Reaganite entertainment), while its gendered narratives more generally appear to speak back and offer an alternative to the toxic masculinities of GamerGate (Lees). Scholars such as Braithwaite and Shaw have drawn attention to the intolerance and anti-feminist sentiment within twenty-first century “geek” cultures, specifically in the sphere of gaming. Likewise, Salter and Blodgett in their exploration of “toxic masculinity” in contemporary geek media cultures have pointed out how science fiction and fantasy fandoms of the sort celebrated nostalgically in *Stranger Things* function as a masculinist preserve from which both women and feminist critique are forcibly excluded. This discussion will focus upon *Stranger Things*’ attempt to renegotiate the geek as a marginalized and subaltern identity by positioning the boys and their allies *against* forces of toxic masculinity, while also focusing on the inclusivity of The Party and the storyworld of *Stranger Things* as a whole. This relocation and re-characterization of the geek is enacted in part through what appears as a conditional nostalgia for its 1980s source texts. For example, at the same time it emulates films of the past like *Revenge of the Nerds* in its focus on the role of romance in The Party’s coming of age, in its representations of Eleven and Max it departs from source texts to make its female characters something more than the object of male narratives. By doing so, it registers the conditional nature of its nostalgia and likewise a certain discomfort with the narratives it nostalgically recalls.

## 1980s Nostalgia, Geek Culture and Masculinity

The 1980s is a period that saw significant developments in gender scholarship, as well as high profile pop culture debates about masculinity. Those “pro-feminist” studies of masculinity that focused on its “socially constructed nature” (Edwards 2) addressed “hegemonic masculinity” as a social problem damaging to men and women alike for the way that it forced men “into confining roles and inhibited their relationships with other men” (Gardiner 5). However, the 1980s was also a period of substantial backlash against feminism, when masculinity was extensively “reconstructed” by men’s movements (Beynon 98). John Bly’s popular work *Iron John*, for instance, asserted that men had been marginalized by feminism and needed to reassert their position within the social hierarchy. The hyper-masculine ideal promoted by men’s movements has been identified as a response to America’s defeat in Vietnam (Burstyn; Jeffords). This trend in gendered representations of the 1980s has been linked to the election of Reagan and consequently, the expansion of American neo-conservatism. These trends are referenced in the election signage we see in *Stranger Things*, likewise in its references to films like *Rambo* (Kotcheff 1982). Such power struggles form its social and cultural backdrop, while within the series itself the lived realities of hegemonic masculinity are most vividly depicted in its representations of Hawkins Middle School and the video game arcade as sites where competitive masculinity is performed (Connell; Kocurek). *Stranger Things* references the 1980s as a time when the link between adolescence, masculinity and gaming was forged by a public culture that aligned young boys, video game technologies and what appears in the arcade culture as the “inherently competitive nature of men” (Kocurek 123). While the arcade enacted its own form of hegemonic masculinity, centered on screen violence, homosocial bonding and competition, it also appears as a key site of the formation of the “nerd” or “geek” persona. We witness this in the first episode of Season Two when the boys compete against each other for top scores on their favorite video games—and encounter the mysterious winner, “Mad Max.” Before speaking further about geek masculinity as it is constructed by such arcade culture, it is worth reviewing geek masculinity’s relation to media cultures more broadly and thus its relation to the media nostalgia at the heart of *Stranger Things*.

The geek has entered contemporary mainstream consciousness primarily through the perceived relationship between geeks and technology (Lane). Texts such as *The Pirates of Silicon Valley* (Burke 1999) and *The Social Network* (Fincher 2010) repeated the trope of nerds who are socially undesirable and challenged by romance while also demonstrating that geekdom could be lucrative and valuable. This newfound mainstream popularity of the nerd or geek positively reframed stereotypical geek qualities such as intelligence and extensive knowledge of popular culture, so that currently nerds and geeks are strongly aligned with films, books and video games in their role as “avid media consumers” (Kendall 1999, 263). In *Stranger Things*, such a description almost perfectly describes Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin, who are fans of the fantasy and sci-fi blockbusters that proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s. These generically hybrid, highly intertextual, deeply nostalgic and widely accessible action-focused productions by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas offered cult media experiences for a mass audience. Hills has noted that cult media narratives (which include these Spielberg and Lucas productions as well as *Stranger Things* itself) typically attract a following of “nerdy, geeky, infantile fans” (62). *Stranger Things* dramatizes the link between geeks and the type of media products with which they engage, while offering itself as yet another site of cult media engagement in part through its presentation of the 1980s nerd as a nostalgic forbear of the now familiar image of the geek.

