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Stranger Things Season 1 Analysis

Stranger Things is a timeless show that easily appeals to millennials, the Generation-X society, and beyond. From its mysterious plot to its enticing characters and iconic time era, the Duffer Brothers created a true masterpiece. With this show being set nearly thirty years ago, it is expected that there would be some elements from the past. Nostalgia and old mindsets, such as the “Smurfette Principle,” are relevant throughout this show, with its success bringing it to the top of headlines today.

The 1980’s culture created an era that is extremely different from modern life today. Through those cultural differences there are similarities, just as there are similarities from 80’s media and *Stranger Things*. . Although drastically different, three relevant films are *The Breakfast Club*, *E.T.*, *the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Children of the Corn* because they all highlight unique elements of the 1980’s. One of the most notable aspects of *Stranger Things* is the environment created. All of the cars, buildings, and technology were accurately dated to the 1980’s. The costumes also appeared very accurate to the time era. Many comparisons could be made to one of the most iconic 80’s films, *The Breakfast Club*. Barb’s fashion is similar to Claire, the princess’s; they both have short red hair and wear predominantly pink clothing. Although their personalities may be a bit different, they still resemble each other in regards to fashion. Steve has John, the criminal’s, long, dark hair. Dustin, Mike, and Lucas are also often seen layering clothes, similarly to John, the criminal, Brian, the geek, and Andrew, the athlete.

While the fashion choices may not be what today's society defines as "fashionable," they are distinctly 80's.

E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial, otherwise known as *E.T.* had a myriad of striking resemblances to *Stranger Things*. Both started off involving similar settings; a dark night in the woods, a sketchy shed in the backyard, and a futuristic location. In *Stranger Things*, the mysterious setting is the secretive office that Eleven came from whereas ET's ship is the enigmatic film starter. In addition, there is a major comparison to be made between Eleven and Mike and ET and Elliot. Both Elliot and Mike stay home "sick" from school to introduce their new friend to a normal day day in the life. At the end of the season and film, both boys plead to have the extraterrestrial being in their life stay and live with them. On top of that, the family dynamics between Elliot's family seems to be a mixture of Will and Mike's families. The dynamic is similar to Will's in the fact that the parents are divorced. The father is not in the picture and comes into question when the police were wondering if they ran away. Mike's family has the annoyed teenage sibling that ends up helping in the end, a young sister, and a mom who is trying her best to be there for the family. All of these references from *E.T.* create nostalgia in the audience of *Stranger Things* because they are extremely similar. Whether the time that one saw *E.T.* was in 1982 when it came out, or decades later, the film still has a great impact on society.

Children of the Corn is similar to the horror side of *Stranger Things*. The style in which the story is told is similar to *Stranger Things* in the way that you watch through the production, waiting for the answer to the question; what is that mysterious being? In the end of each, the question is resolved enough to not be a cliffhanger, yet still with a lack of certainty. The use of music was also essential between both of these projects. There was often synth music playing or

no sound at all to create suspense. In addition, there was a reoccurring theme of a dangling phone, signifying not only that the characters can not get in contact with others, but they are isolated. Joyce was isolated in the sense that no one believed her or understood what she was going through. Bert was isolated because he went through the major life change of becoming a doctor and ended up doing the opposite of his job of saving people; he killed someone. Finally, there is some unknown supernatural being that consumes people. The audience does not know what it is or what it does, yet that lack of understanding keeps the viewer on their toes.

The Duffer Brothers are often compared to Steven Spielberg and Stephen King. Spielberg directed *E.T.* and King wrote the original novel for *Children of the Corn*. All three of these iconic 80's themed stories have kid centered plots. Taylor Phillips wrote a biography about Steven Spielberg, titled *Steven Spielberg: The Man, His Movies & Their Meaning*. Spielberg started his career young, just like the Duffer brothers. One of the most iconic facts about Spielberg is the fact that "before he was even 35 years old, he was responsible for directing four of the ten most lucrative films ever made" (Taylor). King also had a piqued interest from a young age. In her article "Stephen King, Not Just the Guy Who Makes Monsters", Alexandra Alter interviews King. While talking about his childhood, he specifically recalls going through "boxes and boxes of [his] father's stuff [where he found] a bunch of paperbacks" (Alter). Spielberg, King, and the Duffer brothers not only produce similar works, but they all have had intense interest for a long time. Their passion shows in all of their work. *ET*, *Children of the Corn*, and *The Breakfast Club* conveyed many essential aspects that lead to inspiration of *Stranger Things*. From nearly all of *E.T.* to the suspense created in *Children of the Corn*, to the admirable costumes in *The Breakfast Club*, the Duffer Brothers created a truly captivating environment.

Another extremely nostalgic aspect of *Stranger Things* was the casting of 80's actors such as Winona Ryder and Matthew Modine. Jen Chaney interviewed Matt and Ross Duffer in an article titled "*Stranger Things*' Duffer Brothers on '80s Cinema, Fighting Over Kid Actors, and How They Cast Winona Ryder". Throughout this article, Chaney asks the brothers questions regarding their personal upbringings, film influences on the series, and the wistfulness of the 1980's. When speaking on the casting of Winona Ryder and the sentimentality that she as an actress brings, Ross Duffer states "certainly there's nostalgia there [...] and [she is] someone we just wanted to see more of." (Chaney). Hadley Freeman also wrote an article titled "From Black Mirror to *Stranger Things*, why do we keep going back to the 80s?" where she discusses the popularity of the era, what is succeeding in film today, and its political relevance in today's society. One interesting topic she brings up is the success of *Stranger Things* and the somewhat tragedy of Paul Feig's *Ghostbusters* remake. What makes *Stranger Things* stand apart from a movie like the remake *Ghostbusters* is the fact that "rather than being hamstrung by its 80s templates, [*Stranger Things*] realised that what people love about 80s movies is not the plots but the feelings they provoke" (Freeman). While watching *Stranger Things*, it is hard for the viewer not to get attached to Dustin, Mike, and Lucas' adventure, innocence, and passion for their friend. Those three boys, plus Will at some times and Eleven at others, help the audience reminisce on their childhood.

Although Eleven, at times, is seen as part of the friend group with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin, she may also be seen as the girl who needs to be saved. "Where *Stranger Things* Loses Its Magic" by Lenika Cruz addresses this issue head on, as something that she refers to as the "Smurfette Principle." This is the idea that there is one female character who is only created to enhance the plot and adventure of the male protagonists. Cruz argues that Eleven barely had any

opportunity to grow as a person or as a character and that “the show built Eleven to add more danger and excitement to an otherwise typical tale of boyhood adventure, only to conveniently dispatch her.” (Cruz). While Eleven’s departure at the end of the season was abrupt, it was necessary. It gives the audience suspense and desire to return for another season. Contrary to what Cruz argues, Eleven is not all that similar to Smurfette. Eleven is seen by the boys as a person who is not to be messed with; in Season 1, Episode 6, after Eleven scares the school bullies, Dustin shouts “yeah that’s right! You better run. She’s our friend and she’s crazy” (00:40:50 - 00:41:00). Clearly, Dustin, Lucas and Mike see that she is an extraordinary friend and know that she can accomplish more than they can. An exciting factor displayed at the end of the first season is that Officer Hopper keeps leaving Eggo Waffles for Eleven; she is likely to return in Season Two and has opportunity to grow throughout that season. Also, Smurfette is generally liked among all of the Smurfs. For the majority of the season, Lucas holds a grudge against Eleven.

All in all, this season was extremely successful. The themes of childhood throughout Season One of *Stranger Things* touch the hearts of millennials and Generation-X. Millennial audiences got to relive the movies their parents watched when they were children, reminisce on a time that they have heard countless stories about, and experience an example of a culture that is so foreign to their own. Generation-X audiences love it because it takes them back to when they were living a normal childhood, similar to Nancy, Steve and Jonathan who live the average teenage life. 80’s kids could see their own parents in Mike’s parents and they remember having to use the wall phone, sitting in their dad’s La-Z-Boy recliner, and flipping between three TV channels; concepts that are somewhat unfamiliar to teenagers today. Stylistically, the Duffer brothers effectively combined aspects from a multitude of 80’s movies. As previously stated, *The*

Breakfast Club, *E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Children of the Corn* all played varying sized roles in the creation of *Stranger Things*. Michael Hogan interviewed Shannon Purser, the actress who plays Barb. Hogan's article is titled "Shannon Purser: 'People have actually had Barb's face tattooed on their bodies,'" which, as one may assume from the title, is about the impact that not only the show, but the characters have on society. Purser speaks about how her character's popularity was not expected. Although Barb plays a small part in the plot of *Stranger Things*, she is still essential and relates to the audience because "everyone's had an experience when they felt overlooked, ditched, hurt or taken for granted" (Hogan). The impact created is more than just childhood nostalgia; people in today's society can see themselves in media and feel like they are a part of something outside of themselves. *Stranger Things* has large shoes to fill in Season Two, however if they can keep up the morals and creativity displayed throughout Season One, their audience will hopefully have a positive response.

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