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Building the Netflix Brand: Franchise Logic, Authorship, and Distinction in the Promotion of *Stranger Things*

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Abstract

The article explores how Netflix uses the promotional narratives of its content, specifically *Stranger Things*, to pursue control of its wider brand associations. The study applies thematic and discourse analysis to demonstrate how the brand narrative articulated in interviews with the Duffer Brothers (a set of key promotional paratexts) enforces strict interpretation boundaries for *Stranger Things*, its creators, and Netflix. Specifically, the promotional discourse (1) draws on the commercial structures and reception patterns of genre franchises and auteurism to produce alignment with the value systems of different audience markets, and (2) capitalizes on cultural oppositions between film and television to connect the Duffers' original authorship to the idea of Netflix as a unique streaming platform. The article thus suggests a complex branding process at work in the marketing of *Stranger Things*, preoccupied with notions of authorship, distinction, and the need to navigate fragmented streaming audiences.

Keywords

branding, interviews, paratexts, franchises, authorship, Duffer Brothers

Branding and promotion are central to the media industries today (Aronczyk and Powers 2010; Grainge 2008; Johnson 2012) and many scholars have already explored the ways Netflix manages its brand by relying on ideas of "quality" (Jenner 2018;

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Tryon 2015), much like HBO before it (Jaramillo 2002; Leverette, O et al. 2008). As Melissa Aronczyk reminds us, however, branding is not just the process of creating associations but of *controlling* them (Aronczyk 2017, 112), as Netflix already exemplifies in the way it guards audience data (Wayne and Uribe Sandoval 2023) and in the way it speaks about itself. In 2018, for example, Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos claimed "I don't want any of our shows to define our brand, and I don't want our brand to define any shows . . . There's no such thing as a 'Netflix show'" (Adalian 2018). This statement appears to support Michael L. Wayne's argument that Netflix has been "uninterested in building a distinctive brand identity around its original content as cable networks like HBO and MTV have done," instead favoring a "portal-as-brand strategy" (Wayne 2018, 11). However, *Stranger Things* (2016–), the company's most successful franchise to date, suggests a different tactic may be at hand, whereby the Netflix brand is not only built on "Netflix shows" but also "Netflix authors," concepts the company strategically defines in relation to franchising dynamics, authorship and taste distinctions, and the streaming context.

This article explores how Netflix uses the promotional narratives of its content to pursue control of its wider brand associations. *Stranger Things* is well placed to reveal these strategies. Not only is this IP central to Netflix's portfolio, *Stranger Things* was a bespoke property from the start, unlike other heavy-hitting "Netflix Originals" such as *The Witcher* (2019—) *Bridgerton* (2020—), allowing Netflix complete control over its creative development and market identity. Also uniquely, *Stranger Things* generated a second product: the Duffer Brothers, who went from relative unknowns to auteurs and Variety 500 media creators—and are, like their series, exclusive to Netflix. Crucially, both *Stranger Things* and the Duffer Brothers are marketed in constant relationship to Netflix's identity. Describing the series as "a true flag-bearing franchise for Netflix's brand" (Keslassy 2023), executive producer and director Shawn Levy has often stressed that Netflix was the "first choice" for the project because of the way it defines itself in a post-broadcast context: "the Duffers are new and emerging filmmakers and they really didn't want the show to conform to increasingly obsolete notions of what is TV" (Berkshire 2016b). The marketing of *Stranger Things* is anchored on this kind of boundary-making rhetoric that articulates and polices the series' meaning as a Netflix success story, using discursive nudges to downplay the role of marketing in the series' success and emphasize instead its inherent "quality," the product of Netflix's awareness of the needs and values of modern audiences. In Levy's words:

> [Netflix] repeatedly said to me . . . because they know I worked so extensively within the system, "You will not see billboards. You won't see posters at bus stops." They kept warning me because [t]hat's so different from how a network or movie studio markets. They have tremendous faith in the instantaneity of our culture and . . . the biggest thing is they have real faith in the show. The show will have to do the work for us (Berkshire 2016b).

