Eleven and the Cyborg: Gender and Identity in the Intertextual Narratives of *Stranger Things*

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***Editorial Note**: Notes are a new feature of* Slayage: The International Journal of *Buffy+. Notes may be as short as 500 words and up to 4,000 and are not blind peer reviewed. Notes are generally short, of a factual or speculative nature, or expressive of opinions or responses to material or trends in* Slayage, *in contrast to scholarly articles. And Notes are a good way to publish items that defy categories or do not fit our conventional editorial processes, like the following.*

This particular Note is the reading version of a conference paper delivered at the Southwest Popular and American Culture Association Conference in February 2017. Dr. Oberhelman passed away in early 2018 before we could follow up on our plans to co-edit an essay collection on Stranger Things. *I recently found this file in my email and sought permission from his literary executor to publish it.*

While this essay covers only the first season of Stranger Things *(which is set to air its final season in summer 2024), it makes fascinating observations about its simultaneous homage to and subversion of both genre and gender expectations, which we hope will provoke further scholarship on later seasons of the series. We are happy to be able to bring this short piece, which speaks to the "+" in our journal's name, to a wider audience. We have done some minor editing to complete and update citations, correct typographical errors, and align the essay with* Slayage*'s house style.*

---Janet Brennan Croft, Associate Editor

Eleven and the Cyborg: Gender and Identity in the Intertextual Narratives of *Stranger Things*[1]

David D. Oberhelman

The Netflix original series *Stranger Things* (2016-2024) has gained popularity as a pastiche of popular print, film, and television plot devices, character types, themes, and motifs from the 1980s. The series is an extended homage to the various genres of that era, and its three storylines (the pre-adolescents, the teenagers, and the adults) hearken back to the familiar plots, tropes, and character types, creating a great sense of déjà vu and nostalgia among the viewers who remember those works.[2] The boys' plotline echoes the films directed and produced by Stephen Spielberg (*E.T.* [1982], *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977], *The Goonies* [1985]) as well as the 1980s novels and

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film and television adaptations of Stephen King (*Stand By Me* [1986], *IT* [1990], *Carrie* [1976], *Firestarter* [1984], and others). The teenage plotline with Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan pays respect to the 1980s horror films and thrillers such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* [1984], *Altered States* [1980], and *The Evil Dead* [1981]) along with the coming-of-age teen love triangle movies of John Hughes such as *Pretty in Pink* [1986]. Finally, the adult plotline with Joyce and Hooper points to films such as *Poltergeist* [1982] and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Much internet sleuthing has uncovered the multiple layers of borrowings and parallels between *Stranger Things* and these source texts (*Stranger Things Wiki*).[3]

What I would like to examine is the relationship between these intertextual screen and print references and categories of gender, and argue that the directors, Matt and Ross Duffer (or the Duffer Brothers) challenge or problematize some of the basic gender roles and assumptions of the source material by the juxtaposition of different storylines sourced from different popular culture references. The show's main narrative focuses on the boys' adventure story of Mike and his friends seeking their missing friend Will Byers, who was mysteriously propelled into the "Upside Down" an alternate dimension from which a monster they dub (using their Dungeons and Dragons classification) the Demogorgon emerges. This narrative of a heroic gang of boys on a quest, one that frequently appeared in cinemas in the 1980s, focuses on young masculine power and downplays or mitigates the role of girls or women, relegating them to secondary roles or the position of sidekicks. This boy's adventure narrative, though, is juxtaposed against the narrative of Eleven's escape from and fight against the dark government facility, Hawkins Laboratory. Her telekinetic abilities tie her to the monstrous Demogorgon and give her the power to take him

on which in other words make her both the monster and the monster fighter. Using Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," her classic feminist and posthumanist essay from that *Stranger Things* era, I will examine how Eleven's story (and its intertextual counterparts from 1980s popular culture) disturbs the male-centric aspects of Mike's story, but nonetheless harmonizes with it, creating a new hybridized mélange in which both masculine and feminine forces can occupy the same narrative space.

