Genre Theory and *Stranger Things*
Breaking Boundaries, Nostalgia, and the Pop Culture Influence

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ABSTRACT

Netflix's original series *Stranger Things* (2016-) took over the world with its scary monsters, lovable characters, and nostalgic 1980s rural setting. The series embodies the genre of horror at its roots with the mangled monsters and otherworldly villains, while also using these elements to reveal the truths of society and adolescence. With references to the third and fourth seasons, this essay argues how the classic elements of the horror genre, such as the physical monster and body, are at the foundation of this show. At the same time, the apparent themes such as the coming-of-age struggles and mental health issues showcase the ways the show breaks boundaries to exceed certain conventions within genre and twist the viewers' expectations.

Stranger Things (The Duffer Brothers, 2016 - present), a speculative fiction and horror-based television series, follows a group of kids, teens, and adults from a small fictional town in Indiana during the 1980s. From conflicts of growing up and discovering one's identity, to a lethal succession of supernatural forces invading through a portal leading into an alternate dimension, it is one of the most recognizable and watched original productions on any streaming platform. The series is striking in the many ways in which it utilizes inventive takes on horror tropes and the supernatural in a nostalgic setting. It also twists the idea of genre theory – and how these classic conventions are used to help aid in what the audience expects when going into their viewing experience – to become a legendary name in the industry of film and pop culture.

Film scholar Thomas Schatz argues in "Film Genre and the Genre Film" that a genre film is not necessarily defined by its physical characteristics such as setting, but rather, it relies on "cultural milieu where inherent thematic conflicts are animated, intensified, and resolved by familiar characters and patterns of action" (455). Essentially, through the identification of these repetitive patterns of actions, a film will then find itself defined into what would be considered a specific genre. This can range from the classic horror to the epic fantasy, all the way to the slapstick comedy and the musical. Each genre holds specific conventions and characteristics that help define a film (or TV show) physically, but also what social and cultural concepts are addressed that help illustrate underlying themes and conflicts. *Stranger Things*, while marketed in the teen genre, contains traditional horror conventions while also breaking from accepted horror traditions and expectations. With this intention of keeping the traditional conventions of body and gore, *Stranger Things* wields concepts of social issues such as mental health and the influences of nostalgia in ways that enable spectators across many generations to connect with the narrative. It uses the foundation of the speculative horror genre, to give a unique and unexpected perspective in regard to how certain themes are portrayed all while making sure that despite the numerous monsters,

alternate dimensions, and deadly stakes presented, hope, overcoming the darkness, and an exploration of relationships are still at the heart of the show.

In genre theory, "a genre . . . represents a range of expression for filmmakers and a range of experience[s] for viewers" (Schatz 455). For Thomas Schatz, "each genre film incorporates a specific cultural context" (455) where a viewer's "familiarity with any genre seems to depend less on recognizing a specific setting. . . [and more] on recognizing certain dramatic conflicts that we associate with specific patterns of action and character relationships" (455). Sure, for this series, the humble small town filled with the 80s aesthetic is what initially draws spectators to lose themselves in the thrilling plot, but it is the fierce motherly love of Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), the loyal companionship of the five main kids, and heroic sheriff coming into fatherhood with Jim Hopper (David Harbour) that makes the audience stay. From iconography to the evolution regarding genre theory, Schatz breaks this down in ways that can be further applied to how *Stranger Things* fits and breaks these molds and genre expectations. Schatz describes iconography in genre theory as "involv[ing] the process of narrative and visual coding that results from the repetition of a popular film story" (455) or rather "a visual area in which the drama unfolds and also an intrinsically significant realm in which specific actions and values are celebrated" (455). In other words, when specific physical elements of a film are combined, they produce a place for the film in a certain genre. In *Stranger Things,* this could be anything from the haunting grandfather clock, the *Dungeons and Dragons* game boards, the 80s style bikes, or the Christmas lights in the Byer's household. Iconography helps the audience understand and connect a film to a certain genre. When applying genre theory to a film, there is this idea of the same formulaic story, however this does not mean that "genre films . . . have no aesthetic value or . . . social value" (465). For this series in particular, the seat-gripping horror sequences paired with nostalgic 80s setting provides the aesthetic value, and the deeper social appeal formulates in the way the exploration of relationships, including the five main kids and their loyal friendship, the budding romances, and the unconditional love of families transcend. Within any genre film or television series, "aesthetic potential may have been tapped by filmmakers" (465), where the "narrative artistry – ambiguity, thematic complexity, irony, formal self-consciousness . . . tend to work themselves into the formula itself as . . . [the genre develops and] evolves" (465). Through the process of making a film and producing it to the big screen, a film may seem formulaic in its genre, but it is the filmmaker's job to create more social value while also appealing to its aesthetic. While Hollywood genres find themselves between different categories, there is still plenty of room for value laden stories that force "genre filmmakers . . . [to] continually vary and reinvent the generic formula" (462). Amongst many arguments, *Stranger Things* in one show that does all of this. By mixing the conventions of the horror genre and combining it with the influences of nostalgic pop culture references such as *Dungeons & Dragons, Star Wars,* and

