

On Secular Spirituality in the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things*, Series 1

Liesl E. King

York St John University, England. Email: l.king@yorks.j.ac.uk

Received August 07, 2017; Revised September 12, 2017; Accepted September 17, 2017; Published September 20, 2017.

Abstract

This paper explores the way in which the Duffer Brothers' popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* draws on religious symbolism in order to create an allegorical landscape, one which invites viewers to consider the most pressing topics of our time—climate change and ideological opposition. It argues that apocalyptic sf, with its focus on urgent contemporary questions related to technological advancement, is the perfect genre for exploring secular spirituality and ethics, as it potentially impacts as well as appeals to religious and non-religious viewers alike. The paper concludes by considering the way *Stranger Things* encourages viewers to consider what a 'spiritual' response to disaster might look like, and what we might do individually and collectively to become more aware of the damaged "hyperobjects" (Morton, 2013) that surround and move through us, but which can be extremely difficult to keep in clear view.

Keywords: Netflix series, *Stranger Things*, hyperobjects, climate change, ideological opposition.

This essay focuses on the way apocalyptic narrative draws on religious themes and symbols to foreground a contemporary, secular understanding of the term "spiritual". I have selected a popular *Netflix* series in order to exemplify my argument—The Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* (2016) — as many fans of the genre will be familiar with its storyline, and like me, eagerly awaiting Series 2 which will air this coming autumn. There are many, many apocalyptic sf texts which draw on religious themes and symbols in order to highlight spiritual responses to disaster—perhaps the Wachowski Siblings' *The Matrix* (1999) is the most obvious example of these—so I would like to stress that although I am focusing on a single sf text in this paper, my aim is to inspire readers to think about how references to religion may function in a wide range of popular apocalyptic novels, films and TV series.

Arguably, the best apocalyptic science fiction features a powerfully spiritual, ethical dimension. As readers and viewers we are drawn to the genre for a range of reasons: as geopolitical rhetoric becomes increasingly adversarial, and as evidence of ecological dis-ease on a geophysical scale mounts up, many turn to apocalyptic sf for a temporary experience of catharsis. In terms of entertainment, many of us thrill to what narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan calls the "and then' principle" within fiction: successful apocalyptic sf offers up terrifying, mind-bending twists in order to stimulate our neural receptors (Rimmon-Kenan, 2003, p. 18). But if we take a moment to consider what it is that creates the science fictional "landmark" text, we might agree that success can be measured by the degree to which a novel, film or TV series fixes human nature under its forensic lens: iconic science fiction, arguably, most carefully considers "what it means to be human". Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Ursula Le

Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Ted Chiang's (and Denis Villeneuve's) *Arrival* (1998, 2016)—these texts are magnificent not just because they are well-crafted, but because they comment specifically on the ethical aspects of human decision-making. Each asks us to think about our relationship to what eco-philosopher Timothy Morton has called “hyperobjects” in some way, a category which can ultimately be summed up by everything that we are not. Morton explains that a hyperobject “could be a black hole [...], the biosphere, or the Solar System. [...] A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism” (Morton, 2013, p.1). Morton's book suggests that many of us are insufficiently conscious of our impact upon and our connection to the living world around us. Similar to Morton's warning in *Hyperobjects* (2013), religious themes and symbols within apocalyptic sf remind us to widen our sphere of awareness, to undergo a recurrent process of conscientization, through which we might awaken repeatedly and take responsibility for life outside our immediate realities. Slavov Zizek explains in *Living in the End Times* (2010) that “the spontaneous state of our daily lives is that of a lived lie, to break out of which requires a continuous struggle. The starting point for this process is to become terrified by oneself” (p. xii). This is contemporary apocalyptic sf's project: to instil terror not of the alien, or of an indefinable Other, but of a humanity that fails to comprehend its impact as a species. It is not a surprise to find that many of the most popular sf texts are those which persuade us to consider both our ethical responses to disaster and our causal relationship to disaster—literary texts such as Octavia Butler's trilogy *Xenogenesis* (1987, 1988, 1989), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013) Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach* trilogy (2014), and film and TV texts such as *Children of Men* (2006), *The Matrix* (1999), *Fringe* (2008-2013), *Orphan Black* (2013—), *The 100* (2014—) *Black Mirror* (2011—) and *Stranger Things* (2016—).

