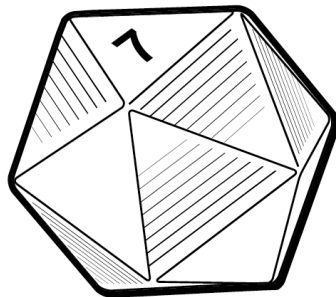


The Silver Archive #4
STRANGER THINGS

Season 1



By Paul Driscoll

THE SILVER ARCHIVE

STRANGER THINGS – SEASON 1

ISBN: 9781909031821

Published by Obverse Books, Edinburgh

Range Editor: Stuart Douglas

Cover Design: Cody Schell

First edition: January 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text © 2018 Paul Driscoll

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

To the family of Kevin Hicks who went missing in 1986 and all those still looking for a loved one.

CONTENTS

A NEW FORM OF CULT TV	09
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE NOSTALGIC KIND	16
REAL WORLD FEARS.....	36
OF PORTALS AND STRANGER KINGS	59
DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS.....	79
THE TRUTH IS (WAY) OUT THERE	100
GEEKS AND FREAKS: A COMMUNITY OF OUTSIDERS.....	113
EVIL, MADNESS AND THE HEART OF DARKNESS.....	131
A TIMELESS MESSAGE FOR THE RIGHT WAY UP	141
BIBLIOGRAPHY	144

OVERVIEW

Original Netflix Release Date (all episodes): 15 July 2016

Serial Title: Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers

Directors: The Duffer Brothers

Writers: The Duffer Brothers

Running Time: 47m

Serial Title: Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street

Directors: The Duffer Brothers

Writers: The Duffer Brothers

Running Time: 55m

Serial Title: Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly

Director: Shawn Levy

Writer: Jessica Mecklenburg

Running Times: 51m

Serial Title: Chapter Four: The Body

Director: Shawn Levy

Writer: Justin Doble

Running Times: 49m

Serial Title: Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat

Director: The Duffer Brothers

Writer: Alison Tatlock

Running Times: 52m

Serial Title: Chapter Six: The Monster

Director: The Duffer Brothers

Writer: Jessie Nickson-Lopez

Running Times: 46m

Serial Title: Chapter Seven: The Bathtub

Director: The Duffer Brothers

Writer: Justin Doble

Running Times: 41m

Serial Title: Chapter Eight: The Upside Down

Writers: *Story by* Paul Dichter / *Teleplay by* The Duffer Brothers

Director: The Duffer Brothers

Running Times: 54m

Regular cast: Winona Ryder (Joyce Byers), David Harbour (Jim Hopper), Finn Wolfhard (Mike Wheeler), Millie Bobby Brown (Eleven), Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin Henderson), Caleb McLaughlin

(Lucas Sinclair), Natalia Dyer (Nancy Wheeler), Charlie Heaton (Jonathan Byers), Cara Buono (Karen Wheeler), Matthew Modine (Martin Brenner), Noah Schnapp (Will Byers)

Antagonists: The Demogorgon.

Critical Responses:

'**Stranger Things** is fun for almost all the family, depending on your juvenile cohorts' response to occasional gory scenes. The pace is (just about) fast enough to keep younger viewers hooked, and anyone old enough to remember 1983 for real is in for a richly enjoyable retro-feast'

[Lucy Mangan, 'Stranger Things review – a spooky shot of 80s nostalgia straight to your heart', *The Guardian*, 15 July 2016]

'[T]here's a higher bar for original stories—even homages—to clear when it comes to incorporating the lessons Hollywood has learned recently about depicting female characters who are as layered as their male counterparts. For all its charms, **Stranger Things** doesn't quite meet that standard.'

[Lenika Cruz, 'Where Stranger Things Loses Its Magic', *The Atlantic*, 26 July 2016]

SYNOPSIS

It is the 1980s and a young boy, WILL BYERS, has gone missing in the sleepy town of Hawkins, Indiana.

Will's mother, JOYCE, is convinced that Will is not dead and that he is speaking to her, but she is not believed, even by Will's friends, MIKE, DUSTIN and LUCAS, far less the authorities, represented by Sheriff JIM HOPPER.

As Will disappears, a strange, mute and shaven headed young girl appears, who the three boys name ELEVEN, after the number tattooed on her wrist.

As the hunt for Will continues, everyone involved must confront terrifying and apparently unearthly forces as the boys come to realise that Eleven might be linked to their friend's disappearance, and his mother's claims may not be so mad after all...

A NEW FORM OF CULT TV

In a matter of months after the series debuted, **Stranger Things** became the Netflix equivalent of the BBC's **Doctor Who** (1963-) and **Top Gear** (1983-). The eight part series is without doubt the streaming service's flagship original content show¹, a worldwide success that defied much of what had been assumed about how to effectively market a new programme. The show caught the majority of viewers off guard, with little advance publicity or paid advertising. Instead the company raised awareness through its narrowcasting strategy and by maintaining a creative and brand specific, or 'bottom up', social media presence². The online equivalent of the old 'word of mouth' adage also came into play, as in next to no time a sizeable fan base was established. Unsurprisingly Marketing companies have been all over the success of **Stranger Things** using it as a model for how businesses can sell their wares³.

