

“The Bridge”: *Stranger Things* and Progressive Nostalgia

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Nostalgic television is far from a modern phenomenon. Shows like *Happy Days* (1974–1984) reflected on teen life in the 1950s, while *That '70s Show* (1998–2006) did the same for the titular 70s. The 2010s deluge of 80s aesthetics can easily be understood as a part of a 30-year cycle of nostalgia that has 90s and Y2K aesthetics resurging today. In the sphere of film and television, this nostalgic trend manifested in reboots of 80s content like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Jurassic Park*, stories set in the 80s like *Super 8* (2011) and *The Goldbergs* (2013–2023), or combinations of the two like *IT* (2017). While not the first and far from the last, one stand-out text from this trend is *Stranger Things* (2016–2025), whose first season boasted “15 million views in the first 35 days” (Briefel 96). In many ways, *Stranger Things* as a whole is defined by its use of 80s nostalgia, but its nostalgia differs from other pieces of nostalgic media. In most of these other examples “carefully observed mimicry strays into the realm of pastiche” with humor being generated “from the gap between the world in which it was set and the world in which it was

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broadcast” (Bartlett 19). *Happy Days*, *That '70s Show*, and *The Goldbergs* are all sitcoms that utilize this type of humor and tone. For *Stranger Things*, a supernatural drama, the references to the 80s are played completely straight and often hold significant narrative weight. The first episode includes a quick reference to an X-Men comic in the Dark Phoenix saga, that upon closer look offers deeper significance for “the parallels between Jean/Phoenix and the show’s telekinetic heroine, Eleven” (Burges). But the show’s references go beyond just aesthetics and mentioning relevant media titles. “[T]he makers exploit every possible avenue, even extratextual ones” to capture the 80s spirit from implementing actors from pivotal 80s content like Winona Ryder, Sean Astin, Cary Elwes, and more, to borrowing plot points, imagery, and character tropes “extravagantly from Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and John Carpenter, moviemakers whose 1980s films have come to typify the era” (Briefel 98). Borrowing visual aesthetics, soundtrack, tropes, themes, and actors of the time for everything from the smallest physical details to the overarching plot of “kids on bikes trying to outrun and outsmart monsters and government agents” (98), the show promises not only to be a love letter to the decade but to feel like a genuine 80s creation.

Despite the intention to recreate the authentic experience of 80s media, it is impossible for the show to avoid the modern context it has been created in and the benefit of hindsight. As described in his essay about nostalgic media and *Stranger Things*, Butts establishes how “in any replica, the replication is a sort of translation. Here in recreating a time we re-interpret it for the present” (239). The question of how we interpret America’s past for the present is an arena of significant political debate. Mindless glorification of the past, especially through the duration of *Stranger Things* run, has been capitalized on by

modern conservative politics, with calls from the right “leveraging racism, misogyny, and xenophobia to ‘Make America Great Again’” (Burgess). Despite the rise of weaponized nostalgia in American culture, *Stranger Things*’ replication of the 80s tries desperately to dodge conservative undertones of “the good old days” or any explicit call to return to the popular values of the Reagan era. It announces itself instead as a show for freaks, underdogs, and outcasts, and as a result, the entire show walks a tightrope between two main desires: to venerate the 80s and to be a lauded show of the 2010s. As a result, the goal of time period accuracy is pitted against its attachment to a rose-tinted progressive nostalgia. Take this example from Bartlett’s “Rose-Colored Rear View”: “Put on the soundtrack to, say, *Pretty in Pink* (John Hughes, 1986), and you’ll probably be able to identify four of the ten tracks as bona fide 1980s classics. ... By contrast, every single song played within *Stranger Things* belongs on a greatest hits collection” (21). This “greatest hits” philosophy underpins the entire representation of the 80s in *Stranger Things*, going beyond the call of nostalgia and “re-creating 1980s television as we remember it, rather than as it actually was” (Bartlett 20). Nostalgic audiences may return to pieces of media from the 80s and find themselves disappointed. “Re-watching a media text dilutes the memory of the original viewing experience. Memory overrides memory: it becomes about remembering the remembering, rather than remembering the original” (McCarthy). On second look, a return to original 80s films and shows may uncover outdated ideas that once seemed acceptable, or merely outdated acting, effects, and stylistic choices. In this way, *Stranger Things* “avoids the sense of disappointment that often accompanies revisiting old favourites” (Bartlett 20) by using “its dedication to ‘authentic’ references, such as Winona Ryder cast as Joyce

Byers and stock footage from the era, to recreate the original viewing experience” (McCarthy) all while making choices in line with our modern tastes and sensibilities. The show exists in a place between the past and the present that allows viewers to be reminded of the highlights of the media they loved in the 80s but avoiding the pitfalls of the past: “The show is designed to feel like your favourite forgotten show, given a high-def spruce for the digital age” (Bartlett 19).