It might strike you that by using the adjectives ‘ethical’ and ‘spiritual’ in relation to sf apocalypse that the discussion begins to move beyond religious approaches. This is entirely purposeful. My argument is that persuasive and hard-hitting sf functions as one of the most important, if not the most important, vehicles for discussing spirituality and ethics in the contemporary period—at the same time that sf's religious themes and symbols signal the importance of evaluating human behaviour, they simultaneously invite responses from individuals across a wide spectrum of belief systems, including those who do not consciously ally themselves with any particular belief system at all. It is crucial that in an historic period which Morton has cheerfully entitled “the end of the world” (Morton, 2013, p. 7) we should consciously, as an artistic community, nominate some common discursive ground so that we can see where we are from an estranging, de-familiarising distance. Apocalyptic sf functions as the perfect generic candidate for this purpose: through representations of apocalypse, projections which bring diverse readers and viewers together to experience fictional experiences of crisis, loss, and terror, we can collectively observe what a “spiritual” approach to disaster might look like.

References to Christianity in Series 1, *Stranger Things*

In Series 1 of The Duffer Brothers' Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a small town in Indiana is disturbed when a twelve year old boy, Will Byers, disappears. Over the eight part series we learn that a group of scientists has been experimenting on a girl with telekinetic abilities, and in forcing her to make contact with the monstrous inhabitant of an alternate dimension she rips open a gate between our world and an “upside down” space, allowing the creature to cross over and kidnap

Will, and later, another character called Barbra. Arguably, the creators draw on symbols which evoke popular Christianity in order to flag the text's ethical concerns, inviting western viewers to consider what human beings might do in the midst of crisis by foregrounding familiar cultural terrain. Our bipedal monster is uncannily humanoid, though faceless at first until its head expands into an enormous flowering mouth, one reminiscent of a fleshy Venus fly trap. 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, seeming at times like a ghost, a giant lizard, a giant insect, and even a blood-sensing shark. 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. The upside down world in *Stranger Things* is a dark, gothic landscape which projects a mirror image of the everyday, but one in a corrupted, toxic form, drawing on sf fans' memories of *Alien*, *The Matrix* and *Stargate* since the monster entombs its living victims in organic material. We are additionally presented with a rather unlikely messiah figure in our slightly paunchy, beer swilling Chief Hopper, but messiah he is nonetheless, as he promises emphatically that he "WILL" save Will Byers. And the series ends at Christmas time, as snow falls heavily outside each window, and families in the suburban town sit down to eat their Christmas dinners. The "Carol of the Bells" echoes across the background of the final scene with its rolling harmonies, bathing the town in an all-immersive choral blessing.

The religious symbols mark this space out as territory where goodness and wrongdoing are carefully measured and observed. For Christian readers, verses such as that of Mark: 12:13, "love thy neighbour as thyself" may readily come to mind. For non-Christian or non-religious viewers, this is an invitation to think about that rather indefinable term, spirituality, from an alternative and potentially secular viewpoint. Science fiction, a genre that critic Damien Broderick has defined as "that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise [. . .] of technical-industrial modes of production" (1995:155), appeals to a diverse group of contemporary viewers and readers as it addresses the ways in which post-industrial societies manage technological change. Apocalyptic sf in particular creates a kind of otherworldly, communal space in which the slippery term "spiritual" might be defined.

Spirituality and Ethics in *Stranger Things*

In terms of exploring how the related terms spirituality and ethics are represented here we might first consider Joyce Byers, whose son is trying to contact her from the "Upside Down". Joyce notices that the lights seem to go on and off in her house erratically, and she receives a phone-call in which she can just about identify Will's voice. Certain that he is still alive, she rigs up Christmas lights all around the house so that he can communicate with her. She does not care at all that everyone around her believes she is crazy, and her willingness to believe that something strange, inexplicable and beyond reason is taking place serves as the catalyst for the rescue mission which ensues. In Morton's terms, Joyce acknowledges the reality of hyperobjects, which others cannot yet perceive. In an earlier sf text, Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Telling* (2000), protagonist Suttu is sent to a planet to investigate a group of individuals who are resisting the religious devotion to Science that the governing bodies insist on. Early in her investigation she is pleased to note that there is nothing "supernatural" about the rebels' belief system, but on one occasion her worldview is upturned when a yogi levitates right in front of her and sits happily,