In 2017 Netflix pushed out the boat to mass market the second series of **Stranger Things** through a Super Bowl trailer, the first of its kind for an on-demand service. The bold move reflects the company's increased confidence in the brand. Following the free advertising they had received through product placement, Kellogg's, the makers of Eggos, stepped in to part fund the commercial. Via the backdoor, **Stranger Things** had entered the mainstream in public awareness if not consumption. That year Netflix also announced plans to branch out commercially by licencing toys and other merchandising for the first time. Eventually, of course, a subscription-only model will reach its ceiling and in order to expand without making the service too expensive, income has to be found by alternative means. That said, the company are at pains to stress that they are making toys to sell programmes and not the other way around⁴.

Netflix's subscription based income stream allows niche programmes to reach an audience without the need to appeal to advertisers. Whilst by no means unique – the BBC and various satellite and cable channels have all been able to respond to the fragmentation of their audiences (through licence and subscription income sources respectively) – Netflix can take a punt on untested talents and the quirky and unconventional because it does not require its individual programmes to attract a mass audience. By being a library rather than a schedule it does not need to fragment into niche specific channels.

Although Netflix's growth has been phenomenal, success is not guaranteed by its (somewhat misleading⁵) choice-based format, as the critical reception to **Marseille** (2016) in France starkly illustrates (with Le Monde reviewer Pierre Serisier calling the Gerard Depardieu show 'cow-shit')⁶. The opinions of critics are as important as those of the fans in that they have the power to draw in or put off new viewers and subscribers. Even the seductive charm of nostalgia, whilst a huge selling point, cannot mask a lack of quality. However, there is no doubt that in Netflix the Duffer brothers found the

¹ Other big hitters such as **House of Cards** (2013-), **Orange is the New Black** (2013-) and the various Defenders series, whilst under exclusive licence with Netflix, are owned by independent production companies (Media Rights Capital, Lionsgate and Disney's Marvel respectively).

² 'some of the best-performing pieces of social content aren't around big news that the company is sharing about shows or personalities, but are posts that include a little bit of Netflix swagger.' Kerns, Chris, 'Streaming social: What marketers can learn from Netflix's social strategy'.

³ See for example Berry, Daniel, 'Strange Success: 5 Marketing Lessons from Netflix's Stranger Things'.

⁴ According to Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos "we don't want to make any shows to sell toys... kids wearing the backpack sell the show." Shaw, Lucas, 'Netflix Plans New Toys, Merchandise Based on Hit TV Shows'.

⁵ See the comprehensive study 'Netflix and the Construction of 'you'', by Aster Reinboud for the University of Amsterdam, who points out the extent to which Netflix chooses for its viewers.

⁶ Mayorga, Emilio, 'Netflix's Marseille Bow Underwhelms in France'.

perfect home for their concept. The show has arguably maximised its audience because of the platform. As a composite of different genres the Duffers would no doubt have lost a considerable slice of their audience had the show been broadcast on a horror, sci-fi, children's or crime specific channel. But the fit works both ways. **Stranger Things'** many homages to other series and movies is a godsend to Netflix's tailored and personalised advertising strategy which gives viewers a recommended list based on what they have watched.

Dan Cohen, the Vice President of Shaun Levy's production company 21 Laps, has said that the team approached Netflix after 20 or so previous rejections⁷. Levy, who personally stepped in to produce the show, contradicts that claim by going on record to say that Netflix was "literally...the first buyer we pitched to."⁸ Cohen's version of the script to screen story is confirmed by Matt Duffer's account in *Rolling Stone*. Traditional broadcasters struggled to understand the concept. Some insisted that it had to be told either from the perspective of Hopper or the kids, but not both⁹. Cohen pointed out that another reason for the multiple rejections was that the Duffers were still relatively new to the industry. Levy claims that they approached Netflix first for that very reason:

"They were the first pitch because they were our first choice. A big part of that is the Duffers are new and emerging filmmakers and they really didn't want the show to conform to increasingly obsolete notions of what is TV. They always spoke of it as an eight hour movie."¹⁰

Whether this latter factor governed the approach to Netflix as Levy claims, or whether following its acceptance the option to binge watch **Stranger Things** began to be seen by the Duffers as a huge benefit, it soon became apparent that the platform was the show's most natural home.

The idea of marketing **Stranger Things** as an eight hour movie (and if the Duffers had their way the second series would have been called **Stranger Things 2**)¹¹ was born out of the Duffers enjoyment of Hugh Jackman's thriller *Prisoners* (2013) and their belief that such a character driven narrative was best served over a longer time frame¹². Netflix offers writers the freedom not to be bound by traditional concerns over scheduling and the need to construct a drama around advertisement slots.

Netflix is well known for remaining tight lipped when it comes to audience figures for its individual shows. All that matters is the number of subscribers, with the core product being the service itself. Some commentators go as far to suggest that perceived popularity is more important than actual popularity¹³. Every programme exists to sell the Netflix brand and hyped up chatter about them is intended to alert non-subscribers to what they are missing. Channel hopping is replaced by flicking through the endless programme lists, as if each category in Netflix represents a channel of its own. It matters little what programmes are being watched, so long as there's enough on offer to prevent a

⁷ Kilday, Greg, 'Produced By: 'Stranger Things,' 'Arrival' Producers on Giving Voice to Talent'.

⁸ Berkshire, Geoff, 'Stranger Things: Shawn Levy on Directing Winona Ryder, Netflix's Viral Model'. It is possible that Netflix was the first network approached after Levy had stepped in, in which case the point is overstated by the producer.

⁹ Grow, Kory, 'Stranger Things: How Two Brothers Created Summer's Biggest Hit'.

¹⁰ Berkshire, 'Stranger Things: Shawn Levy on Directing Winona Ryder'.

¹¹ Netflix, however, were not quite on board with their wishes to market the series as a movie sequel. Stack, Tim 'Stranger Things 2 returns to Upside Down with new monster, bigger story.'

¹² Grow, 'Stranger Things: How Two Brothers Created Summer's Biggest Hit'.

¹³ Mittel, Jason, 'Why Netflix Doesn't Release Its Ratings'.

subscriber from cancelling. Any talk of **Stranger Things**' success has to be circumspect and, critical reception aside, the only verifiable measure is its online profile¹⁴.

A comparison of the number of **Stranger Things** related Facebook groups with those representing **Doctor Who** suggests some caution is in order. The most active and popular groups are from Brazil and Latin America, a phenomena first brought home to Matt Duffer when he noticed the number of likes coming from Brazil after an Instagram post. Eleven actress, Millie Bobby-Brown, has a huge South American following as do many of her co-stars¹⁵. Netflix have duly responded by specifically targeting this section of its global audience with edited mash ups of their classic shows and newly filmed sequences¹⁶.

Algorithms play a huge part in the success of a Netflix show. To cite them as a factor behind the mass appeal of **Stranger Things** might seem counter-intuitive; after all the platform offers the narrowcasting opportunities for niche and targeted shows whilst the Duffers had stated from the outset that their series was for 'everyone'. But by blending together the styles and interests of Spielberg, Hughes and Carpenter et al, the show could appear on multiple recommendation lists and categories, as well as hit many of the notes that Netflix had compiled on its audience's viewing habits. It is worth comparing the popularity of **Stranger Things** with the BBC's **Doctor Who** spin-off **Class** (2016). The latter was used as a flagship for the new BBC3i service, but without the algorithms of Netflix to support and market the show it bombed spectacularly.

Netflix will have also been drawn to **Stranger Things** because of the company's strategy of resurrecting old shows, having built up their initial audience by rerunning a number of cult classics as a way of enticing older viewers away from traditional forms of media. Perhaps unexpectedly the service has taken off as a means of introducing new audiences to old shows¹⁷. In 2016 Netflix invested £6 billion dollars in creating original drama, but many of them are reincarnations or continuations of previously cancelled shows.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE NOSTALGIC KIND

From the soundtracking of Peter Quill's mix tapes in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) to the incorporation of cult classics *The Goonies* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *E.T* (1982), *Ghostbusters* (1984), **Knight Rider** (1982-86) and *Gremlins* (1984) in the *Lego Dimensions* video game, we could be forgiven for thinking that the entertainment industry loves nothing better than to wallow or to revel in its own recent past.

¹⁴ SymphonyAM claiming to have access to accurate figures, have listed **Stranger Things** Live + 16 days figure as 8.2 million, behind only **Orange is the New Black** and **Fuller House** (2016-), but their methodology and results have been dismissed by Netflix as remarkably inaccurate (unsurprisingly given that the company was hired to produce the figures by NBC) see McAloon, Nathan, 'Millions of People Have Already Watched Stranger Things and it's One of Netflix's Biggest Hits'. Since the furore Netflix have hired Neilson to produce accurate figures, but with the exception of the premiere to series four of **Orange is the New Black**, those figures have been kept in-house, see Holloway, Daniel, 'TV Ratings: 'Orange Is the New Black' Premiere Numbers Revealed by Nielsen'.

¹⁵ When accessed on 23th October 2017 the top five countries represented by Millie Bobby-Brown's followers were as follows: USA – 126,792 (24.4%), BRAZIL – 81,369 (15.8 %), MEXICO – 65,459 (12.7%), United Kingdom – 22,220 (4.3%), ARGENTINA – 21,817 (4.2%), Social Bakers.

¹⁶ Netflix Brazil, 'Stranger Things - Xuxa e o baixinho que sumiu'.

Netflix America Latina, 'T3RCER MILENIO con Jaime Maussan: Caso Hawkins'.

¹⁷ James, Meg, Yvonne Villarrreal, 'Nostalgia TV makes a comeback. How Hulu and Netflix are breathing new life into old TV shows'.

Simon Reynolds describes this distinctly post-modern form of remembrance as retromania. Retro is a unique way of relating to the past, born out of the “intersection between mass culture and personal memory,” and is marked by four distinguishing qualities:

1. It is concerned only with the recent past of living memory.
2. It involves an element of total recall thanks to the availability of the originals.
3. It seeks to replicate and resurrect artefacts from popular and everyday culture rather than exceptional works of art.
4. “It tends neither to idealise nor sentimentalise the past, but seeks to be amused and charmed by it.”¹⁸

Stranger Things certainly ticks the first three boxes. It is set in November 1983, it trades on the fact that the movies it references are still available, and it foregrounds items you are more likely to pick up in a flea market than at an auction house, such as Joyce’s corded telephone and Mike’s **Star Wars** toys. The fourth criteria is far less apparent. Disagreements over the accuracy of its portrayal of life in the eighties suggests that when it comes to **Stranger Things**, amusement and idealisation are not mutually exclusive goals.