Through its representation of The Party as nerds and geeks who are both socially marginalized and pitted against both the powers of darkness and the evils of the military industrial complex, *Stranger Things* typifies the way cult narratives often inspire “empathetic audience identification with subversive characters” (Kinkade and Katovich 194). All of the leads in *Stranger Things*, both teens and adults, are subversive due to their secret knowledge of the Upside Down and the monstrous invasion of Hawkins, Indiana. But in the case of The Party, this narrative role is intrinsically linked to their keen preferences in and understanding of a trans-textual geek culture, incorporating media entertainment, literature and games. In this way, *Stranger Things* participates in what Mathijs and Sexton have termed an “us versus them mentality aimed at niche audiences” (230), distinguishing itself from the mainstream. At the same time, through its references to a “vast intertextual network” that constitutes the nostalgic references to popular cultures of the past (Jenkins, 40), the series positions The Party and fans of *Stranger Things* in the same expansive cultural space. This is done implicitly, through the way we are invited to read the show through other similar media texts, but also explicitly through promotional material. For example, in a recent trailer to promote Season Three, Priah Ferguson, who plays Lucas’s sister Erica, addresses the audience, jibing: “Get out of here, *nerds*!” thus allying fans of the show with members of The Party. The show is thus a prime example of how contemporary pop cultural entertainments associated with geek cultures (like comic books) engage a broad spectrum of fans, from hard core geeks to casual viewers. *Stranger Things* satisfies the mainstream through its referencing of iconic, blockbuster entertainments of the 1980s and yet is infused with sufficient narrative depth and intertextual complexity to attract geek attention.

At the same time that *Stranger Things* is an example of how nerd and geek cultures have been mainstreamed, geek culture has also made the news as an exclusive and intolerant space, associated with toxic masculinity (Salter and Blodgett). Typically, the nerd has been derided as a non-hegemonic mode of masculinity, a stereotype “including aspects of both hyper-masculinity and feminization” (Kendall 264). Yet perhaps precisely because of this, when we return to the gaming sphere, we find that it describes an embattled, often exclusively gendered space. Jenkins and Cassells, Consalvo and Kocurek have noted the marginalization of girls and women from both contemporary and historical gaming cultures and the video game industry. While in the 1980s, the arcade offered a social space that encouraged competitive masculinity, in contemporary media cultures, Burrill observes the prevalence of a particular “masculine subjectivity” he terms “digital boyhood.” This is a regressive state, a “space away from feminism” where, rather like the arcade of the 1980s, boys “can prove their manhood” (2). Such aggressively anti-female and anti-feminist territoriality was at the heart of the GamerGate scandal in August 2014. The harassment campaign targeted women in the gaming industry, most notably game developer Zoe Quinn and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Further research has confirmed the continued prevalence of toxic masculinity online (Ging) and at the heart of the video gaming industry (Paul). In this context, the media-focused nostalgia of *Stranger Things* for young nerds coming of age becomes particularly problematic.

Salter and Blodgett have observed that “the discourse of GamerGate was fueled by nostalgia,” a longing for the geek sphere’s restoration as the exclusive realm of hegemonic white masculinity (Quail, Kendall, Kocurek).