and calmly, eight feet off the ground. Sully realises that she needs to leave space in her mind's eye for the inexplicable. Joyce Byers, like Sully, shows she is willing to accept what she cannot understand by insisting that Will is still alive. Literature scholars may remember that poet John Keats introduced the term "negative capability", which describes the ability to harbour two opposing viewpoints without making up one's mind. I would argue that Joyce Byers practices negative capability in *Stranger Things*: she simultaneously acknowledges that which is reasonable, by complaining to Jonathan that "everyone thinks I'm crazy", but at the same time she accepts a reality which lies beyond reason, by rigging up the lamps and Christmas lights to wait for contact from Will. Additionally, her apparent belief that love can transcend the ordinary parameters of reality might be described as a spiritual approach, and likened to the beliefs of those with religious faith.

Secondly, and very simply, an impressive number of individuals in this small American town show themselves to be magnificently courageous as they put their own lives in danger to protect others. Nancy and Jonathan go into the forest to hunt for the monster, and later, they rig the Byers' house with traps and cut their own hands in order to distract it from Joyce and Hopper's rescue mission. Steve, in love with Nancy, unexpectedly returns to the Byers' living room to fight the monster alongside Nancy and Jonathan. Mike jumps from an impossibly high cliff to protect his friend Dustin, as bully Troy has threatened to cut out his baby teeth if Mike fails to jump. All three of the twelve year old boys risk danger at the hands of either the Hawkins' scientists or the Demogorgon by pointing their compasses towards the 'Upside Down' to search for Will. Psychically gifted Eleven, or El, immerses herself in a saline isolation pool, knowing that she is bound to encounter the monster, in order to gather information to help Will. Joyce and Hopper push their way through the toxic, claustrophobic space of the upside down landscape in order to rescue Joyce's son. And very finally Eleven sadly intones "Goodbye Mike" before she uses every last ounce of her telekinetic energy to explode the monster into a thousand tiny fragments. Faced with the unthinkable, the townspeople of fictional Hawkins, Indiana put their lives at risk to protect their community, a reaction which demonstrates enormous generosity of spirit, and one which might be called an "ethical" response to disaster.

The text can additionally be said to offer a "spiritual", or "ethical" approach because it upsets traditional power hierarchies. Our four twelve year old protagonists are geeky friends who love Science. They all have physical attributes that get them bullied at school—Dustin speaks with a lisp due to his lack of adult teeth, potentially brought on by a congenital disease; Lucas is the only African American in an almost entirely white community; Mike is labelled "frog face" due to his large eyes and wide cheeks; and Will is slightly built and nervous. Eleven, who escapes from the scientists who are abusing her, arrives in town with a shaved head and a limited ability to express herself, a portrayal which purposefully challenges traditional gender binaries. Joyce Byers struggles with mental health problems; Jonathan Byers is a teenage outsider; and Chief of Police Hopper battles with alcoholism following the death of his daughter to cancer. The series makes heroes of each of these non-normative characters, simultaneously making points about gender, ethnicity, and dis/ability, and exemplifying the way shared experiences allow us to see beyond surface-level differences.

Very finally, *Stranger Things* can be said to offer a spiritual, ethical dimension through its representation of apocalypse. This is not a traditional apocalyptic space, as the parameters of the disaster zone in Series 1 reach no further than one small town in Indiana and its otherworldly underbelly. But from another perspective, *Stranger Things* works metaphorically to encapsulate the entire contemporary condition, to represent the potential for an apocalyptic event that we

cannot quite conceptualise. Paralleling Timothy Morton's point in *Hyperobjects* about our inability to truly "see" ecological damage, *Stranger Things* potentially insists that the damage to our environment is there, no further than the ground beneath our feet, or even right beside us in a looking glass world—a truth which is seeping into our reality. In the Upside Down, the mirror version of a human being is a monster with an enormous, greedy mouth; in the Upside Down, the air is toxic; transparent flakes float like nuclear fallout; and the limbs of the landscape stretch to entomb both human and animal victims alike.