Reynold’s summary of retromania could be enhanced with the addition of a fifth defining feature, one that highlights the personal memories of both the artists and their consumers. Retromania can in theory draw capital from any period in our lives, but more often than not it settles upon the days of our youth. Retro products tend to succeed best when they can appeal to our wistful inner cries of “when I was a lad/lass.”¹⁹

Children out of Time.

Nostalgia for the lost childhoods of its movers and shakers has always been a huge part of the entertainment industry’s output. In one sense the media’s current fixation on the 1970s and 1980s simply reflects the age of the programme makers and games designers. In the 1970s we were offered an idealised 1950s in **Happy Days** (1974-84) and *Grease* (1978), and in the 1980s-90s we were transported back to the 1960s with **The Wonder Years** (1988-93) as well as new live-action cinematic outings for the likes of *Dennis the Menace* (1993) and *The Flintstones* (1994). Fast forward to 2016 and the twenty/thirty year pattern of TV revivals shows no signs of abating with the return of shows such as **Cold Feet** (1997-2003), **The X Files** (1993-2002) and **Full House** (1987-95) (as **Fuller House**).

Matt and Ross Duffer may have been children of the 1990s and too young to have experienced the 1980s, but the brothers grew up on the decade’s cult movies, watching them not in a crowded auditorium but on the small screen in the privacy of their living room:

“So many of our greatest movie-going experiences were actually experienced in our house, on VHS. These were the films that were on our shelves that we would watch. When you’re a kid, you don’t watch a movie one time. You watch it 10, 20 times. These were the movies we grew up on. It became a part of us.”²⁰

Media theorist Vera Dika has described the 1990s as the decade in which we became conscious of the fact that the media dominated our lives²¹. The Duffers’ consumption of the movies from the comfort of their home was far from atypical. As the boundaries between fantasy and reality collapsed around

¹⁸ Reynolds, Simon, *Retromania*, (2012), pxxx.

¹⁹ See for instance the popularity of retro sweets and video games.

²⁰ Steven, Mark, ‘Nostalgia, VHS and Stranger Thing’s Homage to 80s Horror’.

²¹ Dika, Vera, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film* (2003), p197.

us we were haunted by a vague notion of being trapped inside our own shows²². We longed to break out from the chains (see for instance *The Truman Show* (1998)), but instead the chains became part of us. This would perhaps explain why memories of what we were watching on television are now such an essential part of our reconstructed childhoods. We imagine the characters on screen as being integral to our own personal stories. As children we “accru[ed] to these images, and perhaps to the entire medium of television from that period the connotation of childhood.”²³

From interviews with the brothers it is clear that a deeply personal form of nostalgia lies at the root of their decision to write **Stranger Things** as part homage to their favourite movies. They are nostalgic not for the movies themselves but for the connection they provide to their childhoods:

“I think people are embracing this, because it's really us just going, ‘Hey, these were the movies we loved, these were the types of stories we loved.’”²⁴ (Ross)

“I think even when we were young, even when we were 12, stuff like *Stand By Me* resonated with us because it never felt like it was talking down to us. It felt like these were actual kids behaving in these extreme circumstances behaving like kids really do – even if that involves language, or these kids are actually in danger. So that was really important to us.”²⁵ (Matt)

When it became impractical to set **Stranger Things** on Long Island, originally chosen because it was also the setting for their favourite movie, *Jaws* (1975)²⁶, the brothers settled instead on Atlanta. “I started scouting Atlanta,” explains Matt, “we got excited about it, because it looked actually much more like our own childhoods. It reminded me of my own childhood²⁷.” In one sense then, it is evident that the homages to the movies are an extension of their attempt to recreate a lost childhood.

Despite the rumblings of discontent over Hollywood’s seeming obsession with remakes, other producers were feeding an audience already bloated on nostalgia with more creative forms of tribute. Movies such as *Super 8* (2011) and *Donnie Darko* (2001) had brought a degree of acceptability to the blatant mining of movie sources to tell a new story. The Duffers approached the scripts with an untamed indulgence, knowing that others had got away with it too. It was clear that the audience wanted to play in the same 1980s sandpit, including those whose nostalgic leanings were vicarious, fuelled by their curiosity over their parents’ past.

The 80s as Mediated Through the Movies.

The recreation and remarketing of a product or a fashion from the past often comes in for criticism. Themed pubs and restaurants for instance are accused of lacking authenticity, and retro sweets might look the same but disappoint for tasting completely different. **Stranger Things** avoids such a charge because its reference points are not so much the eighties themselves but the movies that were popular during that era. The historical setting of Hawkins is not fixed in the audience’s mind because through constant repeats the show’s primary sources have already been taken out of time.