There are echoes of this nostalgic desire in *Stranger Things* with its representation of The Party. The boys engage with gaming culture, their close friendship cemented through hours spent playing Dungeons and Dragons in Season One, likewise through their competitions at the video game arcade in Season Two. Before the entrance of Eleven in Season One and Max in Season Two, The Party is a male-only ensemble. As part of their journey through (a strictly heteronormative) adolescence, the boys must adjust their social bonds and cultural outlook to make room for girls. This nostalgic reimagining of the homotopic space of their friendship is, of course, not just limited to the sphere of gaming but extends to other aspects of their social life. Significantly, this valorization of male bonds of friendship and camaraderie that characterizes The Party is something that *Stranger Things* has in common with other nostalgic narratives of the past and present. For instance, when one looks at the key media texts that are the focus of geek fandom in the 1980s, one finds a common pattern of male heroism and camaraderie combined with the marginalization of women and people of color. This is particularly marked in the *Indiana Jones* franchise (1981-89) which cycles through different female love interests for male heroes, while in the *Star Wars* franchise (1977-83) Princess Leia persists as the sole female lead and the object of romantic possibilities that form an ongoing narrative subplot. Likewise, when considering contemporary nostalgia texts, one finds a similar pattern at work. Alice Daynard (Elle Fanning) in *Super 8* (Abrams 2011), Gamora (Zoe Saldana) in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014), Beverly Marsh (Sophia Lillis) in *It* (Muschetti 2017) and Samantha/Art3mis (Olivia Cooke) in *Ready Player One* (Spielberg 2018) are the only females in their respective ensembles and all function as love interests for the male heroes, regardless of what other narrative roles they play. Owing to its nostalgic focus and generic character, *Stranger Things* is shaped by similar gendered and narrative tendencies, problematizing its more liberal, inclusive narrative about difference and its reparative goals in respect of geek masculinity.

This problematic gendered power dynamic has likewise surfaced in production narratives of the show. Specifically, *Stranger Things* creators, the Duffer Brothers, have been subject to heavy criticism from their fan base for forcing young actors Sadie Sink and Caleb McLaughlin to kiss in Season Two’s final sequence (Stolworthy). The exchange was unscripted, and in an interview, Matt Duffer admits that Sink’s clear discomfort heightened his determination to follow through with the kiss. Subsequently, Sink said in interviews that she “never objected” to the scene nor “felt pushed into anything” (qtd. in Sharf), and the show’s creators have publicly apologized. Nevertheless, such behind-the-scenes revelations in combination with the performance itself draw attention to an uncomfortable tension within the geek discourse of *Stranger Things* between the generically heteronormative and masculinist narrative impulses inherited from the past on the one hand and its efforts to embrace difference and diversity in the present on the other.

At the same time, *Stranger Things* appears engaged in a reparative project that is part of a larger recent trend to curb the exclusively white and masculinist nature of geek texts, through re-gendering and altering the racial profile of cult favorites. For example, Jodie Whittaker became the first female *Doctor Who* (Marsh 2017), while *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) brought an African superhero to the screen. With the upcoming release of *Captain Marvel* (Cooper 2018) and the promise of a Black Widow movie (Ashurst 2018), women are taking leading roles within the formerly masculine domain of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – an important cultural space for geeks with its own set of nostalgic appeals. Furthermore, while Gamora, Beverly and Art3mis do function as love interests in their respective fictions, they are all very strong characters within their narratives, different from those female leads of the *Indiana Jones* series, for example, who regularly required rescuing as well as wooing. In these revised texts, we can see evidence of an effort to transform the profile of cult media away from a focus on (white) hegemonic masculinity, prompted by (the slow) realization that women and people of color form a significant part of the audience for such mainstream “cult” fare.

*Stranger Things*, in a similar fashion, both references and revises gendered and generic expectations of 1980s fantasy, sci-fi and coming of age narratives to which it pays homage. Filtering its nostalgia through contemporary beliefs and concerns of the sort highlighted by Harbour’s speech, there is some acknowledgement within the show that racial and gender profiles inherited from the past are no longer appropriate. While Eleven and Max do function as love interests for Mike, Lucas and Dustin, they are also powerful, spirited, distinctive characters within the narrative, standing as tacit acknowledgement of a discomfort cohabitating with nostalgia for the 1980s texts that *Stranger Things* sentimentalizes. Likewise we see the boys of The Party positioned against more toxic forms of masculinity, including especially varieties of Cold War era Reaganite masculinity epitomized by Eleven’s cruel and power-hungry “Papa,” Dr. Brenner, Mike’s authoritarian but neglectfully deficient father, Ted Wheeler (Joe Chrest) and Max’s overtly abusive step-father, Neil Hargrove (Will Chase) whose behavior is echoed by Max’s step-brother Billy (Dacre Montgomery). *Stranger Things* also offers other male leads who model alternative forms of masculinity and fathering, for example, Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) who unexpectedly takes on a carer’s role; Jim Hopper who works to have a positive relationship with his adopted daughter Eleven and Bob Newby (Sean Astin) who is supportive of both Joyce Byers and her sons, especially troubled Will. Significantly, Bob’s geeky but sensitive persona is offered to audiences as an alternative superhero, commemorated by Will’s artwork after his death (2.09), highlighting the difference between his heroism and that of hyper-masculinized male leads of 1980s sci-fi and fantasy narratives. In the process of this reparative narrative of geekdom aimed against conventional forms of hegemonic masculinity, *Stranger Things* works to represent geek culture as an inclusive space which accommodates different forms of masculinity, including those explicitly represented as simultaneously geeky and nerdy but also affectionate, nurturing, and heroically self-sacrificing.