Conclusion: In between faith and non-belief—secular spirituality in *Stranger Things*

Lynn Hume and Patricia McPhillips suggest that "like the breath, which rises out of the body, spirituality stems from a quest that reflects a deep inner hunger for meaning and connectedness" (2006). The best apocalyptic science fiction draws on themes and symbols from a range of religious traditions in order to remind us of an important spiritual value, one common to every mystic tradition: we are all connected—to one another, to our environment and the multiple species that inhabit it, to all the hyperobjects that we cannot fully perceive.

Considering non-religious approaches to spirituality in the U.S.A., theologian Robert Fuller explains that:

Up to 21 percent of all Americans are unaffiliated with a church, but should nonetheless be considered religious in some broad sense of the term. The largest group of the unchurched, then, is concerned with spiritual issues but choose to pursue them outside the context of a formal religious organization. These Americans can be described as "spiritual but not religious." [...] They view their lives as spiritual journeys, hoping to make new discoveries and gain new insights on an almost daily basis. Religion isn't a fixed thing for them.[...] Importantly, the terms they adopt in their effort to understand such things as the nature of God, the essence of the human soul, and the practices that promote spiritual growth are almost all drawn from spiritual philosophies outside dominant religious institutions. (Fuller, 2001, p. 4)

In a digital age which barter in the visual, the narratives that we meet through cinema screens, televisions and laptops work to shape our understanding of the larger realit(ies) in which we swim. Robert Fuller is finally critical of the "unchurched" Americans that he studies, and makes note of "anti-social" tendencies in their daily lives (178). However, the tendency to draw on spiritual philosophies outside religious institutions might be seen not as "anti-social", but instead as "rhizomatic", in a Deleuzian sense of the term. In the influential *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) philosophers Deleuze and Guattari explain that "[t]he book [...] forms a rhizome with the world; there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world" (1987:10). For many in the contemporary period, the visual narratives in which we immerse ourselves function as open books through which we evolve: we "gain new insights" as we consume and reflect upon them, and they generate "spiritual philosophies outside dominant religious institutions" which potentially influence the way we live. In 1998, theologian Stephen May wrote that "SF writers themselves acknowledge how often SF reads like religion-for-unbelievers. With its own priests (scientists), prophets (sf writers) and true believers (fandom) its faith is that of the triumphant rise in science, leaving superstition trampled in its wake" (May, 1998, p. 69). I disagree with May's suggestion that sf places "its faith in the triumphant rise in science", as a vast range of sf narratives in different modes including Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Bradbury's 'The Veldt' (1950) and the Wachowski siblings' *The Matrix* (1999) problematize Science's status as curative. However, I do

agree with May that quite frequently, “sf reads like religion-for-unbelievers”. Science fiction, like religion, foregrounds humanity’s bigger questions, such as, “How did our species come into being?”, “What is our purpose?”, and “What happens after we die?”. Importantly, sf works overtly to flag the most pressing social, political, and environmental concerns of the Anthropocene. I additionally disagree with May that sf leaves “superstition trampled in its wake”, for while it is true that as critic Gwyneth Jones points out, “Science’ in Science Fiction [...] means only, finally, that whatever phenomenon or speculation is treated in the fiction, there is a claim that it is going to be studied to some extent scientifically—that is, objectively, rigorously; in a controlled environment” (1999, p. 4), the genre often surprises us by pushing at the boundaries of that which might be accessed through a purely scientific approach. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Stanislaw Lem’s (and Soderbergh’s) *Solaris* (1961, 2002), Marvel’s *Doctor Strange* (2016), and The Duffer Brothers’ *Netflix* series under consideration here—*Stranger Things* (2016), are all examples of sf texts which reach beyond the borders of the rational. Sf titillates the spiritual imagination as it trades in mystery and possibility, calling readers and viewers into that provocative territory which we might broadly categorise as “that which we cannot yet understand”. This is terrain which potentially draws upon and appeals to viewers from every belief system.