As a result, its re-interpretation of the 80s inevitably struggles to reconcile the inherently complicated nature of our past and present.. While the show attempts to be authentically 80s, “*Stranger Things* is built like a new digital game while masquerading as one from an arcade in the 1980s” (McCarthy). It utilizes modern acting techniques, film techniques, and the “uniquely 2010s binge watch format to expand its story and characters beyond the confines of a ninety minute feature” (Bartlett 20). In their creation of the show, the Duffer brothers professed their desire to create the supernatural elements of the show entirely through practical effects, saying, “It has always been something of a lifelong dream to create a monster and bring it to life on-screen. Not in the computer, but for real. To build it. Like so many filmmakers our age and older, we grew up on genre films that existed before computer graphics” (Duffer). However, as their production continued, they had to make adjustments to their conception of the project: “The ‘original goal,’” notes Ross Duffer, “was to do entirely practical effects,” yet, as he and his brother Matt soon learned, “doing practical is really hard” (Rust). So despite using certain 80s style cameras, reusing stock footage from the 80s, and borrowing plots and motifs from the 80s, in style, storytelling, and all aspects of production, *Stranger Things* is undoubtedly a product of the modern media landscape. It is a show that seeks

to let the Duffer brothers “have their old media while eating their new media cake” (Rust).

This carries into the show’s content and philosophies. “The past as depicted in *Stranger Things* is a very twenty-first century kind of place. There is, for instance, little of the casual sexism or racism prevalent in Western society before 1990s political correctness kicked in” (Haleiga). Despite this modern progressiveness, the show cannot bring itself to criticize the culture of the 80s for its role in any of the structural inequalities of its time. Instead it avoids addressing prevalent prejudices of the era by “reproducing its 1980s sources’ standard dichotomy between good nerds and bad jock-bullies” (Burges). Our main child characters, the four mostly straight and mostly white boys, don’t meet the standards of the “Reagan-era hyper-masculine model of boyhood” (Roach 139) in a way that sets them up for marginalization and an inherent “queer masculinity” (Berns et al. 149). Actual queerness and marginalization is instead entirely projected onto this dichotomy of nerds vs bullies. All major players in the cast, from the boys to adults in positions of power, are free of any other period-typical unsavory opinions. Any bigotry is reserved for their bullies: other middle school boys in season one; Max’s (Sadie Sink) abusive older brother, Billy (Dacre Montgomery), in season two; a handful of Nancy’s (Natalia Dyer) bad bosses in season three; and other jocks in seasons four and five. Meanwhile, a character like Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) threads the line, succumbing to the slut-shaming of his peers before “cleaning off his hateful graffiti (effectively learning how to behave like the twenty-first century boy that he isn’t)” (Bartlett 22). Any prejudice exhibited is used to “identify a character as flawed or unlikeable, thereby reinforcing contemporary values” (22), leaving its female characters, Black characters, and queer characters left to talk

around the structural bigotry that surrounds the reality of their existence in the show's beloved 80s.

Ultimately, with the intent of valorizing the 80s for a progressive modern audience, *Stranger Things* struggles to address the systemic inequalities that permeate American culture then and now. While it is able to avoid 80s tokenism and stereotyping in its own representation of marginalized characters, the show is still trapped between modern expectations of representation and its desire to recreate an authentic 80s text, because "being subversive and, say, gender-flipping the characters so that the central group of heroes was female would undermine the nostalgia at the heart of the series. *Stranger Things* would no longer resemble the texts it aspires to mimic" (Bartlett 23). Instead, the show attempts to perpetuate the core of mainstream 80s cultural memory and must interrupt and reassign any implications of structural inequality to nerd/jock conflict or, if that fails, into the fight against the supernatural. The science fiction and fantasy films of the 80s would often offer cogent metaphors for race, gender, and sexuality in their portrayals of monstrosity—see queerness and gender in *Alien* (1979), *The Thing* (1982), and/or critiques of capitalism in *Day of the Dead* (1985), which characters watch in season three episode 1, "Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy?" Many have attempted similar readings of the monstrous in *Stranger Things*, like Roach, who argues that "With marginalized core characters, queer coding, gender subversion and the ever-present monsters of the Upside Down, the world of *Stranger Things*—much like the eighties themselves—is unsafe for the lonely, the vulnerable and the queer" (135). But with expanding lore in the later seasons, and the underlying attempt at progressive nostalgia and valorization of 80s aesthetics, any metaphor the supernatural may pose ultimately