Figure 2: Will’s drawing of Bob Newby, superhero (2.09). Copyright: Netflix.

## The Geeks and the Girls

An important part of *Stranger Things*’ reparative work in relation to geek masculinity is its representation of The Party’s encounters with girls. The show draws significantly from adolescent ensemble films such as *The Goonies* (Donner 1985) and *Stand by Me* (Reiner, 1986) which center on homosocial friendship groups and their transformation through adolescence. As girls, Max and Eleven pose significant challenges to the dynamic of The Party. Eleven causes a rift between Mike and Lucas in Season One (1.05; 1.06), while Max’s arrival causes tensions between Lucas and Dustin in Season Two (2.06; 2.08). In these scenarios we see how the characters and identities of the two girls are thus structured by “triangulating practices in which women mediate men’s relationships” (Adams and Savran 6). More broadly we see how the nostalgia of *Stranger Things* replays the wish fulfilment of texts such as *Revenge of the Nerds* and *War Games* (Badham

1984), in which the geek gets the girl while, at the same time, as part of its reparative efforts to renegotiate geek cultures it also depicts female characters as subjects in their own narratives, struggling with their own marginalization and difference. In this way *Stranger Things* both allows for a critical reflection on the objectification and exclusion of female characters in geek texts and cultures of the past, whilst also working to ensure that Eleven and Max fulfil their traditional gender roles as objects of romantic coming of age narratives.

Eleven is seen as a threat to The Party, made evident from the way the boys immediately make plans for her to leave. Dustin and Lucas are frustrated with Mike when he does not stick to The Party's agreed course of action and lets Eleven stay in his basement (1.02). Eleven is, however, ultimately admitted entrance into The Party when the extent of her "superpowers" becomes clear, thus granting her cultural affiliation with the boys' Dungeons and Dragons culture of monsters and magic. Identified by Mike as a "Mage," Eleven continues to transform the bonds of friendship between the boys, especially by drawing Mike's attention and loyalty away from The Party (1.06). Mike himself seems blissfully unaware of this but it is noted by Dustin ("Sometimes your total obliviousness just blows my mind"). Eleven fulfils her gender role as determined by the teen film genre when she is subjected to a makeover by the boys (Driscoll). The Party transforms her into an ultra-feminine girl, with a pink dress and a blonde wig, who, once made over, becomes the object of Mike's admiration and affection. Importantly, she is also transformed in her own mind, as Eleven appears to want to be and to be thought of (by Mike) as not just powerful, but "pretty" (1.04; 1.07).

However, *Stranger Things* also registers discomfort with characterizing Eleven as simply the fulfilment of a heterosexual fantasy which she duly internalizes. Her character goes on an important independent journey in Season Two, where she learns to harness her childhood trauma, also the powers she developed under the tutelage of Dr. Brenner, to become more powerful still. She also violently confronts one of the male government officials responsible for giving her mother electro-convulsion therapy (2.07), making her fight against the Reagan-era military industrial complex personal. While on this journey, she is also subject to another makeover, in which, with the help of her older "sister" Eight/Kali (Linnea Berthelsen), she rejects the feminine dress and wig of Season One for a "bitchin'" punk look, with heavy makeup and gelled back hair (2.07). At the same time she is the willing object of Mike's romantic narrative, she is also depicted as strong and fearless, responsible for saving the ensemble cast in both Season One and Season Two (1.08, 2.09). Her position as both an avenging hero and a highly feminized love interest in *Stranger Things*' primary action and romance narratives makes Eleven a character who highlights tensions shaping *Stranger Things*, particularly its mixed efforts to both pursue the pleasures of geek nostalgia while also producing a reparative narrative of geek culture where there's a place for more than just male desire.

