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Stranger Danger: The Inversion of Suburban Stranger- Danger Symbolism in Stranger Things

GREGORY SHEA

On July 27th, 1981, Adam Walsh was abducted from a Sears in the small city of Hollywood, Florida while his mother was shopping a few aisles away. Two weeks later, the boy's decapitated head was found in a canal. Along with a few other cases of child kidnapping and murder—especially that of Etan Patz (Troppo)—Walsh's murder began a collision between the “child safety narratives” that “are central to the suburban experience” (George 138) and the grisly reality of a child being spirited away and murdered by a faceless and malicious actor. The cultural force of this collision can be measured by the reach of its “reverberations” (Waxman 1) across the political, economic, and temporal landscape of America. I will refer to the sum of these reverberations as the stranger-danger movement.

While the entire nation was gripped by the Walsh case, I contend that it most impacted the experience of suburban parents. Obviously, the importance of children in family and society has long been present, predating the suburbs erected after World War II, but concern for the safety of children is especially characteristic of post-war suburban psychology. In his history of the American suburbs, *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth Jackson writes that one of the biggest motivations for the mass migration to the suburbs after WW II was “fear” (289); while this particular fear was a reaction to the increasing racial integration in cities, it shares an important similarity with the suburban fear characterizing the stranger-danger movement that started in the 1980s—both fears motivated a generation of parents to mobilize ““for the kids”” (289). While post-war fear for children led to a mass migration of white families to the suburbs, stranger-danger fear led to “child safety [becoming] an enterprise” (Renfro 152) and focused on the creation of “new safeguards...against the kidnapping and corruption of young Americans by strangers” (Renfro 153), as Paul Renfro puts it in “Keeping Children Safe is Good Business.” In spite of this difference, it seems clear these two fears are distinctly suburban in that they reinforce the sanctity of the nuclear family by focusing on safeguarding children against a dangerous and disruptive other.

It is no surprise that early-eighties America became the site of the collision between the suburban narrative of child safety and the specter of kidnappers and child endangerment: it was only a few years before that America became a country in which more people lived

in the suburbs—a social structure, as I have mentioned, with fear in its DNA (Jackson 289)—than in either rural or urban areas (Beuka 159). At the same time, the pressures of the Cold War were pushing Americans to strive for greater security (George 121). The confluence of these developments led Americans to search for greater security and control. By introducing another faceless and ubiquitous threat into America’s psychic landscape, the Walsh murder shook the foundations of suburban America’s narrative of control and security of its “most precious resource,” its children (qtd. in Renfro 177).

At first glance, the suburban nature of the reaction to Adam Walsh’s abduction and murder seems to be complicated by the fact that he lived in and was abducted from the small city of Hollywood, Florida. However, I contend that the reverberations of this case were most acutely felt in the suburbs. A case in point: only a few years before the Adam Walsh abduction, Atlanta weathered a horrific two-year stretch during which “twenty-nine young African Americans were kidnapped and slain” (Renfro 157). While this tragedy led to a robust (if both tardy and short-lived) response from Atlanta’s city government and private business community, it did not push the country into a decades-long panic, while the abduction and murder of a single white child did just that. Given that a fear for the safety of white children factors so significantly in the development of post-war suburbia (Jackson 289), it becomes clear that the powerful resonance of Adam Walsh’s murder was grounded in suburbia.

The implications of this suburban resonance were wide-ranging. The Walsh case created the impetus for the signing of a number of federal laws, including the Missing Children and Missing Children’s Assistance Acts (Renfro 153). The case also led to the formation of powerful nonprofit groups whose goal was to protect children from abduction (153), and a new market for companies selling products to inform families of the threat of strangers and to protect and insure families against abduction tragedies (178). On a more granular level, the Walsh case changed America’s psyche. Richard Moran, a criminologist at Mount Holyoke College, says, “[the Walsh Case] created a nation of petrified kids and paranoid parents” (qtd. in Waxman 5). Moran also notes that this reaction was not limited to the ‘80s; the durability of the stranger-danger movement is such that “the fear still lingers today” (qtd. in Waxman, 5). For example, only a decade ago, twenty-five years after Adam Walsh’s murder, President George W. Bush “signed The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, which expanded the national sex-offenders registry and created a national child-abuse registry” (181). Even today, one can see the specter of child abduction still present in the suburban psyche. We receive Amber Alerts on our Smartphones, see the faces of missing children on the billboards of our highways and the bulletin boards in our stores, and we can find a website to tell us how many registered sex offenders live in our neighborhood (Renfro 180-181).