fails to make a pointed critique. The supernatural in *Stranger Things* instead acts as a disruption to narratives about marginalization. By the end of the show, it reflects nothing of the social conditions of the 80s or today. This is exemplified in the transition from the amorphous threat of the Upside Down in season one, the possession and hivemind threat of the Mind Flayer in season two and three, to the centralization of the conflict to one man, Henry Creel (Jamie Campbell Bower), in season four and five with a specific backstory motivation and goal that ultimately rejects any applicable reading about the social forces at play in the 80s at all. This paper seeks to track this diametric struggle through the show's run as it became more and more exacerbated, as all social struggle is further subsumed into an individualized conflict to free the bright lights and colors of 80s popular culture from the threat of any modern shadow.

The show's first season, as mentioned, isolates any potential bigotries into individual characters. For the children, this figure is another middle schooler, Troy (Peyton Wich), and his friends. The bullying that Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), and Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) face from these other students is explicitly related to their identities. Dustin is mocked for his physical disability in the show's pilot episode, made to perform for the bullies, and ridiculed for it. Lucas's pejorative nickname in the same episode is "Midnight" ("Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers" 36:15). Later in the season, Troy's mockery expands to include the missing Will (Noah Schnapp), with implications that his disappearance is related to his (at that point potential) queerness, calling him "a fairy" ("Chapter Four: The Body" 30:20). This more explicit bigotry is also resolved interpersonally, with Eleven's (Millie Bobby Brown) presence in this scene allowing our protagonists

to get immediate revenge by publicly humiliating Troy, using her supernatural powers to make him pee in his pants. Additionally, while Troy's bullying is an individual targeting of our protagonists, the moment of triumph over him is marked by a public backing of his humiliation, with the surrounding crowd of children laughing at Troy's humiliation. The implication even further emphasizes that bigotry is a problem posed by harassment from an individual, and that the public seemingly is willing to support our marginalized protagonists against the bullies if they are able to turn the tables, instead of reinforcing the bigotry socially, even if not explicitly systemically.

This approach is slightly different with our teenage characters, for whom the threat of bigotry is along gender lines and is manifested in the jock character of Steve Harrington and his friends Carol (Chelsea Talmadge) and Tommy (Chester Rushing). Here, Nancy Wheeler faces the threat of social stigma around female sexuality, initially not from Steve, but from all other characters around her. Her mother's interrogation of her potential sexual experience with Steve not only individualizes the conflict, but also softens it, not along the lines of Nancy's autonomy and sexuality but as a typical mother-daughter conflict, and thus more about her honesty and obedience. Nancy does face tension from many of our other teen protagonists, like Barb (Shannon Purser) and Jonathan (Charlie Heaton), who don't overtly slut-shame her, but frame her act of pursuing Steve (and specifically sex with Steve) with the claim that "this isn't you" ("Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street" 49:46). These interpersonal accusations against Nancy's character are not framed as misogyny at all, even as she faces intimate social consequences for the act of sex. Instead, by having sex, Nancy is punished by the science fiction narrative,

her pleasure intercut with Barb's violent death by supernatural forces, her desire for sex resulting in the literal loss of her innocence in the death of her childhood best friend ("Chapter 3: Holly Jolly"). Meanwhile, the judgment she faces from Jonathan for her sexuality is subsumed into an argument of equal playing field, where their exchange of insults is meant to represent some deeper truths about the flaws in their characters, even though Nancy's flaw is merely sexual desire for a jock figure ("Chapter Five: The Flea and the Acrobat"). What the season does frame explicitly as slut-shaming against Nancy is only the actions of Steve and his friends, who publicly and explicitly call Nancy a slut instead of privately implying it. The incredibly public nature of this act seems to pose a real threat to Nancy's reputation, suggesting social consequences against her as a result of this misogyny. However, these social consequences never manifest outside of the scene itself, where Nancy gets some judgmental looks from extras ("Chapter Seven: The Bathtub"). Instead, the scene is a vehicle for Steve's redemption. While arguably an anachronistic moment where he does learn to, reprising the Bartlett quote from earlier, "behave like the twenty-first century boy that he isn't" (Bartlett 22), it also marks his movement from jock antagonist to protagonist and fan favorite, a unique case study for the show that otherwise holds entirely to its nerd/jock stratification.

