

Turning the Exorcist's Heteropatriarchal Order 'Upside Down' in Stranger Things

Jason Bartashius, Japan Women's University, Japan

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Abstract

The popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* is often-noted for critiquing homophobia and conservative gender norms. This paper argues that the series—primarily the second season—actively dialogues with *The Exorcist* to upend the Christian heteropatriarchal order that the film attempted to restore. In contrast to *The Exorcist's* single mother Chris MacNeil, the character Joyce Byers discredits the only known religious professional in the fictional town and demonstrates a distrust for the male scientists before herself exorcising the MindFlayer from her son Will. Whereas the demon that possesses MacNeil's daughter Regan self-identifies as the Devil, the Mind Flayer's soldier Demorgorgons physically resemble Christian depictions of Satan. But, while the Devil in *The Exorcist* functions to literally demonize Regan's lesbian sex acts, the *Stranger Things* monsters are often read as a metaphor for homophobia.

Keywords: Stranger Things, The Exorcist, Religion and Film, Christian Right, Heteropatriarchy

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Introduction

The 21st century has seen a rising fascination with Roman Catholic exorcisms. The Vatican has organized courses to train exorcists (Baglio 2009); and in the mid 2010s Pope Francis took to Twitter to confirm the Catholic belief in the literal existence of Satan in the world. In 2017 the conservative U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops arranged for the first ever English translation of the ritual handbook *Exorcisms and Related Supplications* (Mariani, 2018). Meanwhile, the hierarchy has seemingly weaponized the rite in the political realm. For instance, American exorcist John Esseff linked gender neutral child rearing to Satanism (Roberts, 2019). And, in 2013, while Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn was signing legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, Bishop Thomas Paprocki was leading an hour of prayers of “supplication and exorcism in reparation for the sin of same-sex marriage” (Roewe 2013).

These incidents echo the conservative gender and sexuality ideologies embedded in *The Exorcist* (1973). The narrative of the film, and the novel by the same title, centers on the diabolical possession of Regan MacNeil, a 12-year-old girl. After psychiatrists prove unable to cure Regan, her mother, Chris—a divorcee atheist—beckons a Jesuit priest to perform an exorcism. In one of the most infamous scenes Regan is seen masturbating with a crucifix and pushing her mother’s head between her legs. The narrative concludes with the priests, representatives of patriarchy, restoring Regan’s normalcy. The film has been read as an indictment on both feminism and homosexuality (McCormick 1974; Scahill 2010).

This paper argues that *Stranger Things 2*—released in 2018 against the backdrop of the recent resurgent interest in exorcisms—actively dialogues with *The Exorcist* to affectively upend the heteropatriarchal order the film sought to restore. The protagonist, Joyce Byers performs an exorcism without the aid of any male Christian ritualists for her son Will. Moreover, rather than being associated with homosexuality, the monster that possesses the boy has been interpreted as a metaphor for homophobia (Reynolds 2016; 2017; Roach 2018). Upon delineating the ways by which the *Stranger Things* narrative subversively engages *The Exorcist*, I conclude this discussion with an examination of how the series simultaneously dialogues with past and present socio-political contexts.

Intertextual References to *The Exorcist*

Much of the discussion surrounding the immensely popular 80s nostalgia series *Stranger Things* focuses on the extensive pop culture references belonging to that decade. However, the series also engages a number of 70s classic horror texts. To date, the series’ engagement with *The Exorcist* (1973) has received scant attention. Tracey Mollet (2019) only gives passing mention to references to *The Exorcist* found in the conclusion of *Stranger Things 2* (ST 2.9)—specifically Will Byers’s change in personality as he becomes possessed, his thrashing while bound to a bed as well as the actual purging of the Shadow Monster/MindFlayer from Will’s body. However, numerous other allusions can be found throughout the second season—if not the entirety of the series (e.g the flickering of electrical lights signals the presence of the demon/monster.)

For instance, like *The Exorcist*'s Regan, Will is also artistic (and viewers are presented with multiple glimpses of Will/Regan's drawings). Prior to learning of Will/Regan's possession, the respective child's single mother Joyce/Chris is seen either preparing a bath for or bathing the child. Room and body temperature also figure prominently in both of the narratives. Scenes capture a cold draft coming from Will/Regan's bedroom window and both children report being inflicted by burning sensations.¹ Further, both possessed characters attempt to call out for rescue: Will uses Morris Code; Regan etches the word 'help' on her stomach. In sum, the prevalent references invite interpretation as to how *Stranger Things* actively dialogues with *The Exorcist*. This paper argues that the Netflix series subverts the conservative Christian gender and sexuality ideologies embedded in *The Exorcist*.

William Blatty, author of the novel *The Exorcist* and the screenplay by the same title, insisted on the actual presence of Satan in the world and a literal interpretation of Catholic doctrine (Wehner 2013). Not surprisingly, then, the demon in the narrative self-identifies as the Devil and his presence is linked, if not equated, with transgressive behavior (lesbian sex acts) or life situations (single motherhood) that deviate from conservative Catholic notions of gender, marriage and sexuality.² Thus the exorcism performed by male priests symbolically justifies, and attempts to restore, the Christian heteropatriarchal order. In contrast, the *Stranger Things* monsters—which physically resemble Satan—are metaphoric for both homophobia and conservative Reagan era gender norms. Moreover, the exorcism is conducted not by male Catholic priests but by a single mother.

The Heroic Priest-Exorcist to the Single Mother-Exorcist

When interviewed for a feature in *The Atlantic*, Matthew Schmalz explained that alongside immigrant Catholics' requests for exorcisms, concerns over the declining priesthood may help explain the recent institutional interest in promoting the rite (Koningisor 2011). Put simply, aspiring priests may find appealing authorized power to fight supernatural demonic forces. The film *The Rite* (2011) resurrects the trope of the exorcist-priest as hero that dates back to *The Exorcist*. Michael Cuneo (2001) argues that *The Exorcist* countered negative portrayals of Catholic priests by depicting the Jesuits as heroic:

From their first appearance in the novel to their climactic deaths, it was clear that Blatty's two Jesuit exorcists were meant to be regarded, for all their human frailty, as mythically heroic figures. . . In the winter of 1973 *The Exorcist* was released as a movie under the same title, and Blatty's Jesuit exorcists proved every bit as commanding on film as they had in print.³

The priests' authority, however, is dependent on the film's women characters appearing "passive, helpless and lost in a cruel world without male help and guidance"

¹ The *Stranger Things* monster demands that the temperature be kept cold. In contrast, the demon of *The Exorcist* appears to be the cause of the host's chilled environment. During the exorcisms Regan/Devil is burned by holy water and Will/MindFlayer by the sauna room temperature.

² These associations are more pronounced in the novel. Stephen E. Bowles (1976, p. 209) summarizes notable omissions from the adaptation: "In the book, the demon attacks Sharon for her sexual fantasies concerning Father Karras and continually abuses Chris for the predominance of her divorce and career."

³ Similarly, Kelly J. Wyman (2004) notes the "Christ-like" powers of the *The Exorcist*'s priest-exorcists.

(McCormick 1974, p. 21). The patriarchal tone of the narrative is arguably more pronounced in the novel. Take, for instance, Blatty's description of Chris' sense of relief upon meeting Father Merrin: "She'd been watching him, glowing with relief at the sense of decision and direction and command sweeping into the house like sun-drenched day" (1971 [2011], p. 327). Ultimately, Chris depends on the two Jesuit priests to rescue her daughter.

In *Stranger Things 2*, Joyce Byers stands in for Chris MacNeil. Like Chris, Joyce is also a single mother with a possessed child. However, Joyce does not rely on priest-exorcists (the series is largely devoid of Christian symbols and characters) and distrusts the male scientists in charge of treating her son Will. In this regard, a scene in season one might be read as foreshadowing how the series will subversively dialogue with *The Exorcist*. When her ex-husband Lonnie suggests she go to a "shrink" or "Pastor Charles" for counseling, Joyce retorts aghast: "They can't help" (ST 1.5). Despite being subjected to gaslighting the woman protagonists, particularly Joyce and Eleven who play essential roles in conducting the exorcism, tend to be more adept in combatting the monsters of the Upside Down (Jackson Joseph 2018).

Homophobia: The Work of the Devil

The 'Upside Down' in the *Stranger Things* narrative is a parallel universe that reflects the dark realities of the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. The realm is overtaken by other-worldly vines, threatening organic matter and the echoing screeches of preying monsters. This mirror image of Hawkins invites interpretation as to what plagues the town. The prevalence of homophobic bullies prompted Daniel Reynolds (2016; 2017) to argue that "homophobia is the real monster in *Stranger Things*." In a similar vein, Emily E. Roach suggests the possibility of reading "the Upside Down as a metaphor for the threat of homophobia" (2018, p. 144). These assertions demand a closer examination of the Upside Down and the creatures that reside there. Liesl E. King (2017, p. 11) describes the former in relation to the Christian Hell and the Demogorgon monsters as resembling Satan:

Although the Bible does not depict a humanoid satanic figure, popular versions of the devil picture it as part human, part-creature, and Revelations offers up the anti-Christ in the form of a many headed beast, suggestive of Dustin's Dungeons and Dragons' term for the creature—"Demogorgon". Although our beast is not many-headed, it takes many forms. . . This shape-shifting beast which emerges from a murky, underground space is suggestive of the evil being that resides in the biblical story of Hell, which artists such as Fra Angelico (c 1431) have depicted as a nightmarish space filled with humans enduring on-going terror and torture.

King's argument is bolstered by Nancy Wheeler telling the monster to "go to hell" while shooting it with a pistol in season one's finale (ST 1.8). The damnation is repeated numerous times and is not reserved exclusively for the Upside Down creatures. For instance, Joyce, while detained, tells her captor Dr. Brenner—a scientist whose practices allude to discredited psychiatric gay conversion therapies (Roach 2018, p. 139)—to "go to hell" (ST.1.8).

As noted, the demon in *The Exorcist* self-identifies as the Devil and while possessed Regan performs a lesbian sex act—when Chris discovers Regan masturbating with a crucifix, Regan pushes Chris’ head in between her legs yelling “Lick Me! Lick Me!” Andrew Scahill (2010, p. 47) observes: “the film uses lesbianism in the traditional horror film manner: to make the monster more monstrous, the threat more threatening, and the crisis more critical.” *Stranger Things*, however, associates the monster with homophobia (and the policing of gender norms) rather than homosexuality. The resemblance of the Demogorgon with depictions of Satan coupled with the implicit equating of the Upside Down with the Christian Hell provides further invitation to read the text as inverting *The Exorcist*’s messaging on gender and sexuality.

Revisiting Reagan Era Satanic Scares and Ex-Gay Christian Exorcisms

The final episode of *Stranger Things 3* closes with a direct reference to the Satanic scares of the 1980s when a local news broadcaster proffers sensationalized speculation that government conspiracy or Satanism might explain the bizarre happenings in Hawkins (ST 3.8). Relevant to the present discussion are the moral panics that respectively surrounded Ouija boards and Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). In *The Exorcist*, prior to being diabolically possessed Regan is seen playing with a Ouija board to communicate with an imaginary friend named Captain Howdy. Subsequently, Christian exorcists in the United States asserted that experimentation with Ouija boards, the occult or Asian religions function as entry points for demons (Cuneo 2001; Mariani 2018). D&D, another game conservative Christians associated with Satanism, features prominently in *Stranger Things* (Waldron 2005). The role playing game, however, does not function as a means for the monster to enter Hawkins. Quite the opposite is true. Will and his friends use D&D as a conceptual tool kit to understand the Upside Down and battle the monsters. This aligns with 21st century positive evaluations of D&D that focus on its therapeutic effects and potential to help youth develop skill sets (Wetmore 2018).

The game also provides players with a space for gender exploration (Mussett 2014), which is significant considering that Will—and other characters—have been read as queer (Roach 2018). Aside from passing suggestions that Will might be gay, his sexuality remains ambiguous.⁴ However, it is clear that he is unable to conform to the hetero/(hyper)masculine ideals that his father Lonnie and the residents of Hawkins impose on him and his friends. Roach observes the relation between the homophobic bullying the boys are subjected to and their perceived lacking in masculinity. This is especially evident in season one when Joyce tells police chief Jim Hopper that Will is missing. Roach (p.136) describes the scene:

When she talks to Hopper about Will’s disappearance she highlights his sensitivity and explains how that resulted in homophobic bullying. She says Will is ‘not like you. He’s not like me. He’s not like most’ and suggests that her ex-husband, Lonnie, ‘used to say he was queer, called him a fag’ (ST.1.1).

⁴ The most direct inference occurs when Mike says to Will: “It’s not my fault you don’t like girls” (ST 3.3).

Since the monsters are metaphoric for homophobia,⁵ Will's exorcism can be understood as an emotional healing ritual performed in response to the homophobic bullying he is subjected to. In the preliminary stage of the exorcism Will's family and friends attempt to communicate with him to stop the monster from taking his life. Towards this end, loved ones share stories with Will to keep him from succumbing to the monster. Roach details the allusion to the LGBT rainbow in this scene.

When Will is struggling against the Shadow Monster that possesses him, his mother keeps him tethered by recalling his drawing of a rainbow ship and her pride at his work. This juxtaposition of rainbows and pride creates another connection between Will and a symbol of political significance to LGBT communities (2018, p. 137).

In Christian exorcisms, holy objects (e.g. crucifixes) are used by priests to control the demon (Baglio 2009). Thus the LGBT rainbow essentially stands in for Christian symbols. This is significant given the history of Christian exorcisms being performed to "convert" homosexuals to heterosexuality (Ross & Stålström 1979; Cuneo 2001; Fetner 2005, p. 75). Incidents occurring during these rituals sometimes closely parallel scenes from *The Exorcist* (Scahill 2010, p. 48). Exorcisms aimed at changing individuals' sexual orientation belong to the broader Christian (evangelical) ex-gay movement that emerged in the 1970s and continued to exert its influence until the early 2010s. At the turn of the 21st century a number of prominent ex gay leaders were discovered to be gay. The largest blow to the movement came when Exodus International announced in 2013 that it would shut down (Merritt 2015).

"Conversion" or "reparative" therapies led by mental health counselors and Christian ministries are known to have caused detrimental psychological effects on participants (ibid). In contrast, Joyce's exorcism, coded as affirming Will's LGBTQ identity, restored his health. Once the Shadow Monster is cast from his body, Eleven, another queer coded character, closes the gate to the Upside Down (read: Hell), which is deep underground and depicted with fire imagery, to effectively lock the monster out of Hawkins. Of course, this is only a temporary defeat for the monsters/heteronormativity. The closing scenes of *Stranger Things 2* hint to viewers that the series will continue with the characters again being pitted against both bullies and otherworldly forces.

At the junior high Snow Ball a girl asks Will to dance. Notably she addresses Will by the same name bullies called him, "zombie boy" (ST. 2.9). Thus, the invitation coupled with the name calling reinforces the pressures to conform. Will initially appears hesitant, prompting Aviva Briefel (2019) to speculate: "maybe he really doesn't want to dance with her or any girl, for that matter." He does, however, accept the dance. The season ends though with a long shot, capturing the monsters looming over the gymnasium. The ending "is protective of the kids' normalcy, establishing physical barriers—the school walls and the pavement—between their sexual discovery and the monsters out to get them" (ibid).⁶

⁵ Roach (2018, p. 138) further argues that the monster, "described with the language of disease and infection," alludes to the AIDS crisis.

⁶ Briefel argues the Snow Ball's heteronormativity is ultimately undermined by references to the prom scene in Brian De Palma's (1976) *Carrie*.

Not surprisingly, the monsters return in *Stranger Things 3*. The constant resurgence of homophobic bullying represented by demonic attacks parallels a historical trajectory. Recently, the ex-gay movement, previously noted to have relied on exorcisms to change people's sexuality, has quietly resurfaced (Merritt 2019). If past decades are any indication these ministries will likely extoll ideals of heteronormative masculinity (Robinson & Spivey 2007). (Recall Will experiences homophobic bullying due to his lacking in masculinity). Moreover, in the Trump Era the Christian Right, which was most influential in the 80s—Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority—the decade that the *Stranger Things* narrative is set in, has regained prominence. Recent emergent forms of Christian nationalism are patriarchal (Whitehead and Perry 2019) and linked to structural violence against LGBT communities (Bjork-James 2020). The series dialogues with past and present via references to Ronald Reagan, the president championed by the Moral Majority, and Donald Trump, the presidential candidate who won the white Christian evangelical vote in 2016 and 2020 (Sherwood 2020).

Conclusions

It might be tempting to consider *Stranger Things* alongside a subgenre of Euro-horror 70s exploitation films that imitated and queered the *The Exorcist*. Ian Olney (2014, p. 570) argues that this genre emerged in response to broader cultural transformations including the Women's Rights and Gay Liberation movements occurring across Europe. In contrast, to date, each installment of *Stranger Things* was released in the Trump era, a period marked by the rise (and contestation) of right wing populism and regressive gender and sexuality ideologies. Discussing how the series dialogues with 1980s mad science films, Melissa A. Kaufler (2018, p. 85) observes:

In a decade where America has become simultaneously more progressive yet horribly regressive almost simultaneously between the elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, *Stranger Things* is undeniably timely. Unlike its eighties mad science film predecessors, *Stranger Things* is a multilayered confluence of threats and subsequently, it is simply a cultural reflection of what the 2010s are: the 1980s all over again only with more threats and more uncertainty and more weaponization and exploitation.

The series makes (in)direct references to both Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump and thus can (as Kaufler suggests) be read as engaging the socio-political milieu of the 80s and late 2010s. Reagan re-election campaign yard signs code characters as either oblivious to the Upside Down (e.g. Karan and Ted Wheeler) or as bullies—including the teens that taunt Will in the trick or treating scene. The children trick or treat in an upper middle class neighborhood. As Will approaches a house with a Reagan/Bush '84 sign displayed prominently in front of the driveway he is confronted by teenagers who call him "freak" and "zombie boy." Accosted, Will drops his handheld camcorder—a device that alludes to AIDS activism (Roach 2018, p. 142)—falls down and slips into the other world of the Upside Down (ST 2.2). The incident is all caught on video and given more prominence to the narrative when Joyce spots in the footage (in front of the bullies and the yard sign) the monster looming in the sky (ST 2.3). The scene links, or rather equates, homophobia and Reaganism with the monster. Joyce presses pause to examine the outline of the monster *and* to give viewers a chance to reflect on the horrific anti-gay rhetoric of the Moral Majority signified by the yard sign and made monstrous by the Mind Flayer.

Ironically, Scahill's subversive queer reading of *The Exorcist* offers insights as to how *Stranger Things* subverts the 70s horror classic in the context of the 80s and 2010s. Invoking John Rechy's notion of queer rage, Scahill (2010, p. 49) theorizes the appeal of *The Exorcist* to queer spectators:

Central in this film is rage—rage directed at the psychiatric, the medical, the parental, and the religious. It shares a common terrain with queer rage, so rarely expressed—tinged with blood, with shit, with cum, with pus, with vomit, with disease, with every other bodily abjection that the social order links to queerness—and turned upon their oppressors, saturating them in the disgusting volition of its own displaced aggression. Recall the bodily abjection called upon by John Rechy to characterize queer rage. For desire that has been repeatedly and systematically demonized by the agents of heteronormative order, perhaps the most pleasurable response is to join with the forces of hell and wage a hedonistically destructive war (Scahill 2010, p. 49).

Of course, the *Stranger Things* protagonists don't "join with the forces of hell" but rather rage against these forces that are recast in the series as homophobic and misogynistic—or to borrow Rechy's term the embodiment of "heterosexual fascism" (1978, p.231). Scahill examines queer fan discourses surrounding *The Exorcist* "wherein Regan always still remembers and is held unrescued in an perverse state of possessive transgressive erotic power." In the case of *Stranger Things*, however, mainstream viewers are invited to hope for Will's rescue from the pressures to conform. To be clear, rage is not eroticized in *Stranger Things* as it is in Rechy's *Sexual Outlaw* or in the fantasies of *The Exorcist*'s fandom. In the Netflix series, anger figures into Will's rescue mission as well as the self survival of the other marginalized characters just as it does in Rechy's accounts of aiding victims of hate crimes.

The battles with the monsters/bullies provide a subtext that not only critiques Reaganism but also alludes to resistance against Trumpism. The 80s merge with the present when *Stranger Things 3* introduces two blond, tan, male characters—Mayor Kline and the *Hawkins Post* editor Bruce—that (un)deniably⁷ allude to Donald Trump. Mayor Kline has real estate deals with Russia and re-election signage with formatting that resembles that of MAGA yard signs (Bradley 2019). Moreover at his American flag flanked Fourth of July festival he poses with young (teenage?) beauty contestants. On the other hand, Bruce bears a strikingly close physical resemblance to a young Trump and exhibits obscene displays of sexism in the office by taunting teen protagonist Nancy Wheeler (Clarke 2019).

Battles with these Trump-like characters signify and protest the structural violence imposed by Trumpism. LGBTQ rights have been jeopardized by Trump appointed "judges friendly to the Christian Right" (Poshner 2020). The administration has banned

⁷ The Duffer Brothers and actor Cary Elwes have denied fans' suspicions that the show was commenting on the Trump administration (Bradley 2019). These dismissals may perhaps be attempts to help market the series to conservatives. *Stranger Things* was listed at the bottom of *Insider's* list of 27 politically divisive TV shows. Amongst surveyed viewers 33% identified as liberal and 18% as conservative (Oswald 2018). There is other evidence that *Stranger Things 3* enjoys appeal to conservatives. The Christian site *Movieguide* gave the series a positive review that among other things praises *Stranger Things* for perceived "subtle Christian references" and a "pro-capitalism worldview," but takes issue with "tidbits of feminism" and "a homosexual reference."

transgender persons from the military—and more alarming it reversed non-discriminatory policies at homeless shelters and public schools put in place to protect transgender individuals. Propelled by Trump era policies and rhetoric, fanatic anti-LGBTQ hate groups, many of which stem “from grassroots churches,” skyrocketed in 2019 (Moreau 2020). *Knowing that Kline/(Trump) ’s dealings put lives (particularly her sons’ lives) at stake in the town/(nation), Joyce sucker punches the corrupt mayor/(commander in chief)* (ST 3.7). Meanwhile, Trump posed threats to women’s reproductive rights and equal pay protections (Zoellner 2020), and his 2016 campaign mainstreamed the misogynistic sentiments of the far right. *When Nancy smashes an assailant monstrous Bruce, now an anointed monster of the Mind Flayer’s army, over the head with a fire extinguisher she intones the Stranger Things’ battle cry: “go to hell”* (ST 3.5).

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Contact email: jbartashius@gmail.com