The term “spiritual” is an important adjective that does not mean much without context—theorist Ernesto Laclau might call it an “empty signifier” (2006)—but disaster narratives help to bring the word into relief. Readers and viewers from every cultural background can easily identify spiritual responses to catastrophe, as these are the compassionate, selfless actions which lead us to admire individuals of our own species and to hope that communities across our globe may one day cooperate more harmoniously. *Stranger Things* is set in the 1980s, in an era pre internet, pre 9/11, and pre-Donald Trump. Unlike Timothy Morton’s extended, gloomy theoretical text which suggests that history as we know it has come to an end, *Stranger Things* works to re-capture the spirit of an age in America where somehow, life just seemed simpler. In the early 1980s, many American living rooms were defiantly homely, dressed in an eye-catching orange and brown; *ET* was on at the cinema; Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* had just been released; and kids in my neighbourhood in Placerville, Northern California had adventures on their bikes and messed around in “real time”. It might not seem idyllic to many of us looking back, as in fact this era bore witness to the death of approximately a million individuals in the Iran-Iraq war as well as to the horrific nuclear accident at Chernobyl; however, it might still be said that the setting of the series creates nostalgia for an earlier, more hopeful version of American society. Paradoxically, the 1980s American setting also offers a warning, since to evoke the sensibility of this particular period is to simultaneously remind viewers that the 80s celebrated capitalism—Ronald Reagan was busy reducing taxes for the elite in our political pulpit; Michael Douglas’s portrait of the ruthless stockbroker in *Wall Street* sold vast numbers of cinema seats; and women’s fashion featured the boxy corporate shoulder pad in *Dynasty* as well as in real life, speaking volumes about the social focus of the decade. With its representation of the Demogorgon’s giant, greedy maw, *Stranger Things* reminds us that in the 1980s America moved beyond the counter-cultural sensibility prevalent in the 60s and 70s in order to embrace consumerism with open arms. Ultimately, the Duffer Brothers’ *Stranger Things* works to invoke a provocative blend of *both* optimism and horror, leading, arguably, to its widespread popularity. I would suggest that without a healthy dose of each of these we cannot hope to circumvent the human-made apocalypse, a real-life narrative which is filling seats in cinemas, creeping into our nightmares, and impacting adversely on all living species across our globe.

In the final moments of Series 1, *Stranger Things* denies us comforting closure as the scene around the Christmas table cuts to the bathroom, where Will experiences a slippage into the Upside Down and begins to choke, spitting up a squirming black slug. The parallel world is a looking glass version of our own; the Demogorgon lives within us; we like Will must inevitably become terrified of ourselves. But the religious symbols in *Stranger Things* additionally speak of an enormous, redemptive dynamism loose in the cosmos, prime for untapping. Religious and secular viewers will recognise this power in different ways, some calling it divine and others creative, connective, or imaginative; some may locate it in God, others in human potential, and others still in both. In the midst of crisis, the provenance of that energy matters not: what we would like to know as viewers is exactly *what* these characters will do to heal the breach and keep the Demogorgon at bay in Series 2? And in my position as writer here I will take creative liberty and ask you to consider what *you* will do with your own skills and talents to impact on a local or global version of Hawkins, Indiana? Your skills are needed, most urgently, as hyperobjects just out of many westerners' field of vision include melting ice caps, polluted oceans, and hungry, displaced populations of human beings and other mammals. Ultimately, *Stranger Things* asks us *all* to look over our shoulders for the monster we glimpsed in the corner of our eye, just as Nancy does, and to face it with spiritual courage, a courage which might paradoxically draw strength from the knowledge that we are each intimately, rhizomatically, connected to the monsters we fear most.

Bibliography

- Broderick, D. (1995). *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2013). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fuller, R.C. (2001). *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holy Bible, New International Version*. (1986). London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.
- Hume, L. and McPhillips, P. (eds.). (2006). *Popular Spiritualities – The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*. London: Ashgate.
- Jones, G. (1999). *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Laclau, E. (2006). Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 646-80. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Le Guin, U. (2000). *The Telling*. London: Gollancz.
- May, S. (1998). *Stardust and Ashes: Science Fiction in Christian Perspective*. London: SPCK.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2003). *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stranger Things*. (2016). Producer, The Duffer Brothers.
- Zizec, S. (2010). *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso.