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LOOKING INTO THE UPSIDE DOWN: INVESTIGATING STRANGER THINGS (DECEMBER, 14, 2018)

Conference Report by Rose Butler

Looking into the Upside Down: Investigating Stranger Things Symposium. University of Leeds, Leeds, UK, 14 December 2018.

Since its release on Netflix in the Summer of 2016, *Stranger Things* has proven ripe for scholarly interpretation; in the years since its debut on the streaming platform, the series has been the focus of several academic works, including the edited collection *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism and Innocence in the Series* (2018) and, most recently, a special issue of *Refractory Journal* dedicated to the show.

This one day symposium organised by Tracey Mollet (University of Leeds, UK) brought together scholars to discuss the most recent debates in the study and criticism of *Stranger Things*. Across several papers and two keynote addresses, numerous approaches to the series were discussed, ranging from gender to space, fan studies, and politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an overarching theme revisited throughout the day was the series' complex and often problematic relationship with nostalgia for the 1980s, alongside its plethora of intertextual references and homage to countless cultural touchstones from the decade.

The first keynote lecture, delivered by Sorcha Ni Fhlainn (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) focused on *Stranger Things* and its often problematic engagement with the 1980s. Ni Fhlainn proposed that the 1980s exist as a "ReDecade," suggesting that the era is a displaced time in our recollection; as such, *Stranger Things* plays one part in a broader cultural preoccupation with fetishising the 1980s that is symptomatic of a desire to 're-do' or replay a decade during which society apparently found itself on a precipice. Ni Fhlainn's keynote provided a fascinating introduction for the symposium, establishing several lines of enquiry that would be referred back to throughout the day and were addressed at her own symposium 'The Gothic 1980s' in 2019.

Investigating *Stranger Things* and gendered narratives, Tracey Mollet and Karen Dodsworth (Teesside University, UK) delivered engaging papers on the first panel of the day. Mollet interrogated the series thus far in relation to masculinity and geek culture, highlighting that the series engages with Reaganite notions of masculinity while also offering alternatives to the series' 'Bad Men' in the shape of Bob (Sean Astin) and Steve (Joe Keery). In a discussion of *Stranger Things* and Carol Clover's 'Final Girl,' Dodsworth argued that while the series is often deemed as progressive in its depiction

of agentive women and girls, the Duffer brothers' portrayal of this character trope is confused and problematic. Dodsworth's paper included some particularly relevant discussion of fan-favourite Barb (Shannon Purser) as the show's most compelling manifestation of the Final Girl archetype.

In the second panel of the day, Kerry Dodd (Lancaster University, UK) and Isabel Vincent (Bangor University, UK) investigated the networks, spaces, and places of *Stranger Things*. Dodd's paper, on digital aesthetics and the re-conceptualisation of non-human ontology, highlighted some lesser-discussed elements of the series and particularly its part in a wider cultural fascination with non-human phenomena. In a discussion of the Upside Down, Dodd noted the convergence of the organic and the technical and observed that through its 1980s aesthetic of disruption and glitches, the series attempts to reconceptualise networked existence. Vincent's paper positioned the series as an example of transmedia storytelling, suggesting that the online presence of *Stranger Things* and the series' fandom has encouraged narrative growth beyond the episodes available via Netflix. Vincent proposed that transmedia storytelling can often function as religious experience, suggesting that the spread of fan fiction and speculation is comparable to the oral storytelling of parables and spiritual teaching. Though *Stranger Things'* online fandom is less vocal in terms of narrative speculation and fan fiction than more established series – such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) – it will be interesting to observe how this fandom develops and expands as the series continues.

The third panel added to the debate surrounding *Stranger Things* and notions of nostalgia (or anti-nostalgia) with a focus on the cultural context of the series. While countless journalistic articles have observed that the show is apparently 'nostalgic' for a simpler time, the growing body of scholarship on *Stranger Things* is frequently challenging this interpretation. Rose Butler's (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) paper interrogated the connection between the series and one of its most hallowed intertextual references, *Stand by Me* (1986), in an effort to complicate the assumption that either text is an exercise in wistful nostalgia. In a paper written by Lucy Burke and Thomas Rudman (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) Rudman explored *Stranger Things* in relation to nostalgia aesthetics following the Great Recession. Suggesting that the series is a mass of complex contradictions, Rudman summarised that the show may lack the ability to fully combat and address the very sources of its own horror. An excellent paper by Lindsey Scott (University of Suffolk, UK) closed the final panel with a discussion of *Stranger Things* and perceptions of childhood. Scott interrogated the series' subversive combination of recycled horror and coming-of-age narratives to determine how *Stranger Things'* intertextual references – specifically those which feature adolescent protagonists on BMX-riding adventures – can be read as a re-evaluation of broader sociocultural perceptions of childhood.

The closing keynote address was delivered by Matt Hills (University of Huddersfield, UK). Hills shifted the focus from intertextuality to inter-textuality, suggesting that links between texts are forged by audiences and therefore require fan study by its very definition. As such, Hills' address paid particular attention to the fan response of the much-maligned episode 'The Lost Sister.' At this point of the second season, Hills argued, fans became "anti-fans," heavily critiquing and vocalising

their disappointment with an episode that they felt disrupted the progression of the second season. Hills' presentation closed the conference by addressing the convergence of several approaches discussed throughout the symposium: nostalgia, intertextuality, and fan studies.

This research event – the first to be dedicated solely to the critical analysis of *Stranger Things* – was a stimulating symposium expertly organised by Mollet, one that engaged with several new approaches to the series. While debates will certainly continue regarding the show's exact relationship to the many 1980s texts it explicitly references and to its 1980s setting (particularly as future seasons continue to unfold), scholars are increasingly questioning to what degree the series can be considered 'nostalgic.' Similarly, as the show's popularity increases with each new season, fan engagement and speculation is becoming a key point of interest for scholars; Hills' fascinating keynote highlighted the fact that audiences clearly already have a distinct expectation of what an episode of *Stranger Things* should be. The papers presented at this symposium will be published in a future edited collection that will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to scholarship on what is quickly becoming one of our most popular television shows, and several of the scholars present at this event are likely to play a part in shaping our critical understanding of its cultural importance.

BIONOTE

Rose Butler is an Associate Lecturer in film and television studies at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, where she is completing a thesis on masked killers in cinema. Her wider research interests are in genre film and television; she has written on the slasher movie, *American Horror Story*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Stranger Things*. She is the co-organiser of Fear 2000, a conference series dedicated to contemporary Horror media.