Beyond Steve's transformation, season one is also the only season in which our protagonists are at all allowed to suggest non-progressive beliefs, which are quickly disrupted and dismissed, yet nonetheless could point to systemic issues. In episode one, reporting Will's disappearance to Chief of Police Jim Hopper (David Harbour), Joyce (Winona Ryder) describes Will as a sensitive kid who wouldn't run away, and includes the detail that Will's father Lonnie (Ross Partridge)

would call him a “fag.” In response, Hopper makes a face and asks, suspiciously, “Is he?” Joyce disrupts the diversion by insisting “He’s missing, is what he is,” returning the attention of the conversation to the narrative at hand (“Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers” 17:46). Will’s potential queerness and Hopper’s presumably negative opinion of it goes entirely unexamined for the rest of the season. Similarly, when Nancy speaks with two lieutenant police officers, she is also interrupted with off topic questions about her actions with Steve the night of Barb’s disappearance (which her mother (Cara Buono) also focuses on in the scene after). Nancy again responds to both lines of questioning by attempting to refocus the conversation on the plot at hand: that Barb is missing and that should take precedence (“Chapter Four: The Body” 25:20). These suggestions of potential bigotry and sexism in the police force, and how that might impact their approach to their work, are the closest *Stranger Things* ever gets to a representation of the consequences of systemic inequalities. Ultimately, though, these moments are not what discourage the police to halt the search for Barb or Will, and any suggested prejudice does not impede Hopper’s ability to do his job and to find Will.

In season two, we can trace how these disruptions become even more overt, both through the process of undermining some of the representation of marginalized identities as well as the exacerbation of the displacement of bigotry completely away from our protagonists. Where the first season offers plenty of subtext for queer readings of Will or Barb, season two never fully addresses the potential of the subtext in the actual text when Will becomes a more prominent character. His treatment at school is markedly distinct from the other boys but is entirely tied to his disappearance and its supernatural aspects. Whereas the season before he was overly called

homophobic slurs, instead the nickname “Zombie Boy” emphasizes the specificity and unreality of the mockery (“Chapter One: MADMAX” 14:55). Furthermore, there aren’t even any individual bullies this season (at least not at the middle school). Will’s struggle to reintegrate with his peers after his trauma is never established as social beyond this cruel nickname left in his locker, an act of bullying left without a specific perpetrator. Instead the rest of the season explores his trauma as something internal to overcome, through his literal supernatural possession as a result of his time in the Upside Down. His struggle must be overcome through a physical fight with the supernatural, and the school dance at the end of the season sees Will face no remaining stigma from his peers (“Chapter Nine: The Gate”). He is even asked by a girl to dance, and the last moments of the season see him “join the swaying group of male/female couples” (Briefel). While the specter of the Mind Flayer still lingers in the dark over this moment, a potential continued metaphor for something destabilizing, this final scene of the season still celebrates his “initiation into sexual and gender conformity” (Briefel).

However, this doesn’t mean that the nerd-jock stratification does not exist in this season. Instead, it becomes centralized around the issue of race. In episode two, “Trick or Treat, Freak,” the show gets as close as it is ever willing to dare in explicitly challenging the foundational nostalgia that sits at its heart. The boys arrive at school, dressed up for Halloween as the *Ghostbusters* (1984). Aside from the anachronistic act of dressing up with such niche cultural costumes, which is more representative of modern Halloween practices, conflict arises when both Lucas and Mike have dressed up as Venkman. As Mike begins to protest, “Lucas points out that he never agreed to be Winston” (Bering-Porter). It goes unsaid that no one in

the group would want to be Winston. He has a much smaller role in the film and does not have a Ph.D. like the other characters. But Mike argues that he could not be Winston because (it is insinuated) Winston is Black, but trails off, leaving the obvious conclusion that Lucas has to be Winston since he is Black. Lucas's options for representation in the nostalgic 80s nerd content the boys love is a smaller part and the least educated character. However, just as this conclusion and its implications begin to present itself to the boys and the audience, the conversation is disrupted as Dustin realizes out loud that they are the only kids that are dressed up. Who is or isn't Winston or Venkman doesn't matter because they're all nerds and facing the same social conflicts. Of course, Lucas is not. He is a Black kid in 80s white suburbia. In the narrative, he is treated as an equal member of the group, bringing diversity but without being pigeonholed as the diverse one (like Data in *The Goonies* but without the racist stereotypes). But the show cannot seem to address the racism/sexism/homophobia of the content the kids love while still capitalizing on the audience's nostalgic love of the same content.

