

Stranger Things: Complex Serial, Complex Industry

**The Institutional, Cultural, and Textual Significance of
Internet-Distributed Television**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the emergence and significance of internet-distributed television by unpacking the industrial, cultural, and textual ramifications of programming originated for an online context. As one of the foremost streaming services both globally and within the United States, Netflix will be the central focus of this thesis. The programmes that Netflix originates facilitate discussions around the potential of this network and its online platform to encourage innovation and novelty in its long-form TV drama. Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016–), a programme concept that was reputedly rejected by a number of cable networks before being accepted by Netflix, provides a compelling case study of the creative possibilities afforded by streaming capabilities.

This exploration is structured into three chapters. The first examines the environmental and institutional factors of the US television industry from which internet-distributed networks emerged. This chapter also explores the different economic models and the associated storytelling methods of each. Chapter 2 demonstrates the cultural significance of streaming on consumption behaviours and explores how broadcast, cable, and internet-distributed TV networks conceive of and pursue audiences. The analysis of several seminal TV dramas, such as *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019), and *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013), provides comparisons from which to better understand the significance of *Stranger Things* to both the network that commissioned it and to the American television industry at large. The third chapter offers a detailed analysis of *Stranger Things* as an exemplar of Netflix's ability to commission what Trisha Dunleavy (2018) terms the 'complex serial drama' and in doing so emulate the successful strategies first deployed by US cable networks.

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Introduction

While the advent of streaming technologies has resulted in undeniable change to the US television industry, early predictions that these would bring television's ultimate demise are yet unfounded. Many labels have been ascribed to this era of television including "Peak TV", and "TV IV", however, Trisha Dunleavy's (2018) term "multiplatform" seems most adept at recognising both its profound impact on the US industry and the limitations of its distinctions. As Dunleavy suggests, it is a co-habitation – and not a succession – of broadcast, cable, and internet-distributed television (IDTV) networks that define the 'multiplatform' era (2018: 11-13). Although television's obituary is no longer considered necessary, the implications of new screen technologies and distribution capabilities have resulted in significant shifts for the US television industry, the impacts of which are examined in this thesis.

The capabilities of streaming technologies allow internet-distributed services to operate over-the-top (OTT) of traditional broadcasting and satellite channels. OTT delivery and the new viewing possibilities it enables have challenged previous understandings of television, which, as a medium, has historically been defined not only by its industrial practices but also by its technological limitations (Lotz 2017: 2-3). Derived from terrestrial television's finite transmission capacities, the linear schedule reflects the limitation of a broadcast or cable channel to transmitting just one programme at any given time. While Netflix has been the most pervasive of US OTT networks in eschewing and exposing linear norms, Hulu Plus, Amazon Prime and other OTT services are emulating these Netflix strategies.

As broadcast and cable networks continue to adapt to technological disruption, the trend has been toward that of increased "platformisation", a term which refers to the convergence of conventional terrestrial television models and internet delivery systems (Evens and Donders 2018: 1). While Netflix, Hulu,

and Amazon have been leaders in the evolution of internet-distributed television, the threat posed by increased platformisation to their current position is increasingly evident. Two notable IDTV portals to have emerged as a supplementary service for linear networks are HBO Now and CBS All Access, both of which have added OTT alternatives to the linear schedules of their network parent. Even if non-linear distribution protocols are but one facet of a TV network's service, OTT delivery elicits evident creative influences – as demonstrated by recent HBO dramas – on the commissioning of programmes by the parent network.

The 'complex serial drama' form, deployed first by HBO in programmes such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), and *The Wire* (2002–2008), has extended beyond the 'premium' and 'basic' cable networks that established it on US television. A label coined by Trisha Dunleavy, the 'complex serial drama' form can be distinguished within TV drama for its deployment of "conceptual novelty, long-format seriality, narrative complexity ... and morally conflicted, potentially villainous primary characters" (2018: 155). These features have thrived in drama originated for the non-broadcast contexts of US television in first 'premium' cable, second 'basic' cable, and now, subscription-funded IDTV. The Netflix original programme, *Stranger Things* (2016–), provides an exemplary illustration of IDTV's contributions to the 'complex serial drama' form. Created by the Duffer Brothers, two seasons of *Stranger Things* are available on the Netflix portal with more in production. This programme is the basis of a textual analysis in Chapter 3, which highlights the ability of Netflix to commission examples of 'complex serial' drama.

Out of the leading OTT services named above, one has achieved both rapid, near-global penetration and notable commercial success: Netflix. Having launched its streaming option as an alternative to its DVD-by-mail rental business in 2007, Netflix started commissioning original programmes in 2013 when it released *House of Cards* (2013–2018). Since then, Netflix has achieved both critical and commercial success with programmes such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013–), *The Crown* (2016–), and *Stranger Things*. Although

originating programmes is crucial to the retention and further growth of its subscriber base, the volume of shows it offers, and the menu-like organisation of this content also foregrounds Netflix's need to license a large proportion of its programmes from other networks.

Chapter 1, "Institution and Industry: Television in the 'Multiplatform' Era," examines the context in which IDTV emerged and its consequent technological distinctions. This chapter will first identify and analyse the main paradigms of US television: broadcast, cable, and IDTV. While there are several factors that differentiate these paradigms, a key one remains the economic structures each deploys. US broadcast television has typically operated under a commercial system funded by spot advertising strategies, whereas both premium cable networks (HBO) and OTT services (Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu) deploy subscription-based funding models. Their monthly subscription fees not only free these 'premium' networks from the content restrictions upheld by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a regulatory body that monitors the public airwaves, but also removes some of the cultural and narrative constraints that shape TV programmes originated for advertiser-funded networks. Finally, this chapter analyses the repercussions of both commercial and subscription funding models on the narratives of long-form dramas with reference to several seminal texts, Fox's *24* (2001–2010), HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), and Netflix's *Stranger Things*, each of which was commissioned for a different platform and paradigm.

Chapter 2, "Audience Objectives and Commissioning Culture on US Television," focuses on the cultural implications of IDTV and its resulting significance for the origination and retransmission of TV programmes. This chapter will identify and examine the different strategies deployed by broadcast, cable, and OTT networks to identify, target, and retain audiences. Alongside the proliferation of American networks in recent decades there has also been a process of continuing audience fragmentation. The newer networks have sought a share of the total market by pursuing audiences underserved by the mass-appeal orientation of US broadcast television. The second area of focus for this

chapter is the different roles performed for a given network by commissioned programmes compared to acquired ones. Although the largest US networks differentiate themselves and pursue profitability by offering original content, both types of programming are equally important to the success of a portal such as Netflix. While the acquisition of ‘off-network’ programmes allows Netflix to curate a large menu of programmes to maximise its appeal to subscribers, the commissioning of original programming helps to enhance Netflix’s allure as a ‘transnational’ brand.

Finally, Chapter 3, “Complex Serial Drama and *Stranger Things*,” provides a case study of *Stranger Things* as a Netflix-originated example of the ‘complex serial drama’ form. Drawing on the economic and institutional paradigms explored in the first chapter and on the cultural and technological distinctions analysed in the second, this chapter will investigate the textual significance of programmes originated for internet distribution. As an ambitious OTT service in rapid expansion Netflix was in a strong position to ‘green-light’ *Stranger Things* after other cable networks ‘passed’ on the opportunity (Grow 2016). *Stranger Things* will be analysed using three key components of Dunleavy’s (2018) study of the ‘complex serial drama’ form. First, is the show’s conceptual originality, as evident in its story, interplay of distinct genres, and foregrounding of a multi-generational cast; second, the construction of Eleven as a transgressive and morally ambiguous central character; and finally, its deployment of narrative strategies that distinguish ‘complex serial’ drama.

Chapter 1

Institution and Industry: Television in the 'Multiplatform' Era

Television, like most technologies, can be understood through a continuous cycle of evolution and transition. Its inherent 'newness' can only result from an assumed 'oldness.' Yet, disruption allows for novelty, which inevitably results in familiarity (Gunning 2003: 41). There is no question that the past two decades have brought considerable change to the US television industry, one manifestation of which has been "epic shifts in distribution and screen technologies" (Lotz 2017: 1). Yet, the 'multiplatform' descriptor that Trisha Dunleavy (2018) applies to today's US television industry foregrounds a co-existence of broadcast, cable, and internet networks and services (11-13).

This chapter examines technological advancements that have resulted in industry-wide shifts and have challenged assumptions about what 'television' is. First, it will outline key distinctions between the three main paradigms in the American television industry: broadcast, cable, and internet. Second, the chapter identifies and explores the two dominant funding methods (spot advertising and monthly subscription) employed by networks. The analysis of several indicative programmes will further illustrate the repercussions of different economic models for television narrative structures. Finally, the chapter assesses the impact of recent technological advancements on industry-wide commissioning practices.

Paradigmatic Distinctions

Television has undergone great change since its introduction to the US in the 1940s. Today, television is distinguished from the medium's earliest iterations by its capacity for non-linear viewing, and its multichannel, multiplatform environment. John Ellis (2000) termed the early period of television the 'era of

scarcity' as these years were characterised by constraints on the number of channels operating. It was during this era that just three American broadcast networks came to dominate the industry, assisted by their free-to-air operation, wide availability, and control of production. This chapter emphasises the advertiser-funded broadcast network model that was and remains characteristic of these networks. Although this advertiser-funded model largely defined American television during 'scarcity', its influence was not then pervasive internationally. In many markets, most notably in Britain and Europe, television began as a state-owned, publicly-funded service. Despite this, as 'scarcity' gave way to an increasing 'availability' of TV channels in the 1980s (Ellis 2000), advertiser-funded networks came to dominate the operation of broadcast TV.

During this early period of US television, the industry was monopolised by the 'big three' networks (Hilmes 2007): NBC (1939-), CBS (1941-), and ABC (1948-). Beginning in the 1960s, their predominant funding model was 'spot' advertisements, played during and between programmes (Ellis 2000: 52). This model resulted in the commodification of the consumer, developing a system built on scheduling content that subjected viewers to advertisements while they watched (Lotz 2017: 16). This era of American television was influenced by a philosophy of 'least objectionable programming.' Attributed to Paul Klein, Vice President of Programming for NBC during the 1960s, 'least objectionable programming' (LOP) was the prevailing commissioning strategy of the 'big three' networks (qtd. in Thompson 1996: 38). A key component to the LOP strategy was to create programming that could expose advertisements to the largest possible audience (Gitlin 1994: 61). This focus led to the creation of programmes that appealed to the broadest range of people. The universal accessibility of broadcast TV transmissions encouraged risk-averse programming, and the public airwaves on which they were distributed further subjected networks to content regulations imposed by a newly formed Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC's explicit mandate was to monitor content carried on public airwaves and, in consequence, profanity, violence, and nudity were restricted on American broadcast television (Banet-Weiser et al 2007: 6). Growing technological capabilities ensured that the oligopoly held by the 'big

three' American networks would not continue. Their dominance came under threat from the 1980s when the arrival of new commercial channels and pay-to-view networks increased competition and initiated market fragmentation.

The advent of new satellite cable technologies saw a disruption to the previous status quo. In particular, the nation-wide accessibility of cable networks increased their market potential and economic viability. In order to compete in an environment facing oversaturation, the US television industry began to break from "customary norms of program acquisition, financing, and advertiser support that had in many cases been around since the mid-1950s" (Lotz 2014: 4). This resulted in a decrease of market domination and an increase in audience fragmentation. During this time, there was not only a slew of new broadcast networks such as Fox (1986–), and the WB (1995-2006)¹, but also competition from new cable networks. While cable television is not accessible without payment, there are two distinct services that are offered to viewers who opt into them: 'premium cable' and 'basic cable.' 'Premium cable' networks are often purchased independently, based on an "à la carte" system (Mullen 2003: 104). Premium cable networks, the likes of which include HBO (1972–) and Showtime (1976–), obtain funding through the viewers who subscribe to them and rely on their continued subscription. The term 'basic cable' refers to networks such as AMC (1984–)² and FX (1994–), which are not freely available and are typically bundled together by a cable provider to sell as a package. Basic cable networks are sustained via a mix of advertisement and 'per-sub fees', meaning cable operators pay a monthly fee to networks based on the total amount of subscribers to the package (Mullen 2003: 112). The much smaller pool of early original content commissioned by basic cable networks tended to emulate well-established broadcasting norms because their schedules were mostly dominated by 'off-network' ex-broadcast TV shows (ibid.: 8). Since the FCC exists to regulate public airwaves they were not sanctioned to monitor the transmissions of cable networks (Hilmes 2007: 220). The lack of regulation meant that TV programmes originated for cable schedules could depict the

¹ The WB merged with UPN to create the CW (2006–).

² Launched in 2017, AMC Premiere is now an ad-free, premium cable subscription service.

profane language, explicit nudity, and/or graphic violence that was otherwise unacceptable for broadcast television.

The 'multiplatform' era is characterised by the co-existence of broadcast, cable, and internet delivery platforms for television (Dunleavy 2018: 11). In this context programmes can be viewed on non-traditional devices including computers and mobile phones. The ease and accessibility of broadband delivery provided a platform for services that went over-the-top (OTT) of traditional transmission methods to stream both acquired and original programming (Lotz 2017: 7). Netflix (1999-), Amazon Prime Video (2006-), and Hulu Plus (2007-) are leaders of internet-only streaming meaning they do not have a broadcast or cable counterpart. However, most traditional broadcast and cable networks now also offer content to online viewers. This can be a separate service to the one already provided, such as HBO Now and CBS All Access, or as an accompaniment to it, for example HBO Go and CWTV (Evens and Donders 2018: 2). Despite continued platformisation, non-linear delivery systems have encouraged even greater distinctions between the paradigms. One service in particular is recognised as leading institutional and technological shifts in television commissioning and viewing. Netflix, which began in 1997 as an online DVD rental business, is both influential and renowned for its vast catalogue of content. As well as its own original television and film productions, Netflix also offers acquired broadcast and cable television programmes and licensed feature films. Currently, Netflix has achieved an international subscriber base of over 140 million (*About Netflix*), with its first original long-form scripted shows being released in 2013, including *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black*, and the revived *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003–2006; Netflix 2013–). 'Portals', a term coined by Amanda Lotz (2017), distinguishes between those networks distributed via broadcast/satellite transmissions and those services that are distributed via the internet (8). As conventional linear networks expand onto the internet, and OTT portals continue to grow globally, the capacity of internet delivery systems increasingly challenges existing understandings of how 'television' can be defined, not only because programmes can be offered via non-linear distribution but because these services are commissioning original

programmes too (Lotz 2016: 124). Although Netflix is unlike traditional television in many ways, the foremost being its non-linear delivery of content, it also deploys strategies similar to those of premium cable such as a subscriber-funding model.

Television Funding Models

Raymond Williams (1974), upon viewing broadcast television in the United States for the first time, seminally notes the “irresponsible” and manufactured “flow” of images (92). This flow was not simply of disparate programmes but of commercials interrupting the continuity of the episode. This practise was standardised by most of the industry in a pre-cable American context. Broadcast networks are in the business of creating profit and to do so they must sell ‘quality’ audiences to advertisers. As Todd Gitlin (1994) states, “any other purpose is subordinated to the larger design of keeping a sufficient number of people tuned in. That is, after all, what advertisers pay for” (56). This funding model values programming that can aggregate a large number of people at a specific time, especially since ratings determine the extent of commercial success. Broadcast networks therefore adopt a “safety first” approach when considering the suitability of programming for mass consumption because maintaining a large viewership remains crucial to the profitability of advertiser-funded television (ibid.: 63).

The linear schedule was thus derived from both technological limitations and its capacity to deliver commercials. Long-format series (which comprise 22 to 24 episodes per season) are typically the most viable on commercial broadcast television, not least because of their capacity to maximise and retain audience numbers. The sheer length of these series ensures the network can sell the same audiences to advertisers across a greater period of time. Sarah Kozloff (1995) highlights the episodic narrative strategies long associated with the drama series, the term ‘series’ describing “shows whose characters and settings are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode” (90). The procedural drama series, especially in primetime slots, has been a dominant example of the compatibility of long-form drama and American broadcast

television. *Law and Order* (NBC 1990–2010), *House MD* (Fox 2004–2012), and *NCIS* (CBS 2003–) are but a few examples of procedural dramas that have proved popular on US broadcast networks. According to Lez Cooke (2015), the continued prevalence of procedural dramas on television is due to the “endless variations, and re-workings of a basic formula” (19). Such programmes uphold “safety first” thinking, and their shared strategies confirm the accuracy of perceptions by network executives that “nothing succeeds like success” (Gitlin 1994: 63).

American ‘basic cable’ networks gained economic success in an environment of technological advances, market deregulation, and audience growth. Early basic cable networks include USA Network (1977–), A&E (1984–), and AMC. Although basic cable networks enjoy the deregulated environment of pay-service television, their reliance on advertisements continues to expose any original programming to commercial imperatives. Even so, drama originated for basic cable still managed to follow the templates established by premium cable networks. *The Shield* (FX 2002–2008) was commissioned, according to Kevin Reilly (President of Entertainment), to make FX “the HBO of basic cable” (qtd. in Sepinwall 2013: 144). Such strategies were adopted by several other basic cable networks also looking to invest in original programming with the hope of sharing some of the success achieved by HBO. The first long-form drama originated for the AMC network was *Mad Men* (2007–2015), a show created by Matthew Weiner who had previously served as an executive producer on HBO’s *The Sopranos*. Like FX, AMC had adopted the ‘HBO formula’ where “development went out of their way to recruit ‘top-notch talent and give them a wide berth’ to produce programming that was edgy, sophisticated, and as innovative as anything on TV” (Alston qtd. in Edgerton 2011: 7). Anthony Smith (2018) observes the serialised narrative approach deployed by basic cable networks such as FX and AMC in the 21st Century as “antithetical to advertiser-supported programming” (96). Yet, despite commercial obstacles, basic cable networks proved that highly serialised narratives could in fact succeed in an advertising-influenced environment.

The Shield was one of FX's first forays into original programme production, and the gritty violence it depicted caused controversy for a network that was partially reliant on advertiser revenue. *The Shield's* Vic Mackey is portrayed as a "different kind of cop" (1:1) whose morality is by no means straightforward. By the conclusion of the first episode, the viewer has witnessed Mackey use excessive force during an arrest, assault a suspect in custody, and murder a fellow detective on the force (1:1). While the nature of pay television means the depiction of graphic violence and use of coarse language are not regulated by the FCC, concern caused campaigns protesting the programme's content (Lotz 2014: 247). The pressure exerted on advertisers from public advocacy groups caused some to exit during early episodes, thus reducing FX's income (ibid.). The network continued to release episodes despite boycotting and viewership of the show steadily increased, garnering recognition and earning FX a reputation for producing quality original programming in the process (ibid.). As is made clear by *The Shield*, economic imperatives have the potential to dictate the success or failure of a programme. Wherever the economic model of a TV service entails the use of spot advertisements there remains the potential for a show that transgresses content norms (for violence, sex, and language in particular) to fall victim to the demands of the network's advertisers. Although this did not result in the cancellation of *The Shield*, there are many examples of programmes originated for broadcast networks that have been cancelled due to low ratings and/or concerns from advertisers.

Premium cable networks, unlike basic cable, are not reliant in any part on commercial funding. Home Box Office Inc. (HBO) was the earliest premium cable channel available in America. The network began telecasting in 1972 but would not enjoy success until 1975 with the live transmission of the 'Thrilla in Manila', a boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier (Edgerton 2008: 2). HBO employed a funding strategy entirely different to that of US broadcast networks. In contrast to an advertiser-funded schedule that sold audiences to advertisers, HBO's model relied on fees earned through monthly viewer subscriptions. As a result of this economic system, the network has been able to schedule and retain programmes regardless of the number of viewers attracted per episode. The goal

of premium cable channels is to maximise their subscriber numbers and reduce subscriber 'churn', this term describing the decision by a subscriber to discontinue their payments and service (Anderson 2008: 29). Their objective, Gary Edgerton (2008) observes, is to "provide programming ... attractive enough for viewers to sign up, pay a monthly fee, and stay connected to the service on a long-term basis" (2). As a point of differentiation from its broadcast rivals and to justify the high cost of its service, premium cable networks needed to schedule content that was unlike anything available for free (Kelso 2008: 49). This imperative along with its deregulated environment led to the commissioning of programmes such as *Oz* (1997–2003) and later, *The Sopranos*.

The burgeoning success of cable and satellite networks, which began in the 1970s, soon threatened the previously un-challenged dominance of American broadcast networks. As cable television services expanded, viewers gained access to an increasing number and range of channels and content beyond those of the main broadcast networks. These early cable channels offered schedules of acquired films and programmes, live sporting events, and/or re-runs of off-network programming (Mullen 2008: 94). By the mid-1980s, cable deregulation had led to a multiplicity of cable networks. Longer-established premium channels HBO and Showtime were among the first to commission original scripted content (Santo 2008: 22). The subscriber-based income of HBO, Showtime, and other premium cable networks was seen to reduce the risk associated with creating experimental programmes as it ensures "the network will effectively earn the same amount of revenue regardless of the success or failure of any given program" (ibid.: 24). This experimentation presented writer-producers Tom Fontana (*Oz*) and David Chase (*The Sopranos*) with an opportunity to create dramas that had comparatively little input from network executives, allowing both shows to foreground complex characters through serialised narratives.

While the technological capacity of internet delivery systems is one which allows for OTT services to collate and distribute a vast amount of content, in the case of Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and HBO Now this content is limited to only those

willing to pay a monthly fee. However, there are other portals such as ABC On Demand and CWTV that function as catch-up services to their parent networks. The funding strategies of IDTV can thus be categorised into two distinct models: advertiser-sponsored video on demand (AVOD) systems, or subscription video on demand (SVOD) systems (Lotz 2017: 7). Even beyond the capacity of a linear schedule, catch-up services like CWTV still deploy an advertisement-based funding model much like broadcast networks. The economic structure of AVOD portals tends to emulate that of their corresponding broadcast networks because these portals are also free and easily accessible, meaning the viewer is still being sold to the advertiser. SVOD portals such as Netflix and HBO Now, much like premium cable networks, are reliant on monthly subscriptions. For the purposes of this thesis, discussions surrounding IDTV services will be focused on SVOD portals, in recognition that these are distinguishing themselves as industry 'game-changers'. However, it is important to note that while symptomatic of industry evolution the continued platformisation of broadcast and cable networks alike increases competition for all internet delivery services.

It would be remiss in this section on television funding models not to also mention the profitability of a programme's long-term commercial potential. Extended by the multiplatform era, a given programme may enjoy a lucrative off-network 'afterlife', with incomes generated from domestic syndication, international licensing, merchandising opportunities, and DVD sales. Original programming thus becomes an important part of a network's business interests because ownership denotes exclusive control over airing rights. Such rights offer an ancillary revenue stream for networks on top of commercials and/or subscription fees. Edgerton observes that costs from the first three seasons of *The Sopranos* were recouped from DVD sales alone (2008: 17). At US\$2.5 million per episode, this programme's first US 'off-network' sale to A&E set a new record for what such sales could achieve (Dunleavy 2009: 231). Additionally, by 2004 *Sex and the City* had earned HBO US\$350 million during its early syndication cycles (Edgerton 2008: 17). As these ancillary revenue streams continue to prove profitable, broadcast networks are increasingly opting to offer content via their own streaming services or by licensing to existing ones. In much the same way as

VHS and DVD sales previously, the domestic and international licensing of television shows via OTT services provides US broadcast networks with additional revenues to recoup costs and finance further productions.