As gaming champion in the boys' geek sphere of the arcade, "Mad Max" poses a different sort of challenge to the boys' homosocial friendship group, causing them to rethink their prior ethos that "girls don't play video games" (2.01). However, her gaming abilities serve as her ticket into the group and her demonstration of loyalty to the boys throughout the series makes her a permanent member of The Party. While she does serve as a love interest, unlike Eleven, she does not significantly transform her appearance to fulfil this role. Nevertheless, Max is forced to have her hair done by her mother for the Snow Ball and eventually fulfils her appropriate gender role by agreeing to dance with—and kiss— Lucas. While Max is clearly recognizable as a tomboy, *Stranger Things* registers the fact that this identity is only "tolerated within the narrative of blossoming womanhood" (Halberstam 6). Nevertheless, in Season Two, Max talks back to the boys' looks rather than internalizing their judgement of her as Eleven does in Season One. She confronts the boys on their pursuit of her, commenting that their behavior is "creepy," even referring to Lucas as her "stalker." Through Max and the narrative of how she comes to be incorporated into The Party, *Stranger Things* critically engages with the territoriality and gendered exclusivity of geek culture. She engages them by literally beating them at their own game, being the mysterious arcade champion, "Mad Max" (2.01). Yet, when the boys just assume that she would want to go trick or treating with them on Halloween, she calls them on their presumption (2.02), and she also directly confronts Lucas on the evident exclusivity of The Party (2.04).



Figure 3: The Party finds their high scores beaten by the mysterious 'MADMAX'. (2.01). Copyright: Netflix

Like Eleven, Max also fights against forces of hyper-masculinity, epitomized not by the military industrial complex or the monsters it has released, but by her step-brother, Billy. Billy is threatening and abusive towards Max throughout Season Two, his character shown as the epitome of toxic masculinity: violent, racist and domineering. When Billy attempts to attack the boys of The Party, Max takes action to defend them, injecting Billy with drugs meant for Will, thus aggressively mimicking his former treatment of her, literally silencing him into submission (2.09). In this way, Max serves as both the object of The Party's narrative, filling her position as Lucas's love interest, spending time with him against Billy's warnings; but she is also the subject of her own narrative when she stands up to her abusive brother. Like Eleven, she demonstrates *Stranger Things*' awareness of the problematically gendered nature of geek cultures and its generic narratives; we see the series work to counter this while also pursuing its nostalgic narrative desires. Salter and Blodgett have noted that "geek oriented spaces of science fiction, fantasy and comic adaptations" are archetypally concerned with "machismo glorification" with the result that women are cast in secondary roles (20). As this brief sketch of Eleven and Max's narratives makes clear, this is not precisely the case in *Stranger Things* even though both serve as love interests for The Party.

The mix of nostalgic and reparative aims that shape geek masculinity in *Stranger Things* is perhaps most clear in its representations of how the boys deal with their own growing attraction to girls Eleven and Max. *Stranger Things* replays the classic nerd narrative of difficulty with girls, but also makes a space for appreciating the difference of their subaltern masculinity, rather than pitting them competitively against other males in a form of geek "machismo" as we see in films like *Revenge of the Nerds*. In Season One, for instance, we see how Eleven all but ignores Mike's attempts to impress her with his toys and collectables (1.02). In Season Two (2.02), the Party's Halloween costumes give Dustin and Lucas the chance to embody heroic roles from *Ghostbusters* (Reitman 1984), specifically for Max, with mixed results. When Lucas has his photo taken in his costume, flexing his muscles whilst posing, drawing the connection between his status as a Ghostbuster and his perceived manliness, his little sister pokes fun at him saying, "You are such a *nerd*. No wonder you only hang out with boys" (2.02). Similarly, when the boys arrive at school to find that they are the only ones dressed up for Halloween, they are derided as "nerds" in the hallway by their fellow students. Like Eleven who questions whether or not she is "pretty," the boys are prompted to think about how they appear and appeal to girls. Ironically (despite the derisive commentary of their fellow students), Dustin does not see their costumes as detracting from their appeal, as he and

Lucas contemplate inviting Max to go trick or treating. Lucas, who will be the luckier of the two in his pursuit of Max, proves more self-aware of how they appear in costume (thanks perhaps to prompting from his little sister):

DUSTIN: Are we gonna do this?