Instead racism cannot remain structural or cultural the way anti-nerd sentiment is at the end of this scene. Overt bigotry is once again relegated to a jock bully character, this time in the form of Billy Hargrove and his treatment of Lucas's blossoming romantic relationship with Max. However, unlike the more explicit racism of Troy's "Midnight" in season one, Billy's racism is more diffuse and ambiguous. After witnessing a conversation between Max and Lucas specifically, he warns Max that Lucas is the type of person she should "stay away from" ("Chapter Four: Will The Wise" 33:19). But the question remains as to what "type of person" Billy sees Lucas as, whether it is continued judgement of his nerdiness or is explicit

antagonism towards Lucas specifically as a Black boy. Is Billy racist, is he another jock bully out to get the group of nerds, or is he just angry with Max? Would he treat the other boys the way he treats Lucas if they were Max's romantic interest? While Billy's threat to the kids and to Lucas especially escalates in the season finale ("Chapter Nine: The Gate"), Max's ability to physically subdue him and overpower him allows the season to leave the question of Billy's bigotry unanswered and dismisses any other judgement Max and Lucas may face as an interracial couple in 80s suburbia.

In season three, the show begins to further offset this individualized bigotry by further transforming these jock bullies fully into supernatural threats. Billy, no longer explicitly harassing Max and Lucas, is also never given the chance to, as he becomes the first to fall to possession by the Mind Flayer as it begins a hostile takeover of Hawkins ("Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy?"). Nancy, meanwhile, faces misogyny in the workplace from a boardroom of men whose most cutting insult is calling her "Nancy Drew" ("Chapter One: Suzie Do You Copy?" 23:02). Notably, while her coworkers are all complicit in her mistreatment, her boss is the least guilty of sexism and instead his dismissal of her is based on his critique of her actions and how they would reflect on the practices of the paper. The *Hawkins Post* workroom even raises an interesting tension between Nancy and Jonathan. While Jonathan does not face the harassment Nancy does, he also doesn't speak up against it, or more accurately, feels as though he can't because his family's financial situation makes the wage he earns at the *Post* essential ("Chapter Four: The Sauna Test"). This conflict between them, a unique look at the intersection of how their respective marginalizations place their needs and decisions at odds, is disrupted by the supernatural plot of the season. The

true issue of the men's treatment of Nancy is how it limited her investigation of the supernatural possession of more and more Hawkins citizens. The confirmation of these possessions reunites Nancy and Jonathan and resolves their conflict with the simple solution that Jonathan was "wrong" ("Chapter Five: The Flayed 39:20), though without specifying whether that judgement is based on the supernatural or the intersectional component of their conflict.

Ultimately, their positions at the *Post*, the harassment Nancy faced, and Jonathan's loss of income are issues less pressing than the existential threat of the Mind Flayer. The men from the *Post*, now also possessed, pursue and attack Nancy and Jonathan in episode 5 ("Chapter Five: The Flayed"). Like Billy in season two, they have become a physical threat, one which Jonathan is able to support Nancy against, unlike before in the workplace. Now, however, they are also a supernatural threat, and are defeated not by just Nancy and Jonathan, but by Eleven and her powers however, only after they are individually destroyed and subsumed fully into the monster. The complex consequences of workplace misogyny are no longer relevant for the characters and no longer need examination.

Similarly season three marks a shift away from the US government as a shadowy antagonistic force threatening our protagonists to find a new villain in a shadowy antagonistic force of Russians. The rise of the American mall economically threatens Hawkins' small businesses, embodied by Cary Elwes's antagonistic Mayor Kline, even as the show itself revels in the set piece as a nostalgic playground for the younger characters, especially in "Chapter Two: Mall Rats." But it is revealed that the true threat of the mall and Kline is not only the escalating rise and influence of corporate interests, killing local and individual entrepreneurship, but that both Kline and

the mall are under the influence of evil Russians. Even the evil Russians don't pose an explicit political threat, but rather their ambiguous desire for power and their resulting action of reopening the gate between Hawkins and the Upside Down is what pits our protagonists against them for the greater good.