Since 2013, services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon have all invested in original programming for their services. Prior to its first commissioning of original programmes, the Netflix service began by hosting many licensed television programmes and feature films. Ted Sarandos describes the non-traditional syndication potential offered by an online streaming network:

It was a new window we created with broadcast networks and cable channels to license their shows in a season-after model. It's an especially great market for cable channels. They can't really syndicate their shows to other cable channels, and most of the content is so serialized that it's difficult to syndicate at all (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 173)

Streaming services offered an alternative strategy through which to capitalise on a programme after its most profitable time. Licensing and DVD sales during a programme's 'afterlife' have traditionally been a common source of revenue for television networks (see above). Since programming originated for premium cable and basic cable networks is mostly incompatible with the schedule and regulations of broadcast television (if not edited for broadcast television requirements), the afterlife of these highly serialised programmes has tended to be relegated to re-runs or DVD sales. Prior to streaming opportunities, HBO would shoot "alternative sanitised scenes" specifically for the purpose of licensing to broadcast networks (Kelso 2008: 60). Now, the licensing of programmes to IDTV services can provide lucrative opportunities for both the licensor and the licensee. According to Sarandos, AMC, after licensing the first four seasons of *Mad Men* to Netflix, received the highest launch of a season premiere in the programme's history (Curtin et al 2014: 174). Sarandos credits Netflix for this success as the accessibility and functionality of the streaming service meant audience members could catch up on the first four seasons via Netflix before watching the fifth on AMC. Likewise, Vince Gilligan, creator of AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), thanked Netflix at the 2013 Primetime Emmy Awards: "I think Netflix kept us on the air. Not only are we standing up here, I

don't think our show would have even lasted beyond season two" (qtd. in Dunleavy 2018: 160).

Netflix typically acquires the rights to a programme in a 'season-after model' so as to make it available via their service after an initial season release by the original network. The limitations and benefits of both acquired and original programming will be further developed in the second chapter of this thesis, however, it remains important to address the issue briefly here as the licensing of programmes is relevant to the revenues of both advertiser-funded and subscriber-funded networks. Unlike the programmes that Netflix commissions, the ones it acquires are often subject to a weekly release protocol as determined by the originating network's linear schedule. Although Netflix's distribution method and menu-like interface insures it is not required to conform to such a schedule, by acquiring content from broadcast and cable networks it often has to abide by their scheduling protocols. This results in some acquired programmes being released via Netflix one episode at a time on a weekly basis as per the scheduling requirements of the originating network. The practice of licensing original programmes to other networks is admittedly long-established, but in TV's current context of burgeoning 'platformisation' it is becoming more difficult for audiences to associate programmes with their original host networks especially if the tag 'Netflix Original' is applied incorrectly as has been the tendency for Netflix (Dunleavy 2018: 160). Consequently, shows such as the CW's *Riverdale* (2017–) or NBC's *The Good Place* (2016–) are flagged as 'Netflix Originals' making them indistinguishable from authentic Netflix-originated programmes such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2019) and *Ozark* (2017–). Michael Schneider entertains the idea that "many viewers consider everything a Netflix/Amazon/Hulu show until proven otherwise" (2018). There are, of course, contextual factors at play, and the advertiser-funded environment for which *Riverdale* is created is vastly different to the subscriber-funded environment that informs *Ozark*. These differences materialise in several ways with one example being in the narrative structure.

Effect of Economic Model on Narrative

Storytelling in programming originated for US broadcast networks has been considerably shaped by the advertiser-funded environment it was created for. The 'least objectionable' approach, which shaped programming originated for broadcast television, was at its most prolific in the first few decades of US television. During this time, broadcast networks tended to produce shows that were episodic in nature with the main storylines resolved by the episode's conclusion. This narrative structure has long been the preferred method of storytelling for advertiser-funded networks due to its commercial accessibility. It is open to both first-time and habitual viewers as it contains a mix of episodic and on-going storylines. The 'flexi-narrative' structure, as described by Robin Nelson (2007), meant narrative bytes were broken down and "rapidly intercut" so that storylines not of interest to a particular audience demographic could be swiftly moved through (33). The flexi-narrative approach is common in American broadcast television programmes today and is exemplified by the series form that still dominates US broadcast drama.

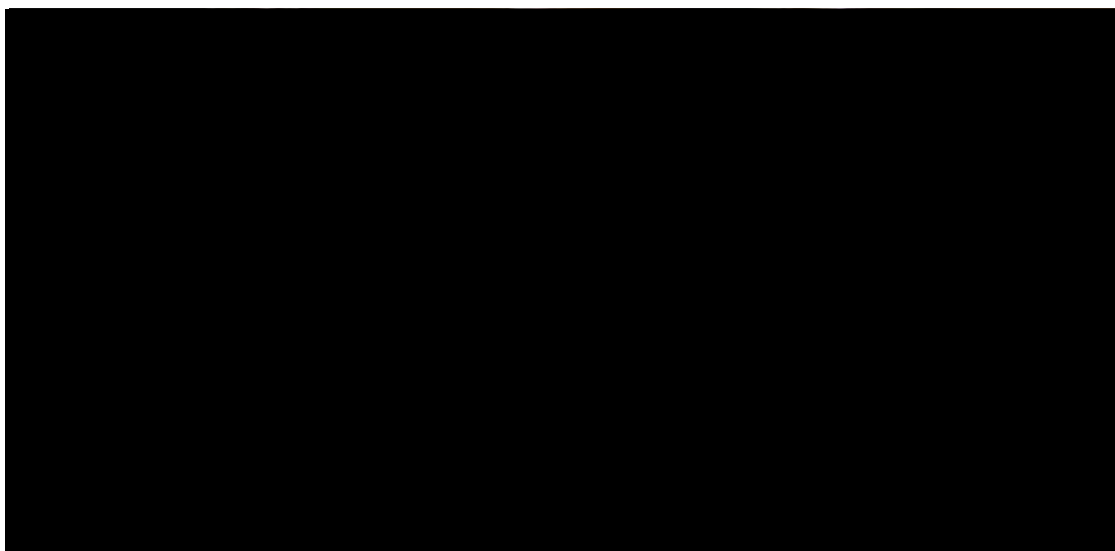


Figure 1.1: The vampire, Darla, kills her victim during the first scene of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* pilot episode (1:1)

In the series drama form, story strands are often delegated screen time based on a hierarchy of importance. Programmes that follow this structure usually operate around a basic 'ABCDE' structure (Porter et al 2002: 26).

Narratives that employ this method often consist of an episode-specific ‘story-of-the-week’ which is told via the A and B strands. Supplementary stories, as in C, D and E, tend to follow character development usually in the form of a relationship. This structure has tended to encourage either the foregrounding of episode-specific stories or the blending of these stories (usually A and B) with additional serial sub-plots (usually C, D, and E). Designed for a linear schedule with regular interruptions for commercial breaks, this ABCDE structure has limited the extent of serialisation within the long-form dramas that deploy it. The many narrative strands enable the rapid intercutting that defines a ‘flexi-narrative’ approach and is therefore ideal for those programmes originated for broadcast networks (Nelson 2007). Episode-specific storylines ensure new viewers can easily understand and enjoy the episode, while the romantic or other character-driven storylines aim to engage habitual viewers and encourage their loyalty to the show.

Given that the task of US broadcast writers, according to Michael Newman (2006), is to “on a weekly basis, deliver the largest and most desirable audience to the network’s clients”, episodic storylines have enabled them to do this (17). Commercial objectives have resulted in narrative practices being designed around the linear architecture of the broadcast schedule. Informed by the specific aim of maximising the number of viewers watching a given network’s schedule, writers needed to manufacture ‘outs’, a method of storytelling still common in broadcast schedules today. This strategy requires storylines to reach a narrative climax before the commercial break to maximise viewer retention. The ensuing “segmentalisation” imposes a systematic interruption of narrative that underpins the successful incorporation of commercial breaks into the episode (Dunleavy 2009: 44). Broadcast programmes are consequently created with the explicit intent of halting narrative progression. Newman identifies a standard commercial structure as one that “organises the hour into four acts of roughly equal length, each of which is followed by a commercial break” (2006: 21). The pre-commercial scene often breaks at its point of highest tension. These “jarring crescendos” precede advertisements to ensure the viewer returns for want of resolution (Smith 2018: 85). Take, for example, the pilot episode of the

WB's cult drama series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004).³ Consistent with the commercial imperatives of the WB, episodes of *Buffy* are organised into clearly defined narrative segments. The "Welcome to Hellmouth" (1:1) episode begins with two teenagers breaking into the fictional Sunnydale High School. Just before the opening credit sequence one of them turns into a vampire, bares her fangs, and goes in for the kill (see fig. 1.1). The episode continues; Buffy Summers is introduced on her first day at Sunnydale where she meets Willow, Xander, and Giles. As the first commercial break looms, the function of the preceding scene is "to rivet the audience to the screen" (Newman 2006: 21). So, in the gym changing room, a student opens her locker door where a body drained of blood falls on her, she screams and the screen fades to black. The following two acts both break on a resurrection ritual to revive a centuries-old vampire known as The Master, the first season-long 'Big Bad' Buffy will have to face. The episode concludes with the most significant 'cliffhanger': as Buffy fights off a vampire clearly stronger than the rest, he gains the upper hand and with fangs bared, he lunges. The frame freezes, and a 'to be continued' card ends the episodes. The message is clear: tune in to the next episode and find out whether Buffy survives. While not all episodes end in such a manner, David Lavery acknowledges the practice of resolution (or lack thereof) in *Buffy* narratives, categorising the most common endings as "Cliffhangery," "Partial closurey," "Foreshadowy," and "Set-Uppy" (qtd. in Albright 2014: 85). This segmentalisation is most suited to broadcast television's linear schedules as it helps to hold audiences over the commercial breaks and encourages them to return for the following episode.

Commercial broadcast television has often been criticised for its mass-consumption orientation. However, Newman suggests, the "mission of selling viewers consumer products and services does not negate [TV's] possibilities for creative expression" (2006: 17). Narrative complexity has long-existed on

³ Much has been written about the narrative complexity and experimentation undertaken by Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lavery 2003; Mittell 2012; Billson 2005). The programme often combined episodic resolutions ('monster-of-the-week') with overarching serialised narratives that unfolded across seasons (the 'big bad'). This was not a typical structure for broadcast television in America at the time.

broadcast television, and there are many programmes noteworthy for their experimentation with conventional storytelling methods. *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990-1991), *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987), *NYPD Blue* (ABC 1993-2005), and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC 1993-1999) are but a few testimonies to the assertion that programmes originated for a commercial context can provide narrative originality. These programmes were a response from networks to the post-1980s market fragmentation that was a result of cable networks' increasing penetration (Dunleavy 2009: 104). ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010) and Fox's *24* are recent examples of the increased integration of highly serialised plots into broadcast network programmes. The first season of *24* follows the character of Jack Bauer over the course of a single day with each of the 24 episodes corresponding to an hour of real-time. Jacqueline Furby (2007) acknowledges the commitment viewers make by watching an episode: "the temporal format, including the real-time conceit, is integral to the contract of extreme involvement" (59). The typical formula used by broadcast networks produces an hour-long episode containing approximately 42 minutes of narrative-time with the remaining episode being comprised of several commercial breaks (Smith 2018: 78). Due to the nature of commercial interruptions, episodes of *24* do not comprise the full 60-minute hour that the story promises. Instead, the plot continues during the commercial break thus the illusion of real-time is maintained regardless of the audiences interrupted viewing experience (Furby 2007: 63). The first episode opens with a card that reads: "The following takes place between midnight and 1:00a.m., on the day of the California Presidential Primary. Events occur in real time" (1:1). The 24-hour clock appears throughout the series and helps to maintain the episode's real-time concept (see fig. 1.2). *24* required greater loyalty from its viewers because unlike a conventional broadcast series that favours episodic storytelling, *24* cannot be viewed casually, and instead demanded a sustained commitment during its initial weekly release.



Figure 1.2: Clock from *24* counting down the real-time hours depicted within the show (1:1)

The increasing serialisation in television narratives owes much to the premium cable networks that prioritised serial storytelling in their original drama. The advertiser-free environment played a key role in the network's ability to develop such highly serialised narrative structures. As such, the 'complex serial drama,' defined by its "conceptual novelty, long format seriality, [and] narrative complexity," is most characteristically a product of subscription-funded networks (Dunleavy 2018: 155). HBO has achieved considerable success with its serial dramas, with a recent example being the critically acclaimed *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*). The overarching storyline of the programme is summarised by Cersai Lannister as "when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die" (1:7). The driving force of serialisation in *GoT* is thus the battle for regency over the Seven Kingdoms. A typical episode features "many serialised storylines [that] are allotted only one or two scenes per episode, if they feature at all" (Smith 2018: 79). The *GoT* narrative amassed many characters, spread across the vast terrains of the Seven Kingdoms; a feature that physically separated core characters from each other. It took seven seasons for Daenerys Targaryen to make the journey from Essos to Westeros, and likewise, most of Jon Snow's narrative occurs far north, at Castle Black or beyond the Wall. With limited episode space for storytelling, only the most central narrative arcs can be depicted during a given episode. The most important storylines are therefore the ones that propel the overall narrative forward. This forward momentum creates

a narrative (uninterrupted by commercial breaks) that at any point can deliver unexpected climaxes (Santo 2008: 28). This is exemplified by the death of Ned Stark (played by Sean Bean) during Season One's penultimate episode, "Baelor" (1:9). Disruption to the status quo grew to become the expectation of any *GoT* penultimate episode ("Blackwater" [2:9]; "The Rains of Castamere" [3:9]; "Battle of the Bastards" [6:9]), however, at the time, Ned Stark had been foregrounded as one of the programme's main characters (see fig. 1.3). George R. R. Martin, author of the original novels, has stated on several occasions that characters within Westeros are never safe and Ned Stark was clearly no exception; his decapitation was a "foundation-shaking event ... it felt big" (Sepinwall 2011). With a universal tendency in television not to kill off main characters, this death was "unprecedented" and played on the expectation that Sean Bean's fame would make him "untouchable" (Hibberd 2011). Methods of storytelling explored by *GoT* are a product of the subscriber-funded environment for which the programme was originated; *GoT* cohesively tells a complex story with many disparate plots and a large cast of characters.

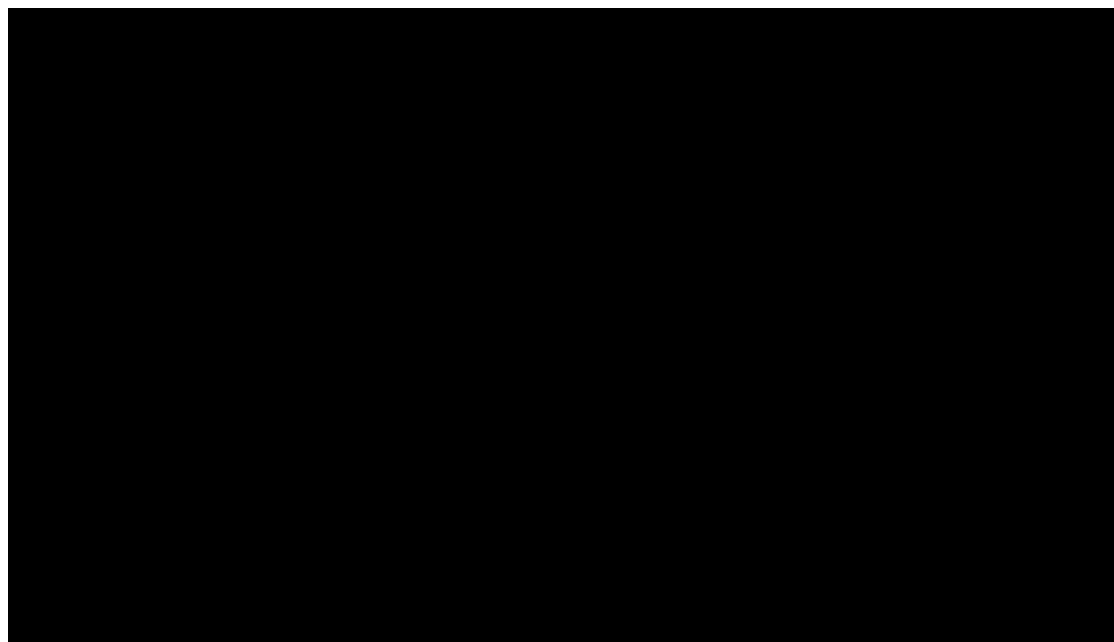


Figure 1.3: Ned Stark in the *Game of Thrones* episode "Baelor" (1:9) receiving a death sentence

Programmes originated for subscriber-funded networks have greater narrative freedoms than those created for advertiser-funded broadcast networks. Since commercial breaks are absent from subscriber-funded

schedules, hour-long drama episodes have the liberty to use as much time as necessary to tell the best story possible. This freedom from commercial interruptions offers opportunities for the writers of premium cable and internet-only TV drama to produce different plot structures. David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*, describes the slower pace at which a narrative is able to unfold on the network: “[there were] longer silences. Nothing is really happening. It’s a different style of editing, not bang-bang-bang-bang all the time” (qtd. in Smith 2011: 40). This approach to storytelling can be contrasted with that deployed for commercial broadcast TV dramas. As both Nelson and Newman (see above) have separately discussed, narrative structures on advertiser-funded networks often develop at a far brisker pace than those seen on premium cable or IDTV. This “slow-burn” approach is one consequence of the subscriber-funded context from which *The Sopranos* and other programmes have emerged (Smith 2018: 100). Therefore, in a subscription-funded environment – where loyalty to a service and not a specific show is paramount – the goal of a writer is not so much to move swiftly from one scene to the next so as to maintain audience interest, but more to tell a compelling story that offers distinction and quality (ibid.: 87).

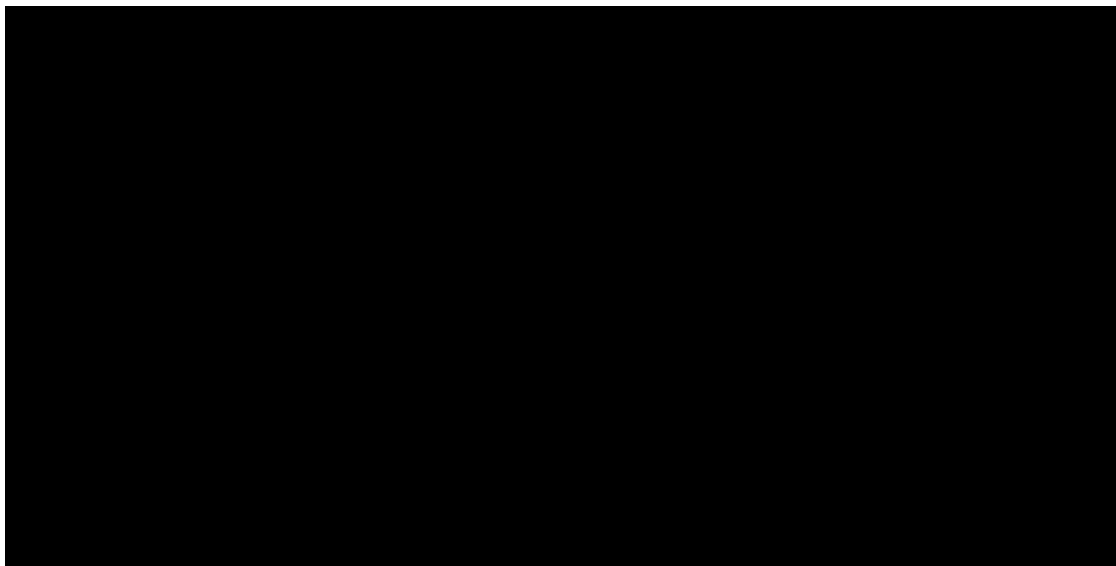


Figure 1.4: Flashback from “Holly Jolly” (1.3) depicting one of the scientific experimentations to which Eleven was subjected

Since 2013 Netflix’s original dramas have predominantly used a serial narrative form. *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black*, and more recently,

Stranger Things exemplify this strategy. These examples also deploy the strategies of ‘complex serial drama’ (Dunleavy 2018). While the complex serial narrative employed by *Stranger Things* will be extensively analysed in the third chapter, the significance of the subscriber-funded context for which it was originated is worthy of attention in this section. One such indicator of narrative experimentation in *Stranger Things* is the complex manipulation of story in a manner uncharacteristic of broadcast TV programming. As a facet of ‘complex serial drama’, Dunleavy identifies the “deployment of additional scenes which, temporally distanced from the main story, function to inform character motivation” (2018: 113). Most commonly these additional scenes take the form of flashbacks or flashforwards. In the case of *Stranger Things*, Eleven’s position as the central enigmatic character makes her the object of additional investigation. Importantly, most of the flashbacks that occur in the series function as a means to further the audience’s understanding of Eleven. Jostein Gripsrud identifies a key narrative distinction between the ‘fabula’ and ‘syuzhet,’ the former being the “chronological order of events” and the latter, “the order in which these events are narrated to the viewer” (qtd. in Dunleavy 2018: 114). Flashbacks, of course, are a way to posit information that, while supplementary, is important to the audience’s core understanding. One early example of the syuzhet’s function in *Stranger Things* occurs when Eleven stumbles upon an advertisement for Coca Cola while flicking through television channels (1:3). The camera pans down into darkness and the “Coke Is It” song ominously fades. When an image of Eleven returns to the screen, she is dressed in a hospital gown, clearly the subject of an experiment, a can of Coke sits on the table in front of her (see fig. 1.4). On the nod of a man in a suit, Eleven uses her telekinetic powers to crush the can with her mind. He looks pleased, but the exertion has caused Eleven’s nose to bleed. The remaining bars from the “Coke Is It” commercial echo and the flashback has ended. The use of flashback is common in many programmes and they alone are not an indicator of complex serial drama. However, their use in *Stranger Things* results in greater psychological investigation of Eleven’s character especially as, during the first episode, she only says three words (Ling 2016). “While,” Mittell argues, “the flashback might be stylistically cued as a memory, its narrative function is more opaque” (2015:

77-8). The scene above raises more questions than it answers, suggesting its inclusion was not intended to offer expository information but to elicit the viewer's undivided attention. While the questions drawn from the scene are eventually answered, viewers must store the information acquired from earlier episodes to fully understand Eleven's past and her current motivations.

As noted, the environment for which a programme is produced is highly indicative of the narrative structure that will eventuate. Broadcast programmes have typically favoured the episodic series form as it appeals to a large audience thus fulfilling the requirements of their advertiser-funded environment. Commercial breaks can significantly alter a programme's narrative structure, as seen in *Buffy*. Manufactured 'outs' must occur at the conclusion of segments to encourage viewers to return after the advertisement break. *Buffy*, *Lost*, and *24* are but a few programmes that have experimented with serialisation, there are, of course, many other shows commissioned for broadcast television that have similarly experimented with narrative structures. However, the first examples of the 'complex serial drama' form were originated for subscriber-funded networks, an environment that encouraged experimentation with long-form serial structures and narrative complexity. Unconstrained by commercial breaks or the need to account for one-time viewers, these dramas were able to tell compelling narratives that unfolded slowly across seasons. Netflix's *Stranger Things*, following those cable dramas before it, has also deployed some similar strategies.

Industry Changes: Technological Distinctions and Continued Platformisation

Internet distribution has significantly disrupted television industry norms. Transmission methods, which continue to confine broadcast/cable networks to linear schedules, have freed OTT networks from such restraints. While it could be argued that distribution methods as a form of paradigmatic categorisation are somewhat redundant due to the continued platformisation of traditional networks, the fact is that most of these services operate as ancillary to their parent network. Even for HBO Now and CBS All Access, both of which are

subscription-funded portals that offer archival content at any time, new programmes remain subject to the weekly-release of episodes regardless of whether these are released across platforms simultaneously. However, services that are not associated with established networks, such as Amazon and Netflix, are able to operate outside the confines of a linear schedule. In these instances, programmes are sometimes released as a complete season, a clear departure from the long-standing tradition of one new episode per week. It is therefore apparent that linear schedule protocols and thus viewing norms are inherently related to the distribution technologies used by broadcasting and cable networks (Lotz 2017: 4).

The schedule remains an important part of US television's architecture due to limitations presented by broadcasting capabilities. Of these, most significant is that only one programme can be transmitted by a network at any given time, a limitation that underpins the use of a linear schedule (Lotz 2017: 9). The linear schedule was also beneficial to a commercial system where the main goal is to aggregate large audiences in one place at a specific time to increase advertising revenue. Many television industry norms have been established due to the prominence of this schedule – such as 'counter programming' and 'appointment viewing' – and its architecture is a staple of any linear television network (including cable channels). Gitlin (1994) analyses the broadcast schedule, explaining that networks "develop shows tailor-made for particular spots" (58). Such scheduling is dictated by the pursuit of particular audience demographics and programming is reflective of this. Shows to be aired in a later time-slot are more likely to include content and themes not suitable for younger audiences (*ibid.*: 58). Gitlin also observes the network's tendency to "program for their core audiences" (*ibid.*: 57). As such, audience groupings by age, gender, and socio-economic status all act as relatively broad categories from which commercially-funded broadcast networks can identify and target their audiences, ensuring advertisers are selling products to the most receptive viewers.

The linear schedule was thus derived from both technological limitations and its capacity to display commercials. These constraints, as Lotz (2016) argues, developed many of the practices and protocols associated with linear television today (130). For the most part, the broadcast schedule and its programming strategies have remained relatively stable. For example, drama, television's most expensive form of programming, is still broadcast during 'primetime', an industry term, which distinguishes the evening hours (between 6pm and 11pm) as the most lucrative given that viewership reaches its highest potential during this time (Dunleavy 2009: 16). Furthermore, as ratings dictate success in an advertiser-funded context, many networks use schedules to entice audiences based on 'counter programming'. As the term suggests, 'counter programming' sees networks determine the likely demographic of competing channels in order to schedule their own programming to attract an opposing audience (Gitlin 1994: 60). The logic is one that sets "a show watched disproportionately by men (*Hill Street Blues*) against a show that appeals more to women (*Fantasy Island*)" (ibid.). Alternatively, networks will also schedule programmes of a similar type to induce direct competition (ibid.). Scheduling strategies such as these ones have significant merit in a broadcast schedule, but networks that operate without such capacity constraints have less need for direct counter programming measures.

It is traditional for an individual channel (or a group of channels operated by one network) to deploy its schedule as a key representation of its brand. The programming block, 'Adult Swim,' was a hugely successful branding campaign for Cartoon Network, and the commercial and critical success of *The Sopranos* reiterated HBO's commitment to quality and exclusivity. It is clear that original programming is pivotal in building market awareness of a network even if used in combination with acquired content. 'Adult Swim' airs adult-oriented animated programmes during the evening hours when Cartoon Network's primary audience (children aged 6-15) have gone to bed. The success of Adult Swim revitalised a section of the Cartoon Network schedule that was otherwise not reaching its full potential and as such exhibits the undisputable effect scheduling can have on a network's brand (Elkins 2014: 598). For networks that employ a

linear schedule, such programme blocks can be highly effective at cultivating network loyalty, especially in a “multichannel” environment where the viewer is presented with abundant choice (Ellis 2000: 169). This is further exemplified by the success of original programming on HBO. The network’s imperatives have remained contingent on the creation of ‘quality’ and ‘exclusivity’ (Santo 2008: 20). HBO has long released its original television programmes on a Sunday evening, cultivating a reputation echoed in the slogan “Sunday is ... HBO” (Koblin 2019). This marketing campaign, according to Santo, was devised to “create audience identification with Sunday night as belonging to HBO” (2008: 27). And in keeping with the network’s ideologies, “HBO has depicted its drama series as ‘watercooler’ TV – the sort of programs that people feel compelled to discuss the following day with co-workers” (Anderson 2008: 34). The marketing of their programmes as must-see TV and the consequent scheduling of their most popular shows on a Sunday evening is important as “it trades on the fact that they are offering something unique, something audiences cannot get elsewhere and something that everybody is talking about” (McCabe and Akass 2008: 85). This technique legitimises the programmes as worthy of appointment viewing, asking audiences to spend their Sunday evening on HBO. Those that do not adjust their viewing practices may be leaving themselves open to spoilers or being left out of the communal ‘watercooler’ discussion.

Historically, the function of the schedule grew from technological limitations faced by broadcast networks. However, the IDTV model does not face such constraints as the technological capabilities of internet transmission meant an IDTV network “could conceivably make any piece of content ever made available” (ibid.: 24). IDTV services, even those that are associated with traditional networks, are able to archive and host many programmes via their site, presenting a “menu” of options to the viewer (Lotz 2016: 133). Ted Sarandos, Netflix’s Chief Content Officer, acknowledges the relative freedoms from scheduling concerns enjoyed by Netflix as the internet provides them with “unlimited inventory space” (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 136). While the menu function can accommodate an abundance of programmes, it is not infinite.

Exclusivity continues to drive competition as more networks turn to internet distribution.

OTT networks eliminate the necessity for time-specific viewing, a practice assumed by the structure of a linear schedule. Internet delivery has resulted in significant viewing practice changes. While individualised and non-linear viewing experiences are not entirely new – VHS, DVD, and DVR services predate internet streaming technologies – autonomous viewing has challenged previously undisputed TV industry norms. Viewers are actively participating in the curation of their own schedules. Rather than turning on the television, surfing through several channels, and settling for a pre-scheduled programme, the viewer is now required to log in and choose (Lotz 2017: 9). This practice forgoes the strategy of ‘appointment viewing’ in favour of greater autonomy. The commercial context, in which scheduling thrived, is reliant on maintaining the largest possible audience in order to sell advertisement spots for the highest price. In a subscription-funded context, this aggregation strategy is inconsequential to the overall revenue earned by an individual programme (Curtin et al 2014: 136-7). Therefore, IDTV networks have adapted scheduling protocols to ensure the service they are providing remains valuable. In this sense, algorithms and site interface continue to ‘recommend’ programmes that are often customised to the specific viewer.

Conclusions

Through analysis of US television’s institutional practices, economic models, and technological advancements, this chapter has explored the significant shifts that the US television industry have experienced since TV’s inception. Television can be categorised into three distinct paradigms: broadcast, cable, and internet. Increased ‘platformisation’ has resulted in conflicting factors – namely economic models and technological distribution – complicating the process of identifying distinctions between each paradigm. However, distribution methods or funding models alone are no longer enough to establish which paradigm a network belongs to. Because the response to internet delivery opportunities has been one of ‘platformisation’, broadcast and cable networks are increasingly offering

original programmes online. Even IDTV services like CBS All Access uphold the release protocols of a linear schedule. Television is not dead as some critics have espoused, but the industry is undoubtedly evolving.

Commercial agendas have characterised US broadcast television since its inception, causing notable effects on network scheduling, episode content, narrative structures, and linear distribution rituals. US broadcast networks, under the observation of the FCC, are unable to show programmes that contain graphic violence, explicit nudity, or profane language. This, and the requirement of broadcast programmes to entice the largest possible audience, resulted in the production of shows that followed a “safety first” mentality when it came to storytelling (Gitlin 1994: 63). Informed by long-held narrative conventions such as ‘segmentalisation’, manufactured ‘outs’, and the introduction of serialised narratives to engender loyal viewing, the dominance of the episodic series on commercial television continued.

Recent shifts in distribution protocols have certainly changed the way television is understood, but the same could be said for the introduction of cable before it. The first four decades of US television were dominated by only three broadcast networks: NBC, CBS, and ABC. However, the advent of cable television technologies in the 1970s caused major disruptions to the TV industry including considerable market competition and audience fragmentation. The result of greater choice effectuated significant market share loss because audiences were choosing to pay a monthly fee in order to forgo subjection to commercials and FCC regulations. The creative freedoms this afforded allowed subscriber-funded networks to experiment with complexity in their original drama narratives. Edgerton (2013) credits HBO as “harbingers” of innovation during the mid- to late-1990s with series such as *Oz*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire* (7). As institutional pioneers of the ‘complex serial drama’, HBO’s influence on the narrative complexity of US TV drama can be seen in programmes across the three main paradigms, such as Fox’s *24*, FX’s *The Shield*, and Netflix’s *Stranger Things*.

The advent of internet streaming capabilities has seen the introduction and swift uptake of OTT services such as Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. While internet services offer archival possibilities these networks are increasingly also producing original content. Netflix's *Stranger Things* and Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–) are examples of the risks that OTT networks are willing to take on innovative complex serial dramas. Those IDTV services that employ a subscription-based funding model have notably adopted HBO's approach to complex and serialised narratives in their respective original programming. This is achievable due to the similarities in funding models despite the differences in distribution methods (Lotz 2016: 135). However, the departure from a linear schedule on some OTT services (most notably Netflix and Amazon with full-season release protocols) has provided many opportunities to challenge industry norms. The increased autonomy and greater seriality afforded to programmes originated for the sites has suggested subscription-based IDTV services are leading forces in the discussion on what 'television' can be in this multiplatform environment. The following chapter aims to examine the repercussions of these OTT services for commissioning, distribution, and reception.

Chapter 2

Audience Objectives and Commissioning Culture on US Television

During the 2009 Emmy Awards, host Neil Patrick Harris hijacked the ceremony reprising his role in the three-part web series' *Dr Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008), to tell an audience of television industry professionals "the future of home entertainment is the internet" ("61st Primetime Emmy Awards"). As Mareike Jenner (2018) notes, this sketch poked as much fun at online streaming services as it did at broadcast television, but its message of continued industry disruption was important (1-2). Fittingly, less than ten years later at the 2018 Emmy ceremony, Netflix won twenty-three awards (the same number as premium cable network HBO) against only two won by broadcast networks (including NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox) that same year (Bloom 2018). While Harris' prediction of industry disruption was correct, OTT services have not supplanted traditional networks but have instead complemented them.

This chapter seeks to understand the cultural implications of OTT services on the US television industry. Most important to television networks is identifying and retaining audience groups under-served by existing TV services. This chapter will explore the differences amongst broadcast, cable, and OTT networks as they conceive of and pursue audiences. Additionally, the creation of a network brand is derived from both their target audience and also the programmes on offer. The solidification of a distinct identity is most significantly determined by the commissioning of original programmes. Yet, Netflix continues to acquire many programmes, not least because its interface enables it to do so, but most importantly, because the value of its service is one that offers a 'menu'. Finally, rituals of television use have shifted greatly due to technological advancements, therefore, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of the

changes in audience viewing behaviour that are attributable to streaming capabilities.

Mass, Niche, Global: The Pursuit of an Audience

The central goal of US broadcast networks has always been to sell audiences to advertisers; as such, a requirement of the programming they commissioned was to appeal to a wide variety of people. The emphasis for networks was to design programmes that attracted viewers aged 18-49, an audience segment for which advertisers will pay more per thousand (Dunleavy 2009: 141). Between 1950 and 1980, the limited number of networks available to US viewers effectively guaranteed larger audiences, and the 'big three' dominated the television landscape returning consistently high ratings. Many programmes were made with family audiences in mind, resulting in a selection of programmes and a design of schedules that was most "likely to be acceptable to, although perhaps not most favoured by, the widest range of viewers" (Lotz 2014: 24). This becomes increasingly evident in the types of programmes commissioned for advertiser-funded channels, as wide audience appeal remains vital to the continued commercial profitability of US broadcast networks.

In the 1980s, as more broadcast networks beyond the 'big three' were introduced, there was a greater need for newer networks to distinguish themselves. After significant research, the new Fox (1986-) network noticed a gap in the market for the underserved youth audience and so resolved to originate programmes with them in mind (Kimmel 2004: 22). The tendency of new networks has been to commission programmes for underserved audiences, as seen earlier with ABC. This strategy, also deployed by Fox, resulted in its early original programming exhibiting youth-oriented themes and stories. A form that prospered on the new Fox network was animated comedy. First seen with *The Simpsons* (1989-), then *Futurama* (1999-2013), and *Family Guy* (1999-). These programmes, while they were the cultural successors of ABC's *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) and *The Jetsons* (1961-1962), acted as early indicators of Fox's determination to originate programming for an otherwise neglected youth audience.

Increased proliferation of satellite transmission technology resulted in even greater audience fragmentation. The inception of such technology presented a previously unthinkable opportunity for national (not merely regional) coverage. Cable networks utilised this division when pursuing audiences. As such, the niche targeting techniques employed by cable networks directly complemented the mass audience focus of broadcast channels. Because of their niche orientation (and assisted by their relative freedom from FCC content rules) cable networks were able to acquire and commission programmes that did not necessarily adhere to LOP principles and consequently attract audiences whose interests were not being met by broadcast programming. This is apparent in both basic and premium cable networks such as the 24-hour news service, CNN (1980-), the youth-orientated music channel, MTV (1981-), and for sports fans, ESPN (1979-). Programmes needed to reflect the network's goal of attracting a niche audience, resulting in series such as HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), and *Big Love* (2006–2011) as well as Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), and *The L Word* (2004–2009). Programmes like these were considered too risky for advertisers to support as they depicted taboo subjects such as LGBTQ+ themes and polygamous relationships. While their risky content and niche appeal were both challenging for conservative and mass-oriented broadcast networks, the potential to draw underserved viewers (some of whom were willing to pay a monthly subscription for access to such programmes) made them ideal for cable channels.

Edgerton asserts that HBO's early focus was on "pleasing and retaining its viewing audience," a different approach to that of the advertiser-supported system, which sold audiences to advertisers (2008: 1). Regardless of its initial niche marketing techniques, the subscriber base of HBO eventually grew, and its programming reflected this. Original content was not necessarily produced to reflect the targeting of a particular demographic, but rather to retain affluent viewers. The requirement of a subscription to access HBO transmissions signalled its cultural difference from broadcast networks (Nelson 2011: 42). US broadcast television, which is free to any viewer with the appropriate technology and a willingness to tolerate commercials, is an unashamedly populist medium

(Anderson 2008: 34). Contrastingly, premium cable networks sought exclusivity by appealing to “viewers [in] privileged economic circumstances” (ibid.). Not including the additional expenses of a cable subscription, access to HBO can cost up to US\$20 (*Ways to Get HBO*). Even if programmes originated by HBO do not necessarily feature the upper-middle class people who are subscribing to the service, the expression of cultural status is evident in the subscription itself. The next-day ‘watercooler’ conversation can only occur if all parties are subscribers (Anderson 2008: 34). Accordingly, a cultural chasm opened up between viewers confined to universally available television and those who could also afford to pay for access to an abundance of extra channels and content.

Although ‘mass’ in its outcome, Netflix’s target audience is conceptually different to that of US broadcast television. Where broadcast networks serve a national market first and foremost, Netflix seeks global viewership. As a result, Netflix currently has over 140 million international subscribers, but neither the programmes they commission nor even the ones they simply acquire, are intended to appeal to every subscriber. Netflix’s global reach has resulted in the pursuit of what Lotz (2017) terms “conglomerated niches.” Different from both the mass audience resolve of broadcast networks and the niche marketing techniques of cable, this strategy “achieves the advantages of scale while servicing heterogeneous tastes” (ibid.: 26). Learning from HBO, Netflix kept its monthly subscription fee relatively low, suggesting that the audience it sought was not so much wealthy but rather one which wanted non-linear TV, a large menu, and a diversity of content (in which populist conventional fare has remained important). The cost of a Netflix subscription, at approximately US\$10, is cheaper compared to that of US\$15 for HBO’s separate IDTV service, HBO Now. The price difference, not vast but nevertheless significant, suggests that Netflix is better able to fulfil its conglomerated niche strategy by targeting audiences with less disposable income.

Additionally, Todd Yellin, Netflix’s Vice President of Product, found categorisation by age and gender (demographics typically important to broadcast networks) were consistently inadequate indicators of a viewer’s future interest

when compared to past viewing habits (Adalian 2018). The commissioning of generically disparate programmes opens the network to audiences whose interest in even one programme might be encouragement enough to subscribe to the service. Additionally, with the data collected on viewing habits, Netflix is better able to serve subscribers with a range of viewing tastes by offering programmes with niche appeal. As Netflix's catalogue of original programmes is relatively limited, acquired content is imperative to provide a sufficient volume and diversity of programmes. A viewer who watched *The Crown* is more likely to receive similar titles featuring the British royal family on their profiles than those who watched *Ozark*. In this sense, audiences are catered to through both the retransmission and the origination of programmes. The success of Netflix, which can be partly attributed to its ability to offer an unusually large menu of programmes, demonstrates the effectiveness of a 'conglomerated niche' strategy as a way to serve niche audiences en masse.

Complete personalisation of user experience is central to Netflix's model, and fundamental to its pursuit of a global audience. An individual's encounter with the service is tailored to his or her preferences and as a result, no two Netflix profiles are alike. In order to account for the distinctive tastes and sensibilities of each profile, the service collects a significant volume of data as viewing occurs to then promote content to the individual subscriber based on the findings. Data can tell Netflix more about a person's current and likely future viewing habits than Nielsen ratings can. As Gitlin notes, "Nielsen doesn't measure anyone's satisfaction, but only the raw numbers of households and eyeballs" (1994: 49). Ted Sarandos, Netflix's Chief Content Officer, does not place much value on the capacity of the Nielsen ratings system employed by broadcast and satellite television networks to reveal the popularity of a given programme (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 137). Ratings remain important in a linear environment where advertisers want to calculate and aggregate eyeballs, but are of limited use in a non-linear, menu-oriented context. Netflix pursues a conglomerated niche strategy by way of an extensive collection of data that is able to identify and create "taste communities" so as to then recommend programmes based on them (Adalian 2018). Categorisation based on taste offers greater nuance than the

broad demographic indicators employed by US broadcast television networks. As Sarandos explains, “if we think you’re going to hate it, we don’t even show it to you” (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 138). Accordingly, unlike the mass marketing techniques employed by broadcast networks, programme recommendations made by Netflix are based entirely on data indications. In theory, Netflix will sacrifice the promotion of original programmes if the data predicts a negative response. The absolute worst outcome for Netflix is for “the wrong person [to] see new content and thus produce negative word of mouth” (Lotz 2017: 27). This aims to ensure that the programmes are promoted only to those who might enjoy them. Even if predictions cannot always be correct, Netflix’s approach is at least beneficial to wide subscriber retention and is also one that is exclusive to OTT services.

Creating a Network Identity

Sometimes, the name of a network is itself sufficient to evoke an identity and with it to suggest the kinds of programming viewers can expect. This is the case with several basic cable networks, including the History Channel (1995–), Disney Channel (1983–), and Cartoon Network (1992–). However, there are other networks whose programming is too diverse to distil into a name that is emblematic of its content, for example, NBC (National Broadcasting Company). In other cases network names reflect a brand that is no longer relevant, such as HBO (Home Box Office), and AMC (American Movie Classics). In order to account for similarity in viewing experience, networks aim to forge distinction through programming, thus their commissioning and acquisition of programmes is pivotal to the generation of a distinctive brand.

In today’s ‘multiplatform’ television environment, the strategy of targeting young adult audiences is one that is more apparent than ever before. Freeform (2016–)⁴ optimises storytelling techniques that appeal to a younger audience, whose use of the ‘second screen’ has become entrenched in viewing rituals. Evens and Donders (2018) assert that current “viewing patterns are marked by multiscreen interactivity, in which mobile devices and especially smartphones

⁴ Prior to a name and brand change, Freeform went by the title ABC Family (2001-2016)

are becoming the main television screen for younger media generations” (52). Programmes such as *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC Family 2010–2017) and *Shadowhunters* (2016–2019) reflect the approaches of these networks to engage younger viewers by utilising methods of storytelling that purposefully emphasise its audiences’ preferred viewing habits. This includes the use of hashtags as a means of encouraging the audience to engage with the show by live tweeting while they watch. By adopting such methods, Freeform are acknowledging the changing habits of the viewer and actively seeking to capitalise upon them. Even though the success of US broadcast television is determined by its ability to procure mass audiences, individual networks are still able to maintain mass appeal while also achieving an identity unique from other networks.

Early on, premium cable channel, HBO, adopted a sensibility different to that of the above. The tag line, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO” – which was used between 1996 and 2009 – has spurred much discussion amongst media scholars (Leverette et al 2008; Edgerton 2013; Lotz 2014). The bold statement single-handedly raised HBO’s status as purveyors of ‘quality’ while simultaneously critiquing US broadcast television (Anderson 2008: 25). As noted previously, HBO’s position as better than broadcast television was achievable due to the different economic models employed by broadcast networks and premium cable networks in America. Through the ‘not TV’ tag line the network claimed to deviate from the conventional fare dominating broadcast schedules. This advertising campaign ultimately critiqued the cultural value of other television because it suggested that HBO-originated content was in some way culturally superior. In this sense, the tag line became more of a mantra than a slogan. HBO achieved the highbrow status to which it aspired from the late-1990s through its commissioning of innovative original programming with high production values. This branding was also necessary to validate the high monthly cost of a subscription to the service. The notable successes of *Oz*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Sopranos*, saw a reinvigoration of HBO’s existing brand that emphasised the viability of high-cost, long-form drama, the consequences of which filtered to the rest of US cable TV (Edgerton 2008: 10). Each of these programmes proved commercial and critical successes for the network, and their reception effectively

facilitated and encouraged discourse surrounding HBO's branding as purveyors of high culture status (ibid.).

Unlike linear television transmission practices, the very nature of internet distribution demands an audience actively seek out an OTT service. As viewers are unlikely to stumble upon OTT services in a manner similar to that of 'channel surfing', the branding strategies deployed by such networks are necessarily altered to accommodate inherently different approaches to viewing. While these strategies might differ in practice, they are comparable in intent. Although Netflix has dominated cultural and academic discourse on the burgeoning success of internet distribution, it is not the only OTT service available. As noted previously, Amazon, Hulu, and HBO Now, have all achieved relative success within the IDTV industry, and central to the distinctions between each are user experience, interface engagement, and of course, content exclusivity. These distinctions are evident in even universal functions such as 'logging in' which can itself be a marker of brand. The red 'N' and accompanying sound that plays before every Netflix viewing experience have come to symbolise the service on their own. Distinction amongst OTT services is not only achieved through original programming, but also through a subscriber's unique negotiations of the site's interface too (Lotz 2017: 9).

Cultivation of a 'menu' is central to the perceived value of the service; as a result Netflix's brand is not contingent on the success of a singular programme but rather on the highly personalised experience the service provides and its ability to cater to every viewer. As Sarandos explains, "I don't want any of our shows to define our brand, and I don't want our brand to define any shows" (qtd. in Adalian 2018). Netflix original productions include dramas (for example *Narcos* 2015–2017), dramadies (*Master of None* 2015–2017), animated sitcoms (*Bojack Horseman* 2014–), and makeover shows (for example *Queer Eye* 2017–). The variety of genres commissioned by Netflix, as listed above, highlights its attentiveness to ensuring each individual viewer finds value in his or her subscription. Netflix's identity could, therefore, be considered partly as one of curation. A further purpose of the data collected by Netflix is as an indicator of

the popularity of a programme, thus aiding their understanding of which shows are driving people to purchase subscriptions (Adalian 2018). The considerable global success of Netflix has resulted in an internationally recognisable brand – one that places a premium on user experience and technological advancement.

Customer experience and increased autonomy were crucial to the identity cultivated by Netflix in its early years and were a result of advances in streaming capabilities. The strategies used to promote network identity are due to both the non-linear delivery system employed by OTT services, and also to the highly individual experience it offers each subscriber. Although commercial breaks are not part of Netflix's architecture, functions such as algorithmic recommendations and automatic plays are deployed as indicators of its brand in lieu of framing techniques (Lotz 2017: 9). Yet, reminiscent of audience engagement strategies deployed by linear television, the automatic play function on OTT services can facilitate an uninterrupted viewing experience similar to that of a 24 hour broadcast schedule.

The Role of Acquired and Original Programming

Over the past decade, the increasing ubiquity of OTT services and the potential that internet delivery offers have caused great disruption to the US television industry. Recently, programmes originated for OTT services have achieved critical and commercial success. At the same time, however, origination strategies deployed by Netflix and Amazon in particular are also reminiscent of those deployed by their cable and terrestrial predecessors.

An important component of early cable schedules were acquired films, and 'off-network' programming (Mullen 2003: 130). This reliance on the acquiring of successful broadcast original programmes transpired from economic necessity, as production was too costly, and therefore risky, for newly established cable channels (ibid.). While both HBO and Showtime aired licensed feature films during their early years, basic cable networks, such as AMC and USA Network filled their schedules with 'off-network' programmes. As well as providing ancillary revenue to the originating network, the sale of 'off-network' shows can

also introduce audiences to new and untested networks through familiar programming. Acquiring programmes is not only significantly cheaper than producing original ones, but the commercial schedule of basic cable networks is one that is already hospitable to the structure and style of programmes originated for broadcast TV. Thus, the acquisition and retransmission of existing programmes has been an effective means of filling a schedule for new networks precisely because it avoids the expense and risk of producing original programmes. As Vice President for A&E, Michael Cascio noted, “the most important thing for a young cable network ... is for people to get a handle on who you are” (qtd. in Turow 1997: 103). The easiest way for a new network to build an audience if they are unable to afford to commission shows in expensive genres such as drama, has been to acquire programmes that fit the network’s central brand. Nickelodeon, for example, launched its 1985 ‘Nick @ Nite’ block by scheduling classic sitcoms such as *Bewitched* (ABC 1964–1972), *The Brady Bunch* (ABC 1969–1974), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970–1974), and *Mork & Mindy* (ABC 1972–1978). Similar to the Cartoon Network evening block discussed in Chapter 1, this scheduling strategy attempted to introduce older audiences to a network with a primarily younger demographic. The scheduling of programmes that have previously secured an audience is – relative to other options – a lower-risk approach.