Yet, for a supposedly non-hyped series *Stranger Things* was the focus of considerable press attention with coverage invariably structured around the series' brand

hooks: its references, its cinematic ambitions, the Duffer Brothers' nostalgic vision. *Stranger Things* clearly had a branding plan, focused on the series' citations and the Brothers' persona as not just auteurs but specifically Netflix-enabled creators. What boundaries of interpretation does the promotional discourse of *Stranger Things* establish? How does its rhetoric capture the logic of media brands to produce value for the IP and for Netflix? How and why is the idea of authorship central in this rhetoric?

This article argues that the promotion of *Stranger Things* was strategically anchored on ideas of authorship in order to amplify the market capital of the Netflix brand: first by simultaneously capturing the disparate value systems and commercial structures of fan audiences and critical elites within a single property; and second by linking the Duffer Brothers' authorship to Netflix as a context (and company) distinct from both film and television. This strategy suggests a new direction in the way Netflix defines itself, moving the company away from its previous image as portal but also from the HBO template of "quality" television in an attempt to negotiate the fragmented nature of streaming audiences.

Method and Rationale

The study consists of thematic and discursive analysis of promotional interviews with the Duffer Brothers. This approach responds to Gray's (2010) claims about the centrality of paratexts in creating meaning for media texts and specifically builds on Tompkins (2014) argument that promotional materials help to align the subcultural values of target audiences to business priorities. In his study of horror reboots Tompkins shows how interviews and behind-the-scenes documentaries discursively affirm the reception patterns of horror cultures by presenting "canonical literacy, audience connoisseurship, and (sub)cultural distinction" as integral values to the industrial practices that produced the reboot text. This discursive insistence is a way to "maintain consumer ties" to the franchise (2014382,) and encourage "(profitable) forms of horror movie expertise and generic competency" in the target demographic (2014, 386). *Stranger Things*' promotion draws on similar strategies; indeed, Sarandos has already spoken about his intention to "build fandom in a way that can drive revenue" (Jones 2023).

Some of this work was accomplished by the series' art and trailers which, alongside Netflix's algorithm, constructed direct links between *Stranger Things* and relevant genre cultures (Hills 2021b). Interviews, however, have a privileged place in the reception practices of both fans and critics: interviews are where auteur personas emerge and where the "fundamental parameters" for approaching an author and their work are set (Klinger 1994, 10). Unsurprisingly, interviews made up the bulk of *Stranger Things*' early promotion, pushing the Brothers as auteurs and the series as a collection of their personal homages to 1980s texts. Demonstrating the effectiveness of this narrative in setting consensus, current academic literature on the series has generated a "critical orthodoxy" focused on "nostalgic, 1980s-focused intertextual referencing" (Hills 2021a, 189) and "overwhelmingly devoted to [the series' nostalgic] aesthetics" (Griffith 2022, 5).

The interviews for analysis were sourced in a way that would replicate a viewer's likely engagement with *Stranger Things* paratexts: by seeking out official promotional objects (specifically interviews included in the companion book *Worlds Turned Upside Down*, the Netflix after-the-show series *Beyond Stranger Things*, and those published on Netflix's Tudum website), and by encountering promotional material in a range of publications through (UK-based) Google searches. To find the latter I used simple keywords (*Stranger Things*, Duffer brothers, interview) and the News filter; the overwhelming number of results was then limited to sources published during key marketing moments: the brand's launch with Season One and the quick follow-up of Season Two (2016–2017), and the reputation management period upon release of a tonally-different Season Three (2018–2019); this yielded thirteen unique interviews, mostly published in the first period. The study's corpus is therefore biased toward interviews given to the press around the first two seasons, a slant which accurately reflects the importance of interviews in the establishing phase of branding processes.

The analysis distils the key themes and rhetorical patterns of these sources, showing how they create a branding narrative that polices the meaning boundaries of *Stranger Things*, the Duffer Brothers, and Netflix simultaneously. The first section highlights the use of discursive practices associated with fan reception and the franchise promotion model. The second section focuses on the way discourses of authorship build an auteur persona for the Brothers. The third section develops how ideas of "quality" and cultural oppositions between film and television are used to creation distinction for Netflix, positioning the company as essential to the series' success. Lastly, the Conclusion explores how this promotional narrative suggests changes in Netflix's overall brand strategy.