The boys' adventure story narrative revolving around Mike, Dustin, and Lucas occupies the heart of the series and belongs to a set of cultural norms that pit the efforts of the underdogs against larger forces of evil, often from a government or larger forces that imperil childhood. Eric Lars Olsen argues that films such as *Stand by Me*, *E.T.*, and *The Goonies* the direct inspiration for the Duffer Brothers' work pit child heroes in battles against corrupt or shortsighted authority figures and serve as commentary on the governmental politics of Reagan era. These motion picture sources for the series evoke Joseph Campbell's myths of the hero and his journey, and more pointedly, the American hero story of the underdogs fighting an unjust system and overcoming it in the end by the seat of their pants. The stories belong to a long chain of narratives centered on heroic boys going back to the Victorian period and beyond, and in that era as well as modern times, the comic book heroes who arise from "ordinary" circumstances to become superheroes. These films usually offer a group of boys who become the "red-blooded" exemplars of American values and ideals and who have their own missions or quests set out for them (for example, helping the extraterrestrial return to his people or going on a quest for pirate booty to save the family home). Like their adult counterparts from the 80s such as

Indiana Jones, they help define a masculine ideal with a hero boy at the center of the story (though their ranks often include comic relief characters and other "nerdier" figures who must rise to their heroic potential through the course of the story). Girls or other females in such narratives are often secondary figures, such as the sister Gertie in *E.T.* or the female teenagers of the *Goonies* who accompany the boys; they are part of the quest but are largely not key players in the mythic storylines. The boys' efforts to rescue Will and fight the Demogorgon, on the surface, fit the expectations of that genre, but the presence of Eleven, the one girl in their midst, injects a new set of intertextual narrative strands into the series. It is around her that the series' questions of gender and identity circulate, and the Duffer Brothers effectively weave together the more traditionally heroic and masculine boys' adventure formula and a different one, the (female) cyborg's story, which asserts a feminine identity that threatens patriarchal male dominance and problematizes the gender dualities in the boys' story. She also points to some of the complexities of gender identity in the teenagers' and adults' stories as well.

I will be reading Eleven's narrative (and the sources from which her story arose) through the lens of the philosopher/critic Donna Haraway's 1984 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (later republished in 1991), an essay that is her posthumanist examination of the figure of the half-human, half-machine (or half-other) entity known as the cyborg, which populated the science fiction of that era. Haraway uses the cyborg as a figure to mark the breakdown of essentialist gender categories and see it as a kind of feminist antidote to the highly structured distinction between male and female, nature and technology, and so on. Haraway writes, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as

well as a creature of fiction" (149). And she goes on to say, "In a sense, a cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense; a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space" (150-151).

For Haraway, "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (150): "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code" (162-63). She also notes that the cyborgs "are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (151). Thus the cyborg arises from the highly masculine system of patriarchal rule with its accompanying militaristic values, and stands in opposition to it as an identity that defies gender categorization.

In the popular culture of the time in which Haraway was writing, there were many examples of such "cyborg" female figures who represent the defiance of male-dominated social norms. The character of Ripley from the film *Alien* [1979] (and then its sequels such as *Aliens* [1986]) is a case in point. As Patricia Di Risio observes, Ripley in the *Alien* franchise is the character who fights both the acid-blooded alien beings and the corporate-militaristic complex that seeks to use those dangerous creatures as weapons, and thereby poses a feminist challenge to masculine culture. Ripley was initially written as a male character in the first Ridley Scott-directed film, and in the sequel *Aliens* she was given some maternal elements (her ties to the orphan girl Newt), but quickly became the most stalwart warrior against the alien creatures and against the evil corporate representatives that seek to harness the aliens. Then in the

fourth film, *Alien Resurrection* [1997], she is brought back to life as a hybrid with the alien genetic code in order to form a being that is at once a predator and the best defense against the monstrous predatory aliens. (And her shaved head from *Alien III* [1992], David Fincher's addition to the franchise, forms a visual reference for Eleven.) As a cyborg, Ripley undercuts the masculine state apparatus that seeks to contain her and challenges their political system.