Netflix’s early strategy of acquisition was not unlike that of American basic cable networks. From its outset, Netflix offered subscribers a menu of acquired films and television programmes for several years before it began originating its own content. Netflix is able to retain and subsequently grow its subscriber base by acquiring many of the programmes it offers. As of March 2019, *Business Insider* reported that only 11% of Netflix’s entire catalogue is commissioned, this is up from the 4% share in 2016 (Clark 2019). While acquisition of programmes is just one way in which Netflix is better able to serve its viewers, the above figures suggest acquired content still remains extremely important to Netflix’s operation. While acquiring ‘off-network’ programmes is a long-used TV network strategy, Netflix brought a new approach to this as it was the first US service to deliver ‘off-network’ programmes through the internet. Free from capacity constraints, the

technological opportunities presented by non-linear distribution meant that IDTV services could amass vast quantities of content (Lotz 2017: 24). As with other subscription services, Netflix subscribers pay for access to the entire menu, including both original and acquired programmes. More important than this, in the context of Netflix's pioneering of the subscription-funded model of internet distribution, is that viewers have paid for the experience of being able to watch wherever and whenever they choose.

Yet, by marking programmes with a 'Netflix Original' moniker regardless of their actual origin, Netflix deliberately misrepresents distinctions between its original and acquired content (Dunleavy 2018: 160). Commissioning dramas specifically entails considerable financial risk and Netflix, through this practice, is reducing the significance of the initial network's role (ibid.). However, the CW's *Riverdale* (2017–), and NBC's *The Good Place* (2016–) are two programmes whose licensing agreements have entitled Netflix to use the 'Netflix Original' tag. Additionally, Catherine Johnson (2012) observes that searching Netflix by using the originating network's name will not necessarily return the appropriate information (54). In terms of international recognition, licensing to OTT services can be both advantageous and disadvantageous for broadcast and cable networks. Since the reach of OTT networks has the potential to be global, the international exposure a show receives when it airs via these services is not insignificant and benefits the programme in the long term. This was the experience for AMC's *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* on Netflix's portal. However, programmes that are acquired by Netflix are also susceptible to its marketing strategies, which entail foregrounding Netflix's name (even though it is only the distributing network) and, in the process, concealing the name of the originating network.

As noted above, *The Good Place* is one programme to bear the 'Netflix Original' tag but the programme's actual origin was for the US broadcast network, NBC. Creator, Michael Schur, employs several conventions within *The Good Place* typical of the advertiser-funded environment for which it was made. For example, the programme's language adheres to the FCC restrictions placed upon broadcast

television content in America. Therefore, terms like “shirt” and “fork” are used as replacements for expletives within episodes. Yet, its popularity on the streaming service has meant as many people watch *The Good Place* on Netflix as they do on NBC (Shneider 2018). This contextualisation could account for some of the programmes digressions away from conventional storytelling. Unlike typical sitcoms, which often return to equilibrium by the end of an episode, *The Good Place* uses ethical dilemmas to progress the narrative to the extent that the second season moves away from the original afterlife setting entirely and takes place on Earth. While its popularity on Netflix could explain this unconventional narrative deviation, it does not necessarily acknowledge that NBC, as the originating network, took the financial risk associated with commissioning original television programmes in the first place. The licensing of *The Good Place* to Netflix will no doubt provide NBC with revenue ancillary to that made through commercials, however, by licensing the programme NBC will lose the all-important connection a well-known brand can cultivate between audience and network. As discussed earlier, the cultivation of a distinct identity is vital to TV networks, yet when *The Good Place* is streamed via Netflix there are often no symbolic or discursive indicators of the original network. While the acquisition of a popular show can be beneficial to Netflix, there are implications beyond the advantageous that might come from tagging acquired content as ‘Netflix Originals’. This tag has the potential to deliberately misrepresent a programme’s origin, therefore obfuscating that which makes Netflix distinct from other networks such as release protocols. When programmes have not been specifically commissioned for Netflix but have instead been acquired from broadcast networks they are often subject to the constraints of a linear schedule. As a result, the weekly release of episodes that acquisition entails directly contradicts the network’s promotion of its service as one that foregrounds viewer autonomy.

While the above branding strategy is indicative of Netflix’s typical approach to acquiring and distributing programmes, it is not reflective of all OTT portals. In particular, Hulu, which operates over-the-top of broadcasting networks much like Netflix and Amazon, yet it has an interface that emphasises a programme’s originating network (Elkins 2018: 334). Hulu is a joint venture

between several industry conglomerates, which when combined own three of the four major US broadcast networks: NBC, Fox, and ABC (Johnson 2012: 54). Unlike Netflix, which tends to elide a programme's original network in favour of foregrounding themselves as distributors, on Hulu, the programme's originating network is clearly identifiable. This is because the conglomerates that own Hulu have a vested interest in drawing viewers to both the originating networks and to its online portal (Elkins 2018: 335). Although the Hulu portal does acquire many of its offerings, the service also commissions original programming under the Hulu brand, for example *The Handmaid's Tale*. As an internet-distributed service, Hulu's branding, like Netflix's, is one that also foregrounds autonomous viewing and interface experience. This, as Catherine Johnson (2012) observes, is why channel branding is relatively absent on its home page, and the service instead offers programmes categorised by popularity or recently added (55). However, the Hulu portal, unlike that of Netflix, can, if desired, be browsed via network, and programmes are searchable by network name, which suggests subscribers are able – even if unlikely – to watch a show purely based on the network that commissioned it (ibid.).

Achieved via its innumerable acquisitions, Netflix's sheer breadth of content maintains its commitment to catering to its diverse audiences. While some programmes have benefitted from the opportunities streaming capabilities provide (see AMC's *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*), networks continue to grow increasingly protective of the value exclusive holdings of their property can provide. Most of Netflix's competitors are moving to or already have their own IDTV portals, the existence of which will open significant gaps in the acquired content that Netflix is able to offer. In 2017, for example, the Walt Disney Company ended its licensing agreement with Netflix in order to launch an exclusive online portal known as Disney+ (Evens and Donders 2018: 1).⁵ AMC also launched its own streaming services in 2016 with AMC Shudder, so its programmes are likewise now notably absent from Netflix's menu. The large volume of content Netflix initially acquired did contribute to its early growth but

⁵ Disney+ is set to be released in 2019 and will hold content owned by the Disney Company including Pixar, Marvel, and Star Wars.

as platformisation continues and exclusivity remains key there will be less content available for acquisition. To counter the speculated fragmentation that is expected to increase as traditional networks offer internet delivery, Netflix has sought to expand its cache of original productions. This is evident in the US\$15 billion Netflix is expected to spend on original productions during the year of 2019, a significant increase from the US\$8 billion it spent in 2017 (Spangler 2019).

Learning from the experiences of US cable networks, Netflix has realised that the best way to solidify its identity is through origination and exclusivity. *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* have demonstrated Netflix's ability to commission successful original programmes. More so than ever, the growing ubiquity of internet distribution emphasises the significance of exclusivity and intellectual property ownership. By maintaining control over the licensing of their original programmes, OTT services can leverage content to encourage subscription (Lotz 2016: 137). Rather than selling the property to a range of entities, OTT services often "seek to hold the exclusive license to content in perpetuity" (ibid.: 137). This has not always been the case, especially given the relatively recent substantial international penetration of the Netflix service. *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black* were available in some international contexts before the service was. Prior to its Australasian launch in November 2014, consumer research indicated that 340,000 Australian households already had access to Netflix through VPN (virtual private network) addresses (Given 2016: 113). Of course, there were also legitimate ways to access exclusive content; *House of Cards*, for example, was licensed to broadcast networks in Australia and New Zealand prior to its launch in these markets. This meant when Netflix arrived in Australasia, New Zealander's were unable to watch the "biggest and best show" on the portal that originated it (Shulz 2015). While one view of this is that Netflix was forced into competition with its own content (ibid.), another is that the licensing of its original content before the Australasian launch enabled Netflix to foster consumer awareness around the 'buzz worthy' programmes audiences could expect from the service (Given 2016: 115).

The import and export of television programmes has, for many decades now, been a standard practice in the US television industry. However, removing these programmes from the context for which they were originated can result in a significantly different reading than the one intended. Moreover, the cultural references and phrases made within these programmes are often specific to the country of origin (Jenner 2018: 209). The emergence of internet distribution capabilities mitigates the limitations of previous licensing strategies by ensuring that IDTV networks, such as Netflix and Amazon, are able to integrate themselves into local markets and maintain control over their exclusive holdings. Netflix remains a US-based company, yet its expansion, firstly into Canada in 2010, has made it a global actor. This global reach has meant it is crucial that Netflix maintains control over its original productions to further grow its subscription base via the exclusivity of its offerings. The perception of Netflix as a “foreign invader” has led to a diversification in its acquired and original programmes (ibid.: 188). Jenner (2018) identifies several policies and quotas in place to ensure Netflix caters to its near-global audience. The EU, for example, requires that 30 per cent of content available via Netflix’s European services is European (ibid.: 189). Beyond transnational acquisition strategies, and the incorporation of foreign language subtitles, Netflix also co-produces content. As Evens and Donders (2018) observe:

It is fair to say that Netflix has not destroyed local television markets and that in some cases it has even supported the growth of local media production systems, either by investing in local originals – including the political drama *Marseille* in France and the British monarchy drama *The Crown* – or by licensing domestic shows for its service (73).

This transnational strategy suggests that Netflix is combatting concerns that increased ‘platformisation’ will lead to greater competition for acquired content. By co-commissioning programmes in non-US markets, Netflix is simultaneously expanding its menu offerings and alleviating future acquisition obstacles.

The combination of a subscription funding model and OTT delivery present an opportunity for Netflix to originate content that is unlike the broadcast programmes it has acquired. Yet, despite Netflix’s freedom from the

many constraints of a linear schedule, the programmes it originates still adhere to structures that are typical of US broadcast and cable television networks (Smith 2018: 77). Netflix's potential to originate unconventional programmes that deviate from typical broadcast fare is inhibited by the necessity to continue its reliance on acquisitions. However, there are several exceptions to this, one being *Love, Death & Robots* (2019–) a Netflix anthology series of 18 standalone stories. While thematically connected, different studios produced individual episodes and each feature independent storylines. Episodes vary in length from six to seventeen minutes and can be viewed in any order, thus taking full advantage of the platform's non-linear possibilities. Although Netflix operates beyond the normative functions of a linear schedule, its approach to origination has been to tell stories that are at once distinct and analogous to those commissioned for US broadcast and cable television.

Netflix pursues intentionally ambiguous marketing strategies while simultaneously seeking to distinguish its authentic Netflix-originated shows through its approach to commissioning. Programmes produced for Netflix tend to receive a 'straight to series' order rather than the typical pilot-order that broadcast and cable entities usually make. As Edgerton (2011) argues, the broadcast network approach can be restrictive, as "most of these shows fall quickly by the wayside ... an estimated 75 per cent never make it beyond their first seasons" (4-5). Conversely, Netflix's approach factors in data projections so as not to "waste millions making pilot episodes that will never air" (Adalian 2018). Sarandos has criticised the above traditional commissioning approach as a flawed strategy by saying that "[broadcast and cable networks] spend \$8-\$10 million on a pilot that they screen to sixteen people and decide not to make because of how it tested" (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 142). Instead, programmes that the service purchases are bought with the explicit intention of going straight to series based on data-driven predictions (Aladian 2018). *House of Cards*, for instance, received an unprecedented two-season commitment from Netflix, something other networks were unwilling to offer (Curtin et al 2014: 142). Even if a Netflix-originated programme does not perform as well as the data has predicted, the service rarely abandons the project completely. As of 2018, Netflix

has cancelled only six programmes officially, but has “left plenty of others hanging in limbo to maintain hope of content continuation” (Lizardi 2018: 383). Rather than formally cancel any programmes that have failed, Netflix leaves these shows open for future reboot opportunities.

Viewing Practices: Binge Culture and Re-watchability

The weekly release protocol of linear TV programmes functioned as a means of organising the limited transmission capabilities of broadcast and cable networks. As only one programme could be transmitted at any given time, the conventional 24-hour television schedule grew from necessity (see Chapter 1). The limitations of distribution technologies went on to influence mass viewing habits and to standardise the industrial practices that developed around these. However, recent shifts in transmission methods have challenged some of these assumptions and practices (Lotz 2017: 4). The refinement and consequent ubiquity of streaming technology has resulted in a menu-like offering replacing the experience of a linear schedule.

The linear schedule provides networks with the opportunity to create and build loyal audiences. The release of episodes within a weekly schedule encourages viewers to return repeatedly to the network until at least the end of the season. Such practices have informed industry protocols and even encouraged the use of certain narrative structures. The significance of the television schedule has remained steady even over decades of technological change and the consequences of this solidity have been undeniable. Ultimately, the rituals associated with linear organisation and viewing patterns have become habitual and part of a cultural understanding about the traditional experience of television (Lotz 2016: 124). Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (2013) suggest the current multiplatform environment makes the idea of “watching TV,” most especially on the medium from which it derives its name, seem anachronistic or “like a fossil from the previous century” (4). Time-shifting capabilities have been widely available since the 1980s: early developments include first the VCR, and then the DVR (both of which challenged many of the temporal restrictions on how television could be consumed). However, the greatest disruption to the industry

in the last two decades has been the capacity to stream TV programmes. Where the linear schedule once championed 'appointment viewing', nonlinear distribution encourages even greater flexibility for viewers, including the ability to 'binge watch' a given show.

OTT networks have challenged traditional definitions of television by insisting that programmes need not be distributed in a linear fashion. New viewing rituals enabled by streaming capabilities build upon and challenge preconceived notions of how television can and should be watched. In particular, Netflix has appropriated the term 'binge' into its network vernacular. As a term with generally negative connotations, the IDTV service has embraced the behaviour and encourages its users to try a new way of TV viewing. Netflix defined the act of 'binge-watching' as the full consumption of "at least one season of a show within 7 days of starting" (Urban 2018). However, Jenner (2018) has observed several inconsistencies when it comes to defining the term, including the individual's personal viewing habits, the number of episodes watched, and the time taken to consume them (111-112). Consumption of three episodes for example, might constitute as binge watching for one viewer, but not for another. Regardless of inconsistencies in definition and application, such viewing behaviours have only recently been achievable and normalised via internet distribution practices. Streaming capabilities have radically extended the challenges to linear viewing that VCR and DVD technologies initiated.

Netflix's deployment of a release protocol different from that of either broadcast or cable networks is indicative of its non-linear capacity. Netflix-originated programmes are released by season, and not, as the linear schedule has come to determine, by weekly episode.⁶ This release strategy is one that maximises the autonomy of viewers, as they are able to watch episodes in their own time, be that in swift succession, or over several months. Due to its subscription model, Netflix is relatively unaffected by the time it takes an individual to consume a programme. Ted Sarandos rationalises that "it's no

⁶ Notable exceptions occur in specific licensing circumstances such as the CW's *Riverdale* and CBS All Access' *Star Trek: Discovery*.

cheaper for me if you watch it all at once or watch it over the several-year license that we have the show for” (qtd. in Curtin et al 2014: 138). Aggregation of viewers is not a priority for the network, reflecting Netflix’s eschewing of mass audience strategies.

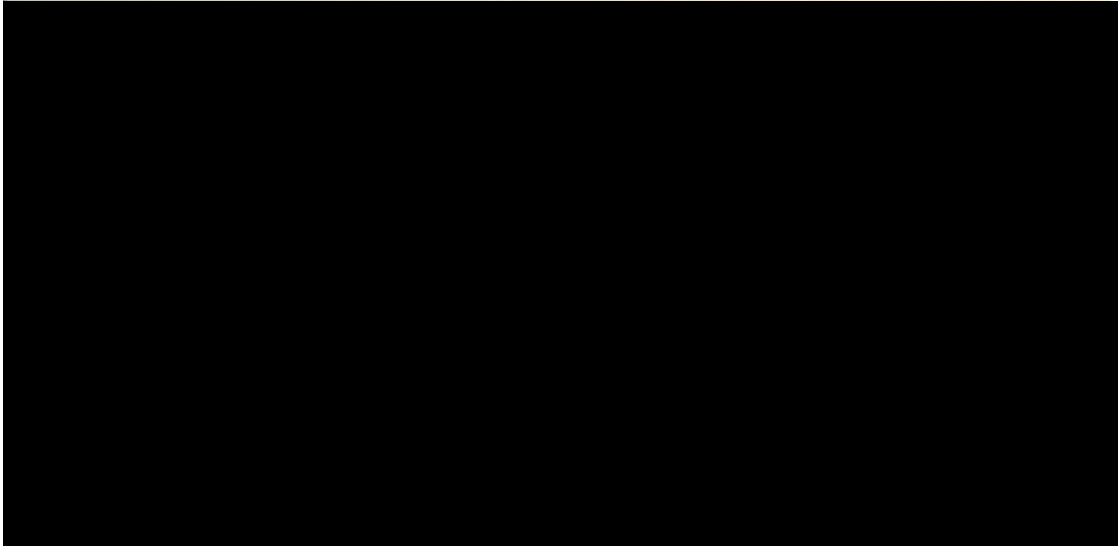


Figure 2.1: Lucas, Will, Dustin, and Mike dress up as *Ghostbusters* for Halloween in Hawkins from “Trick or Treat, Freak” (2:2)

While Netflix does not use a schedule, the release of its content may coincide with US national holidays, a commercial practice influenced by longstanding traditions for linear TV (Jenner 2018: 119). However, Netflix brings a different business imperative to this. The first two seasons of *Stranger Things* were released on July 15th 2016 and October 27th 2017 respectively, dates which coincide with US summer holidays and Halloween. This strategy is aimed at increasing the ability of audiences to watch more than one episode in a single sitting (Jenner 2018: 248). It also imbues the narrative with a sense of temporal urgency: the second season of *Stranger Things* was not only released just before Halloween but also explicitly depicted Halloween festivities (see fig. 2.1). Of course, if the viewer is watching in any month other than October the appearance of Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas trick-or-treating in *Ghostbusters* costumes will not detract from the story, but given that it was released four days prior to Halloween, it does serve as an indicator of the length it should take to view the complete season. This suggests that the anticipated mode of consumption may

inform the approach to a show's narrative structure. Moreover, the depiction of events occurring over days and not months increases the potential for serial narratives to synchronise "with the presumed lived experience of the subscribers who binge the season in a short period of time" (Smith 2018: 91). This is expressed in several Netflix programmes including *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–) with its initial release five days before Halloween. This show also received a Christmas special, "Chapter Eleven: A Midwinter's Tale" (1:11), released on the 14th of December. Netflix's release of its original programmes by season and its effort to correlate this release date with public holidays have both worked to encourage the binge-watching culture that the network has actively cultivated as a point of difference.

In the assumption that viewers may watch episodes consecutively (and often immediately), Netflix provides the viewer with the option to 'skip' a recap. This enables viewers to remain immersed in the storyworld of the programme as it "removes one marker of distinction between episodes, making the flow from one episode to the next even more seamless" (Jenner 2018: 127). Programmes originated for a linear schedule on US broadcast and cable television are subject to weekly breaks between episodes. Hence these programmes need not only remind audiences of information they may have forgotten, but also to open the show to new viewers. Some programmes will remind the viewer of information that will be crucial to upcoming events, and it is conventional for all shows to also address the programme's general premise. An opening narration used during every episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s first two seasons introduces the drama's central premise: "In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer" (1997–1999). No original Netflix drama repeats this *Buffy*-styled opening because while such recaps serve a purpose on a linear schedule, non-linear distribution makes this somewhat redundant. To some extent it is imagined that the OTT viewer can remember details that, under different circumstances, might be forgotten. As well as the ability to skip a recap, most OTT networks offer an autoplay function to better encourage sustained viewing. Viewers, as Lisa Perks describes, are consequently made to opt out of watching

the next episode rather than the more conventional method of opting in (qtd. in Jenner 2018: 126). This is because programmes originated for Netflix are often promoted based on their level of ‘binge-ability’, with an episode’s concluding scene expected to ‘hook’ a viewer into the next one.

The interface of Netflix’s portal invites the audience to also return to content as desired. While Dunleavy (2018) asserts “re-watchability” is not specific to programmes originated for OTT networks and is a feature of many dramas, however, IDTV’s internet delivery encourages such viewing practices (149). Prior to streaming capabilities, the re-watching of TV programmes was confined to rudimentary time-shifting technology, or the unpredictable scheduling of re-runs. The non-linear environment offered far more flexibility than these earlier options did, allowing subscribers to watch at their own pace, choose a specific time, and/or return to the programme as often as is desired. Encouraged by the site’s interface, the ease of re-watching increases the text’s polysemic potential and challenges long-held viewing habits established during an era of television defined by limited availability. Originated for AMC, *Breaking Bad* found a loyal audience on Netflix’s service, where non-linear offerings provide a viewing experience that is radically different from the network for which it was commissioned.

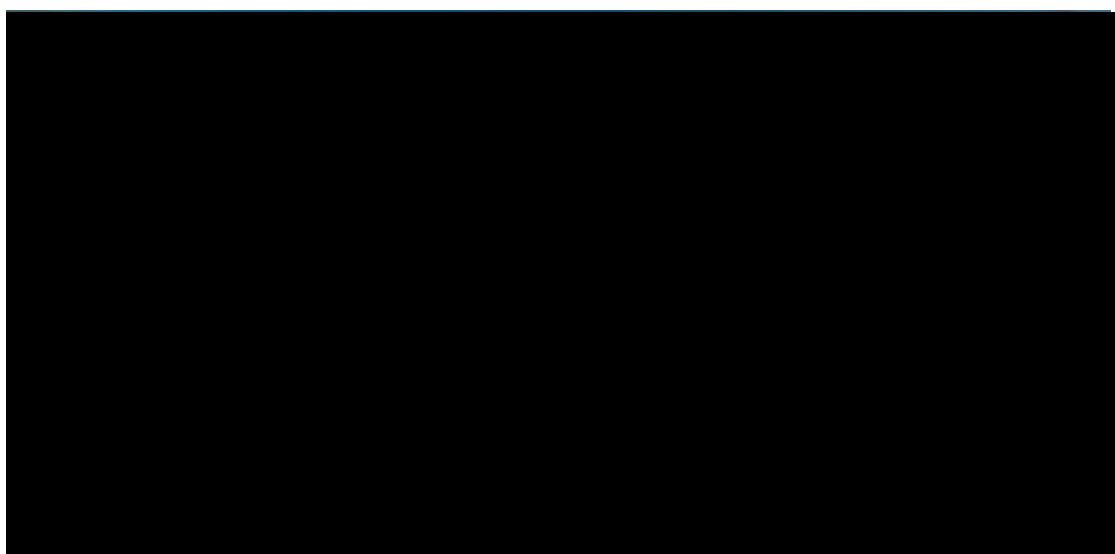


Figure 2.2: Walter White finds a child’s soft toy floating in his pool after a plane crash in “ABQ” (2:13)

Although unique neither to the medium nor to the drama form, the narratives of 'complex serials' tend also to incite re-watching practices. This is due to multiple storylines that evolve across seasons resulting in important information being revealed throughout the programme. For example, in *Breaking Bad*, each episode begins with a 'cold open'. While this narrative technique can bring a range of information to the unfolding narrative, in this instance the cold opens tend to explore a development that has yet to be addressed diegetically. A striking example from the second season of *Breaking Bad* can be seen in the cold open assigned to four non-sequential episodes: "Seven Thirty-Seven" (2:1), "Down" (2:4), "Over" (2:10), and "ABQ" (2:13). Together these scenes offer mere fragments of a development that will not play out until the last episode of this season. The event to which they refer is spelled out across the four episode titles, and each cold open depicts a detailed scene from the disaster that is pre-destined to take place. The use of cold opens disorientates the viewer and solicits "intense engagement through the deepening of narrative intrigue" (Dunleavy 2018: 115). Although the significance of these cold open scenes might only be clear after the final episode, the information has been available all along and it is the deployment of this technique that incites repeat viewing.