Franchise Markets and Subcultural Legitimacy

The most obvious characteristic of the Duffer Brothers' interview persona is perhaps how closely it recalls Scott's (2019) concept of the fanboy auteur, a mode of authorship in convergence cultures in which a director's fan credentials are amplified to generate authenticity (and thus positive reception) for new additions to a franchise. Indeed, it is through the consistent narrativization of their multiple fan identities—in their words, as "big genre people" (Miller 2016) and "just nerds really" (Fienberg 2016)—that the Duffers justify the extensive use of references in *Stranger Things* as homage rather than illegitimate appropriation of existing IPs (Rogers 2021). This rhetoric follows the trends Tompkins notes in the promotion of reboots, whereby creators "overstate the cultural and historical importance of a franchise and present their own subcultural credentials to genre fans" (2014, 383) so as to reiterate "canonical systems of value and interpretation" that boost the franchise's brand and encourage its consumption, including the consumption of reboot texts (2014, 386). In other words, the self-reflexive promotional discourses associated with fanboy auteurs are not the product of individual creators' preferences but a required part of the franchise promotion framework.

By highlighting their citations and fandoms in interviews, the Duffer Brothers reframe *Stranger Things* as a franchise product, discursively inserting it into the promotional sphere of several legacy IPs with pre-existing markets. This strategy is made possible by a constant and carefully negotiated display of various subcultural currencies.

There are myriad examples of this approach, most prominently in relation to the horror genre (*Stranger Things*' main marketed generic affiliation and a large franchise audience demographic). For instance the Brothers' answer to the often-asked question "When you were kids what scared you?" clearly communicates an insider's knowledge of the value systems of horror subcultures, beginning with the understanding that scary is code for quality: their response exclusively lists canonical monsters (Pennywise, Freddy Krueger), authors (Clive Barker) and films (*Evil Dead*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Hellraiser*), correctly recognizing divisive texts ("the 'It' miniseries, which is–I don't want to knock it–it's not very good") and emphasizing the need for maturity and nuance in order to understand the genre ("We're watching 'Evil Dead,' which you don't really see the humor in when you're 10 years old"; Cohen 2016). Similarly, practical effects, often linked to scariness/quality because of the expertise and craft involved, are described in several interviews as an important part of the Brothers' vision: again listing only canonical names as inspiration (H.R. Giger, Guillermo del Toro, Clive Barker), Matt Duffer claims that "the movies that scared us the most [as children], the horror elements were done practically" (Berkshire 2016a). Though the Brothers admit the series uses CGI too, this is stated in terms that reinforce the established hierarchies and canons of horror fandoms:

> What we realized—and it really made us admire those guys who did *The Thing* and *Alien* and whatever—is that doing practical is *really* hard. . . . So for something like the lab, most of the vines and all that stuff throbbing and coming out of the hole, that's all production design. We built all that. But then where we . . . didn't have the time [it] becomes visual effects. It was a bit of 50–50 in the end. But I mean, those guys in *The Thing* . . . are our heroes (Leon 2016).

In nearly all interviews the Brothers' claims to subcultural legitimacy are further evidenced by childhood memories of the relevant texts, contributing a sense of authentic long-standing fandom. As Klinger (2006) notes, film cultures often depend on narratives of memory and nostalgia, both in the sense that this shared memory is what establishes "classic" texts and enforces specific interpretations of history, and in the sense that it is integral to the practices that grant connoisseur status, such as quoting canonical texts. The memory narratives given by the Brothers are aligned with Klinger's observations about the film cultures of "the first video generation" (2006, 137) but, crucially, these memories are ambiguous, apparently constructed to match the values of canonicity and expectations of fan cultures rather than present factual events in the Brothers' past.

One example of this is the way the Brothers talk about their references to *It*, one of Stephen King's most controversial novels (1986) later adapted as a television

miniseries (1990). In one interview, *It* is named as a formative novel "just because we're the age of those characters [eleven] when we're reading . . . We just devoured his stuff when we were little" (Fienberg 2016). In a different interview, a new memory is given: "We saw the "It" mini-series, which is. . . not very good. I had read the book, I think we were in fourth grade or third grade, so [between the ages of 8 and 10], too young" (Cohen 2016). In yet another interview a third version is presented: "We actually first experienced it when we saw the mini-series back in 1990, so we were around six or seven, way too young for this thing. . . . Couldn't sleep for a couple weeks. Like the most scared I've ever been in my life. It's an incredible book" (Wired Staff 2019). All three versions of this memory place the Duffers' encounter with *It* in childhood but make no clear distinction between the book and the miniseries. This ambiguity is important in terms of subcultural capital because all three retellings, regardless of their differences, match the Brothers' supposed experiences to the dominant quality hierarchy between the two versions of *It* in horror subcultures: while one is a controversial novel containing graphic violence and mature themes, the other is a very thoroughly edited series made for general television audiences and considered by many horror fans to be a watered-down or inauthentic adaptation, as the Duffers themselves suggest in their comments.