Season three does advance the show's queer representation with the introduction of fan favorite character Robin Buckley (Maya Hawke), the first explicitly queer character. Once again our progressive attitudes are manifest explicitly in the show through Steve Harrington, the only redeemable jock in Hawkins. In "Chapter Seven: The Bite," Robin turns down Steve's romantic confession by admitting to her own attraction to girls. Steve's immediate acceptance of her identity and reaffirmation of their friendship makes the scene a heartwarming standout of the entire series. A small question remains, though: is Steve's immediate positive reaction to Robin's romantic rejection of him and coming out anachronistic? Like in season one, Steve's actions may represent what we expect of a 21st century boy, but also should not be understood to be impossible in the context of the 80s. One 1985 poll from the *LA Times* cites 15 percent of responders who had no issue with same sex couples (*Gay and Lesbian*). While in the minority, especially in comparison to the same poll conducted by the newspaper in 2024, queer acceptance did exist in individuals in the 80s, just as disapproval exists in a minority of individuals today. The interpersonal acceptance between Steve and Robin is undoubtedly possible in the context of the 1980s. But by confirming Robin as canonically queer, the show reaches a point of no return with its tight-rope walk of progressive nostalgia. While the show is able to present us with interpersonal acceptance just as easily as individualized bigotry, Robin's queerness is now a fact of the story and must

contend not just with Steve, but with the greater environment of Hawkins. How much further can Robin explore and expose her queerness? Can she pursue a relationship or come out to more characters? How much can she carry our expectations of queer representation before the show has to address the homophobia of the society around her and expose the 80s as less perfect than they wish to have it remembered?

Season four begins to answer this question, introducing a love interest for Robin (“Chapter One: The Hellfire Club”). However, the central question around Vickie (Amybeth McNulty) is her queerness in the context of Robin’s interest in her. While Robin does mention that her interest in girls is different from Steve’s, and that pursuing the wrong girl would make her “the town pariah,” the show ultimately doesn’t treat it any differently (“Chapter One: The Hellfire Club” 15:31). Robin believes that Vickie is not into girls and therefore not interested in her, but Steve disagrees and is ultimately proven correct by the end of the season and the beginning of their romantic relationship in the next. However, his ‘proof’ subsumes Vickie’s potential queerness into 80s cultural reference through a heteronormative model of desire for women. He points to Vickie watching and returning *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, paused at a timestamp where actress Phoebe Cates is scantily clad. His assertion is that the only type of person who would pause the movie at that time is someone interested in “boobies” (“Chapter One: The Hellfire Club” 16:40). This is another prime example of the show’s approach to nostalgia, drawing upon the cultural landmarks of the time to fit into the narrative at hand. But it speaks to a universal and heterosexual nostalgic audience that would remember a scene from *Ridgemont High* for being risqué and sexually provocative. It does not consider a queer nostalgia for the queer culture of

the 80s that would undoubtedly speak not only to Vickie and/or Robin's attraction to girls, but their identity as queer women in the 80s. 1985's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, for example, not only features two female protagonists and compelling queer subtext, but also stars Madonna, an icon of the time for her queer advocacy. While it is not impossible that Vickie, or any queer woman of the time, would watch and enjoy the scene from *Ridgemont High*, here we see again how the show assumes a universal 80s cultural experience, and like with Lucas as Venkman in season two, doesn't know how to account for how the lived experiences of different identities at the time would impact the characters' relationship to these cultural touchstones.

Speaking of Lucas, season four also introduces another crossing of the nerd-jock stratification as Lucas joins the basketball team. This act is seen by the other boys as a betrayal of their ideals and an inauthentic capitulation to conformity. The nerd-jock struggle is further embodied by newly introduced characters on either side, Eddie (Joseph Quinn) and Jason (Mason Dye). Eddie rails against "the man" in his *D&D* shirt but makes no pointed social critique beyond "conformity" which is "killing the kids" ("Chapter One: The Hellfire Club" 35:35). Jason meanwhile is the face of this conformity, captain of the basketball team, blond and blue-eyed, with a cheerleader girlfriend. Jason takes the figure of the jock bully another step further from Troy's overt bigotry and Billy's threatening ambiguous bigotry. He begins the season mildly disdainful of Eddie and the Hellfire Club and only becomes radicalized against Eddie when he is wrongly accused of the murder of Jason's girlfriend. Reminiscent of the true Satanic panic of the 1980s that set its sights on *Dungeons & Dragons* as a demonic activity, Jason rallies Hawkins townsfolk against the Hellfire