Even though Netflix is not constrained by the limitations of a linear schedule, the site's reliance on data to promote content ultimately encourages the viewing of specific programmes. The high degree of personalisation provided by Netflix's algorithms can inhibit the viewer's choice by only highlighting programmes the data determines relevant (Jenner 2018: 110). Limitations such as this effectively oppose the sense of autonomy explicit in the marketing of the brand. Netflix's adoption of taste-based algorithms could arguably appropriate the use of 'filter bubbles.' This creates a situation where only information that supports each user's own views and opinions is fed back to them. Content is promoted with unusual specificity in that programmes are only shown to audiences who might enjoy them, thus eliminating the risk of viewers clicking on content the data suggests they are inclined to dislike. As Lotz (2017) argues this strategy can "provide viewers with content they want to watch – rather than just something to watch" (26). Therefore, programmes on Netflix are often organised

into highly specific categories to ensure the effectiveness of its algorithmic promotion. The result of which is a method of categorisation that is more indicative of how viewers might search the portal for content than identifiers of the programme itself (Jenner 2015: 212). Jenner (2015) observes several instances where Netflix's categorisation deviates from more familiar classifications, this can be seen in categorisations such as: "films starring Sarah Michelle Geller" (212). Of course, individual television programmes available on Netflix tend not to operate within a singular algorithmic category but within multiple categories. Therefore, Netflix's approach arguably serves the purpose of easily connecting audiences with shows regardless of whether this ultimately undermines the autonomous viewing for which the service is known.

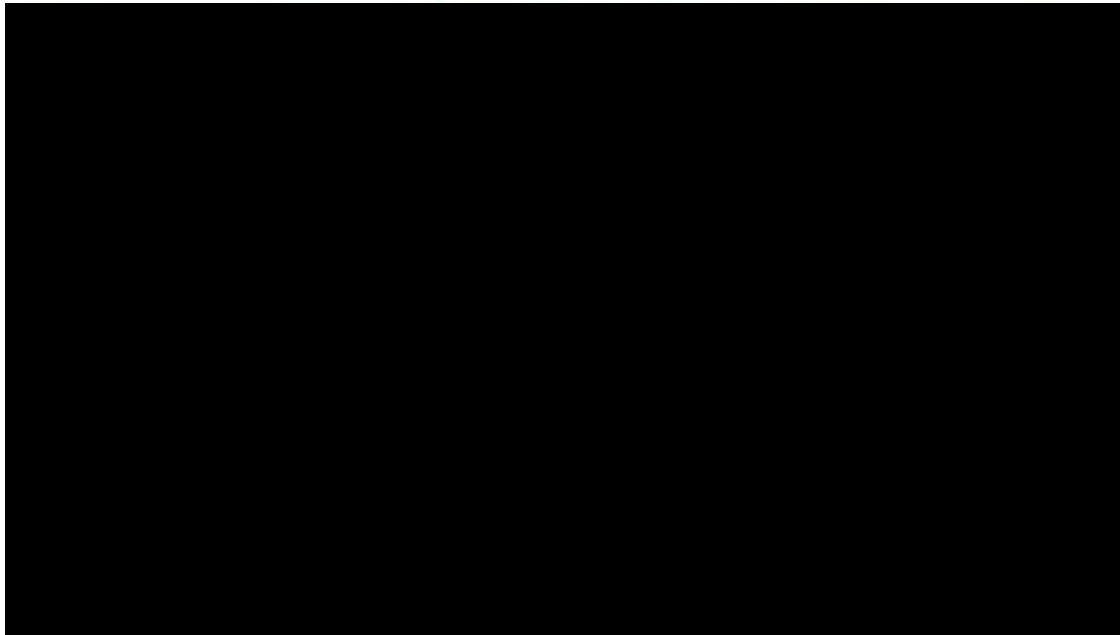


Figure 2.3: Chandrashekar et al's collection of 'row art' displays for *Stranger Things*

One such way Netflix exploits the multiple categorisation of its TV programmes is through the use of 'row art' (Adalian 2018). Given the diverse taste communities that comprise Netflix's subscriber base, the structure of a Netflix profile is determined by data patterns that emerge from viewing history. The graphic squares ('row art') that are seen on the home page of Netflix are typically static visual representation of the programme. Each programme might have more than a dozen possible images, any of which can be substituted for

another depending on a subscriber's tastes. The artwork usually takes the form of stills from the programmes, promotional photos, or iconographic symbols. This might be a recognisable actor, an "exciting moment," or a "dramatic scene" (Chandrashekar et al 2017). Chandrashekar et al's (2017) analysis of *Stranger Things*'s row art depicts nine different images shown to individual subscribers based on their viewing history and include: the title in a dark forest; the four boys on bicycles with the looming 'Mind Flayer' overhead; Chief of Police Hopper in a field of rotting pumpkins; Will Byers at school; the boys staring down into the camera; the boys dressed as *Ghostbusters*; Eleven's bleeding nose; Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler; and finally, Will Byers looking out of his house at the Mind Flayer (see fig. 2.3). All of these images depict the show, but each one is designed to highlight specific elements of the programme especially emphasising its generic mix. As the above shows, the *Stranger Things* row art uses visual signifiers that accentuate each of the genres that comprise the generic mix used by this show. For example, the interdimensional monster identifies *Stranger Things* as a supernatural programme, while the image of Chief Hopper signifies police show, and the still of Nancy and Jonathan connotes teen romance. It is because of this kind of approach that "people with different tastes [may] have very different experiences of the content available" (Lotz 2017: 26). However, by adapting the promotional material of each programme to the interests of specific viewers, Netflix does take the risk of promoting a show to viewers who may not be interested, a strategy that could backfire.

Conclusions

Internet distribution and streaming capabilities have caused significant disruption to the US television industry, affecting in particular the relationship between viewer and programme. Success in an advertiser-funded environment is determined by the ability to draw in the largest audience possible, often resulting in the commissioning of programmes with a presumed broad appeal. Although such programmes can be enjoyed by the widest demographics (and have indeed garnered great success in the past), they can sometimes be critical failures. David Bloom (2018) highlights the "near-shutout" traditional broadcast networks received at the 2018 Emmy Awards ceremony with a total of only two awards

won by the main four broadcast networks (NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox) combined. This result suggests that programmes designed to serve advertisers are now failing to achieve the critical acclaim that subscription-services (including cable and OTT networks) are achieving.

The cost of a subscription to Netflix has undercut the monthly charges initially paid to US premium networks, indicatively HBO. Despite its over 140 million subscribers, the global composition of Netflix's audience is not to be considered a 'mass audience' since the focus of the network is on what Lotz has termed "conglomerated niches" (2017: 26). This strategy enables Netflix to serve a near global audience on a highly individual level. The use of personal algorithmic data allows the service to promote content to only the viewers that will enjoy it. If this is entirely true, then no two user profiles will be alike, suggesting that Netflix's brand is not contingent on a single form of television, nor even on the socio-economic status of its audience, but instead on the ability of its interface to adapt to the individual needs of the viewer.

Acquiring as well as commissioning programmes is a strategy deployed by most US networks, be they advertiser- or subscriber-funded. However, original programmes are the most crucial in their capacity to forge recognisable distinctions between networks. Although Netflix did initially license several of its original programmes in territories where it was not yet legally available, it has, in more recent years, increased its exclusive holdings in order to protect its international brand (Havens 2018: 329). This, to some degree, counters Netflix's own discourse that suggests its brand is the highly personalised experience it offers and not the menu of programmes it holds. Yet, important to Netflix's marketing has always been to foreground the vast quantity of titles it holds. While its non-linear distribution is more than capable of retaining an abundance of titles, continued platformisation and license re-negotiations means that Netflix's ability to acquire such a large volume of existing shows will be more limited in the future than it has been in the past.

Netflix has eschewed, wherever possible, such traditional practices as the weekly release of new episodes for a given show. Importantly, not all OTT services have followed it in abandoning weekly release protocols. HBO Now, CBS All Access, and Hulu all operate in accordance with a weekly schedule. By releasing programmes by season and not by episode, Netflix is challenging preconceived notions of viewing by actively encouraging audiences to watch a show at their own pace. In the different ways outlined in this chapter, Netflix both facilitates and encourages a 'binge' mode of consumption, a practice only achieved previously by means of VHS, DVD, or DVR. Binge viewing has undeniably become more common as a result of Netflix's successful full-season release strategy. Furthermore, Netflix's 'curatorial' capabilities and non-linear menus also allow for easy re-watching. The creative possibilities the menu feature offers increase in significance as Netflix continues to commission new dramas that demand a higher level of engagement from viewers. The 'complex serial drama', as termed by Dunleavy (2018), is one such form of programming to benefit from the distribution methods deployed by OTT services. Originated for US premium cable network HBO, the 'complex serial drama' form will be analysed closely in the following chapter with Netflix's *Stranger Things* used as a highly successful example of both the OTT network's commissioning capabilities and its position within the contemporary US television industry.

Chapter 3

Complex Serial Drama and *Stranger Things*

A story of five pre-teens, their siblings, and Winona Ryder battling interdimensional monsters during the 1980s hit screens globally on the 15th of July 2016, when Netflix released the whole first season of *Stranger Things*. Gaining the praise of both the public and critics, *Stranger Things* has received 18 Emmy nominations, and, according to Parrot Analytics, 58.8 million “demand expressions” in the US alone during 2017 (2018: 15). Created by Matt and Ross Duffer (credited as the Duffer Brothers), *Stranger Things* explores a world inhabited not only by rabbit-eared TV sets, walkie-talkies, and vinyl records but by interdimensional monsters too. Season One’s narrative foregrounds a twelve-year-old girl, Eleven, whose psychokinetic supernatural abilities are the cause of paranormal disturbances in Hawkins. Although by accident, Eleven frees a ‘Demogorgon’ from a parallel universe referred to as the Upside Down (USD), setting in motion a series of events including the capture and imprisonment of Will Byers. Will’s mother Joyce, the town Chief of Police Jim Hopper, his friends Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, and Dustin Henderson, and their siblings, Nancy Wheeler, and Jonathan Byers, as well as Nancy’s boyfriend, Steve Harrington, all work together to uncover this supernatural government conspiracy and rescue Will.

The environmental circumstances under which Netflix was launched have greatly impacted the programmes they are able to commission including the likes of *Stranger Things*. As discussed in Chapter 1, the US television industry experienced great technological disruption as a result of internet technologies growing more ubiquitous and streaming capabilities becoming more refined. The arrival of broadband and the availability of OTT services that ensued brought unprecedented distribution possibilities that threatened television’s traditional

revenue streams (Dunleavy 2009: 200). Netflix's 2007 launch offered viewers the option to pay a monthly fee so as to gain unlimited access to the site's inventory of titles. Solidifying its position in a multiplatform environment, Netflix has achieved over 140 million international subscriptions, each of which has the capacity for multiple individual subscriber profiles. On top of this, there is also the potential for a significant number of viewers to gain access to the site through password sharing (Lotz 2017: 42). This near-global reach and its technological opportunities highlight Netflix's capacity to continue impacting global TV industries.

Netflix's considerable critical success and their normalisation of 'binge-viewing' consumption has resulted in disruptions to long-standing viewing practices. Netflix has forged an identity distinct from its OTT network peers through its approach to mass individualisation and unconventional release protocols. The high degree of personalisation that the service promotes (generated by viewer preference) is particularly apparent in the displayed 'row art', which is different for each subscriber profile. Netflix's deep-rooted algorithmic customisation highlights certain elements within programmes and uses these to target specific taste groups. As Dan Hassler-Forest wrote in an auto-ethnographic piece about his own experience with *Stranger Things*: "it was ... almost literally as if it had been tailor-made just for me" (qtd. in Hills 2018: 469). Internet delivery has presented autonomous viewing strategies not achievable on conventional broadcast and satellite channels; however, most unique to Netflix is its release of complete seasons, a contrast from the episodic weekly release schedule necessitated by the constraints of linear TV. The recent international uptake in subscriptions and OTT market domination reinforces the cultural significance of Netflix and affirms its place within the current industry ecosystem. Netflix's menu offering and its foregrounding of customer experience and its impact on both the US and international markets makes the service a pioneering example of internet-distributed television and a highly relevant study.

This chapter will investigate the textual significance of internet distribution during television's multiplatform era by using *Stranger Things* as an example of a complex serial drama originated for an OTT network. The chapter will begin with an examination of the 'complex serial drama,' a term that was coined by Trisha Dunleavy (2018) and a form that was introduced to US television by premium cable network, HBO. Utilising the complex serial drama strategies outlined by Dunleavy, I will perform a textual analysis of *Stranger Things* that will examine the conceptual novelty surrounding the creation of the programme. To support the analysis of *Stranger Things* as a complex serial drama, an examination of the key strategies deployed by the programme – such as the use of transgressive and morally conflicted characters – will be used to solidify my attribution of the programme to the complex serial drama form. Finally, institutional claims from Chapter 1 and cultural assertions from Chapter 2 will be legitimated through an examination of the relationship between *Stranger Things* and its originating portal, Netflix.

Complex Serial Drama

Coined by Dunleavy, the 'complex serial drama' is defined by its "conceptual novelty, long-format seriality, narrative complexity, aesthetic idiosyncrasy, and morally conflicted, potentially villainous primary characters" (2018: 155). Pioneered by premium cable network, HBO, the complex serial form is a product ideally suited to a subscriber-funded environment. Without the need for regularly scheduled commercial breaks, premium cable and OTT networks are able to offer relative narrative freedom to the writers of these highly serialised programmes. Notable examples of the complex serial drama form to follow HBO's lead include Showtime's *Dexter* (2006-2013) and *Homeland* (2011–), FX's *The Shield*, and, AMC's *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. While this drama form has been dominated by shows produced for US cable networks, recently IDTV services have also released several complex serials that have garnered considerable commercial and critical success. These include Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), as well as Netflix's *House of Cards*, *The Crown* (2016–), and *Stranger Things*. The above examples suggest that the complex serial drama

form has engaged the interest of an increasing range of US premium TV services, including both cable channels and internet portals.

Yet, it was premium cable network, HBO, that originated and later refined the form. Airing in 1999, HBO gave *The Sopranos*' creator David Chase considerable freedom during the production process, resulting in a television show that offered significant seriality and foregrounded a transgressive, morally conflicted character. As Edgerton argues, *The Sopranos* was a television "game-changer" and its unprecedented success "was not achieved in an industrial, aesthetic, or cultural vacuum" (2013: 91-92). That is to say, the HBO programmes that followed solidified the network's position as innovators and producers of complex serial dramas. Additional HBO examples such as *The Wire*, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014), and *Game of Thrones* (see Chapter 1), refined the form and embraced the increasingly serialised and highly complex narratives that *The Sopranos* had popularised.

Long-form serialised dramas have thrived on subscription-funded channels, first as originals produced for US cable networks and now as original IDTV programmes. This is partly due to the freedoms associated with a commercial-free environment as writers are not attempting to manipulate scenes around pre-determined interruptions. While IDTV networks are afforded even more freedoms in the absence of a linear schedule, both IDTV and cable networks produce programming that bears some semblance to traditional broadcast narrative structures. Even so, there are several elements which suggests that the complex serials originated for subscription-funded networks differ from the TV drama narratives preferred by advertiser-funded broadcast networks (Smith 2018: 78). Anthony Smith (2018) highlights two key distinctions: the duration of episodes, and the narrative pace (78-79). Linking these features to the absence of commercial breaks, Smith (2018) suggests that stories within the complex serial drama form tend to unfold more slowly:

The absence of a commercial obligation ... has not only permitted narrative designers within the subscription service space to incorporate lengthy scenes

within episode plots; it has also allowed them to develop a combination of unhurried plotting and narrative style within scenes (79-80).

What Smith (2018: 100) calls the “slow-burn” approach to storytelling is particularly apparent in Showtime’s *Dexter*, which deploys season-long arcs as opposed to the episode-specific storylines more common on US broadcast TV. As with real life, the events within complex serial dramas are not able to be neatly concluded in an hour but instead unfold across episodes and even seasons. As seen in *Dexter*, each episode progresses the search for a season-specific serial killer even if individual episodes also contain its own conflicts and resolutions. This structure invites complexity as information needs to be remembered across seasons and not just within an episode.

Another key component of the complex serial drama identified by Dunleavy is “the foregrounding of morally conflicted and transgressive characters” (2018: 109). Mob boss, Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* certainly inhabited this role, so too did corrupt cop, Vic Mackey from *The Shield*, and undoubtedly, high school teacher turned drug lord, Walter White from AMC’s *Breaking Bad*. Dunleavy highlights the centrality of the character’s internal conflict as “distinct from concepts devised around precincts, workplaces or character communities” all of which are conventional of broadcast television drama (2018: 111). Such characters are not simply flawed, but highly immoral (most especially in the eyes of the law). The criminal acts that each of the above commit should be deplorable, yet the continued success of each programme season after season emphasises just how transgressive these characters can be and still remain on air. Important to the successful use of transgressive characters is that they must not operate solely with evil intentions. As Lotz argues, these characters draw into question “which immoral actions can be justified and under what conditions” (2014: 63). Upon finding out he has cancer, Walter White ‘breaks bad’ to pay for his health care and provide for his family in the event of his death. His improved health in “Más” (3:5) provides a moment where Walter must choose between the diverging roles of a “hapless victim reduced to earn for his family by any means possible [or] ... a willing and complicit agent in the drug trade” (Lotz 2014: 79). Earlier events for which

Walter is partly responsible – notably the death of Jane in “Phoenix” (2:12) and the resulting airplane crash in “ABQ” (2:13) – cement his position as a villainous and immoral central character. Yet, the complexity through which Walter’s character is explored offers redemptive potential, which, even if unfulfilled, makes for a compelling protagonist.

Of course, US broadcast television has reacted to the success and prevalence of increased seriality and the deployment of morally ambiguous characterisations by incorporating some of these features in their own stories. While there is a willingness to experiment with the above strategies, US broadcast networks have yet to fully commit to the extremities in the same manner as subscription services have proved able to (Dunleavy 2018: 110). The influence of the complex serial drama form is evidenced in the highly serialised narrative structure of Fox’s *24*, discussed in Chapter 1, and even the reprehensible nature of *House MD*’s central character, Gregory House, whose drug addiction and constant misanthropy is reminiscent – albeit to a lesser degree – of the moral ambiguity described above. Commercial imperatives remain of central importance to broadcast television and so there is a tendency for these characters to eschew criminal transgression in favour of moral ambiguity. This, as discussed in Chapter 1, is because the FCC and advertisers regulate the appropriateness of broadcast TV’s content. That NBC’s *Hannibal* (2013-2015) was cancelled after returning disappointing ratings suggests the continued “reluctance of broadcast networks to commission long-format dramas with villainous lead characters” (Dunleavy 2018: 110). Despite the evident influence of complex serial drama on US broadcast television networks, reservations remain as to the feasibility of the form in an advertiser-funded environment.

Highlighted above is the relevance of contextual factors to the possibilities of complex serial drama with the suggestion that a subscription-based economy allows for greater narrative liberties and fewer content restrictions. Yet complex serials have aired successfully on advertiser-funded cable networks with FX’s *The Shield* and AMC’s *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* as

outstanding examples. FX initially struggled to convince advertisers of *The Shield's* potential and many withdrew during the first few episodes (Dunleavy 2018: 111). Yet, FX's perseverance forged the path for many other basic cable networks to originate complex serial dramas, most notably AMC. As relative newcomers to the television industry, internet streaming services, Netflix and Hulu, have both originated complex serials, some of which have shown the potential to rival those produced for US cable networks. Assisted further by the release of whole seasons at once, dramas created for Netflix have fewer limits on the extent of their serial storytelling as compared with dramas produced for other networks. What follows below is an in-depth analysis of *Stranger Things* as a complex serial drama.

Case Study of *Stranger Things*

"We have vague memories of the Eighties ... We were the last generation to have the experience of going out with our friends to the woods or the train tracks and the only way our parents could connect with us was to say, 'it's time for dinner.' ... We were also movie nerds and had all these VHS tapes of all these classic Eighties films that we would watch over and over again. That was our point of reference for what it was like in the Seventies and Eighties."

(Ross Duffer quoted in Grow 2016)

Conceptual Originality

Television's difficult relationship with conceptual novelty is alluded to in HBO's tag line "It's Not TV, It's HBO" discussed in Chapter 2. With the advent of streaming technology – and the arguments surround how 'television' should be defined – this relationship has only grown more complex. In 1994, Todd Gitlin argued that what he termed "recombination" was crucial to the programmes being commissioned by US broadcast networks because the imitation of proven successes has so often been considered by these networks as a more commercially viable business practice than any pursuit of originality and/or innovation (63). Recycling specific elements of programmes provides "signposts for rapid recognition" that are useful to both the network and its audience (Gitlin 1994: 77). Dunleavy argues that by promoting programmes as new, even if they are essentially recombinations of past successes, "there is [a] vested interest in

accentuating novelty and disavowing conventionality” (2018: 55). Furthermore, the blending of genres provides originality through means of appropriating recognisable attributes and tropes. “Generic mixing,” as Mittell defines, “is an ongoing process of generic combination and interplay” (2004: 148). This tactic is evident in the subversive approach to the mixing and foregrounding of genres in HBO’s *The Sopranos* and Showtime’s *Dexter*. Both dramas can be placed within the crime genre yet also deploy elements of other genres (such as family melodrama) to achieve conceptual originality. The ‘concept’, also known as the premise around which the show revolves, and its originality, Dunleavy contends, is a key component of the complex serial drama (2018: 56). This is because “the concept distils not only the central tensions that will drive, sustain and possibly distinguish the narrative, but also the ‘treatment’ and/or point of view that is applied to the ‘narrative territory’ of the show by its creators and writers” (ibid.). Concepts devised for complex serial dramas tend to foreground a single enigmatic character and not an institution (such as policing, judiciary, or a hospital) as is common for the procedural dramas found on US broadcast television (ibid.: 111). *Stranger Things* exhibits conceptual originality in several ways, including its deployment of a multi-generational cast, and its intermixing of traditionally separate genres.