LUCAS: Not right now, we look like morons.

DUSTIN: Maybe she likes *Ghostbusters*.

LUCAS: Of course she likes *Ghostbusters* but that's not the point. The point is that we're dressed up and she isn't. (2.02)



Figure 4: The Party realise they are the only students in costume. (2.02). Copyright: Netflix

Here, it is clear that it is not the boys' geeky interests that they perceive to be the problem, but simply the fact that they stand out through being in costume. They are not territorial or exclusionary about their geeky enthusiasm, nor do they view their fandom as exclusively male. They feel that their love for *Ghostbusters* makes a significant contribution to their desirability as friends—even potential boyfriends for Max. However, the narrative's insistence that the boys are marginalized by their fandom, which is confirmed by Max just as it is by Lucas's little sister, positions The Party as a subaltern form of masculinity at odds with hegemonic male norms.

Yet, importantly, at the same time that Dustin and Lucas struggle with their marginalization in relation to the adolescent mainstream and with how they might attract the girls they like, the boys of The Party are also represented as a safe space for the girls they admire. While Eleven is represented as stronger and Max is represented as more sophisticated than the boys of The Party, and thus neither Eleven nor Max is represented as being in need of rescue, both are in need of respite. They get this with The Party who form a space removed from the abusive control of the hyper-masculine figures that dominate the home and family lives of Eleven and Max. Eleven hides from the "Bad Men" taking shelter in the blanket fort of Mike's basement, while The Party also offers Max a safe retreat from the aggression of her step-brother, Billy. While the heteronormative gender performance of The Party in the Snow Ball scene at the close of Season Two underlines *Stranger Things'* need to rehearse 1980s narratives where geeks ultimately get the girls, there is an attempt to balance this problematic nostalgia, this generic gendering of the text, by characterizing Max and Eleven as strong characters with their own significant journeys and development. Likewise, *Stranger Things* endeavors to pit its young leads against and set them in contrast to more toxic forms of hyper-masculinity, thus emphasizing the inherent difference of the male geek.

### Battling the Bad Men

Also important to the renegotiation of geekdom in *Stranger Things* is the way in which The Party battles toxic white masculinity. The heroes of films such as *Rambo*, *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) and *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988) were the embodiment of Reaganite hyper-masculinity, defined, among other things, "by whiteness; [...] an athletic body; an unemotional disposition and aggressive tendencies" (Jeffords 34). While there are no comparable hyper-masculine heroic figures in *Stranger Things*, the storyworld nevertheless appears shaped by hegemonic masculinity that privileges such figures, signified by a thematic focus on toxic masculinity and paternalism evident especially in its deficient and overtly malevolent father figures. Dr. Brenner is positioned as the primary human antagonist in Season One, as his dangerous experiments in ESP and telekinesis led to the opening of the "gate" to the Upside Down and the release of the Demogorgon (1.06). Memories of this trauma allow him to continue to psychologically torment Eleven in Season Two (2.07). As representative of the government, he also underlines *Stranger Things'* rejection of neo-conservative ideologies. And, his position as abusive and neglectful "Papa" is echoed by other bad fathers. Joyce's ex-husband, Lonnie (Ross Partridge) is shown to be insensitive to the needs of his sons, Will and Jonathan. Through flashbacks, it is shown that Lonnie tries to make Will participate in stereotypically masculine spectator sports despite Will's lack of interest (1.02). Likewise, it is clear that the abuse of Max's step-father, Neil Hargrove, is the source of Billy's own hyper-masculinized behavior, his aggressive and homophobic tendencies demonstrated in a heated exchange with his son (2.09).

Similarly, Ted Wheeler, Mike's father, also tries to reshape his son's gendered identity, when he attempts to speak to Mike in the alien language of football (2.01). Athleticism is important to hegemonic masculinity and is associated with Reaganite masculinity (Jeffords), as made clear by the "Reagan/Bush" placard prominently placed in the Wheelers' garden. However, Mike is clearly different from his father, who displays unwavering faith in the government's lies about Eleven being a Russian spy. Mike remains defiant toward his father and toward government agents in his loyalty to her: "I don't know where she is! And even if I did I would never tell you. I would *never* tell you" (2.02). At issue here is not just Mike's refusal of government authority but also his willingness to display his emotional bond with Eleven. Salter and Blodgett observe that the ideal geek male is typified by his lack of feeling. By contrast, Mike pines after Eleven and their reunion at the end of Season Two is highly emotional. Through Mike especially, *Stranger Things* distinguishes the boys of the Party from both Reaganite hyper-masculinity and the conservatism of their fathers, while emotional sensitivity also distinguishes him from the stereotype of the geek.

Alongside its many bad fathers, *Stranger Things* offers a series of alternative father figures for its adolescent leads, none of whom wholly endorse hyper-masculine ideals. High school jock Steve Harrington is an interesting case in point. Dustin looks up to Steve as the ideal embodiment of masculinity, due to his good looks and sexual prowess, however Steve is a far cry from the hyper-masculine stereotype. He is brave but inept at fighting (1.07; 2.09), seductive yet also sensitive towards the feelings of Nancy (Natalia Dyer) when she chooses to lose her virginity to him (1.02; 1.03). Through his character, *Stranger Things* takes a "clear swipe at Reagan's conception of masculinity" (Butler "Eaten for Breakfast Club," 7). And, importantly, Steve takes on the role of carer and fights alongside The Party at the close of Season Two. While Jim Hopper wears an Indiana Jones-inspired hat, is not afraid to use violence to get what he wants and is overly protective in his parenting of Eleven, he is also deeply emotional when expressing his grief over losing his daughter and learns to change his style of parenting after Eleven runs away (2.03; 2.09). Hopper also fights exclusively against the government in Season One, evidence of his own rejection of the military industrial complex associated with neo-conservative government. Through these characters *Stranger Things* references 1980s male heroes but also provides us with alternative forms of masculinity.

Also important are those characters who model both alternative masculinities and alternative images of the caringly mature geek or nerd, namely science teacher Mr. Clarke (Randy Havens) and Joyce's boyfriend, Bob Newby (Sean Astin). Mr. Clarke shares scientific and technological breakthroughs with The Party, mentors them as A.V. Club members and fields their questions surrounding the Vale of Shadows from Dungeons and Dragons (1.05). Importantly, the boys use their knowledge from Mr. Clarke's classes to understand—and shape—major concepts in the show, for example, the

"hive mind" of the Mind Flayer monster (2.08), highlighting the inherent value of nerd knowledge. Similarly, Bob Newby, ("Bob the Brain"), is offered as a significant example of nontoxic nerd or geek masculinity. As a tech-savvy employee of Radio Shack and the "original founder of Hawkins A.V." (2.08), Bob is firmly grounded within the sphere of geekdom. Throughout *Stranger Things*, he is shown to be a kind and non-judgmental character, positioned as an alternative father for Will and Jonathan and supportive partner for Joyce, helping without question to decipher Will's tunnel map (2.04). When Hopper, Joyce, Mike and Will find themselves locked in Hawkins Lab with a pack of Demodogs, it is Bob's computing skills that facilitate the group's escape (2.08). Following his death, Will draws him as a superhero figure, underlining the importance of his sacrifice. Such veneration has been echoed in the audience's interaction with *Stranger Things*. Following the release of Season Two, #JusticeforBob exploded onto Twitter, as fans were saddened by his death (Saunders; Chaney). In a sphere tainted by GamerGate, Bob is offered as a kind, sensitive and mature alternative to toxic geek masculinity.

Throughout *Stranger Things*, The Party and their allies fight against such figures of toxic white masculinity while attempting to forge and negotiate their own alternative gender roles. From the very first scene, members of The Party are identifiable as different, as not fitting "within the sphere of hegemonic masculinity" (Berns et al. 149), which is typically white and able bodied. Mike is sensitive and physically weak, derided as "Frogface" (1.01) and threatened by knife-toting bullies (1.06), clearly positioned as an underdog (Chess 2018). Lucas is different by virtue of his race, the only African-American lead character in the series. Dustin plays the stereotypical role of the "fat boy" in childhood ensemble films and suffers from cleidocranial dysplasia, while Will is labelled as "gay" by bullies and even by his own father (1.04; 1.01). This characterization of The Party emphasizes their difference and exemplifies how *Stranger Things* works to re-negotiate geek masculinity in more positive and inclusive terms. Likewise, the series draws attention to the issue of difference in a self-conscious and critical way, for instance addressing the issue of white privilege normalized in the 1980s narratives it references when the boys dress up as Ghostbusters on Halloween. When Mike and Lucas both cosplay their favorite white character, Venkman, Mike is forced to acknowledge both his assumption of racial advantage and the racist scripting of the beloved cult film *Ghostbusters*. Lucas, outraged that Mike assumed he would play Winston, defends his own Venkman cosplay saying, "No-one wants to be Winston, man [...] he joined the team super late, he's not funny and he's not even a scientist!" (2.02).

The trope of Mike's unearned privilege is also played out when, in trying to scramble change to play video games at the arcade, Mike steals from his sister while by contrast, Lucas mows "Old Man Humphrey's lawn" for cash (2.01). These scenes confront white advantage, depicting Mike—leader of The Party from the first Chapter of the series—as pedantic and prejudiced and Lucas, by contrast, as honest and hardworking. In the critical renegotiation of *Ghostbusters* fandom with a specific focus on race, we see how *Stranger Things* qualifies its own nostalgia. A similar qualification of nostalgia takes place through Lucas's own efforts to embody or emulate the hyper-masculine figure of John Rambo when he dons a bandanna, army knife and binoculars "from 'Nam" (1.03) for key action sequences. His performance of hyper-individualist, hyper-masculinity is countered both by scenes where his little sister makes fun of him and also, more substantively, by his changing relationship to Eleven and Max. He ultimately accepts Eleven's difference in Season One (1.07) and displays understanding and kindness toward Max in Season Two (2.06). This critical renegotiation and qualification of nostalgia for 1980s films and their modelling of masculinity is part of a broader renegotiation of masculinity in *Stranger Things*, including its efforts to re-cast geek identity in terms of non-hegemonic masculinity.

The endorsement of male difference is perhaps most strongly highlighted in a poignant exchange between Will and Jonathan after Will has been called "Zombie Boy" at school. Jonathan reassures him that "being a freak is the best," using David Bowie as an illustrative example and sharing his own experience of living outside of the hegemonic norm (2.01). This exchange encapsulates *Stranger Things*' endorsement of difference in the context of coming of age. While in many teen films, nerds are told to change (Shary 40) or compete with other male characters to demonstrate their dominance, *Stranger Things* revels in the marginalization of The Party. Dustin's rejection by a group of popular girls at the Snow Ball, for instance, underlines the show's swipe at the "dangerous world of the in-crowd" (Bolte 100). In its rejection of the mainstream and embrace of difference *Stranger Things* shows its affinity with cult geek texts such as the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011) and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017). And by doing so, it attempts a reparative reading of geek culture as not just marginal but inclusive, showing The Party struggling with gender norms and difference, yet also accepting the difference of others, as part of their coming of age journey.

## Conclusion

Kocurek has suggested that nostalgia "often points not to the superiority of the past, but to the shortcomings of the present" (160). In contrast to the intolerance of geek culture demonstrated by the scandal of GamerGate and in contrast to the toxic masculinity widespread within Trumpian politics, *Stranger Things* works to put alternative masculinities on screen, while forging more positive identities for the nerds and geeks of The Party. Telotte has suggested that cult media texts work within "a realm of difference" and that cult is, in itself, a "longing to express difference" (7-12). What is important here is the kind of difference that *Stranger Things* evokes and expresses. As *Stranger Things* highlights struggles with difference experienced by the marginal masculinities of The Party, it creates a space for geek identity to be renegotiated, not merely uncritically nostalgized and appreciated. In doing so, it highlights the conditional nature of its nostalgia, one that acknowledges the popularity of 1980s geek texts while also seeking to correct some of the problematic elements of the hegemony and hyper-masculinity common to these narratives. As a consequence, at the same time that it re-enacts some of the most familiar narrative patterns associated with its source texts—for instance in the focus on heteronormative romance as the key to geek coming of age—its attempts to be more nuanced in its gendered representations also registers sources of discomfort within its own nostalgia.

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