There is a danger that movies and television shows, in taking so much of their inspiration from their forebears, might lose connection with the time and space of the outside world, limiting all meaning

²² *Recycled Culture*, p198.

²³ *Recycled Culture*, p202.

²⁴ Fienberg, Daniel, ‘The Duffer Brothers Talk ‘Stranger Things’ Influences, ‘It’ Dreams and Netflix Phase 2’.

²⁵ Wolfe, Clarke, ‘How Stranger Things is the Rare Modern Thriller for and about Children’.

²⁶ But see too the links with the Montauk Project as discussed below – The Truth is (Way) Out There.

²⁷ Fienberg, ‘The Duffer Brothers Talk Stranger Things.’

to an irrelevant self-referential echo chamber²⁸. Certain scenes may or may not accidentally impinge on real life personal experiences, like a signature song that reminds us of a loved one, but primarily the most accurate memories they provoke are of what it felt like to watch the shows, rather than the outside world we were inhabiting at the time.

Mark Fisher's experience of watching **Life on Mars** (2006-07) is an excellent case in point. He bemoans the fact that the series, despite its attention to period detail, feels like an artificial construction. The problem as he sees it is not the existence of jarring anachronisms but the fact that the Seventies of **Life on Mars** does not feel lived in. "Everything is so iconic, and the thing with icons after all is that they evoke nothing."²⁹ **Stranger Things** repeatedly draws upon some of the most iconic moments from cult movies and as a result risks disconnecting the viewers from the world it wants us to inhabit.

Fisher shares Baudrillard's pessimism about the possibility of being transported back in time because "every cultural object from 1963 on has been so thoroughly, so forensically mulled over that nothing can any longer transport us back."³⁰

It's the difference between all those **I Love the 80s** (2001) list shows and documentaries such as the **Prog Rock Britannia** series (2009)³¹, or between history told as a series of unchallengeable vacuous anecdotes from B list celebrities to history being called to account and up for renegotiation.

Stranger Things and Listmania.

Stranger Things has spawned endless lists of movie references but far less debate about the worlds it constructs³². Listmania is a distinctly modern preoccupation, encouraged by all those personal self-generating databases we now take for granted, from our browsing history and social media friends lists to our MP3 collections, and from our recommended shows on Netflix and Amazon to the automatically organised libraries of our gaming consoles.

Some of the Duffers' movie references come across as completely random and nongenre specific, reflective of the potentially endless clicking from one You Tube video to the next based on the suggestions bar, when before you know it the latest video has practically nothing in common with the first. A reference to the thriller *Witness* (1985) in the scene in which Eleven recognises Will in one of the Wheeler's photos³³ (chapter 2, *The Weirdo on Maple Street*), and the unashamed borrowing of visual techniques from *Under the Skin*³⁴ (2013) to show the void scenes inside Eleven's mind, reveal that anything is game for inclusion, regardless of its genre and release date³⁵.

²⁸ "Unless you are a hopelessly nostalgic foreigner, you cannot even long for anything outside of pop culture. American popular culture has become a common coin for the new globalisation." Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), p39.

²⁹ Fisher, Mark, *Ghosts of my Life* (2014), p76.

³⁰ *Ghosts of my Life*, p77.

³¹ See Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, p26-31.

³² E.g. Tobias, Scott, 'A *Stranger Things* Glossary: Every Major Film Reference in the Show From A-Z', Uncredited, 'Stranger Things: All the hidden (and not-so-hidden) movie, TV and book references', Hoffman, Ashley, 'The 10 Best References You Might Have Missed in *Stranger Things*'. On one cult website there is even an article listing movies that *Stranger Things* 'still needs to reference.' Anderson, Kyle, 'Nine 80s Movies *Stranger Things* Still Needs to Reference'.

³³ The influence was subconscious at first but when the Duffers read through the scene in question they were reminded of Weir's thriller and decided to frame the camerawork and music in such a way as to evoke it. Thrower, Emma, 'Stranger Things: the Duffer Brothers Share the Secrets of their Hit Show'.

³⁴ An influence confirmed by the Duffers. Hutchinson, Shaun, 'How *Stranger Things* Created The Void'.

³⁵ The incidental music is similarly eclectic despite the overall 80s synth-pop feel of Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein's haunting soundtrack. For example, at one point there is a tribute to **The Six Million Dollar Man** (1973-

Prior to and during the making of **Stranger Things**, the brothers had drawn up a list of their favourite movies, making sure that the most significant ones were in the forefront of the writers' and actors' minds. The key works the Duffers set out to reference are disclosed in the third line of the pitch bible:

"The feeling of fear and wonder as Elliott approaches a fog drenched shed in *E.T.*...the helpless dread that consumes chief Brady as he watches a boy and a raft dragged under the water by an unseen monster in *Jaws*...the crackling television in *Poltergeist*...the horror of a cackling clown in *It*...the friendship and adventure of *Stand By Me*..."