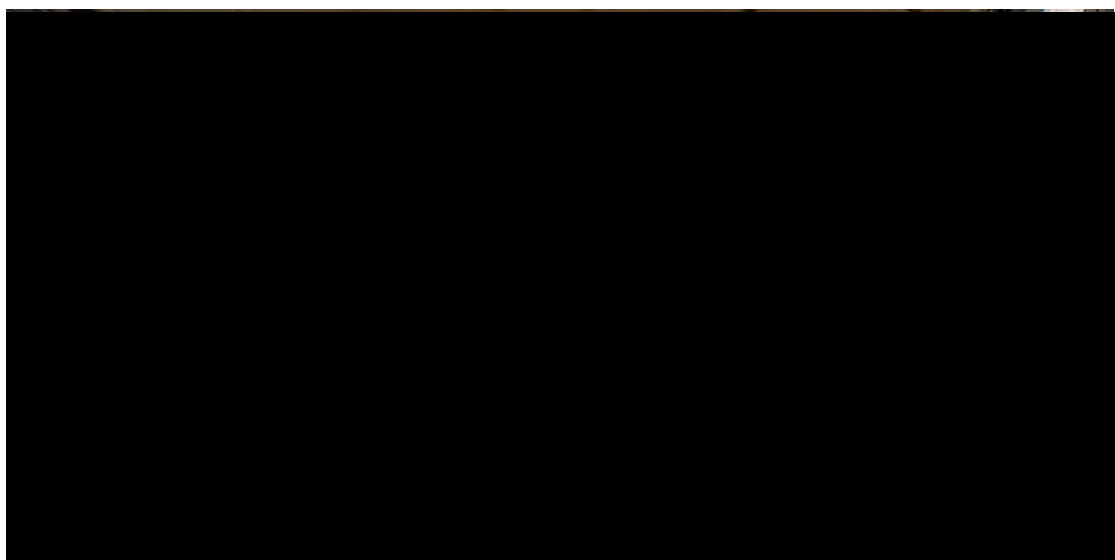


Figure 3.1: Eleven, Dustin, Mike, and Lucas take cover in a junkyard after they escape from the “bad guys” in “The Bathtub” (1:7)

The equal featuring of children, teenagers, and adults alike is unconventional in the core casts of complex serial dramas. As a form, which typically foregrounds middle-age male characters, the prominence of young children in *Stranger Things* (see fig. 3.1) ultimately deterred an estimated 15-20 networks from 'picking up' the show (Grow 2016). Matt Duffer recalls advice he received from network executives while pitching the programme: "you either gotta make it into a kid's show or make it about this Hopper character investigating paranormal activity around town" (Grow 2016). Traditionally, children in cable-commissioned complex serials have inhabited significant but ultimately periphery roles. Children are often included to provide morality to otherwise irredeemable characters. Lotz (2014: 58) observes the importance of parenthood – and particularly fatherhood – in male-centric serial dramas, which include *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *Dexter*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad*. Although the Duffer Brothers insisted on keeping Eleven as the programme's central character, had they taken the advice of network executives Hopper's characterisation as a flawed father figure is most aligned with the tendency for complex serials to centralise masculinity and fatherhood. Even one of the form's most villainous central characters, Dexter Morgan (a known serial killer), is spared complete condemnation due to the children in the series. The first episode sees Dexter chastise another man's murder of several young boys, saying, "Children – I could never do that. Not like you ... I have standards" (1:1). As the series progresses, Dexter becomes a father to three children and his subsequent struggle to balance his paternal responsibilities with his serial killer instincts is central to the conflicted position in which he finds himself. While paternal responsibilities do not forgive criminal misdeeds, they can provide moral justification, especially if these responsibilities are seen to motivate illegal activity (Lotz 2014: 63). Leonard Cassuto (2008) suggests that children offer at least some redemption for Dexter's actions by observing, "the kids are the key ... In the end, the kids are what allows us to root for a serial killer." It is precisely through the eschewal of conventionality and the foregrounding instead of pre-teen characters that *Stranger Things* achieves conceptual originality. Dunleavy highlights the centrality of pre-teens rather than adults as "the very feature that most distinguishes *Stranger Things*" (2018: 147). This originality is evident in

the fact that no earlier complex serial drama has featured a twelve-year-old in a central position as *Stranger Things* does with Eleven. However, it is important to note, there are a number of complex serial dramas to have featured women in primary roles including USA Network's *La Femme Nikkita* (1997–2001), HBO's *Big Little Lies* (2017–), FX's *Damages* (2007–2012), AMC's *The Killing* (2011–2014) and Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (as discussed further below).

While not unique to *Stranger Things*, or to the complex serial drama form, generic mixing is another important facet of conceptual originality. According to Glen Creeber (2001) genre is determined by a negotiation of expectation that takes place between audience and text (7). In television, genre has been a means of categorising and differentiating programmes and their forms with relative ease. The three main genres that *Stranger Things* draws from are science-fiction, horror, and coming-of-age (Dunleavy 2018: 146). By combining elements from such distinctive genres, *Stranger Things* achieves conceptual novelty. It is important to note that the film examples discussed below from which the series draws generic inspiration and intertextual references are sometimes themselves not constrained to a single genre but are also generic hybrids. However, as these are almost exclusively feature films and not television series, *Stranger Things* and other television programmes within the complex serial drama form are still achieving conceptual novelty through the delicate interplay of generic mixing. Furthermore, Jason Mittell argues programmes that mix genres “often foreground generic conventions even more than ‘core’ examples of a genre” (2004: ix). He attributes this to the capacity of a mixed-genre text to juxtapose different genre conventions in ways that highlight these through contrasts. In its blending of three genres, *Stranger Things* assumes the audience has sufficient generic literacy not only to recognise these references and conventions, but also to link them with iconic 1980s feature films that help define each of the three generic traditions in the first place.

Stranger Things' use of generic mixing manages to achieve novelty by inciting a sense of familiarity. The deconstruction and consequent reconstruction (via the USD) of the programme's setting evokes 'suburban gothic', a sub-genre

of horror. Bernice Murphy (2009) describes suburban gothic as a “sub-genre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from [a] dramatic (and generally sinister) incident” (2). This sub-genre creates narrative tension by inverting the home as a place of safety into the ultimate horror. The township of Hawkins, in the eyes of most of its residents at least, is a safe and normal suburb in America’s Midwest. As Hopper says, “This is Hawkins. Want to know the worst thing that’s ever happened in the four years I’ve been working here? ... an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie’s head because it thought that her hair was a nest” (1:1). However, the USD changes this situation and perception.

The USD presents a literal inversion of Hawkins, and as the series continues, the alternate dimension, once only accessible by gates or a “tear in time and space” (1:5), is shown to be less of a reflection and more of an independent organism. Unlike the initial gate opened by Eleven, the tunnels beneath Hawkins are accessed by Hopper when he digs through a pumpkin patch (2:4). The very nature of suburban gothic is that it incites fear of an environment previously deemed safe. The USD demonstrates that the environment once familiar to the characters offers little protection from the creatures that have made it their home. Castle Byers, a small home-made fort built by Will and his brother in the woods near their house, transforms from a place of solace to a hideaway during his entrapment in the USD. However, Castle Byers, as with everywhere else in the USD, does not stay safe for long before the Demogorgon finds and captures Will, destroying his fort in the process (1:7). As the narrative progresses, there is a sense that nowhere in Hawkins is safe or untouched by the USD. While Eleven’s closing of the underground fissure during “The Gate” (2:9) does destroy the monsters inhabiting the real Hawkins, it does not entirely eliminate the threat of the USD. The final scene of Season Two sees the camera transition, in a single twisting movement away from the relative safety of the high school dance, into the USD, where the Mind-Flayer is dominating the landscape, standing menacingly over the school (2:9). Once the

door has been opened and the monster invited in, there seems to be no permanency in its expulsion. The suburban gothic genre, which, by definition tends to play with and subvert expectations, characterises the horrors brought upon Hawkins by the USD.

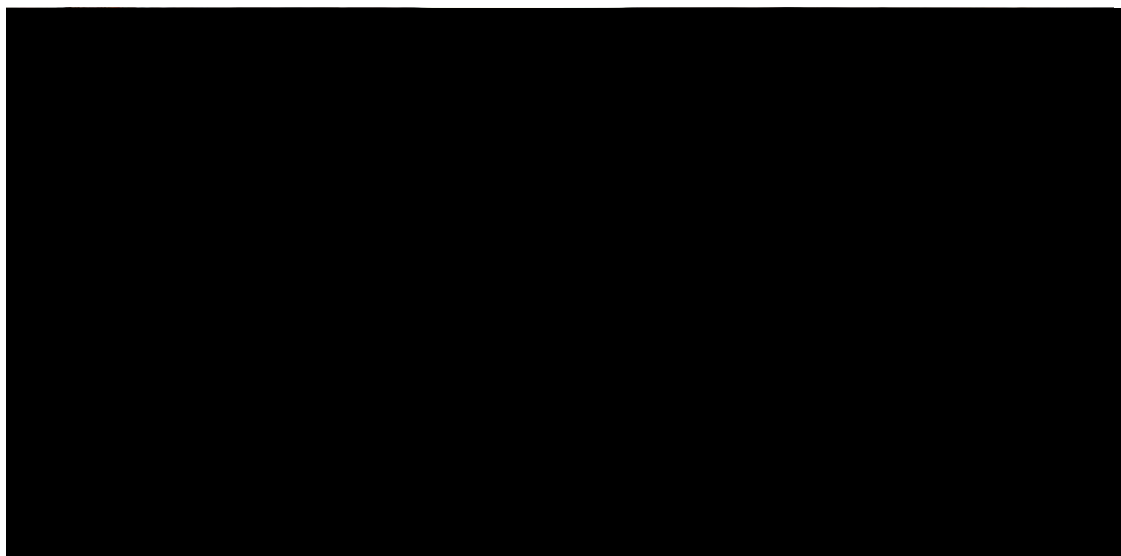


Figure 3.2: Steve, Nancy, and Barbara watch Jonathan hang flyers for his missing brother in “The Weirdo of Maple Street” (1:2)

The reconceptualisation of genre conventions within *Stranger Things* is also explored in other horror tropes. The antagonists of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Halloween* (1978), and *Friday the 13th* (1980) terrorise and kill their victims much like the creatures from the USD. However, unlike those creatures that have invaded Hawkins, the monsters of ‘80s horror narratives tend to punish transgression – as seen with the ‘final girl’ trope that was popularised by Hollywood’s classic horror films (Clover 2015). Carol Clover (2015) defines the ‘final girl’ as the “chaste, vice-free, damsel-in-distress who outlives the antagonist and often gets saved or saves herself” (39). This ‘final girl’ figure can be seen in Nancy Thompson of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Laurie Strode of *Halloween*, and Alice Hardy of *Friday the 13th*. In *Stranger Things* this trope is re-worked as it is not Barbara, the sensible best friend, who survives to be the ‘final girl’ but is instead Nancy Wheeler whose relationship with Steve is the cause of her transgressions. At first Barb encourages Nancy and Steve’s relationship and she tells Nancy, “you’re going to be so cool now, it’s ridiculous.

You better still hang out with me,” believing they will both benefit from it (1:1). But before long she condemns the relationship, insisting to Nancy that “he just wants to get into your pants” (1:2). According to Butler, this is ultimately Barb’s downfall because, unlike its generic predecessors, the monsters in *Stranger Things* are seen to reward transgressive behaviour by punishing the morally righteous (2018: 80). *Stranger Things*’ treatment and consequent amalgamation of disparate genres (see below) solidifies its conceptual originality.

Even though the greatest threat to life in *Stranger Things* is a monster from another dimension, the programme maintains a generic balance between horror tropes and teen movie elements. As Timothy Shary (2005) suggests, “the teen horror sub-genre would be one of the most voluminous within the entire teen genre” (33) and this long history is both acknowledged and honoured by *Stranger Things*. By the 1980s, the teen movie genre had achieved a resurgence in popularity which makes it only fitting that *Stranger Things* chooses to acknowledge such a prominent genre of the decade in which it is set (Butler 2018: 75). Seminal films like *Risky Business* (1983), *The Goonies* (1985), *Stand by Me* (1986), and *Heathers* (1988) helped revitalise the genre, and their consequent importance is not only honoured by *Stranger Things* but also heavily referenced. Nancy, Steve, Jonathan, Barb, and later, Billy Hargrove, are all somewhat evocative of the teenagers depicted in *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1983), and *Risky Business*, with Nancy and Steve even dressing up as *Risky Business*’ Joel and Lana for Halloween in “Trick or Treat, Freak” (2:2). Rose Butler (2018) analyses the teenage stereotypes that are introduced and later subverted by the Duffer Brothers (see fig. 3.2): Nancy embodies the typical female protagonist, Jonathan represents the introverted outsider, Steve plays the jock, and Billy the bully, but none of these stereotypes last very long. By the end of the Season Two, Nancy has broken up with Steve (2:2), knows how to wield a loaded gun (1:5), and takes on government agents attempting to cover up Barb’s death (2:4). Jonathan’s arc is more traditional as he and Nancy ultimately start a relationship (2:6) evoking ‘80s underdog stories like that of *Can’t Buy Me Love* (1987) and *Say Anything* (1989). However, it is Steve Harrington’s characterisation that most subverts his original stereotype; throughout the first

two seasons he transitions from high school “King” (2:2) to glorified babysitter (2:6). Billy’s main purpose from the beginning of Season Two is to support Steve’s redemption arc by presenting “a human villain who is on the edge” (Matt Duffer qtd. in “Unlikely Allies”). Yet, even Billy, who bullies his step-sister (2:4), and violently assaults Steve (2:9), subverts his ‘bad boy’ persona when he cries after being verbally and physically attacked by his own father (2:8). Butler argues that “much like the cultural touchstones of the 1980s it so clearly pays homage to, *Stranger Things* is laced with darker subtexts that often go unnoticed” (2018: 72). While the above characterisations have been played out many times, the overt referentiality and subsequent subversion of them is reflective of conceptual originality, especially when used in the context of *Stranger Things*’ distinctive generic mix.

Eleven as Enigmatic Central Character

“She knows where Will is and now she’s just letting him die in the Upside Down. For all we know, it’s her fault. We’ve been looking for some stupid monster, but did you ever stop to think that maybe she’s the monster?”

(Lucas Sinclair: “The Flea and the Acrobat”)

While Hopper may have been the more conventional choice for a complex serial protagonist, Eleven’s central positioning is indicative of the Duffer Brother’s innovative vision for the programme. As the enigma around which the serial revolves, Eleven’s psychokinetic abilities firmly situate her as the programme’s central character. Although each character plays an important role in the overall story, it is Eleven’s narrative arc that offers the greatest complexity and moral ambiguity. As outlined by Dunleavy, the complex serial drama approach “allows their narratives to investigate morally conflicted primary characters as opposed to investigating situations in which conflict is a regular occurrence” (2018: 99). As it stands, the deep psychological investigation of Eleven from the programme’s outset deviates from the narrative trajectory that the programme would have deployed had the Duffer Brother’s redirected their focus to Hopper’s investigation of paranormal events in the town.

The tendency of complex serial dramas – especially those produced for US cable networks – has been to foreground men, typically white, middle-aged, and upper-middle class. Accordingly, Eleven’s positioning within *Stranger Things* is unusual on the basis of her youth as well as her gender. As discussed in Chapter 1, the services of cable networks are restricted to only those willing to pay the required monthly fee. The total cost of a US cable subscription can reach US\$100 per month (Lotz 2017: 53). This would suggest, the subscription-funded TV environment is “one designed almost perfectly to solicit the attention and affections of an educated upper-middle class” (Anderson 2008: 34). While Netflix also operates under a monthly subscription model the cost is significantly less than that of premium cable networks, a difference that may have informed its receptiveness to the idea of *Stranger Things*. There is also the appeal of Netflix, as an IDTV service that offers unusual audience control, to young adult viewers. Television’s multiplatform environment has increased the opportunities for individualised viewing practices and these can also accommodate the anywhere/anytime mentality of younger audiences (Dunleavy 2018: 57). Yet, access alone does not ensure success and Ryan Twomey (2018) suggests that the Duffers’ evocation of nostalgia through “childhood memories of friendship, riding bikes, exploring neighbourhood surrounds, and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*” is itself important to this drama’s appeal across adult and young adult audiences alike (43).

Also uncommon in the complex serial dramas has been the foregrounding of central female characters. Jason Mittell (2015) emphasises “the distinct lack of female characters [within this form] who invite us in to embrace their troubling morality” (149). As mentioned earlier, several US cable and IDTV examples (*La Femme Nikita*, *Big Little Lies*, *Damages*, *The Killing*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*) have emphasised female characters and positioned them centrally in the narrative. Other examples, such as HBO’s *True Blood* (2008–2014) and FX’s *The Americans* (2013–2018), assign narrative importance to the male and female characters in equal measure. This, as Mittell suggests, is antithetical to the subjective (and intense) treatment of protagonists in male-centric complex serial dramas (2015: 150). While the female characters of any of the above

programmes may commit deplorable crimes, their morality is never quite as unequivocally villainous as that of their male counterparts. Mittell argues this is due to widespread ideological gender associative norms by which “men are most likely to be respected and admired for ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost, while women are still constructed more as nurturing, [and] selfless” (2015: 150). Many of the immoral actions taken by these characters are seen to be a consequence of their impossible circumstances. For example, when the characters of *Big Little Lies* are present and later cover up the murder of Perry Wright, the audience understands their transgression as morally justified given his proclivity for physical and sexual abuse. Similarly, Eleven is very much an abused, exploited character rather than an empowered transgressive agent. Any criminal actions taken by her – from stealing Eggos to murder – are morally justified by her circumstances, even if all the details of her traumatic past are only gradually revealed.

While initially unbeknownst to the viewer, the catalytic release of the Demogorgon is the consequence of Eleven’s psychokinetic powers (1:6). This information is finally revealed during the sixth episode (“The Monster”) via a flashback in a scene where Eleven injures two boys in an attempt to protect her friends. Dustin incites the traumatic memory as he screams, “She’s our friend and she’s crazy. You come back here, and she’ll kill you” (1:6). Eleven’s behaviour may not be as transgressive as Dexter Morgan or Tony Soprano but her actions are undeniably deviant. Even by Eleven’s own admission she, and not the Demogorgon, is the real threat to Hawkins: “The gate – I opened it. I’m the monster” (1:6). Although the audience does not witness a death at Eleven’s hands until the third episode during a flashback where she wills the neck of a government agent to break (1:3), her moral ambiguity is notable from the first episode where the lethal consequences of her powers are explicitly depicted even if the action is not (1:1). These flashbacks are not necessarily intended to offer expository information but rather to provide emotional complexity and character development (see Chapter 1). The non-linearity of their appearance in the narrative is itself suggestive of Eleven’s traumatic past because they are not remembered in chronological order but rather in jolts of recollection. The

flashbacks help to affect the psychological investigation of Eleven but because the audience experiences them only through her memories it cements Eleven's position as the central enigmatic character of the series.



Figure 3.3: Eleven realises she can communicate with her mother, Terry Ives, by using her telepathic powers and entering the Void in “Dig Dug” (2:5)

Eleven's centrality is further expressed through representations of the 'Void', a visual space of Eleven's mind within which she locates and communicates with people regardless of the dimension they inhabit. The Duffer Brothers describe the black, expansive, spatio-temporal vacuum as being a “way to portray an abstract and sort of bizarre idea” (qtd. in Hutchinson 2016). The Void is used as a vehicle to express Eleven's telekinetic powers that would remain otherwise unseen. As Dunleavy suggests, it is not uncommon for such psychological investigations concerning primary characters to occur in complex serial dramas (2018: 116). In *Stranger Things* Eleven's interiority is explored through the Void, whereas in *Dexter* this occurs through voiceover narration, and in *The Sopranos* through Tony's dreams. The Void allows Eleven to communicate with both Will and her mother. In the former case, the Void allows Eleven to inhabit the USD and, in the latter, to connect with her mother, whose catatonia inhibits any verbal communication (see fig. 3.3). As Eleven, and consequently the audience, comes to learn, Terry Ives, Eleven's mother, has been left in this state by Doctor Brenner and is forced to relive her final moments of clarity on a loop,

repeating: “Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the left, four to the right. 450. Rainbow” (2:5). Each word uttered by Terry reflects a single event, which, when connected, culminates in Eleven being taken away from her. This sequence comprises Eleven’s birth (breathe); sympathy flowers (sunflower); the combination lock of a safe containing a gun (three to the left, four to the right); the voltage number used to destroy Terry’s brain (450); and the room in which Eleven was kept (rainbow). Even if it only occurs inside Eleven’s mind, the above revelation is vital to the narrative of the first two seasons. Therefore the Void, as this is how the audience comes to learn a lot of information, maintains a significant role in both providing important narrative clarity and solidifying Eleven as a central character.

Despite the many deaths that occur at Eleven’s will, it is possible for her transgressions to be understood and forgiven because she is seen to act for the good of others. Even when Eleven commits murder, her crimes tend to offer moral ambiguity and not outright culpability. For example, when Eleven breaks the arm of a school student it is done in defence of Mike and Dustin (1:6). Likewise, the deaths she causes are rarely considered unjustifiable given the circumstances because the audience is aware of the danger she faces, even during the first episode when little is known about Eleven’s past. Connie, one of the government agents searching for her at the burger joint, does not hesitate to pull a gun on and then kill the owner (1:1). While these agents use the Department of Energy as a guise, the children use the more transparent term “bad men” to describe them, making it clear where Eleven is positioned within this moral hierarchy. If the people who are chasing Eleven are bad, by comparison she has to be good, or at least, better than them. To ensure that viewers are compelled to continue watching Eleven’s character cannot be the worst on screen, hence the use of ‘relative morality’ to absolve Eleven of serious wrongdoings. Coined by Jason Mittell (2015), relative morality offers a characterisation exemplary of the complex serial drama, in which “an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero’s redeeming qualities” (143). While her acts are criminal, they also provide significant ambiguity. Compared to

the Demogorgon, Dr. Brenner, or even her 'sister', Kali (all of whom are explored below), Eleven's transgressions are forgivable.

The monsters that emerge from the USD would most certainly be considered the ultimate antagonists if *Stranger Things* were a traditional horror film. Yet, its generic mixing allows the programme to borrow elements (including a conventional villain) from the horror genre and reconceptualise these so as to provide instability through unpredictability. Not only do various peripheral characters meet their demise at the hands of the creatures from the USD, so too, do Barb (1:3) and Bob Newby (2:8). Stephen Prince (2004) argues, "[in horror] films of the classic Hollywood era ... the monsters were often located in faraway lands ... This sense of faraway places and things, and the story convention that good will prevail, helped transform the induction of horror into a reassuring experience for the audience" (3). Even though the USD is nothing more than a fantasy for most Hawkins' residents, its locale and the threat it poses are much closer than they think. Although the Demogorgon of Season One and the Demodogs of Season Two fulfil a role in keeping with traditional horror villains, one of the greatest threats to have emerged from the USD is core character, Will Byers. The first season ends with Will vomiting a parasite-like glob that he contracted during his time in the USD (1:8) and throughout the following season he gradually succumbs to the force of the Mind Flayer. Mike is the first to figure out the danger posed by Will: "He's a spy. If he knows where we are so does the shadow monster. He killed those soldiers, he'll kill us too" (2:8). Even if Will is not himself a shadow monster, by the middle of Season Two he has been possessed by one and is forced to do the Mind Flayer's bidding. Beyond this particular instance, the shadow monsters cause considerable chaos and many deaths even if their screen time is minimal the result of which helps to firmly solidify their villainous position within the programme.

Despite the Demogorgon and Demodogs presenting traditional otherworldly monsters in the first and second season respectively, there is an argument to be made for Dr. Brenner's evil intentions as his characterisation is that of a conventional screen drama villain. Eleven's flashbacks reveal that

Brenner is undoubtedly cruel; he kidnapped, imprisoned, and manipulated Eleven into using her abilities against her will. Therefore, Eleven's morality is constantly juxtaposed with Brenner's, as exemplified when she is asked by Brenner to end the life of a caged cat while he observes her from behind glass. After she refuses, the camera pans to a disappointed Brenner and cuts to Eleven being dragged towards an isolation room, a punishment to which she reacts by using her telekinetic power to kill those trying to lock her away (1:3). Brenner is directly responsible for Eleven's removal from her biological mother at birth and Terry's consequent catatonia, all of which further demonstrate his moral deviancy. Moreover, the comparison between Hopper and Brenner (both of whom function as father figures to Eleven) is used to reinforce Brenner's villainy. Unlike characters in male-centric complex serial dramas, whose paternal roles help to justify their criminality, Brenner's expression of fatherhood serves to amplify his cruelty. Although Eleven calls him 'Papa', the viewer learns of Brenner's true character throughout the first season. During a fight between Hopper and Eleven, she accuses him of being like Papa, an accusation that elicits his angry response: "Really? I'm like that psychotic son of a bitch?" (2:4). While Hopper's attempts at fatherhood may be flawed, Brenner's are often abusive and immoral and it is Brenner's actions that further ameliorate the transgressions of Eleven. Ultimately any action undertaken by Eleven that might be seen to be villainous is usually countered by Brenner performing an action that is far worse. For instance, when Eleven takes Brenner's life she is absolved of any crimes because the audience is aware of the crimes Brenner has committed.

As evidenced, Eleven's criminal transgressions are constantly justified by comparison to those around her. This strategy is repeated once again when Eleven discovers the existence of, and eventually meets, her 'sister', Kali, also known as 'Eight'. Her number and psychokinetic powers bear striking similarities to that of Eleven's and reveals to the viewer the increasing likelihood that at least nine other children were subjected to similar laboratory experiments. Eleven runs away from Hawkins to find Kali, whose traumatic childhood has shaped her criminal lifestyle in Chicago (2.7). Before long, Kali convinces Eleven to use her powers to track down one of the lab technicians

responsible for her mother's catatonia, attempting, not unlike Brenner, to use Eleven as a weapon (see fig. 3.4). Although Eleven has willed the deaths of several lab technicians and government agents prior to this occasion, the death of this particular technician does not align with her own moral code. Unlike the circumstances of the previous deaths for which she was responsible, neither Eleven's life, nor Kali's, is under threat and Eleven refuses to participate. This scene establishes the limits of Eleven's transgressions by directly comparing her to someone from the same situation and background but whose moral judgement is flawed.

