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# ARTIFACTS

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## **“I Don’t Know Where My Boy Is!”: Abduction and Brainwashing in *Stranger Things***

*Blake Beck*

In “Chapter Six: The Monster” of Netflix’s *Stranger Things*, there’s the big reveal: Eleven, the daughter of Terry, a former subject in the Central Intelligence Agency’s Project MK-Ultra, was stolen—abducted—by “the big bad Man” to be used as a psychic weapon against the Soviet Union. Everything’s there: child abduction, brainwashing, the Man, an irrational fear of communism. In other words, it has all the makings of the perfect conspiracy theory, one that brims not only with government distrust but also other fears and anxieties—of childhood innocence, individualism, and social influence. With *Stranger Things*, the Duffer Brothers have seemingly struck gold, and the show’s instant popularity is proof. Its charm is no coincidence, and though 1980s nostalgia may have a lot to do with its success, I believe it has something more to do with America’s continued preoccupation with perceived threats by unseen forces on childhood innocence and the privacy of our minds, both of which are inextricably

connected. With the convergence of child abduction rumors and brainwashing conspiracies, *Stranger Things* addresses contemporary anxieties about social influence and technology, as well as the public's distrust of the federal government.

Despite remaining more or less separated in popular culture, brainwashing conspiracies and child abduction rumors, specifically those concerning organ theft and body defilement, tackle similar themes and anxieties. The former entered the popular imagination of America

during the Cold War, during which, "Soviet totalitarianism, technology, and collectivism were said to have reduced the Russian people to manipulable objects that could be duped without knowing it and were incapable of independent thought or action" (Smith 219). Rumors of brainwashing in the Soviet Union and during the Korean War acted more or less as propaganda in the American effort to stop the spread of communism in the 1950s. This changed when brainwashing was "decoupled from communism and deployed to theorize frightening new forms of domestic social and political influence—especially American media and corporate power" (Melley 148). Among the main targets here were comic books, which Frederic Wertham, leading the crusade against the comic industry, blamed for the "psychological mutilation of children" (Dunne 155). Wertham, who decried the sexual and violent nature of comic books, went so far as to say, "We are dealing with the mental health of a generation—the care of which we have left too long in the hands of unscrupulous persons whose only interest is



greed and financial gain” (Dunne 155). Indeed, “the sanctity of young children’s mind” was the main concern of the debate, and the rhetoric used to describe the influence of comic books was not too dissimilar from accounts of Soviet brainwashing.

The same language is used with respect to child abduction rumors, especially those involving organ theft or body defilement. In these rumors, instead of “psychological mutilation of children,” it is physical mutilation that causes the biggest stir: “Where the stories allege that children are being murdered for their body parts, the horror is intensified by the sense that the child is leaving the world not only claimed and violated by strangers but also mutilated and incomplete” (Bennett 216). Children being “claimed and violated by strangers” is yet another theme shared between brainwashing conspiracies and child abduction rumors. In the former, political and social institutions influence children, hijacking their minds and turning them into violent sex-fiends. The latter involves “the conspiracy of the elites,” the idea that “child abusers generally belong to privileged social classes and are thus embedded in powerful and protective networks that enable them not only to obtain their prey but that also help them to hide their crimes” (Campion-Vincent 91). In both cases, some powerful, privileged force, be it the comic book industry or the underground organ trade, psychologically or physically “mutilates” children, the “weakest elements” of society and “the embodiment of the future,” for financial or material gain. In some ways, the real-life manifestation of these two legend complexes is Project MK-Ultra, the CIA’s top secret mind control experiment that “assessed the effects of sensory deprivation, hypnotism, drugs, and electroshock” on unwitting subjects, some of them children (Melley 154). In more formal terms, MK-Ultra “sought the, ‘research and development of chemical, biological, and radiological materials capable of employment in clandestine operations to control human behavior’” (Linville 7). Through the psychological

mutilation of unwitting minds, MK-Ultra, a real life government program, features elements of both brainwashing conspiracies and child abduction rumors, stories that, for years, resonated with the American popular imagination.

The first child abduction narrative introduced in *Stranger Things*, the disappearance of Will Byers, offers a fairly typical portrayal of the genre that introduces newly emerging anxieties. In the show, Byers, riding home from a night of Dungeons & Dragons at Finn Wolfhard's home, is attacked by what his friends soon name the Demogorgon and taken to the Upside Down. With its homages to films of the 1980s, the series is firmly rooted in an era rife with fears of child abduction and child predators, making the narrative all the more realistic and resonant with an American audience. The Demogorgon, too, gave the audience a face—or no face?—that they were familiar with, which Paula Fass says, “sounds like an embodiment of the ‘stranger danger’ panic of the era, someone ‘having no face, coming from somewhere else’” (Kutner). What's more, as Fass told *Newsweek's* Max Kutner, “[Will's] mother, Joyce, fits an aspect of the panic at the time, which was that because of the rising divorce rate and women increasingly entering the workforce, parents were no longer around to look after their children 24/7.” Despite greater pains to supervise our children, this still causes great anxiety in American culture, what with the rise of the Internet and social media, where it is believed child predators have invaded and made dangerous (Campion-Vincent 95). These same fears are articulated in the story of Will Byers: his mother is divorced, so he's independent, riding home alone at night, and he communicates, once he's taken to the Upside Down, via electricity, like Christmas lights, like children today, who increasingly rely on technological forms of communication such as cell phones and social media to stay in touch with their family. Since children are not under the direct supervision of their parents while surfing the Web, it makes sense that this would be a fear among mothers and fathers today,

and if children are left unsupervised, they could, it is believed, be dragged into some strange world by some strange creature, like Byers, as if it's an episode of *To Catch a Predator*, where they risk "mutilation."