Presented as if it were an old school paperback horror novel and illustrated with full page stills from various cult classics, the pitch document is in itself a work of homage. It was complemented by a trailer made up of cut scenes from around 30 movies³⁶. During casting sessions, the Duffers used a giant 'inspiration board' made up of movie names and posters³⁷, auditions included reading lines from *Stand By Me* (1986)³⁸, and once they had been cast the younger actors were set homework – to watch a list of films including *The Goonies* and *E.T.*

It should therefore be of no surprise that the audience mirrors the Duffers' listmania in their response to the show. The brothers' fondness for planting easter eggs, a reflection perhaps of their love for gaming³⁹, adds further fuel to this list making obsession. Viewers were even drawing convincing parallels to movies the Duffers claim to have never seen⁴⁰.

Pastiche, Parody or Plagiarism?

"The contemporary artist is unavoidably made anxious by the overwhelming torrent of influences that flood the self, but... can fight back with a defiant celebration of non-originality and non-priority."⁴¹

The reappropriation of another's work, once a source of shame and a sign of an artist's inadequacy has now become an acceptable form of art in its own right, so long as the 'theft' is acknowledged. The artist Sherrie Levine, a self-declared plagiarist who used her methods to challenge both the marginalisation of female art and the notion of originality, put it thus:

"The world is filled to suffocating... We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations.... Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears with him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense encyclopaedia from which he draws."⁴²

78) theme (when Mike appears to cheat death by flying back up the cliffside) and elsewhere we hear shades of Bear McCreary's work on the reimagined **Battlestar Galactica** (2003-09) series.

³⁶ It is possible that the trailer preceded the pitch bible, which looks to have been specifically tailored for Netflix. In one interview the Duffers claim to have used it instead of a traditional storyboard or written synopsis ('Stranger Things' Creators On Barb, Eleven And How Glitter Delayed Production.)

³⁷ Bettridge, Daniel, *Stranger Things A – Z* (2017). p135.

³⁸ Ibid p221.

³⁹ The hidden message 'Easter Egg', whilst now a feature on many DVDs, has its roots in gaming, specifically the Atari 2600 1979-80 game *Adventure*. Modern video games such as *Silent Hill*, *The Last of Us* and the **Fallout** series are among the many influences behind **Stranger Things**. The Duffers were keen to release a tie-in 8 bit retro game to tide fans over from season 1 to 2, but discovered that the fans had already been inspired to design 8 bit images that were then incorporated into the official game app. Ongley, Hannah, 'Stranger Things Just Dropped an 8-bit Game Based on Fan Art'.

⁴⁰ E.g. *D.A.R.Y.L* and *Beyond the Black Rainbow*. Fienberg, Daniel, 'The Duffer Brothers Talk 'Stranger Things' Influences.

⁴¹ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, p147.

⁴² Quoted by Reynolds, *Retromania*, p147.

The influences behind **Stranger Things** are extensive and come from a variety of mediums including film and television, novels, anime and video games. The Duffers are self-confessed Geeks, gamers and movie buffs, and whilst they claim that their sources became less influential the more they fleshed out their characters and plots⁴³, it is clear that they had no qualms about cutting and pasting from existing work. Not that it seems to have bothered those they have borrowed from. Stephen King and Guillermo Del Toro have both openly praised the Duffers for producing a series that takes cues from their work⁴⁴.

Parody was once the only acceptable face of plagiarism. Today the irreverent enjoys even greater freedom to use copyrighted materials (whether in the classic satirical mould or to sell products)⁴⁵, and not-for-profit cosplaying, fan fiction and fan art is blossoming. Nonetheless some critics argue that this culture of reappropriation, of which **Stranger Things** is a prime example, represents a dumbing down of entertainment and creativity.

The post-modernist theorist Fredric Jameson offers a scathing assessment of contemporary dramatic and visual arts, arguing that they have regressed into a form of parody that is little more than mimicry:

“Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a particular or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.”⁴⁶

Ironically, the success of **Stranger Things** may lie in its derivative nature. In marked contrast to the movie remake which retells an existing story using contemporary forms, techniques and artistic biases, **Stranger Things** sets out to tell a new story by conservatively adhering to bygone forms. The story is shaped by the expectations of the genres and movies the Duffers have adopted as their framework even when they are deliberately mixed up or subverted. The pitch trailer included rescoring of various scenes from *E.T.*⁴⁷. The simultaneously jarring and fitting match of John Carpenter’s eerie synth music with Elliott’s encounter with the alien aptly illustrates why **Stranger Things** comes across as both derivative and novel.

The distinctive genres behind **Stranger Things** are very often transformed by being welded together, but they can also be used to challenge or subvert each other. The characterisation of Dustin Henderson is an excellent case in point. The viewer is teased by Dustin’s similarities to Chunk from *The Goonies* as early as his first scenes, when in keeping with the stereotype we expect him to consume the leftover pizza. It comes as a big surprise then that he offers the pizza to Nancy⁴⁸. In this scene Nancy’s bedroom door physically represents the intersection between two of the show’s core

⁴³ Leon, Melissa, ‘Inside ‘Stranger Things’.

⁴⁴ We discuss the Stephen King links in detail below, but albeit less explicitly, Del Toro is another significant influence. The Duffers took inspiration from his realistic non CGI’d monsters (even employing Spectral Motion, the same company responsible for the *Hellboy* (2004) models), and pay homage to *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) when Nancy enters the Upside Down through a tree (chapter 6, *The Monster*).