Club, accusing them of being a demonic cult sacrificing other students (“Chapter Six: The Dive”). The undertones of Christian fundamentalism of his speech are accurate to “most organized opposition to *D&D*” at the time” (Wetmore 61). This moment marks Jason officially as our jock bigot, but “What often goes unmentioned is how *right* Jason is” about the demonic forces at play in Hawkins (Rosson): just episodes before this, Jason saw his fellow team member levitate and die right in front of him. Beyond Jason’s accurate assessment of the danger of the situation, his role as the figurehead of Hawkins’s Satanic panic still obfuscates the reality of it. The push against roleplaying games most potently came, not from other students, but the media, parent groups, and school boards, the systems of authority, not just social status. “In the eighties, these groups encouraged parents and schools to ban *D&D* and forbid the playing of it” (Wetmore 61). Meanwhile, in *Stranger Things*, the town hall scene does suggest a threat of larger social agreement with Jason’s negative judgement of our protagonists, but the police as an institution dismiss Jason’s theory as completely irrational. Even in the following season (and with Hawkins under militaristic occupation), social stigma around *D&D* remains as interpersonal judgement and violence, with no threat of legitimate censorship of the game or mentions of the Hellfire Club.

In season four, the threat of Jason’s mob mentality also never manifests against the protagonists. Jason and Lucas face off against each other in the finale alone. Unlike Billy, Jason has not been subsumed into the threat of the supernatural but now stands as an obstacle to our protagonists’ fight against it. Jason is only an explicit threat to the protagonists in how his wrong assumptions disrupt the plan to use Max as bait for Vecna. As Jason attempts to “save” Max from what he sees as demonic

sacrifice, he accidentally breaks her Walkman and ultimately condemns her to being Vecna's fourth victim. Additionally, the supernatural threat is no longer the existential threat of the hive mind, but a specific powerful enemy, Vecna/Henry Creel. The victims are no longer the possessed Will, or the various bullies that were made into vehicles of the Mind Flayer's violence. All threats now are interpersonal, as Eleven faces off against Vecna and Lucas faces off against Jason. In the wake of Vecna's final victim, Jason is unceremoniously killed by the opening portal to the Upside Down.

In season five, the nerd-jock struggle is taken up by Dustin, who, in memory of Eddie, continues to wear his Hellfire shirt and provokes the ire of a violent group of jocks ("Chapter One: The Crawl"). This nerd-jock divide is even resolved off screen by the finale, in which Dustin gives a valedictorian speech about how the walls between "the jocks, the nerds, and the freaks" supposedly broke down in the chaos ("Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up" 1:34:10). He concludes by calling out not the fellow classmates that physically assaulted him, but the school administration for being "squares," to cheers from the entire graduating class. This last-minute turn does finally mention themes of "order" from systems of authority as the true issue, but without any textual backing or deeper examination of the implications of the system issue.

But the season's true test of progressive nostalgia comes from Will Byers and the canonization of his queer subtext. Volume one of the season explores Will's queerness through his discovery of Robin and Vickie's relationship, who, between seasons, have begun a romantic connection in private. After Will accidentally witnesses them kissing, he begins asking Robin questions about the relationship. There is brief tension in the aftermath of the discovery, which Robin rushes to try to

mitigate, with the subtle and unspoken implication of severe consequences for the girls if their relationship is made public. Instead, it becomes an opportunity for queer self-discovery and community-building, with Robin sharing her experiences in such a way that opens up Will's ability to overcome his unrequited feelings for Mike and accept his queerness. This subplot even reaffirms the significance of what queer representation in media and in real life is capable of through the connection and mentorship Robin and Will share. While as in season three, this acceptance of queerness is still interpersonal, it is a moment of connection between queer characters that acknowledges the differences of their experiences from the rest of the characters and validates their marginalized status through moments of mentorship and community.