Ghostbusters, as well as sci-fi and drama elements, the filmmakers and creators of this show, Matt and Ross Duffer, have been able to warp genre theory beliefs by mocking this expected formula and surprising viewers with the narrative.

In general, horror is a genre that focuses on taking an unapologetic deep dive into the uncomfortable, the taboo, and the body. It is sometimes considered to be the epitome of "low" culture in this area of genre according to some elitists and has been thought to be "less than" by many critics. Many individuals associate this genre with gore, demonic monsters, and an overall dark aesthetic, and while that is true in many cases, the genre itself has evolved just as any genre has "from transparent social reaffirmation to opaque self-reflexivity, [where] there is a gradual shift in narrative emphasis" (Schatz 464). From mere aesthetic to deeper social messages and themes, the horror genre has opened many different subgenres, including horror verité. This truthful sub-genre of horror is defined by scholar Alison Landsberg as

> deploy[ing] the standard cinematic conventions of horror - strong sound and visual cues that shock and unsettle the viewer. . .that involves either supernatural/science fiction elements, the struggle for survival of a person who is being chased by a psycho-killer, and/or a haunted house - but it does these things in the context of very real material and historical circumstances. (6)

Horror is still evolving from its stereotypical cheesy monster story and many spectators can now detect hidden meanings about societal issues and conflicts from all subgenres of horror. Even though early examples of horror have had their moments of engaging with taboo topics, it is now becoming more acknowledged and praised. *Stranger Things* is one of those TV shows that many are familiar with, such as the creepy monsters and beasts that bring chills to its viewers, but it also touches on deeper societal issues such as mental health seen with Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink) in Season Four and the struggles with trauma, discovering sexualities, and coming of age like with Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) in seasons two to four. From the Demogorgon in Season One to the curse of Vecna in the show's fourth season, there are strong elements of the dismantled and mangled body paired with the gory deaths in each season that provides both a physical and lethal supernatural threat to the characters as symbols for their internal struggles.

In the Season Three finale, "The Mind Flayer," the mangled villain that the series has been setting up throughout the previous two seasons, appears for the final battle (Fig. 1). It is a beast that not only takes up the entire frame when presented on screen but has a looming psychological shadow that looms over the audience and characters. Again, this can be drawn back to the way this show uses the conventional horror elements such as the classic scary monster but explores the way these monsters can symbolize the deeper struggles of the characters. Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery) has been a character

Fig. 1 | Billy Sacrifices himself to the Mind Flayer, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt", 00:49:42. Netflix, 2019.

struggling with the abuse from his father and the abandonment of his mother. By having Billy face the beast in this medium shot, it helps symbolize him standing up to not only to the physical monster, but his internal demons as well. The dimmed and dark colours (Fig. 1) create the tone of impending doom for the spectators and the characters, and while the small fires burning in the background should provide light, it only illuminates the massive unearthly threat. By having Billy positioned in the centre of the frame (Fig. 1) with the Mind Flayer above him, this gives the spectators a bone chilling realization of where the scene will lead; a foreshadowing if you will. From the tentacles grabbing onto Billy to the legs holding itself up, the symmetrical shape of the creature creates this image and being that seems too indestructible even for the characters within the show to defeat. People that struggle with mental illness or trauma may sometimes feel like their own demons are too big to overcome and there is no way to escape its clutches, and might find themselves seeing this scene as a symbol for their struggles.

Another example of *Stranger Things* embodying classic horror elements such as the grotesque monsters, the vulgar death scenes that send chills down the spectator's spine, and dark, dimly lit shots, comes with the iconic Episode Four in Season Four, specifically with its classic gory monster leading heavily on the idea of the body – or rather the mind in this episode's case. The focus of the frame (Fig. 2) relies on the monster's, Vecna's (Jamie Campbell Bower), long shadowed and mangled fingers. Presented in the foreground, the warped hand not only looks physically disturbing, but viewers who have watched the show leading up to this point understand the symbolism of the close up. The hand becomes the object for immense amounts of pain, suffering, and death. Max Mayfield's
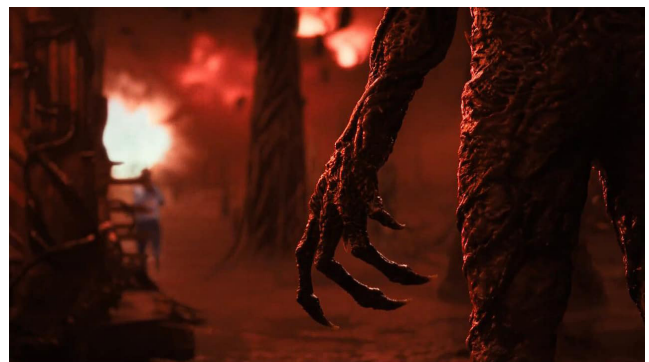

Fig. 2 | Vecna watches Max escape from his mind trap, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Billy", 01:12:57. Netflix, 2022.

figure is blurred out of focus as she runs towards the only source of light in the frame, illuminating the season's theme of hope and overcoming mental turmoil. Classic horror elements are prevalent in everything that appears in *Stranger Things*. We see this in the way the upside-down dimension is portrayed and how it is simply a nightmarish and shadowed portrayal of our world, where the setting is filled with monsters ready to impend doom and destruction. Darkness is a dominating factor in the tone and many of the shots as well. At the same time, it addresses elements about real world societal issues. The show's themes focus on Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and her journey into adolescence and adulthood alongside her gang of friends, but as scholar Zachary Griffiths notes, it also "relies on [the] ambiguity produced through connotation, and beyond overly familiar maxims such as "friendship is important" and "growing up is hard" (5). This is where horror verité comes in

Fig. 3 | Max reads a letter to Billy's grave, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Bill", 00:58:50. Netflix, 2022.

Fig. 4 | Max desperately runs towards her friends and away from Vecna, *Stranger Things 4* "Chapter Four: Dear Billy", 01:13:34. Netflix, 2022.

play. Using the elements of horror, *Stranger Things* also "symbolize[s] society's fears in the form of a monster" (Landsberg 6-7). In Season Four, the monster, Vecna, takes the form of a physical being but his presence lays heavily on the internalized mental sufferings of who he targets in this world. While a physical being, Vecna is truly a psychological demon. Spectators understand the complex layers of this monster who becomes a symbol for those who may be dealing with traumatic experiences and mental illness. In the previous season, Max witnesses her brother, Billy Hargrove, gruesomely murdered in the finale, and experiences survivors' guilt, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Vecna lures in individuals possessing past traumas and uses their suffering to viciously murder them to his own advantage. While there is the physical stereotypical gory element seen in the horror genre, underlying messages of overcoming mental health issues can be seen here as well, particularly in Episode Four of Season Four.

As Max sits in front of Billy's grave (Fig. 3), she reads the letter she wrote for him as a last-ditch effort to say what she wants to say to those in her life as she is next on the Vecna's kill list. Not only does the cemetery provide a classic horror setting, but it helps progress the tone and emotions of the scene. By placing Max at the centre of the frame, the weight and attention of the spectator is drawn to her. However, despite her being at the centre of the frame, the colours of her clothes do not necessarily make her stand out against the other colours used

around her. It fits the scene and her guilt well, allowing her to blend in as she confesses how she's thought of wanting to die instead of him. Max almost becomes one with the cemetery and its surroundings.

The iconic scene of Max running back to her friends and away from Vecna (Fig. 4) not only provides a tense action sequence of the character running from the monster, but a more metaphorical hint of overcoming depression or mental health issues in times of utter darkness. This combination of fill and backlighting highlights Max against the darkness, shadows, and lurid red lighting filling the frame, leaning into this idea of overcoming and running from the darkness. Max is running away from the fog and shadows of her mind towards the light of living. While the setting of this dark place coincidentally is supposed to be the "dark place" of Max's mind and thoughts, Matt and Ross Duffer use various elements of the horror genre, such as the dark colours, the physical monster and body, as well as incorporating horror verité to address social issues. Each inclusion adds to the impact of the show.

While *Stranger Things* is a show that breaks boundaries within genre theory, it is one that breaks away from the "rather one dimensional" stereotype and provides a combination of multiple genres to provide a "rich, complex, and perhaps even profound series" (Griffith 5).It uses the complexity of genre crossover while also using nostalgia and pop culture to influence its impact and popularity. Critic Alex Godfrey notes that "the 80s and 90s are perfect fodder for contemporary horror, providing nostalgia as well as a context that speaks perhaps to where we have ended up today." In reference to nostalgia,

> the series has been seen as a distinctly celebratory, nostalgic vision of the 1980s and its media . . . as a critique of the 1980s, and middle-class suburbia . . . [and] an allegory or metaphor for the traumatic experience of coming-of-age and entering into a world of adult conformity. (Griffith 5)

Being all these things, it is no surprise that this show "is, in other words, not interested in investigating the 1980s as a historical moment" (7), but rather it aims towards using the time period as a backdrop to appeal to both modern and old issues with a wide set of characters from a multitude of backgrounds and experiences. This is an important note to make when comparing it to other films or television shows that aim to produce nostalgic pleasures. *Stranger Things* has almost become a genre of its own simply for its nostalgic setting and its symbolic objects, costumes, and characters. From the presence of Eggos, a food Eleven loves so much (Fig. 5), to the iconic costumes that fit so perfectly for the period and the individual characters (Fig. 6), everything this show does is intentional for the way newer generations view these decades or the way older spectators reminisce on their earlier years.

Each nostalgic item presented within this TV series has "gained iconic status within its fandom" (Griffith 3). The costumes and even the monsters fit into this idea of nostalgic 80s vibes since the monsters, like the Demogorgon, are

Fig. 5 | Eleven sits in front of a freezer of Eggos while entering the void during mind walking, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Seven: The Bite", 00:26:43. Netflix, 2019.

Fig. 6 | The group watches as some help arrives for the final battle, *Stranger Things 3* "Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt", 00:03:06. Netflix, 2019.

supposed to be reference to early *Dungeons and Dragons* characters – a popular game in the decade. The wave of popularity this show is riding is another reason to why so many 80s related items and merchandise have gained popularity alongside the show. The soundtrack is also very monumental and helps make the show what it is. Chalked full of classic hits from the 80s, the pop culture of today can find itself heavily influenced by the imprint of this show. From Tik Toks of people dressing like the characters, to the Kate Bush hit "Running Up That Hill" that played during Max's big scene in Episode Four of Season Four (01:13:34), which has now hit the charts again after years of laying under the radar, you can find influences of *Stranger Things* everywhere. Reviving the 80s highlights a perspective that pop culture and nostalgia have immense influences on society, whether that be from the parts of the audience who grew up during this time period or sparking new passions with the newer generation.

For the many individuals analyzing and critiquing the series, *Stranger Things* acknowledges elements of the 80s and classic genre conventions and brings it to life from a new angle. Applying Schatz's genre theory, formulaic film making might just be significant for impactful shows like this one to make a statement in today's society in providing more awareness to more taboo topics in an accessible format. From the struggle of teens with their sexualities, troubled families, and showing the unique experiences with mental health issues, *Stranger Things* have been able to find space for everything. Future filmmakers can use this series as a way to dissect the ways genre films can have immense impacts and influence on a variety of spectators. Film and the concept of genre is constantly evolving, and it is crucial that as this evolution continues to occur, conventions and aesthetic values are twisted, and social topics become priority. ▪

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