⁴⁵ On 1 October 2014, the UK softened its copyright laws under The Copyright and Rights in Performances (Quotation and Parody) Regulations 2014.

⁴⁶ Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), p17.

⁴⁷ See the interview ‘Stranger Things’ Creators On Barb, Eleven And How Glitter Delayed Production’

⁴⁸ And yet elsewhere he conforms to the stereotype, providing food for the party, eating leftovers at the wake and getting excited over supplies of chocolate puddings in the school canteen.

genres – Spielberg meets Hughes. The door is promptly slammed shut and from then on the two characters mostly operate in their own separate genre defined story threads⁴⁹.

The movie remake offers a different form of derivation to the pastiche, one that make its characters forgettable and that more often than not places the piece in the shadow of the original. Pastiche might lack the cutting edge of parody, but unlike the remake it does at least have the potential to become iconic in its own right⁵⁰. **Stranger Things** itself has already become the subject of numerous parodies (see for instance **Sesame Street's** *Sharing Things*⁵¹), a testament to its almost paradoxical uniqueness.

Realism vs Parody in the Characterisation of the Children.

The paucity of creative originality has been explained by some as the result of underinvestment in the arts and a consequence of neo-liberalism⁵², but Fredric Jameson traces its roots back as far as the Seventies, describing **Star Wars** (1977) as nothing more than a homage to 30s-50s adventure serials such as **Buck Rogers**: “*Star Wars*, far from being a pointless satire of such now dead forms, satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again: it is a complex object in which on some first level children and adolescents can take the adventures straight, while the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again.⁵³”

Nowadays our pastiches are barely disguised, but **Stranger Things** is operating on exactly the same multiple levels as **Star Wars**. There is then an argument that the Duffers use nostalgia to hook older viewers, whilst offering children a new adventure of their own.

Although the Duffers had a hard time selling **Stranger Things** as an adult show starring kids, it was clearly written as something their twelve year old personas would have lapped up. When concerns were raised about whether or not the show was too scary for children of a similar age to its leading protagonists⁵⁴, this in itself was a throwback to eighties cinema. In 1984 at the recommendation of Steven Spielberg and in the wake of parental concerns regarding the suitability of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Gremlins*, the PG-13 rating was introduced in the US to bridge the gap between PG and R⁵⁵. Despite the new classification, family movies such as *The Goonies* continued to push the boundaries of acceptability in a way that makes them more accurate representations of childhood than the current crop of disneyfied, spoon fed children's movies. Not only are the children uncloseted from scary and traumatic situations, they also speak realistically using the unsanitised language of the playground.

The Duffer brothers are quite open about their hopes that children will watch and be terrified by the show. They clearly feel that today's kids are missing out: “When we were growing up, some of those Amblin films, those Spielberg movies, led to the creation of the PG-13 rating because he was pushing it so dark and he upset a lot of parents. I liked that, though. I think that that's good and healthy and great and some of our favourite experiences growing up were having the shit scared out of us. As we get further into the show, especially when you get into the final episode, it ratchets up a notch. But

⁴⁹ A division that will begin to collapse in season 2 – with both Steve and Nancy sharing key scenes with Dustin.

⁵⁰ See Mendleson, Scott, ‘Stranger Things Proves Hollywood Should Rip Off Instead Of Remake’.

⁵¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npqBt_e4k0

⁵² See for instance Mark Fisher, *Ghosts*.

⁵³ Jameson, Fredric, ‘Postmodernism and Consumerist Society’, in Hal Foster (ed) *The Anti-Aesthetic* (2002), p116.

⁵⁴ See for example Gale, Cloe, *Is Stranger Things too Scary for Kids?*.

⁵⁵ The UK followed a few years later with 12A in 1989.

by then you've already got the kids watching, so then we can scare the shit out of them. *Then* the parents can get mad.”⁵⁶

The realism behind the characterisation of the children in **Stranger Things**⁵⁷, seems at first to be at odds with Jameson's critique of pastiche. Grafton Tanner offers perhaps the most scathing Jamesonian response to **Stranger Things'** nostalgic world. He describes the series as “the point in which 1980s pop nostalgia jumped the shark.”⁵⁸ For him the show is the most extreme example of a post 9/11, post analogue reductionist approach to history:

“Retromania distorts history and then hands us the leftover clichés. The ‘decade of nightmares’ that was the 1980s is now not even a memory anymore. If the 80s were nightmarish, the 2010s are childish.”⁵⁹

Tanner sees the 1980s of **Stranger Things** as an idealised and sanitised past, an exercise in wish fulfilment constructed as a means of dealing with ‘present-shock.’ For him the tragedy of **Stranger Things** is that it presents a world its audience naively wants to live in – a world where children can go on unsupervised adventures and enjoy a freedom that today's youths are robbed of. Indeed the Duffers appear to confirm his theory having made the same observation, as if such liberty was an incontrovertible reality rather than a selective reinterpretation.

In an example of form becoming part of the story, the loosening of the Disney chains around the young actors and the push towards a greater realism of characterisation might in fact be contributing to the idolatry of the past. Whilst on a surface level this movement is counter to the romanticisation of the 80s, perversely it could also be functioning as another weapon in the idealised past's fight against the present, with the objects of ridicule so-called helicopter parenting and dumbed down children's dramas. The children in **Stranger Things** occupy a world that is freer in its sensibilities than that of Elliott's in *E.T.*, suggesting that the brothers may have overstated their case for ideological effect.

The homage approach to the invented past, whilst endemic to the 2010s is as we have seen hardly a new phenomenon. **Star Wars** is an example of the conservative use of nostalgia, but there are plenty of examples of more provocative reinventions.

In 1978 *Grease* did to the 50s exactly what **Stranger Things** does to the 80s:

“The film strives to repress any remembered personal traumas of an adolescent past, as well as any regional, class, race of gender conflicts from that era. What we get instead is commodified memory, one now set in a mythic past where all hurts are resolvable. *Grease* thus constructs a fantasy of how we may wish life could have been in the past, but most importantly, how we wish it could be in the present.”⁶⁰

Like **Stranger Things**, to achieve its effect *Grease* pays homage to a host of past movies, from James Dean to 1950s musicals, merging them to form an image of the 1950s that never actually existed. For Dika this is fantasy written to sell the equally fantastical notion that innocence is not lost in 1970s North America. As Boym has rightly pointed out however, “Nostalgia is a marketing strategy that tricks consumers into missing what they haven't lost.”⁶¹ In contrast to ancient forms of nostalgia, our

⁵⁶ Thrower, Emma, ‘Stranger Things: the Duffer Brothers Share the Secrets of their Hit Show’.

⁵⁷ The word Shit or Bullshit for instance is used 25 times.

⁵⁸ Tanner, Grafton, ‘Stranger Things and the Nostalgia Industry’.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture*, p126.

⁶¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* p38.

modern preoccupation with retro is a “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory⁶².” Is **Stranger Things** then, like *Grease* before it an attempt to recover a past that never was?

Nostalgia and the Slow Cancellation of the Future.

Nostalgia often wallows in a mythic past, whether as a form of wistful escapism from the horrors and insecurities of the present or as an angry call to arms, motivated by a paranoia about modern living, be it technology, immigration, or globalisation⁶³. With the future seemingly doomed and lacking in prospects, and the present overwhelming and fleeting, many are turning to artefacts from the misremembered past – using them as comfort blankets or totems. For many viewers the familiarity of scenes in **Stranger Things** with *E.T.*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Jaws*, *Stand By Me* and *The Goonies* (amongst others) are tremendously reassuring.

To support the movement back to a lost age when the future was still achievable, the past is no longer behind us. Instead it travels with us, kept alive through the availability of archive material on the internet. But the recycled past is malleable, unbound and open to interpretation. The chaotic and endless toing and throwing of stimulants undermine all our efforts to retain an idea of linear progress. Time and space are irrelevant in the virtual world and thus we are experiencing in the words of one theorist, the slow cancellation of the future⁶⁴.

Some of the horror in **Stranger Things** is accentuated by the very post-modern fears of disorder, provisionality and meaninglessness. The Upside Down interrupts our comfortable viewing even as it channels the likes of *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Alien* (1979). The disorientating intersection of different genres creates an unfamiliarity that draws us out of the show’s world, but also out of our own compartmentalised memories and associations. The heavily referenced *E.T.* as the ultimate celebration of innocence and optimism is used to fool the audience into believing in a happy ending and the realised future. The brutalism of Eleven’s treatment and Brenner’s fate is in marked contrast to Keys standing beside Elliott’s family to see the alien off. In true Lovecraftian style season 1 ends with a strong hint that the enemy remains not only undefeated but undefeatable. *E.T.* magically heals Elliott’s broken heart, whilst Will is leaning over the sink aware that the Upside Down is now a part of him.

The end of progress would not be such a bad thing if we were able to truly seize the now, but we have forgotten how to live in the moment because our attention is divided by the constant bombardment of information vying for our attention. It is harder than ever now to be fully lost in an imaginary world, with every ping on the mobile device we’re watching it with or on reminding us that we are outsiders. Behind the spirit of retromania, as distinct from the timeless nostalgia for lost youth, is a desire to return to analogue⁶⁵.

Reminders of analogue in **Stranger Things** are frequent, but only a few are incidental (e.g. Hopper’s typewriter). The walkie talkies, the kids gathered around a board game, the corded telephone, the

⁶² Arjan Appandurai, quoted by Boym, p38.

⁶³ Boym distinguishes between reflective and restorative nostalgia. The former focuses on the passage of time itself, wallowing in its ruins under no illusion that the past is irrecoverable, whilst the latter wants to bring back a mythical golden age, restoring its monuments: “paranoic reconstruction of home is predicated on the fantasy of persecution.” *The Future of Nostalgia*, p43.

⁶⁴ Beradi, Franko, *After the Future* (2011).

⁶⁵ See Tanner, Grafton. ‘Stranger Things and the Nostalgia Industry.’

cassette player, and even the Wheelers' CRT television all become vehicles for perceiving or interacting with the Upside Down⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Note too S.U.R.V.I.V.E's Tangerine Dream inspired analogue soundtrack and the Duffers preference for non-digitised effects (which proved in the end to be too impractical to maintain, Adams, Guy Notes from the Upside Down (2017), p18).