While the economic and temporal reach of the Walsh case is staggering in its breadth and depth, the most important aspect of the Walsh case for the pur-

pose of this argument is its symbolic power. The significance and reach of the stranger-danger movement is on its own proof that the case touched the suburban American psyche in a very powerful way. There is, however, another aspect of the stranger-danger story that shows these reactions were *primarily based* on the symbolic power of the abducted child narrative. In the early-to-mid '80s, activists and politicians often quoted the statistic that "fifty thousand youths were taken by 'strangers' annually" (Renfro 152). By the late eighties, however, this number had been debunked; "In reality, only a few hundred young Americans at most were abducted by strangers in any given year" (152). No one questions that many of the advocates who worked in the stranger-danger movement did so to help children and had no intention of misleading the public. Instead, I contend that the powerful symbolic force of the abducted child narrative warped people's sense of reality. Suburban America all at once realized it was less able to "mediate the hazards [its] children face" (George 139) than the suburban narrative had promised. Gone were the days of a suburban space insulated from the dangers of the outside world; now the suburbs were a place where "death lurks behind every cupboard and waits in every garage" (George 139).

In July 2016, three decades after the stranger-danger movement began, *Stranger Things* debuted on Netflix and met instant success, garnering "a whopping 14.07 million views in the United States in the key adults 18-49 demographic in its first 35 days," making it "one of Netflix's highest ratings [sic] shows" (Bowden). It is significant that many in this demo-

graphic were children themselves during the '80s. While at least some of *Stranger Things*' success with this group can be attributed to the show's '80s aesthetic, "allow[ing] the series [and its audience] to luxuriate in a comfortable bath of Deja vu" (Wren 1), I contend that the show's success is at least partly due to a deeper cultural resonance connected to the stranger-danger movement. The show's title itself seems to enter into discourse with the stranger-danger movement, and the series develops a number of plot lines centered around kidnapped children. It is no surprise, then, that a large part of *Stranger Things*' demographic is the adults who were children themselves during the advent of stranger-danger. With this in mind, I contend that the power of the show comes not simply from its engagement with the symbolism and narrative of the stranger-danger movement but from its reconfiguring of some of most paranoid and insidious aspects of stranger-danger. Specifically, *Stranger Things* inverts the power structure underpinning of the stranger-danger movement, characterizing the government and the nuclear family as dangerous and, especially in the government's case, exploitative of children, while the children themselves are positioned as active, empowered agents in their own safety. In doing this, *Stranger Things* offers its audience a way of understanding children in the suburbs that promises to free both parents and children from the paranoia that characterized 1980s childhood and now threatens to bleed into the world of the next generation.

Like many contemporary critics of suburban film and literature, my goal is to use a suburban text to enter into the symbolic landscape of suburbia. Rob-

ert Beuka, in the introduction to his book, *Suburbia Nation*, writes that the term “suburbia” itself is full of “loaded signifiers” like pools, barbeque pits, and neatly constructed neighborhoods that “taken together, connote both the middle-class ‘American dream’...and that dream’s inverse: the vision of a homogenized, soulless landscape of tepid conformity” (4). However, Beuka also notes that the suburban critic must look past this durable but simple conception of the suburbs in order to form a deeper, more culturally exact view of suburban film and literature that expands “the dominant perception of suburbia over the course of the second half of the twentieth century” (14).

Of the most recent studies on suburban film and literature, Murphy’s introduction to *The Suburban Gothic* is the only text that sets its argument squarely within the “dominant perception” noted by Beuka. In this chapter, Murphy suggests that *The Suburban Gothic* explores “the malevolent and frequently subversive flipside to the pro-suburban rhetoric espoused by” the leaders of popular culture (4), highlighting “the perception that there is a dark and terrifying underside to the suburban experience” (11). Murphy’s argument certainly connects to *Stranger Things* on a very literal level; the upside-down of *Stranger Things* and its terrifying inhabitant can both be read as a reification of that “dark and terrifying underside” of suburbia. However, outside of a cursory mention of the suburbs as “an obvious hunting ground for pedophiles and child murderers” (3), Murphy’s analysis does not provide an extensive analysis of the position of children in the suburbs.

Each of the other major contemporary suburban critics attempts to complicate the “dominant perception” of the suburbs in his or her own way. Catherine Jurca’s criticism in *White Diaspora*, for example, stands alone in its attempt to fully confront the fraught racial dynamics of the suburbs. Instead of engaging in the critique of suburban literature as resting on bland “tropes of typicality and ‘mediocrity’” (4), she seeks to “analyze the assumptions that sustain” suburban novels, especially “the tendency in twentieth-century literary treatments of the American suburb to convert the rights and privileges of living there into spiritual, cultural, and political problems of displacement” (4).

Jurca attacks this tendency with considerable force, as is evident in the introduction to her book *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*, where she states, “that perhaps nothing comes more naturally to the affluent white middle class than feeling bad—maltreated, rather than angry or guilty—about being the white middle class” (19), a feeling she clearly sees as anything but “a reasonable point of view” (8). On one hand, the force of this attack is only proportionate to the injustice of a whole genre of literature based on a “fantasy of victimization” (8-9), which the author convincingly argues is true. On the other hand, Joseph George argues that the polemic force of Jurca’s argument “overlook[s] the contingent and multifaceted communities so prevalent” (George 31) in suburban literature. Jurca’s contribution to the discourse on suburban film and literature certainly highlights the fact that *Stranger Things* largely ignores the issue of race in the suburbs. However, I do not believe

Stranger Things, which privileges suburban outsiders over the affluent suburban core, is guilty of being a narrative of affluent people worrying about “problems of displacement.”

Joseph George’s analysis of the suburbs, *Post-modern Suburban Spaces*, reads suburban literature “as acts of imagination, creative responses to real facts of suburbanization that describe and explore more ethical ways of being together in a model that has dominated American popular culture as much as it has real landscapes” (37). George conceives of the suburbs as an “imaginary space” (3) that promises much more than simply reinforcing old clichés of suburban life; specifically, he contends that many modern portrayals of suburbia complicate the “dominant perception” and act as a “means to envision a different type of suburban interaction, one based on care for the other people with whom one lives” (4). George applies this idea specifically to suburban families in the third chapter of book, titled *Domesticated Strangers: Fissures Within the Nuclear Family*. Most germane to my argument is the section of this chapter focusing on John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*. In it, George argues how the protagonist of the novel, T. S. Garp, is “[transformed from] the fretful parent into the inescapable threat” (141), a model which perfectly describes the transformation of Karen Wheeler, the mother of Mike and Nancy, when Eleven arrives at their house (as will be discussed later in this analysis).

In his argument in chapter three, George also makes the point that part of *Garp* “reflects the out-

look...[that] it is [both the author and the protagonist’s] imagination that has made the world into his enemies, focusing on grisly deaths instead of potential lives” (147). This powerful observation fits perfectly into my conception of the stranger-danger movement; the Walsh case and others like it ignited the American imagination, creating a world of unseen enemies and “grisly deaths” that clouded the public’s view of reality. Further developing this idea of unseen danger, George notes that in suburban literature, “death lurks behind every cupboard and waits in every garage” (George 139), a description that fits *Stranger Things* perfectly. The creature from the upside-down (that is itself a kidnapper, it should be noted) travels through the suburban electrical grid and emerges from the walls of suburban houses; he is quite literally behind the walls of the Byers’ house and the Hawkins Middle School (Duffer ch. 8, 30:51). The nature of the upside-down itself further develops the idea of death as a ubiquitous and hidden force in the suburbs. It is “a place of decay and death” (Duffer ch. 5, 06:29) that exists just under the surface of the suburbs at all times--it is literally “right next to you and you don’t even see it” (Duffer ch. 5, 6:38).

In fact, *Stranger Things* positions itself as a narrative developing the concept of unseen suburban danger from its very first moments. The first scene of the series shows a horrified scientist running down a dimly lit subterranean hallway, only to be pulled into the ceiling of an elevator by an unseen malevolent force. In a juxtaposition representing a perfect example of what George terms the “juxtaposition of the horrific and the mundane” (139), the next scene is a ground-level shot

of a sprinkler head watering the lawn of the Wheeler house in Hawkins, Indiana (Duffer ch. 1, 01:33-01:57). The nature of the Wheeler family reinforces the mundane, suburban mood of this scene. They are the film's premier nuclear family, complete with parents who married for money and status rather than love (Duffer ch. 5, 22:12), and who live in a classic suburban house, the "modified colonial" (Jackson 240).