The story of Will Byers contains other motifs of child abduction rumors, too, where it is common to hear things like, "The victims are eaten, emptied of their blood or their fat, and their vital forces are absorbed by the evil-doers. Often the evil-doers are sick or in some ways defective, and the victims possess the precious and unique element that can cure them or supply what they lack" (Campion-Vincent 102). The Demogorgon feeds on blood, which Byers can provide, and when Byers is found by his mother and Jim Hopper, a serpent-like creature drains the boy of his life force. What this all eventually boils down to is the age-old trope of child abduction being used, like in the past, to examine "questions about the protection and innocence of childhood" (Kutner). Along these lines, *Stranger Things* articulates emerging anxieties about child supervision in the Digital Age by utilizing an archetype that already resonates with the American popular imagination.

Throughout the series, the federal government attempts to "brainwash" the citizens of Hawkins, Indiana, by manipulating reality in order to meet the government's desired definition, hiding their deepest, darkest secrets from public view. This is brainwashing on a large scale, but, nonetheless, it is brainwashing in the sense that the people of Hawkins are duped into believing a makeshift reality, that, more specifically, Will Byers fell into a quarry, Benny, the diner owner, committed suicide, and the power and light vans are really just power and light vans. By planting a doll of Byers, framing Benny's death as a suicide, and using power and light vans for undercover surveillance, the government in *Stranger Things* creates a "thought control net," the real threat of conspiracy theories that is "a system of communications, an organized array of ideas, discourses, and techniques," through which an entity manipulates reality, allowing them to

operate under a more innocuous guise (Melley 74). The thought control net is not a mere theoretical concept, as Dunne notes the Pentagon attempted to “sway public opinion on U.S. foreign policy” by using “a group of prominent retired military officers who had appeared on national television and radio hundreds of times since 9/11, supposedly as objective military analysts” (Dunne 229).

Viewers see the same kind of brainwashing in *Stranger Things*, and we experience this first hand through Jim Hopper, the chief of Hawkins Police Department, whose appearance, in contrast to the corporate look of Martin Brenner, the leading scientist at Hawkins Laboratory, is incredibly utilitarian, what with his rugged flannel-wearing, beard-sporting aesthetic. Through his attempts to uncover the government’s secret plots and thwart their attempts to brush the disappearance of Will Byers under the rug, we come to see Hopper as a kind of folk-hero, not a “mere cog in some huge and impersonal organization,” but a “western hero,” a cowboy that “stands alone and independent,” fighting against the system (Smith 227).

Ultimately, what makes this aspect of *Stranger Things* so resonant with audiences is not simply Hopper’s character, as cool as he is; it goes much deeper, encompassing a growing distrust of the American government born out of a “covert sphere,” which Melley describes as “the clandestine counterpart of the increasingly embattled public sphere, a Cold War security state in which the supposed need for secrecy routinely overrides the principles of liberal democracy”. The covert sphere, which has reemerged in recent years with the War on Terror, relies “increasingly on undemocratic, secret means,” and so fuels suspicion of government and its top secret tactics, many of which—Project MK-Ultra, for instance—may be construed as brainwashing (Melley 150). This distrust isn’t exclusive to brainwashing, though. In a 1984 cover story for *Newsweek* titled “Stolen Children,” parents of missing children were met by “foot-dragging police departments, jurisdictional tangles and an FBI unable to enter a case unless

there was clear evidence of an abduction” (Kutner). Distrust of government, then, spans conspiracy theories and real-life events; it plays not only into our “sneaking suspicions,” but also our heartbreaks, our losses. While knowing the truth, the characters of *Stranger Things* often come face-to-face with a government that actively attempts to manipulate reality.

Brainwashing, both large and small and coupled with child abduction rumors, is everywhere in *Stranger Things*.