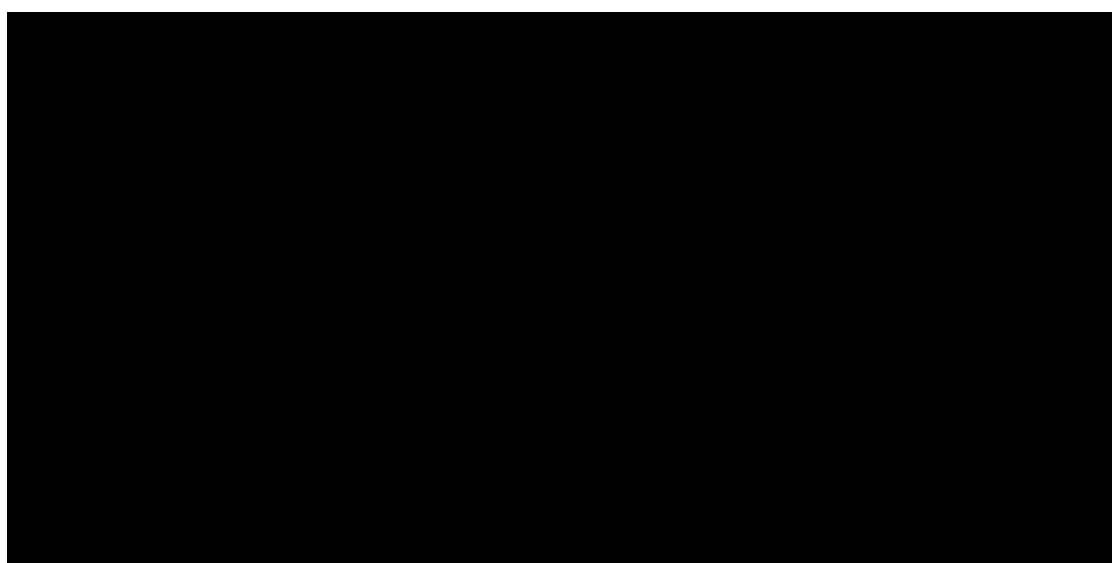


Figure 3.4: Kali teaches Eleven how to harness her psychokinetic powers in "The Lost Sister" (2:7)

The presence of clearly villainous characters, such as those above, affirms that Eleven's actions are morally ambiguous rather than straightforwardly transgressive. Whereas the Demogorgon operates similarly to a science-fiction or horror villain (mysterious, otherworldly, and something to be feared), Brenner's character, who at first seems moral, soon enough emerges the next most villainous. Even Kali's sense that murder on the basis of vengeance is justifiable foregrounds Eleven's convictions that it is not.

Narrative: Seriality and Complexity

“We’ve heard discussions about what this [*Stranger Things*] would have been like as a feature film or if it would have been better rolled out one week at a time ... But the idea of a one-week delay between shows was the main reason why I didn’t get into television growing up. ... Maybe it’s just my brain but it really helps me get emotionally involved in a story if I can consume it more rapidly”

(Matt Duffer quoted in Hutchinson 2016)

Long format seriality and narrative complexity are both key components of the complex serial drama form (Dunleavy 2018: 155). As discussed in earlier chapters, the nature of serial storytelling is ideal for a subscription-funded environment, where the commercial risks associated with long-form narratives intended to serve smaller or specialised audiences can be mitigated by payment of a monthly subscription. Even the delivery method of an OTT service encourages serial narratives, as audiences are able and invited to watch episodes in rapid succession. The binge-viewing habits encouraged by internet delivery are well-suited to narrative complexity, since audiences have the flexibility to watch and re-watch as they desire.

For a network whose non-linear and subscription-funded environment allow it to take risks, the dramas commissioned by Netflix to some extent offer familiar narrative structures. This is derived from Netflix’s reliance on a volume of programming acquired from broadcast and cable networks. As a drama devised to complement the experience of other dramas on Netflix’s portal, it is not surprising that *Stranger Things* uses some familiar narrative tropes and strategies. These are evident in the first of four pre-credit scenes within “The Vanishing of Will Byers” (1:1). At Hawkins National Laboratory, ominous fluorescent lights flicker, and a white-coated researcher bursts on to screen, running away from an unseen threat (1:1). His escape is ultimately thwarted. As a first scene this sets up several questions, many of which are unwittingly answered by Mike in the next scene when he foreshadows the events of the series during a lengthy *Dungeons & Dragons* ‘campaign’: “Something is coming, something hungry for blood. A shadow grows on the wall behind you,

swallowing you in darkness. *It is almost here ... The Demogorgon*" (1:1). Unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the quiet suburban town, their home has become the epicentre of an otherworldly attack. A threat once perceived by the boys as imaginary and little more than a game suddenly becomes all too real for Will, whose prophetic admission to Mike – "The Demogorgon – it got me" – in the third scene, sees him become the Demogorgon's next target in the fourth (1:1). The rest of the episode proceeds to set up more questions than it answers, ending on the three boys finding Eleven wandering alone through the woods.

Although Netflix's original dramas tend not to feature a 'pilot' episode, as discussed in Chapter 2, the first episode of *Stranger Things* still fulfils one of the pilot's traditional functions which is to provide an introduction for the series. Mittell (2015) suggests that its purpose is to encapsulate "what a series might be like on an ongoing basis, while providing an exceptional degree of narrative exposition to orient viewers within an often complex storyworld" (56). The first episode of *Stranger Things*, whose title is stylised with the apt prefix of "Chapter One," effectively introduces each character, their relationships, and intriguing events – the arrival of an otherworldly monster and of Eleven – which are ostensibly unrelated. The episode follows familiar storytelling conventions throughout and it ends on the boys encountering Eleven in the woods; a 'cliffhanger' designed to entice viewers to watch the next episode.

If the serial narrative of *Stranger Things* does not by itself encourage binge-viewing, the episode structures work in addition to support it. By ending episodes during, and not after, intense conflicts, audiences are more likely to continue watching, rather than stop before a given situation has been resolved. Of course, this is a strategy with a long history in linear television and is conventional in serial drama. However, the release of all episodes of a season at once, imbue the cliffhanger with some new possibilities. It allows episodes of *Stranger Things* to end at the highest point of tension and to interrupt the most important beat, the other half of which is delivered as the first scene in the next episode. Enabled by the possibility that viewers have just finished the previous episode before moving on to another, this structure is exemplified by the

opening scene of the first season's sixth episode, "The Monster", which sees Jonathan frantically searching for Nancy in the woods after she disappeared into the USD during the previous episode (1:6). Accordingly, episodes of *Stranger Things* often open with resolution and end in conflict. This approach is reflective of the complex serials typical investigation into the psychological ramifications and transgressive actions of the protagonists as these are not episode-specific stories that require resolution but rather storylines that offer character development. *Stranger Things'* narrative structure further cements the programme's position as a complex serial drama by foregrounding continuity over episode containment. This is evident in Season One as every episode builds upon the last, focussing on several main storylines: the search for Will, the hunt of the Demogorgon, and the investigation into Eleven's past. Although progress is made on each of these storylines throughout individual episodes, none of them are resolved until the season final. Even then, the programme resists a finite ending in favour of another cliffhanger. During the epilogue of "The Upside Down" Will is struggling to adjust to normal life and is psychologically haunted by his time in the USD (1:8). While his family eat Christmas dinner, Will vomits a parasite that can only have come from his time in the USD leaving the audience with more unanswered questions than any other episode does (1:8).

Although there is familiarity in *Stranger Things*, there is equally a degree of risk, especially when the show deviates from narrative expectation. As with many television programmes, *Stranger Things* features a hierarchy of storylines with those deemed most important to the forward propulsion of the narrative being awarded greater screen-time. This is an expectation set up from the first episode, however, toward the end of Season Two, the viewer's expectations are halted by a tonal and geographical change in the story. Although the programme often transitions between 'real world' Hawkins and the USD, these environments are mirror images of one another so while the tonal differences might be vast the locations are generally familiar. Yet, the deviation during the seventh episode of the second season (involving a move to Chicago) was cause for criticism (see fig. 3.4). As Kathryn VanArendonk asserted, "it's *weird* to have a stand-alone episode. It feels distinctly out of step with the way the rest of the show works, and it

comes at a point that cuts off the momentum that'd been building toward the end of the season" (2017). As VanArendonk has identified, "The Lost Sister" (2:7) interrupts the season at a moment of heightened intensity, when the fate of every main character (excluding Eleven) is uncertain as Demo-dogs infiltrate Hawkins Laboratory (2:6). Yet, instead of following their story, the narrative of "The Lost Sister" directs all attention onto Eleven as she travels to Chicago to find Kali. Although there are earlier instances of characters venturing outside of the township, for example Jonathan visiting his father, Lonnie, in Indianapolis (1:2), as well as Hopper and Joyce visiting Terry (1:6), "The Lost Sister" approaches the distance differently. Earlier episodes with storylines away from Hawkins (exemplified by the above) foreground the narrative strands of other characters in order to spatially situate the viewer within Hawkins. The narrative deviation of this particular episode, while it was criticised, functions to reaffirm Eleven's centrality.

Homages alone may not incite complexity, but original treatment of familiar references can. Intertextuality, as Brian Ott and Cameron Walter (2000) describe, is "both an interpretive practice of audiences and a stylistic device consciously employed by producers of media" (429). Through the act of one text referencing another, intertextuality is a sign of complexity, and *Stranger Things* is rife with allusions to other texts. While the show has been both lauded and criticised for its multitude of filmic allusions and intertextual references, the deference with which each reference is handled is more indicative of meticulous homage than mere pastiche. For example, the first season is filled with references to Steven Spielberg's *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982), with Eleven as a clear re-interpretation of Spielberg's friendly alien. However, Eleven does not merely re-imagine ET. Instead she becomes an inversion of the alien, reconceptualising the kind and curious creature of Spielberg's narrative into something far more ominous and sinister in the Duffer's creation (Quercia 2018: 119). There are several references to *ET* throughout the programme, including (but not limited to) a scene where Eleven is disguised in a dress and wig (1:4), Eleven's first encounter with a television set (1:3) and a scene in which Eleven and the four boys are chased through the streets of Hawkins on their bikes by

government agents (1:7). The last of these examples offers a clear subversion of Spielberg's classic. Unlike in *ET*, where the bikes float over the top of the government agency vans sent to capture the alien, the scene in *Stranger Things* is much more formidable (see fig 3.5). Rather than moving herself and her friends out of harm's way, Eleven removes the danger from their path by using her telekinetic powers, sending a van flying overhead to land with a deadly crunch in her wake (1:7). In this moment the audience is acutely aware that Eleven's powers are far more destructive than ET's ever were. While ET's powers offer healing, Eleven's abilities are potentially fatal and ultimately cause the deaths of several people throughout the two seasons (Quercia 2018: 119). *Stranger Things* incites complexity through subversion as references to *ET*'s familiar narrative are constantly destabilised by foregrounding Eleven, a morally ambiguous main character.

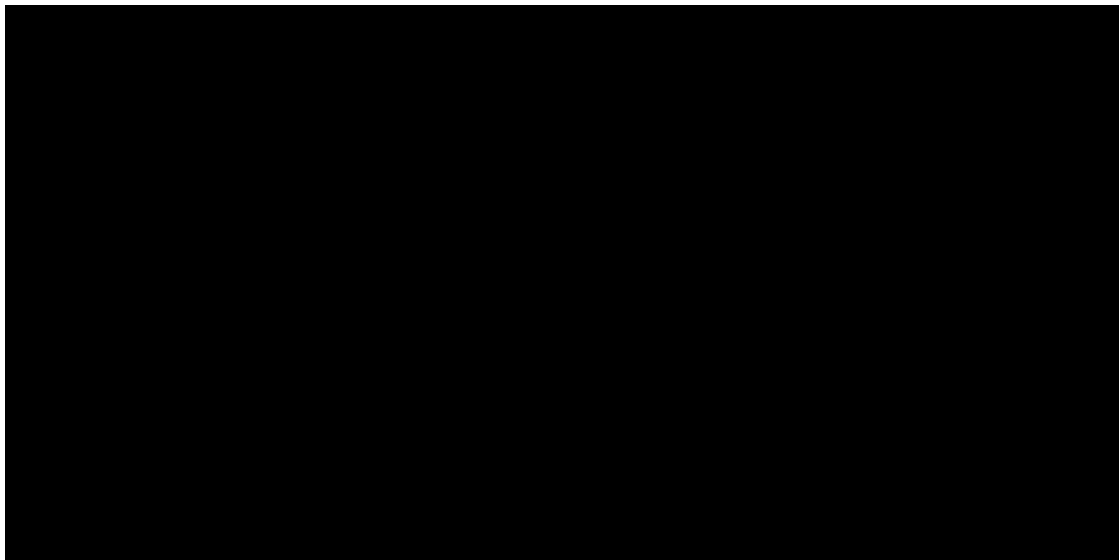


Figure 3.5: Eleven uses her telekinetic powers to flip a van over their heads in "The Bathtub" (1:7)

Conscious casting has also resulted in several moments throughout the programme of self-referential intertextuality. Perhaps best known for her early roles in *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Heathers* (1988), and on the cusp of the decade, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), Winona Ryder plays the *Stranger Things* character Joyce Byers. The Duffer Brothers were intent on casting Ryder, saying, "Winona was a huge part of our childhood. We had a lot of her movies in our VHS

collection” (Duffer qtd. in Grow 2016). However, the Ryder of *Stranger Things* is significantly less glamorous than the characters Ryder played in the 1980s. She is now a “lower-class mother with a bad shag haircut, a smoking problem, and a small, isolated house in serious need of some maintenance” (Morton 2018: 94). While such a characterisation might seem vastly different from the comfortable upper-middle class roles of her early years, the similarities are nonetheless evident, as her *Beetlejuice* character, Lydia, admits: “I myself am strange and unusual.” In this sense, the axe-wielding Ryder of *Stranger Things* is therefore not so different from the gun-wielding Ryder of *Heathers*.

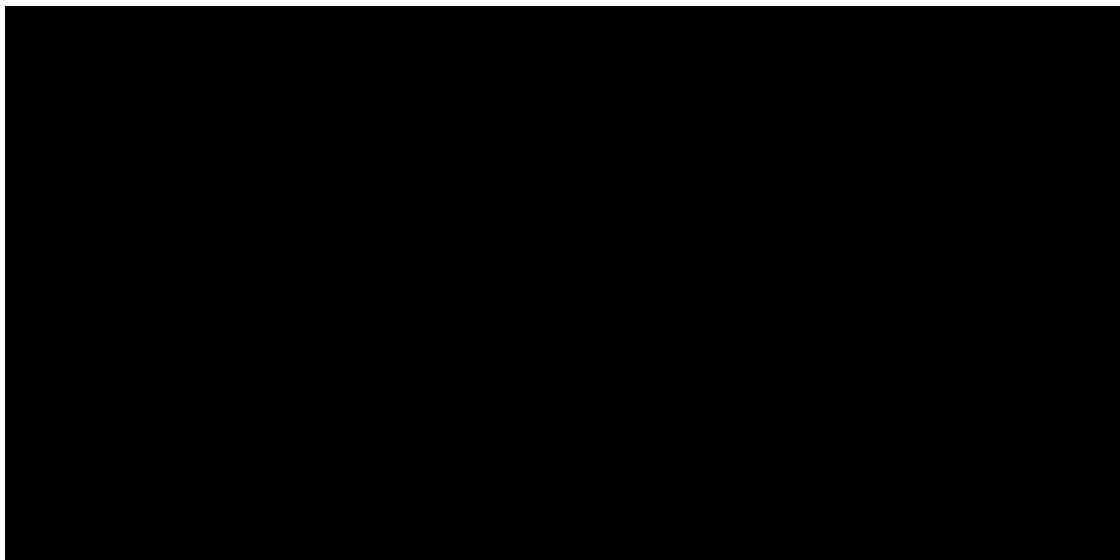


Figure 3.6: Bob ‘the Brain’ Newby decodes Will’s map of the USD in “Dig Dug” (2:5)

Yet, unlike with Ryder, the Duffers were originally reluctant to cast Sean Astin as Bob Newby. Astin played de facto leader in *The Goonies* (1985), and hobbit, Samwise Gamgee, from the (heavily referenced) *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003). Astin claims the Duffer Brothers’ reluctance stemmed from the worry that they “didn’t want it to be a gimmick” (Astin qtd. in Bradley 2017). However, during a scene in which Bob enters the Byers’ house to find its walls and floors covered in a hand-drawn map, he asks, “What’s at the X? Pirate treasure?” (2:5). According to the Duffer Brothers, Bob Newby was never “intended to be that big of a role and then Sean came into the picture” (“Mind Blown”). So, gimmick or not, the question Bob poses about pirate treasure can only have been incorporated specifically to evoke Astin’s *Goonies* character (see

fig. 3.6). The casting of Matthew Modine (*Full Metal Jacket* [1987]) and Paul Reiser (*Aliens* [1986]) furthers the assertion that the series is highly self-aware of its audiences pop culture literacy and references are made accordingly.

Industry and Culture: The Significance of Netflix to *Stranger Things*

As evidenced at the beginning of the chapter, the degree of risk associated with producing a highly serialised programme that foregrounded a morally transgressive twelve-year-old girl with supernatural abilities was enough to deter some 15-20 networks (Grow 2016). Ultimately it was OTT network, Netflix, who dismissed concerns regarding the prominence of young characters in a programme not designed for children viewers and 'green-lit' *Stranger Things*. Netflix, which at the time had several successful productions to its name including *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*, proved to be the perfect location for *Stranger Things*.

The complex serial drama is currently one of the most costly television forms to be produced making it, therefore, one of the riskiest. The subscription-funded environment has historically been receptive to the risk associated with these large investments as monthly fees generate fairly steady revenue. After all, it was HBO's pursuit of 'quality' within a populist medium that initiated a much-emulated strategy of allocating a higher budget across fewer episodes. HBO's *Game of Thrones* began with a budget of US\$6 million per episode, but as the programme has continued and its popularity increased, the budget for each episode grew to well over US\$10 million in later seasons (Smith 2018: 75). Additionally, as a service that not only operates on a subscription-funded income but also one that employs non-linear distribution methods, Netflix's environment is ideally situated to emulate the narrative structures of successful cable dramas (such as *Game of Thrones*) and experiment with increased serialisation. Evidently, the first and second seasons of *Stranger Things* have eight and nine episodes respectively, with a reported budget of US\$6 million per episode on the first season, and US\$8 million on the second (Ryan and Littleton 2017). When comparing the above figures of *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things* with broadcast drama budgets, the disparities are significant. In a

broadcast environment episodes per season are typically greater than 20 and budgets tend not to exceed US\$4 million per episode (Smith 2018: 75). By allocating higher budgets across fewer episodes, cable and IDTV services are better able to produce the complex serial drama most receptive to subscription platforms.

The monthly fee entailed by the deployment of a subscription model has remained a relatively efficient way of mitigating potentially small audience shares against expensive productions. Typically, programmes originated for US premium cable networks have received smaller audiences than those produced for US broadcast television. For example, HBO's *Big Little Lies* received 2.1 million US viewers during the premiere episode (Andreeva 2017). Although it may seem a lot, this figure is still low compared to US broadcast network standards, which can draw regular audiences well over five times the size of *Big Little Lies* (Fitzgerald 2019). Audience figures produced by cable television, while comparatively small, are sustainable because in a subscription-based environment, audience ratings are less indicative of success than monthly subscriber 'churn' rates. Even programmes that return lower audience shares are still considered successful as long as audiences find value in the service and remain subscribed to the network month upon month.

An alignment with these approaches and assumptions is evident by Netflix's tendency to promote its service as curatorial and highly customisable so that its brand is not reliant on a single programme. That is not to say that its original programmes are unable to reach large amounts of people, on the contrary, digital ratings company, Parrot Analytics, as mentioned previously has estimated the average "demand expressions" for *Stranger Things* to be close to 58.8 million in the United States alone during the year of 2017 (2018: 15). Because Netflix does not release its own viewership figures these 'demand expressions' are compiled and weighted based on digital data that reflects an audiences' "desire, engagement and viewership" of the programme (Parrot Analytics 2018: 63). If valid, the data recorded by 'demand expressions' highlights *Stranger Things* mass appeal despite an environment known for its

high individualisation of user profiles. This would suggest *Stranger Things* is exemplary of Netflix's 'conglomerated niche' strategy, an approach that Lotz describes as one that "does not license or develop a series with the expectation that all Netflix viewers will value it, but develops offerings with distinct segments of subscribers in mind" (2017: 26). The non-linear conditions of IDTV provide increased opportunity for Netflix to reach greater audiences across multiple taste categories. In support of this assertion, the 'row art' used to promote *Stranger Things* can be influenced by a subscriber's previous viewing habits as evidenced in Chapter 2. As *Stranger Things* foregrounds several genres (predominantly horror, coming of age, and science fiction), data indicating previous preferences determines which image of the show is used on an individual's interface (Chandrashekar et al 2017). By targeting the same content to multiple taste groups, *Stranger Things* exemplifies the conglomerated niche marketing strategy that distinguishes the Netflix service.

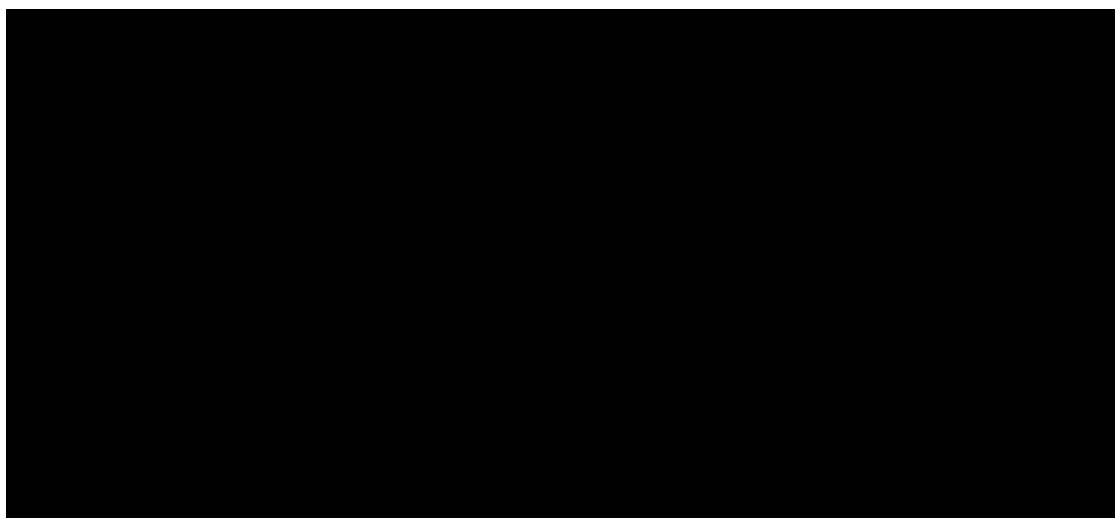


Figure 3.7: Lawn sign in support of Reagan's presidential bid outside the Wheeler's house in "MADMAX" (2:1)

In order to pursue a global audience, Netflix must ensure that the programmes it commissions have international appeal. While Netflix continues to partake in transnational co-production opportunities with programmes such as *Anne with an E* (2017–) and *The End of the F***ing World* (2018–), there is also an imperative for its American productions to appeal to international audiences, not least because these exclusive originals are what draws subscribers to sign up

to the service. Even though *Stranger Things* is set in an American town, its deployment of what Jenner terms a “‘transnational’ version of history”, ensures it can be viewed, and more importantly, enjoyed, by Netflix’s near-global audience (2018: 229). As Ryan Twomey (2018) argues, “*Stranger Things* could have been set in any small town, in any part of eighties America, and our interpretation and reception of the series would remain the same” (42). Its emphasis of a specific time period and not a specific geographic location ensures *Stranger Things* is relatable to an international audience. The 1980s decade is primarily evoked through its numerous intertextual references, many of which are themselves internationally recognisable. The decision to exclusively reference iconic 80s cinema is one that contributes to *Stranger Things*’ international acclaim. The *Star Wars* (1977–), and *Indiana Jones* (1981–) franchises, as well as, *Alien* (1979), and *Mad Max* (1979) are some of the many blockbuster films referenced in the show. *Stranger Things* is relying on the ability of its audience to recognise the texts to which it refers, and its use of pop culture phenomena offers insurance that they will. Jenner also highlights the foregrounding of supernatural elements as a strategy that avoids depictions of American-specific social and foreign politics (2018: 228). However, 1980s political affairs are not completely absent from the programme. On several occasions the programme’s young characters cycle past signs from the 1984 presidential campaign adorning the lawns of Hawkins’ residents (see fig. 3.7), and Eleven is thought by Mike’s father to be a Russian spy (1:7).

Even though *Stranger Things* is set in the 1980s, its production processes are undeniably of the 21st Century and, furthermore, a product of the platform for which it was commissioned. Aside from the above discussion on complex serial drama tendencies such as conceptual originality, transgressive central characters, and narrative seriality, the production process of *Stranger Things* is also evidence of a ‘multiplatform’ environment. When compared to standard US broadcast productions, episodes of *Stranger Things* were allocated much longer shooting schedules and were filmed two at a time over the course of 21-22 days (Dunleavy 2018: 148). The effect of such a production schedule encouraged cohesion across episodes. Only two episodes (“The Weirdo on Maple Street”

[1:2] and “Holly Jolly” [1:3]) of the first season were directed by someone other than the Duffer Brothers (that person being executive producer, Shawn Levy)⁷ resulting in a narrative and aesthetic cohesion akin to that of a feature film. The post-production process furthers this comparison as the season was edited altogether and not individually by episode. Likening the post-production process to film, one of the programme’s two editors, Kevin Ross, also acknowledges Netflix’s full season release protocol as being influential to his editing approach:

What I found working in this new Netflix mode was we mixed all the episodes in the end, in 28 straight days, so it was like a feature [film] in that way. We weren’t rushed by the stress of having to lock episodes for air. We locked them all at the end, once we saw the whole (qtd. in Marchant 2017).

Stranger Things, according to Ross, has benefited from what he terms “the new Netflix mode”, in other words, the nonlinear distribution method deployed by the network. The above comparison between *Stranger Things* and film is somewhat apt in that the Netflix service (unlike most broadcast and even cable networks) also commissions and produces feature films thus providing its original programmes with further distinction from those produced for broadcast television.

While *Stranger Things* remains a product of the era in which it was made and not in which it is set, it is still able to emulate television practices and processes of the 1980s. As Myke Bartlett (2017) affirms, “this show simply wouldn’t have existed in 1984 ... The format that *Stranger Things* adheres to, in which a single story unfolds across eight hours, didn’t really exist outside soap operas and epic historical miniseries” (20). In this sense, the creative team’s meticulous attention to detail does affect a look of the 1980s, but its production processes are uniquely suited to the distribution capabilities of the OTT network for which it was commissioned. Bartlett highlights key elements of the production that pays homage to the 1980s: “From the fuzzy VHS-like opening title, via its Stephen King-inspired logo, to its electronic score” (2016: 19). This is further evidenced in the creation of the Void. In order to create the expansive

⁷ Two further directors contributed to the second season: Andrew Stanton (“Dig Dug” [2:5] and “The Spy” [2:6]), and Rebecca Thomas (“The Lost Sister” [2:7])

black space the production team simply hung black curtains and pooled water on the floor (Matt Duffer qtd. in Hutchinson 2016). While this was for all intents and purposes technologically unsophisticated, for Ross Duffer, “it was always about going back to [a] simplicity” before CGI possibilities (ibid.). However, some have argued, the programme’s references are too cherry-picked to ever truly capture the decade properly. Bartlett likens it to a “screen equivalent of a ‘Best of the ‘80s’ CD” (2016: 21), because its evocation of the 1980s removes the audience from believing it could ever truly have been made then. As Dunleavy contends, “it is a twenty-first century production that references 1980s texts as part of its larger effort to evoke the look, feel and culture of the decade” (2018: 148). Unquestionably, the 1980s produced ground-breaking programmes, for example NBC’s *Hill Street Blues* and CBS’s *St Elsewhere* (1982–1988), the success of which later influenced programmes such as ABC’s *Twin Peaks* and *NYPD Blue*, as well as NBC’s *Homicide: Life on the Street*. No matter how successfully *Stranger Things* is able to emulate the decade in which it is set, its premise, narrative strategies, and production processes would never have been feasible on US broadcast television, which was, at the time, the only paradigm of US TV originating long-form drama.

The 21st Century approach to storytelling is further evidenced in *Beyond Stranger Things* (2017–), a companion talk show hosted by Jim Rash following the second season of *Stranger Things*. Produced by Netflix and released concurrently with the second season, the talk show features seven episodes and includes interviews with the Duffer Brothers, Shawn Levy, and a number of cast members. *Beyond Stranger Things* is most similar to a new iteration of the talk show format pioneered by cable network AMC through the programme, *Talking Dead* (2011–). Several other similar programmes have also been produced including AMC’s *Talking Bad* (2013), A&E’s *Bates Motel: After Hours* (2014–2017), as well as HBO’s short-lived *After the Thrones* (2016). Typically, these ‘aftershow’ air directly after an episode of their respective companion programme, discuss events pertaining directly to that episode and often feature a live audience. Based on that alone, there are significant differences between *Beyond Stranger Things* and the above talk shows. In accordance with the binge-consumption model Netflix encourages, original programmes are released as a whole season and beyond the

purview of a linear schedule, as a result of this the 'aftershow' format is somewhat redundant. A viewer may mistake the 'aftershow' series as being intended to watch episodically, alternating with episodes from the second series of *Stranger Things*, but this was not the intended order. The potential for viewers to watch the series incorrectly was probable enough for a warning to be given at the start of the first episode by Rash, "if you are watching this before you have watched *all* of season two you have done it wrong and you are doing it wrong" ("Mind Blown"). Furthermore, where AMC's 'aftershow' seek connection with the audience, *Beyond Stranger Things* re-asserts the authorial power of the original show's creators, the Duffer Brothers. Although *Beyond Stranger Things* does not actively encourage fan participation, there are many discussion boards and fan-generated forums that users can seek out in order to engage with like-minded fans.

The processes described above are not only indicative of a 21st Century approach to storytelling, but are also specific to how Netflix as an OTT service produces programmes that are distinct from those available on broadcast or cable television. This is particularly evident in the post-production process, which *Stranger Things* editor, Kevin Ross, likens to that of feature film. Not only does the platform allow for the simultaneous release of episodes, but the subscriber-funded environment also facilitates greater risk in terms of budget allocation and global reach.

Conclusions

Stranger Things is exemplary of the 'complex serial drama' as set out by Dunleavy (2018). Mitigating the long confinement of US-originated dramas to advertiser-funded broadcast networks and assisted by the different imperatives and economics for US subscription-funded networks, premium cable channels, beginning with HBO, originated and refined the complex serial drama form. Unlike broadcast networks that seek to maximise ratings per episode and are economically reliant on advertising revenue, US cable networks, and more recently, OTT services, ensures the feasibility of a full or partial reliance on

monthly fees which reduces or eliminates the influence of advertisers on the concept, content, and narrative structure of TV drama.

Situating Eleven as the central character allows for greater exploration into the nature of transgressive, enigmatic characters in complex serial dramas, a role that has predominantly been inhabited by older male characters. As both a female and a child, the character of Eleven represents a risk by deviating from the character archetypes who habitually occupy this role. This departure was a key factor in the rejection of *Stranger Things* when it was initially pitched to other networks. Eleven is the catalyst of the programme and progresses the narrative through a deep psychological investigation. Her psychokinetic powers ensure she is the connection between the real world and the USD, furthermore, her powers ensure she is the only person capable of closing the gate between them. Any moral deviancy, of which she is guilty, is often justified through comparison to those around her. Shadow creatures, Dr. Brenner, and even Kali, provide enough villainy to ensure Eleven remains, at worst, morally ambiguous.

The narrative structure of *Stranger Things* presents a serialised storyline that unfolds across seasons and not episodes. Rather than cycling through moments of conflict and resolution, the narrative of *Stranger Things* tends to build steadily toward a climactic end. Episodes end at points of high tension to encourage the binge-viewing culture for which Netflix is known. The complexity of *Stranger Things* is explored through narrative deviations and explicit references to texts of the 1980s. By evoking well-known texts and casting recognisable celebrities, intertextuality within *Stranger Things* could be little more than pastiche, but its delicate handling has resulted in intertextual self-referentiality.

Stranger Things explores the 1980s with a decidedly contemporary production process. The level of seriality and complexity present in *Stranger Things* would simply not have been feasible in programmes produced in the 1980s. The intertextual references to pop culture films are plentiful, and yet the self-reflexive nature of these means that many of these references are

reconceptualised and reinterpreted for its modern viewer. This act of transformation turns what might have been considered pastiche or mimicry into an homage to the programme's generic predecessors. Such an understanding is dependent on an audience's literacy and knowledge of the films that it references.

As demonstrated, *Stranger Things* indeed operates as a complex serial drama. The programme, which was originated for Netflix, has seen two successful seasons produced with a third in production. *Stranger Things* has been nominated for several industry awards and won at the 2017 Screen Actors Guild for 'Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble Cast'. Not only has it achieved success critically, but also commercially. While Netflix does not release viewing figures, third party sites have estimated the popularity of *Stranger Things* as evidenced in its digital impact analysed by Parrot Analytics (2018). This analysis highlights the effectiveness of an internet platform in its promotion and dissemination of content and the success of the programme as a complex serial drama. Even though Netflix undertook a risk many other networks were unwilling to take when it commissioned *Stranger Things*, the eventual success the programme achieved has further solidified Netflix's significant position within the current 'multiplatform' environment.

Conclusion

The emergence of internet-only portals heralded predictions of television's demise, yet the burgeoning 'platformisation' of networks has not been the death of TV but has instead affected evolution. Within the past two decades, the emergence of internet-distributed television has caused significant disruption to the US television industry and challenged long-held cultural beliefs surrounding both commissioning practices and viewing behaviours. The success of internet delivery services has resulted in further audience fragmentation, yet it is no longer only the domain of OTT services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon. Most broadcast and cable networks now offer their own internet portals supplementary to the traditional broadcast and satellite transmission already available. Advertiser-sponsored portals, such as CWTV, as well as subscription-funded portals, for example HBO Now and FX Shudder, are symptomatic of the evolutionary disruption caused by internet-only portals. It is therefore no surprise a new era of television has been ushered in as the US industry continues to adapt to technological advancements and streaming capabilities. The resulting co-existence of US broadcast, cable, and IDTV services is best described by the term 'multiplatform' (Dunleavy 2018: 11).

The institutional context from which IDTV emerged was one that already included subscription-funded services in the form of 'premium' cable networks but was limited by the finite capacity of a linear schedule. As Chapter 1 explores, the deployment of a subscription system revolutionised US television whose mostly commercial networks offered content supported by the sale of advertising space. This resulted in the confinement of US television viewers and TV programmes to linear schedules and time-slots loaded with commercial breaks. Importantly, the subscription-funded model deployed by 'premium' networks is not subject to either the interruptions arising from commercial breaks or to the range of creative influences that accompany the necessity for advertiser-funded networks to also foster consumption in the design of their

programmes. Another important distinction for cable networks – this applying to both ‘premium’ and ‘basic’ examples and also to internet-distributed TV services – is their freedom from the content restrictions upheld by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This has resulted in the commissioning of programmes that depict the kinds of graphic violence, nudity, and profanity not permitted on US broadcast TV. While these regulations have an evident effect on programme content, the effects of a network’s economic model can also be observed in the form and content of its original drama. Emerging on premium cable network HBO and then expanding first to basic cable providers and later to IDTV networks, this non-broadcast US television environment allowed new strategies and commercial objectives to inform the commissioning and creation of long-form television drama. An important outcome of these changes, as Dunleavy (2018) argues, was the emergence and proliferation of the ‘complex serial’ form.

Advertiser-funded networks, such as US broadcast channels, have often relied on a “safety first” approach to commissioning television drama (Gitlin 1994: 63). This is to maximise audience numbers because success on broadcast television is determined by ratings. Programmes commissioned for an advertiser-funded schedule are characterised by their schedule longevity (up to 24 episodes per season), the ‘segmentalisation’ of their episodes (a narrative structural response to the regular interruption of commercial breaks), and the duration of their episodes (40-42 minutes in a commercial hour). While these features have proved successful for advertiser-funded broadcast television, such restrictions are not necessary on subscription-funded channels. Programmes commissioned for networks that deploy a subscription model are typified by their ‘seriality’ (Dunleavy 2009) and ‘slow-burn’ (Smith 2018) approach to narrative. The capability of US cable channels to produce a different form and style for their original drama content was first evident in programmes such as HBO’s *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. OTT services that deploy a subscription-funding model are also commissioning high-end dramas and these are emulating the form and style of dramas created for US cable networks.

The commercial risks associated with commissioning original programmes are to some extent mitigated by the reliability of a system that collects monthly fees regardless of the popularity of an individual programme. It is this context that enabled Netflix to 'green-light' *Stranger Things* when many other cable channels had already 'passed' on the opportunity. The Duffer Brothers indicated it was their foregrounding of pre-teen characters, the foremost of which is the twelve-year-old girl, Eleven, that most concerned networks who rejected the show when it was pitched to them (Grow 2016). Some of these networks suggested that the Duffer Brothers revise their concept to foreground Hopper, Hawkins' Police Chief (ibid.). This would have highlighted a male character whose individual flaws make him very similar to the primary characters of such successful cable-commissioned dramas as *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. However, the Duffers resolved to maintain Eleven's central role despite the considered risk of this approach and continued trying to find a suitable host network.

As explored in Chapter 2, the feature that most emphasises Netflix's cultural impact on the US television industry is the capabilities of an online delivery system. Lotz (2017) identifies a 'conglomerated niche' strategy, which enables Netflix to serve a global audience by offering programmes designed to appeal to niche groups within its large number of markets (26-27). Customer experience and increased autonomy are vital components in the cultivation of a Netflix brand and this is less dependent on the offer of distinctive programmes than it is on a particularly flexible viewing experience. To achieve this, vast amounts of data are collected every time a subscriber is active on the service. This data allows Netflix to organise its viewers into "taste communities" from which it can promote content that an individual viewer is most expected to enjoy (Adalian 2018). Conversely, if the data indicates a viewer is unlikely to be receptive to a particular show, Netflix will not feature it on his or her profile (Curtin et al 2014: 138). It is through Netflix's pursuit of a global audience, its deployments of a 'conglomerated niche' strategy, and the additional reassurances offered by the audience data it collects from each of its subscribers

that some of the usual commercial risks in the commissioning of new and untested programmes are reduced.

Although *Stranger Things* uses narrative strategies that are common to both US broadcast and cable television, the manner in which it is distributed highlights several key distinctions between non-linear delivery systems and traditional linear schedules. As a means of enticing viewers to return to a programme after an advertisement break and/or the following week, ‘cliffhangers’ have occupied a significant role in the narratives of American broadcast television. It is important to emphasise that while some of the strategies Netflix deploys may be conventional, the manner in which its programmes are delivered to viewers has facilitated and encouraged some new viewing practices. The full-season release protocol that Netflix pioneered imbues the familiar cliffhanger strategy with greater significance. By releasing the season as a whole, as opposed to releasing a new episode each week, the viewer gains greater control over their access to and consumption of programmes. DVR and DVD technologies were previously the only means to a greater flexibility of viewing that had been otherwise offered by linear television. Yet, even these alternatives were only available in the period following the initial transmission of a new episode or season. The full-season release of Netflix-originated programmes eschews the viewing practices associated with a linear schedule and encourages ‘binge’ consumption. The cliffhanger ending prevalent on Netflix-originated dramas like *Stranger Things* effectively facilitates ‘binge’ culture by ending episodes at a point of high tension. In this way, and while they can choose to limit their viewing to one episode at a time, viewers are enticed to watch the next episode and the automatic play function swiftly facilitates this.

The ‘architecture’ of the Netflix portal along with its menu-oriented delivery system maximises the opportunity for viewers to rapidly consume content by means of ‘binge-watching’. The functionality of this portal and service also invites viewers to return to this content as often as they desire. Dunleavy (2018) asserts that “re-watchability” is a common feature of ‘complex serial’ dramas and that internet distribution works to further encourage this practice

(149). Narrative complexity tends to incite re-watching especially when used in serial dramas. This is because the unfolding of many storylines across multiple seasons is a narrative practice that foregrounds the importance of information that may have seemed insignificant or confusing when first revealed. The motivations behind Eleven's actions in *Stranger Things*, for example, are revealed via flashbacks that do not occur in chronological order but are instead revealed intermittently throughout the first two seasons. The ability of the viewer to re-watch episodes, and more specifically, to return to a scene within a particular episode, is facilitated by Netflix's delivery system. Its large menu-like offer of programmes allows Netflix subscribers to control what, when, and how they watch. This means that information dispersed through a given narrative can be re-visited with retrospective understanding, thus the intrinsic narrative value that a given flashback may hold is accessible once again to the viewer. Therefore, repeat viewing practices are more effectively executed by the 'architecture' of the Netflix portal than have been otherwise achieved, for example, through the purchase of a DVD.

Netflix's rapid subscriber growth both within and well beyond the American market is indicative of the increased 'platformisation' (Evens and Donders 2018: 1) and continuing market fragmentation of television's industry and audiences that has signalled the 'multiplatform' era. There are several IDTV services besides Netflix, most markedly Amazon Prime, which also targets international viewers. However, Netflix's near-global penetration means that it is not only competing for international viewers against American OTT portals, but it is also competing for viewers within the domestic markets of each country in which it operates. This competition has resulted in several strategies that aim to continue Netflix's global subscriber growth. First, the commissioning of content that can be enjoyed by a global audience; second, the arrangement of several 'transnational' co-production opportunities; and finally, the acquisition and re-transmission of programmes from non-US TV markets. These strategies are crucial to Netflix's pursuit of a near-global audience. However, in order to maintain its strong position in non-US markets, Netflix must accommodate the regulations imposed upon it. For instance, the EU requires Netflix's European

services carry programming that is 30 per cent European (Jenner 2018: 189). These strategies provide ways to mitigate increasing competition for acquired programmes as more networks remove their content from Netflix's portal in order to create their own (see Disney+ and FX Shudder).

As the winner of several prestigious primetime Emmy awards, *Stranger Things* provides an exemplar of the type of 'complex serial' drama that Netflix commissions. *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Crown*, and *Ozark* are among some of Netflix's other critically acclaimed dramas and these also use the 'complex serial' form. Bearing in mind that conceptual originality is a characteristic of 'complex serial' drama (Dunleavy 2018: 106-109), each of the above programmes could hardly be more conceptually different from the others. *House of Cards* depicts a ruthlessly ambitious congressman; *Orange is the New Black* follows an unlikely felon who receives a 15-month prison sentence for a crime committed a decade earlier; *The Crown* portrays the early years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign; *Ozark* features a money laundering financial advisor; and *Stranger Things* depicts a series of supernatural occurrences in the otherwise quiet town of Hawkins, Indiana. While these distinctions deliver a diversity of stories, conceptual originality is only one facet of the 'complex serial drama' form, to which Dunleavy attributes six characteristics (2018: 105-106). Each of the above programmes also feature enigmatic central characters, highly serialised narrative structures, and a range of complex storytelling strategies (ibid.). Chapter 3 identifies and analyses these 'complex serial' strategies in *Stranger Things* in order to demonstrate how the characteristics of 'complex serials' have been deployed by dramas originated for IDTV.

The conceptual innovation of *Stranger Things* is demonstrated in its foregrounding of a twelve-year-old girl. As explained, this deviated from the tendencies of earlier complex serials to foreground adult, usually male characters. Additionally, as with *The Sopranos* and a range of earlier complex serials, *Stranger Things* is all the more distinct because its concept and narrative involve a blending of the different genres of horror, science fiction, and coming-of-age. As Jason Mittell (2004) argues, 'generic mixing' occurs through "an

ongoing process of generic combination and interplay” (148). While the intermixing of these genres is a means to accentuate novelty, it is the programme’s overt references to iconic 1980s films categorised by these same genres that highlights *Stranger Things*’ distinctive approach. Therefore, viewers with greater generic literacy are rewarded when watching *Stranger Things*, as they are able to identify the films it so often references such as *E.T* and *The Goonies*.

Beyond Eleven’s age and gender, the deep psychological investigation that occurs throughout the first two seasons of *Stranger Things* is specifically focussed on her, thus situating Eleven as the programme’s enigmatic central character. Although Eleven is not as morally deviant as some of the complex serial drama form’s most egregious criminals (serial killer, Dexter Morgan, for instance), her willing murder of several people means she must at least be described as morally ambiguous. Despite this position, Eleven remains a compelling character, this due in part to the strategy that Mittell (2015) terms ‘relative morality’. As a narrative strategy, ‘relative morality’ ensures any transgression and moral ambiguity from the central character are juxtaposed with the actions of more villainous characters (Mittell 2015: 143). This strategy means Eleven’s actions, even if transgressive, are always morally justifiable.

The IDTV context for which *Stranger Things* was commissioned has facilitated the seriality and complexity of its storytelling. By releasing whole seasons on a single day, the assumption is that viewers can watch at their own pace whether this is through ‘binge-viewing’ or re-watching episodes. The objectives of subscription-funded and/or non-broadcast networks have been highly conducive to the deployment of long-form, serialised, and narratively complex original dramas. It is no surprise then that Netflix’s economic model, as well as the flexibilities of its internet-distributed, non-linear menu have encouraged the deployment of these same features for use in Netflix’s original dramas.

Netflix inhabits a significant role in the US television industry as demonstrated by its commissioning of successive acclaimed dramas, all of which entail the use of 'complex serial' characteristics. As a brand, its online delivery system and the volume of content available on its portal distinguish Netflix more than the characteristics of individual programmes. Yet, Netflix has committed itself to a much larger supply of original programmes and this seems crucial to its effective response to the ongoing tendency for other TV networks to develop their own OTT services through which they can deliver original content via the internet. Netflix's commitment to originals is evident in the US\$15 billion that it is expected to spend on content in 2019 (Spangler 2019). One strategy that Netflix deploys to entice people to subscribe is by holding the exclusive distribution rights to every one of the programmes it commissions. Therefore, the programmes Netflix originates must also be devised to appeal to the near-global audience to whom they will be available. While *Stranger Things* is an American production and depicts a mid-western American town, it is ultimately a programme designed for appeal to an international audience. As Jenner (2018) observes, the numerous intertextual references that *Stranger Things* deploys, some of which include the *Star Wars* franchise and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, are inherently global in their widespread popularity as opposed to addressing a mainly American audience (229). The 1980s setting provides a distinct social milieu from which to investigate such topics as gender politics and technological changes. Importantly, these are evocative of a specific historical period as distinct from a specific geographic location thus insuring international accessibility (Jenner 2018: 228).

As evidenced, increasing platformisation has resulted in the success of globally ambitious IDTV services, with notable examples in Netflix and Amazon Prime. However, Netflix's rapid growth, distribution methods, and commissioning strategies demonstrate its specific institutional and cultural significance for the international television industry. Netflix and its original programmes are helping to redefine historical notions of what 'television' is and to reconceptualise rituals of television consumption by increasing the viewer's control. *Stranger Things*, originated by Netflix in 2016, is an exemplary addition

to the 'complex serial drama' form and highlights the commissioning capabilities of the service in general. Given the still expanding nature of television's multiplatform operation and the intensity of related inter-network competition, Netflix's ability to remain successful in the future, as it has been in the recent past, will rely on its ability to continue to offer a large volume and variety of programmes. Within this supply there will need to be an increasing proportion of shows directly commissioned by Netflix, as distinct from those purchased from other networks. As one of the most successful original dramas that Netflix has commissioned thus far, *Stranger Things* provides a strong indication of the significant potential contributions of IDTV-originated long-form drama to television's multiplatform environment.

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