In a voice-over behind the sprinkler head shot, Mike Wheeler, one of the show's young protagonists, introduces his friends to the next encounter in their game of *Dungeons and Dragons*, saying "something is coming. Something hungry for blood" (Duffer, ch. 1, 01:44). The dramatic irony in these words highlights the innocence of the children, who believe monsters exist only in the safety of their games when the audience already knows otherwise. More importantly, this voice-over sets the narrative clearly within the framework of the stranger-danger movement, when suburban citizens became convinced monsters who were "hungry for blood" lurked under the surface of the suburban patina of child safety.

While the opening shots of this series unmistakably place it within the stranger-danger discourse, the narrative quickly inverts the sources of danger in its narrative. Where the stranger-danger movement created a dichotomy between the danger of strangers and the safety of established social structures such as the nuclear family and the government, *Stranger Things* characterizes these two institutions as the narrative's major sources of danger.

From the show's very first chapter, the government is characterized as a dark and murderous force. In this episode, the audience sees the government illegally tapping the town's phone lines (Duffer ch 1, 18:10), suggesting it is a secretive and manipulative force. Also introduced in the first chapter is Connie Frazier, the government agent who murders Benny, the restaurant owner who first took in Eleven (Duffer ch. 1, 39:53). Seeing a government agent pose as a social worker, only to murder a well-meaning citizen, clearly establishes the government as a threatening entity. The fact that Connie looks very much like a put-together suburban mom also begins to develop the motif of the nuclear family as a source of danger.

More specifically, the narrative places the government in the role filled by the malicious stranger in the stranger-danger narrative; there are two kidnappings and a child murder in *Stranger Things*, and each can be attributed to the government on some level. The first and most central kidnapping in the narrative is that of Eleven, who was kidnapped at birth by the government (Duffer ch. 6, 27:10). Interestingly, although the kidnapping of Will Beyers and the murder of Barb Holland both come at the hands of the creature (who the kids dub the Demogorgon) from the upside-down, this creature can itself be read as the reification of the government's kidnapping and exploitation of Eleven, since it is the government's eventual attempt to exploit Eleven's powers in an effort to gain an advantage in the Cold War (Duffer ch. 6, 19:15 and ch. 7, 30:34) that sets the Demogorgon loose (Duffer ch 6, 42:16-42:41). In this way, the government is indirectly responsible for

the kidnapping of Will Beyers and the murder of Barb Holland. Supporting this point, the government seems at times to be in loose collusion with the Demogorgon; in both Barb's and Will's case, the government acts to hide the creature's crimes. In Will's case, they create a fake body to trick Joyce into thinking her son is dead (Duffer ch. 5, 12:20). In Barb's case, the government moves Barb's car to a bus stop to mislead the public into believing that Barb ran away (Duffer ch. 5, 30:26). The characterization of the government as a dangerous kidnapper is also developed in the headlines connected to Dr. Brenner that Hopper reads as he researches the government lab, headlines such as "Alleged Experiments, Abuse," and, most incriminatingly, "Terry Ives Suing: 'They Took My Daughter'" (Duffer ch. 3, 26:24-26:43).

Whereas the government's function in the stranger-danger movement was in part to "shore up... the nuclear family" (George 153), the government in *Stranger Things* turns the suburban nuclear family into a source of danger in the Wheeler house. When Mike finds himself harboring Eleven in his basement, his first instinct, like that of any good suburban child, is to go to his parents for help. He suggests Eleven sneak out the house and immediately return to the front door, pretending she is lost. Mike is confident his mom will "know who to call" (Duffer ch. 2, 10:00). Knowing the fate of Benny, the restaurant owner when he called for the government's help in dealing with Eleven, Mike's words again ring with dramatic irony; the call Mike's mom would make would almost certainly lead to the demise of Eleven and the entire family, a point made

fairly explicit by Benny's earlier murder and Eleven's denial of Mike's plan. She explains her answer by miming both her and Mike getting shot by the "bad people" (Duffer ch. 2 10:48).

George describes a similar inversion in *The World According to Garp*, saying that "parents' efforts to safeguard their offspring in fact makes them vulnerable" (140), a point made with great clarity in *Stranger Things* when, after Eleven has made it clear asking for help from Mike's parents would lead to death, we see Karen Wheeler, Mike's mom, say to him, "I never want you to feel like you have to hide anything from me" (Duffer ch. 2 24:39). Taken in a vacuum, this is a classic familial interaction between a concerned, well-meaning parent and her child; however, set within the inverted framework of *Stranger Things*, these words carry an implied threat. Karen Wheeler is unable to help her son, even when his problem is not an outside adult stranger, but another child living within the walls of her very house.

The characterization of both the government and the nuclear family as dangerous is cemented in the narrative's central antagonist, Dr. Martin Brenner, the lead scientist of a series of top-secret government experiments at the Department of Energy research lab in Hawkins. It was Brenner who kidnapped Eleven at birth, a kidnapping that stemmed from a series of ethically questionable, government-funded human experiments he conducted on Eleven's birth mother (Duffer ch. 6, 21:06). Interestingly, because of the extended length of Eleven's captivity, she comes to identify Brenner as a

parent, as we see in the chilling punishment scene in which she repeatedly cries out “Papa!” to an unmoved Brenner as she is dragged away to solitary confinement (Duffer ch. 2, 23:25). The complex intersection of roles in Brenner’s character—he is at once kidnapper, government official, and parental figure—positions him as one of the narrative’s central characters and the personification of the inversion of sources of danger in *Stranger Things*.

It is also worth noting a powerful critique of the stranger-danger movement present in the complex construction of Brenner’s character. As Paul Renfro argues, the ‘80s struggle against child abduction can be read as self-serving for both the government and the private sector. In the case of the Reagan government, “[the] administration harnessed the power of the child safety campaign” (168) to support their neoliberal agenda, using the movement to support its “core thematic objectives vis-a-vis social and economic policy” (173). The private sector also used stranger-danger to forward its own goals. Larger, more established companies: Mobile, Trailways (a bus company), and Quality Inn, to name just a few—engaged with the stranger-danger movement through public awareness campaigns and the offering of safe spots for missing children; however, in the end, these efforts succeeded only in “captur[ing] market share for ‘responsible’, family oriented, child friendly businesses, as many of these campaigns amounted to “little more than public relations moves” (Renfro 171). The stranger-danger movement also drew the attention of “more dubious startups” that capitalized on the movement in more brazen and direct

ways. New insurance programs offered such services to parents as access to “a private investigator, counseling services, up to \$50,000 in reward money, and up to \$10,000 in travel funds should their child fall prey to a kidnapper”—all for a monthly premium, of course (Renfro 178). Along with these insurance programs, “companies marketed new products devised to restrain and monitor children, in the hopes of keeping them out of harm’s way” (178). Viewed through the lens of these facts, the stranger-danger movement seems less about protecting children from the exploitation of strangers and more about the exploitation of suburbia’s fear for its own children by the government and for-profit businesses.

Throughout *Stranger Things*, Brenner’s relationship with Eleven can be seen as a reification of the exploitative relationship that blossomed during the stranger-danger movement between government and for-profit businesses on one hand and children on the other. There is never a question that Eleven’s place in the government is purely motivated by exploitation; in fact, she is characterized as a captive or prisoner. The haunting, Holocaust-like image of her numerical name tattooed on her wrist (Duffer ch. 1, 27:56) strongly suggests the government has stripped her of a human identity. This characterization is further developed through Eleven’s limited vocabulary and the spare, prison-like image of her bedroom (Duffer, ch. 5 04:18-04:35). In place of developing a human, we see the government pursuing a darker goal in its interactions with Eleven. In the numerous flashbacks to Eleven’s time at the Energy Department labs, we see her repeatedly being trained to

use her telepathic and telekinetic powers as a weapon. At one point, the audience is to understand that Eleven has been asked to injure a cat with her mind (Duffer ch. 3, 33:04); soon after, we see her practice surveilling a Soviet operative with her mind before she kills two laboratory workers with telekinesis. Brenner's reaction to this last event shows he is more concerned with her status as a weapon than as a human being. After being unmoved by her crying only moments before and seeming unconcerned that Eleven is pale and bleeding from her nose and ears after using her powers, he caresses her head and says "incredible" (Duffer ch. 3, 34:46). This reaction clearly shows Brenner's value structure—he gives Eleven positive parental attention only to reward her for her making herself a weapon.

That Eleven's exploitation directly introduces the Demogorgon into the narrative further comments on the exploitation of real suburban children during the stranger-danger movement. Just as the shadowy kidnapper of the stranger-danger movement gained power as various government and for-profit institutions propagated the stranger-danger threat for their own benefit, the very existence of the Demogorgon in *Stranger Things*, a child kidnapper and murderer itself, is a consequence of the exploitation of a child by the government.

When *Stranger Things* repositions the source of danger in the stranger-danger movement, it also liberates the image of the suburban child, which has been trapped in the paranoia of the stranger-danger movement for the last thirty years. The stranger-danger

movement's focus on the child as a victim, which can be seen in everything from the exaggerated statistics about child abduction to the profusion of lost children's faces on milk cartons and specially-made leashes to keep children near their parents, led to "a nation of petrified kids and paranoid parents" (Waxman 5). Gone were the days of children being allowed to independently explore public spaces in their neighborhoods unattended. (Corcoran et al. 11) The stranger-danger era ushered in the age of the play date, of the highly structured, highly managed childhood, a childhood that robs kids of a sense of agency, independence, and empowerment.

Stranger Things certainly acknowledges the reality that some children will fall victim to tragedy, just as Adam Walsh did; Eleven, Will Beyers, and Barb Holland all suffer at the hands of a kidnapper in this narrative, and, in an incredibly painful flashback, we see Chief Hopper lose his young daughter to cancer (Duffer, ch. 8, 38:04). With the exception of Barb, however, children are given more agency than simply being passive objects of adult aggression and perversity. Will Beyers was kidnapped, but the narrative allows him to use his ingenuity and bravery to stay alive, where Barb could not. Both of these traits are on display in the very fact that he manages to navigate the upside-down. He successfully communicates with his mother in the Beyers' home (Duffer, ch. 3, 40:10) and escapes the Demogorgon by finding refuge in Castle Beyers (Duffer ch. 7, 34:38). Both of these points suggest a heroic and empowered act--trapped inside the incredibly forbidding and dangerous world of the upside-down, Will takes active steps to communicate and survive.

The narrative of *Stranger Things* empowers most of its child characters in one way or another, creating too many examples of child empowerment and agency to profitably list in this paper. An example that stands out above many of the others is the role Will Beyers' three best friends--Mike, Dustin, and Lucas--play in the narrative. From the beginning, against the insistence of the adult figures in the narrative, these boys take a brave and active role in the search for Will. As soon as they hear of his disappearance, they venture out into the dark woods in spite of knowing it is "the exact same spot where [Will] went missing," a place where "he ran into something bad" (Duffer ch. 1, 45:42). These children are not the passively endangered children of the stranger-danger movement who are unable to act outside the purview of the nuclear family, the business world, and the government. In fact, *Stranger Things* positions these boys' independent actions as some of the most efficacious in the narrative. For example, next to Joyce Beyers and Eleven, who both have a preternatural connection to Will, the three boys are the first characters to solve the mystery of Will's disappearance. The fact that they use *Dungeons & Dragons*, a game popular with children in the '80s (Duffer ch. 5, 06:26), as a lens through which to understand Will's situation offers a vision of children using imagination and flexibility to solve their own problems.

In another key scene in *Stranger Things*, the teenagers Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve make the most successful stand against the Demogorgon by any character without telekinesis (we will soon explore Eleven's climactic encounter with the creature). At two

different points in the series, the Demogorgon easily dispatches trained, armed soldiers--once when the lone soldier ventures into the upside-down (Duffer ch. 4, 27:57-28:49) and again during the dramatic climax of the series, when the monster single-handedly dispatches the entire unit of heavily-armed paramilitary soldiers led by Dr. Brenner (Duffer ch. 8, 30:52). Yet Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve manage to lure the monster into the Beyers' home, ensnare it in a bear trap, and set fire to it, all of which leads to Hopper realizing that the creature is hurt when he sees blood stains on the floor of the upside-down Beyers' home (Duffer ch. 8, 22:40). While this scene may strike the audience as improbable on a literal level, (especially when Steve bests the creature in close combat) (Duffer ch. 8, 20:51), it can be read figuratively as a metaphor of empowered children confronting the issues in their lives.

While these scenes are strong examples of *Stranger Things* empowering its child characters, Eleven is the character who most embodies the empowered and active child; her character can be read, in fact, as a reification of child power. Like Dr. Brenner, Eleven's important role in this narrative is reinforced by the way her identity represents an intersection of a number of important images relating to the stranger-danger movement. Eleven is a daughter-- literally, she is the daughter of Terry Ives; figuratively she is the daughter of Dr. Brenner. At the same time, Eleven is also a kidnapped child. Above all else, though, she is an empowered child.

As I have noted a number of times, the strang-

er-danger movement's immense cultural force was fueled by the power of children in suburbia, and this should be no surprise, given that the creation of the suburbs itself was fueled, at least in part, by this same power (Jackson 289). In both the post-war migration to the suburbs and the stranger-danger movement, the power of children manifested itself as adult fear, which paradoxically led to the practical disempowerment of children in the suburbs. In yet another inversion of stranger-danger symbolism, Eleven herself becomes the seat of the power of children. Endowed with immense telepathic and telekinetic abilities, Eleven is the personification of power. With nothing more than her mind, Eleven launches a van high into the air (Duffer ch. 7, 4:11), saves Mike from falling to his death (Duffer ch. 7, 06:29), breaks a boy's arm (Duffer ch. 7, 40:43), surveils a Soviet operative halfway across the world (Duffer ch. 5, 42:51-43:18), and even "open[s] up a tear in time and space...[an act that would require] a massive amount of energy, more than humans are currently capable of creating" (Duffer ch. 5, 20:34). Eleven's presence has the potential to warp the world around her, just as the presence of children in suburbia warped adults' views of reality (Renfro 152). Also, like children in the real world, Eleven was exploited and penned in because of this power by adults hungry to forward their own interests. It is significant, then, that *Stranger Things* begins its narrative with Eleven escaping from captivity and becoming a force that disrupts the structures of adult exploitation in a number of ways.

If the Demogorgon can be read as the reification of the dark consequences of child exploitation, and

Eleven can be read as the reification of the power of children, the final confrontation between Eleven and the creature is the ultimate metaphor of child empowerment disrupting the dark forces released by the stranger-danger movement. The greatest fear of adults during the stranger-danger movement was that their innocent and powerless children would fall prey to the lurking kidnapper, but *Stranger Things* allows its audience to see the ultimate reversal of this image. Eleven, the kidnapped child, confronts and destroys the kidnapper, saving her friends, and maybe even her entire community--for who else could have stopped the Demogorgon?

It is of course easy to discount this powerful image--the singular tragedy of losing one child in as barbaric a way as Adam Walsh's parents lost him seems to at once negate any hope *Stranger Things* holds for changing the way our society views its children. Moreover, it seems an unchallengeable truth that children are not capable of protecting themselves. There are, however, expert voices who seem to support the idea empowering children in the face of danger, a stance that runs totally counter to the passive conception of children forged during the stranger-danger crisis. First of all, Mary Corcoran reminds us in her article, "Making Space for Sociability: How Children Animate the Public Realm in Suburbia", that our view of children as "vulnerable and in need of protection" is not an immutable truth but a "contemporary construction". Taking this idea a step further, Nancy McBride, national safety director at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, stresses that our culture must

“take stranger-danger and put it in a museum” (qtd. in Abrams). She goes on to explain that children need to be empowered to think situationally, making them more active and empowered agents in their own safety.

It may seem that I have given undue weight to the narrative symbolism of *Stranger Things*. It is, after all, a fictional account, so it may be difficult to imagine that it could contribute to changing our culture’s view of children, which is based in part on real--if extremely rare-- cases of tragic child abduction and murder. However, it is clear stranger-danger derives most of its power from the *narrative* of child endangerment created by the Adam Walsh case; parents reacted to the *story* of an abducted child more so than they reacted to any real-world data suggesting their children were actually at risk. Because of the narrative underpinnings of the stranger-danger movement, there is the possibility that offering an alternative narrative could influence the discourse around the safety of suburban children in our culture. As George explains in the conclusion to *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, fiction has the power to offer “new myths” in place of “conceptions of childhood that dominate American suburbs” (189). By offering the image of empowered children overcoming dark and exploitative forces, *Stranger Things* offers our culture a “new myth,” and, while this narrative will never bring back Adam Walsh, it can help our society find the bravery to banish the specter of stranger-danger and free today’s children—and their parents—from the prison of fear.

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