Representing the convergence of child abduction rumors and brainwashing conspiracies, the story of Eleven in *Stranger Things* articulates anxieties addressed in both the abduction of Will Byers and the government’s attempts to brainwash Hawkins, Indiana. In “Chapter Six: The Monster,” we learn that Eleven, the telekinetic child who escapes Hawkins Laboratory after opening the Upside Down, is actually Jane, the daughter of Terry, a former subject of Project MK-Ultra, who was abducted by the government at birth and was supposedly a miscarriage in the third trimester. Despite a lack of physical mutilation, the story of Eleven contains many of the same motifs found in child abduction rumors of the organ theft and body defilement variety, albeit with a psychological twist. For starters, Eleven is taken from her mother, a lowly test subject, and is immediately used for government experimentation. Eleven’s abduction parallels with the adoption scare rumors of the past, where “babies adopted from abroad did not arrive in the homes of loving families but instead were sent to operating theatres where they were cut into parts by unscrupulous surgeons for patrons from rich countries” (Campion-Vincent 82). Of course, laboratories can replace “operating theatres,” mad scientists substituted for “unscrupulous surgeons,” and the government inserted for “rich countries.” Herein lies the true horror of child abduction rumors, and thus, Eleven’s story: “that their children’s little bodies had been treated with disrespect, regarded as ‘specimens’ and stored in jars” (Bennett 222). Eleven’s mind is treated as a specimen by the government in *Stranger Things*, and though Dr.

Brenner approaches her with an air of paternalism—hence the nickname “Daddy”—I think the most disconcerting thing about the whole thing is this tension between Brenner’s tenderness and the irrefutable fact that she is treated as a specimen. Here we see a similarity between Eleven and Will Byers: both are “eaten, emptied of their blood or their fat, and their vital forces are absorbed by the evil-doers.” What’s more, like in other child abduction rumors, “the evil-doers are sick or in some ways defective, and the victims possess the precious and unique element that can cure them or supply what they lack” (Campion-Vincent 102). When the viewer first encounters Eleven, she is skinny, pale, frail, her “vital forces” being absorbed by the government’s cruel experimentation. She’s forced to consume an ungodly amount of Eggo waffles just to survive. What she possesses, of course, is the psychic capabilities that may be used to spy on the Russians. In this way, Eleven’s story hits on the anxieties expressed in the abduction of another character, Will Byers, namely, anxieties about faceless entities abducting children and hurting them in the cruelest of ways.

Brainwashing comes into play when one considers the role of social influence on Eleven’s character. As I’ve noted above, when the viewers first meet Eleven, she’s more or less a puppet for the government, without a personality, wearing a hospital gown, her head shaved bald. When she escapes the laboratory, however, this all changes; becoming acquainted with the boys, she becomes socialized, having known little, if anything, about the outside world, “reality,” if you will. The boys teach her friendship, trust, and other important values along the way. They even go so far as to dress her in real clothes, albeit distinctly and perhaps stereotypically feminine, creating a unique personality that, although socially influenced, is all her own. Contrast this with her appearance in the government’s hands, which the viewer learns of through traumatic flashbacks. Like Smith’s description of the Soviet man, brainwashed and a cog in the machine,



Eleven is no more than a “manipulable object that could be duped without knowing it and is incapable of independent thought or action” (219). Indeed, Eleven’s story suggests the need for positive social influence, as sociology “argues that identity is constructed from without, repeatedly reshaped through performance” (Melley 65). With the ever-growing awareness of socialization in childhood and the popularity of sociological thinking, as well as new fears about the influence of the Internet and social media, addressed in “The Vanishing of Will Byers,” Eleven’s story, combining aspects of child abduction rumors and brainwashing conspiracies, strikes a chord with its audience. *Stranger Things*, however, makes sure to note that social influence is not the be-all, end-all; there is room, of course, for independent thought or action, as Eleven is constantly faced with situations where personal responsibility is required, such as the moment when she faces off against the Demogorgon. Additionally, Hopper, despite facing a massive government conspiracy, is capable of standing up to the Man and combatting it head-to-head through sheer willpower. *Stranger Things*, like historic accounts of brainwashing, “permits a crude form of sociological thinking that is compatible with individualism” (Melley 164). By combining themes of psychological mutilation, the innocence of childhood, and the manipulation of reality generally and people specifically, Eleven’s story tackles the same anxieties as the abduction of Will Byers and the government’s attempts to brainwash the town of Hawkins, but in a more nuanced fashion, stressing the role of social influence while simultaneously upholding individualism, the most important of American ideals.

Explaining the popularity of *Stranger Things* is no simple task. Nostalgia has a lot to do with it, sure, and maybe brainwashing conspiracies and child abduction rumors continue to appeal to an American audience that stills grapples with advertising, conformity, government bureaucracy, and ideological struggles. Regardless of the source of such fears and anxieties,

American audiences are still preoccupied with unseen forces influencing and assaulting our minds and our children. Through a cocktail that's equal parts brainwashing conspiracy and child abduction rumor, *Stranger Things* reaches out to these fears, individually in "The Vanishing of Will Byers" and the government's attempts to dupe Hawkins, as well as together in a combined narrative I'd like to call "psychological abduction," the story of Eleven. Of course, this paper is but an attempt to brainwash you, the reader, into thinking like me, the author, *the Man*.



Blake Beck is a senior from the Greater St. Louis area studying English and Creative Writing. His creative work has been featured in EPIC, Mizzou's undergraduate literary magazine. He graduates in May 2017 and hopes to obtain an MFA in Creative Nonfiction sometime in the future.

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