It is no surprise, then, that the Duffer Brothers draw heavily on the *Alien* franchise in developing Eleven's story, even making the Demogorgon that she fights resemble the physique of the alien designed by H.R. Giger for the franchise. Although elements of Stephen King narratives abound as well (*Firestarter* and *Carrie* in particular), the parallels between Eleven and Ripley suggest that she is the cyborg opposing the male-dominated tyranny of Hawkins Laboratory. That she knows Dr. Brenner, the head scientist and most sinister of the antagonists in the series, as "Papa" shows how she is an "illegitimate offspring [or seized child] of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (Haraway 151) a product of the sinister governmental forces that produced her and cultivated her dangerous powers. She is also rendered somewhat gender-ambiguous with her shaved head (she is initially mistaken for a boy), and in her fight against the Demogorgon, it is hinted that her telekinetic powers opened up the portal through which that monster of the Upside Down entered our reality. Indeed, Eleven herself says she is the monster and she turns on the government that created her, making her a deadly opponent to them as well as to those who threaten her young male friends. As Dustin quips after she has dispensed with a group of bullies seeking to attack the heroic boys, "She's our friend, and she's crazy!" ("Chapter Six: The Monster" 1.6, 40:57-59).

The juxtaposition and indeed the melding of the boys' adventure narrative strand with its focus on "all-American" male identity fighting evil and that of the female cyborg fighting back against the oppressive masculine powers-that-be make *Stranger Things* a fascinating study of gender and identity. Eleven is the character who most unhinges the distinctions of gender, first scaring the boys by lifting her hospital gown (as she is unaware of privacy and the taboo of seeing the opposite gender naked), and then by her uncomfortable relationship to her blonde wig and to Nancy's old dress, which she wears with boy's tube socks in her assumed identity as the Swedish female cousin.[4] She becomes the chief agent in the opposition to the oppressive governmental system, and the boys in turn become her companions, following her lead. Although Eleven does seek to become "pretty" (as seen through the eyes of the boys) ("Chapter Four: The Body" 1.4), and in the last episode of the season briefly kisses Mike in a classic nod to youthful romance story conventions ("Chapter Eight: The Upside Down" 1.8), her presence in the gang of boys unbalances the simple myth of the boys' adventure story and renders the gender dynamics of the series complex. Whereas the boys embody the all-American male spirit of fighting against adversity, Eleven embodies a rejection and revolution against the patriarchal establishment that fortunately constitutes a common goal with that of the boys.

This unsettling of gender identity roles in the main plotline with the younger characters is also mirrored in the ones with the teenagers and adults. Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan belong in a John Hughes love triangle, but the usual gender stereotypes break down, and Nancy becomes the aggressive, bear-trap wielding huntress, breaking with the conventions of her teenage heroine stereotype, whereas Steve breaks out of the

antagonistic rich kid stereotype and joins Nancy and Jonathan to fight the Demogorgon in the Byers' Christmas-light festooned house. Similarly, Joyce takes the lead in guiding Hooper into the Upside Down to rescue her son from his supernatural imprisonment, unsettling the gender roles familiar to viewers of *Close Encounters*, the most immediate reference for that storyline, by making her as strong and determined as the police chief.

Thus the intermixing of different intertextual print and film narratives in *Stranger Things* creates a complex web of gender relations within the story and both pays homage to, but also reinvents and recasts, many of the mythic tales from the 1980s. It remains to be seen how the second and later seasons might further complicate the role of gender identity and narrative in the series, but the first season establishes a world in which both boys and cyborgs can join forces to take on the militaristic patriarchy of their universe.

Notes

[1] Published with the kind permission of Richard Oberhelman.

[2] Editor's note: On the series' nostalgia and allusions to the 1980s, see *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series*, edited by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.

[3] Editor's Note: Oberhelman provided a link to a source no longer available on the internet, but the *Stranger Things Wiki*, frequently updated by users, demonstrates the richness of allusion and intertextuality throughout the series. See "Influences and References."

[4] Editor's note: The series' playfulness here illuminates Butler's ideas of gender performance.

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