However, the season finally tries to move beyond mere interpersonal acceptance and rejection. In the penultimate episode of the series, "Chapter Seven: The Bridge," Will gathers the ensemble of our protagonists and comes out as a means of owning his queerness and not allowing Vecna to weaponize it against him. The episode currently sits at a 5.6 rating on IMDB ("Stranger Things"), the lowest of the entire series, no doubt in part to homophobic backlash, like tweets from X owner Elon Musk, calling the scene "unnecessary" and "forced" (Musk). However, there also seemed a general sentiment of disappointment with the scene from queer fans as well, "who felt Will's coming out was poorly written and awkwardly constructed" (Perry). A large part of this disappointment stems from a rupture of the show's progressive nostalgia into the explicit text, finally foregrounding the tension between modern expectations of queer characters on television and the glorification of the 80s through the removal of its

structural cultural prejudices. Will being publicly and proudly queer in the small town of Hawkins would be highly unlikely to impossible in the true 80s; instead, he would likely have faced severe and dangerous social stigma both interpersonally and structurally. Being privately out to his friends and family would be risky, but even with their acceptance, the private nature of Will's queerness would potentially imply a shamefulness or a lack of pride in his identity.

The scene in "Chapter Seven: The Bridge" attempts to split the difference, by giving him "public" pride and acceptance but still in a smaller space than the social whole of Hawkins. His closest friendships are reaffirmed and supported at the end of the scene. The opinions of many other characters in the scene, including Hopper (who had expressed some form of suspicion around the concept of queerness in the show's pilot episode), are not revealed at all, but assumed positive or else private in the wake of his closest friends and family offering him acceptance. By concentrating on our cast of main characters as Will's audience for his coming out, the scene ensures a positive outcome and highlights our protagonists' modern social politics even as Will is able to speak about his fear of not being accepted. The threat of homophobia in the 80s is allowed to exist as a shadow in the distance of this scene, but unlike other shadows in *Stranger Things*, this threat is always somewhere else, never manifested in a way that Will or Robin must confront.

Will's social sphere, from his closest friends to his teacher to Steve Harrington (his brother's ex's ex), will inevitably accept him, a byproduct of their role as the protagonists of our 21st century TV show. Anything outside of that – the larger public of Hawkins and their potential prejudice, casual homophobia in 1980s cultural output, Ronald Reagan and the AIDS

epidemic all continue to go unmentioned as aspects of Will's reality that fundamentally separates him from his age group. Even in the language of his coming out, Will emphasizes his difference from the other young characters as "not liking girls." He makes no use of any terminology around his identity as "gay" or "queer." He instead discusses his desire to still be allowed to participate in the activities of their nostalgic culture, grabbing milkshakes and going on adventures in the woods. The focus is on one unifying experience of the 80s as a time of adventure, good music and movies, and bright colors.

Ultimately, the purpose of my argument is not necessarily that *Stranger Things* should have pursued an accurate depiction of 1980s structural inequality. As Butts explains "this version of the eighties necessarily offers some misremembering, something uncannily off like a wax figure's not-quite-right facial structure. But this is not a negative for *Stranger Things*; it is precisely what works so well" (240). The pleasure of the show lies in both the supernatural horror and the optimistic spirit of adventure, which would not be improved by our marginalized protagonists experiencing intense period-typical institutional discrimination. The show takes great pains to avoid glorifying the conservative politics of the 80s but ultimately cannot find a way to address how social conservatism impacted the culture it is so attached to. It seeks to embody a 2010s progressiveness and recreate the 80s for a more accepting and diverse modern audience. While there are many worthwhile critiques of its representation of marginalized characters, it is certainly an improvement from much of the 80s media it seeks to position itself in conversation with. At the same time, Will, Robin, Lucas, and many of *Stranger Things*' marginalized characters challenge our ability to bask in the comfort of nostalgia that the show is centered on. Their experience of 80s culture and media

is influenced by the structural inequality they face as a result of the conservative underpinnings of the time period. To compensate for that, the show attempts to purify the 80s for these characters, to allow them entrance into the nostalgia by drawing the line of systemic prejudice between nerds and bullies, heroes and villains. Will's coming-out scene most explicitly demonstrates the show's attempt to have its cake and eat it too, to recreate the 80s for a modern audience, but in a way that venerates the culture of the 80s without ever disrupting the rose-colored haze of nostalgia for a simpler time. This scene most explicitly makes clear that the 80s of *Stranger Things* is not the 80s as they truly were, and suggests that we perhaps wouldn't actually want the 80s as they were to be depicted for us in full. Otherwise, we would have to confront the real monsters beneath the bright colors, those that couldn't be defeated by a good plan and a bat with nails in it.

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