Memory narratives are constructed to support authentic fan identities for other franchises too, including those for which the Brothers have no actual childhood memories. This is the case with *Dungeons & Dragons*, a major reference across all seasons. Since there are no different versions of *D&D* to justify an ambiguous recalling as with *It*, the Brothers create a sense of authentic engagement by invoking comparable childhood experiences instead: "We weren't playing much *Dungeons and Dragons*, we were mostly playing *Magic: the Gathering*, but very similar. And we would go out in the woods and you felt like you were on these adventures. So that was all very much we're just ripping from our childhood there" (Anon 2016). Not only is *Magic* presented as an equivalent to the *essence* of *D&D*, general memories of childhood are given as evidence of what *D&D* is *really* about, justifying the Brothers' claim to participation in that subculture and therefore opening access to the *D&D* franchise market.

This particular claim to the *D&D* franchise becomes more complex in later seasons when the series' narrative contradicts the game's lore. In an official promotional video for Tudum, the Brothers discuss the role of *D&D* in the series and in their personal lives, again admitting that their memories are actually of *Magic*. The video is edited to suggest the same adjacent fan identity as before, opening with an interview clip in which the Brothers describe their childhood role-playing characters—*Magic* characters, we later learn, but easily mistook for *D&D* memories in the context of a video titled "The Duffer Brothers geek out on *Dungeons and Dragons.*" What changes in this example is that the interview happens in the context of promotion for Season Four, which anachronistically uses the *D&D* monster Vecna four years before its introduction to the game's manuals. This could undermine the Brothers' claim to *D&D* expertise (as Scott notes, part of the appeal of fanboy auteurs is their promise to keep canonicity) so the Duffers admit to having "cheated a little" to fit the story. This confession is central to the video, which is shaped not just as an apology but as apologia,

with questions designed to allow the Brothers to focus on the value of *D&D* and reinforce the links between that subculture and *Stranger Things*: “Why do you love *D&D* so much?”; “Did *Stranger Things* resurrect *D&D* culture?”; “Why is *D&D* important to you as filmmakers?” (Bitran 2022). The evidence given for the Brothers’ authority to cite *D&D* and capture its commercial power is presented here as more than an adjacent fan identity; it is the ability to understand and celebrate the values of existing fan subcultures.

Similar negotiations happen in relation to other cited IPs, even when their textual use does not challenge canons. Speaking about the key reference to *Ghostbusters* (1984) in Season Two, the Brothers affirm it as “a seminal movie for us” and note their early decision to have all the child characters be Ghostbusters for Halloween. They continue, “And then it immediately led to the Venkman conversation. Who’s going to be Venkman? And no one’s gonna want to be Winston” (Dempsey 2017a). This comment is again fanspeak, showing an awareness of the characters hierarchy within *Ghostbusters* fandom. However, these fan preferences have been linked to racism in the original film (Winston, the only Black character, joins the group toward the end of the film and is not featured in the poster), leading some to read the *Ghostbusters* scene in *Stranger Things* as a continuation of those racist politics (Lucas, the only Black main character, is assigned Winston for his costume). When this issue is raised in the interview, the Brothers respond by praising Winston as a character who has not been “given enough credit” and who has great scenes in the film—nevertheless closing their response with “But let’s be honest, he’s not Venkman” (Dempsey 2017a).

The Brothers get to have their cake and eat it: by addressing the criticism and praising Winston, they align themselves with the diversity values that are core to the Netflix brand and to many *Stranger Things*’ viewers but, crucially, they do this without challenging the opinion of (a portion of) *Ghostbusters* fans and without proposing the need to reconsider *Ghostbusters*’ position in the canon. The claim to legitimate use of that IP is therefore maintained, and *Stranger Things* can continue to be sold as an authentic extension of that franchise.

The Duffer Brothers as Original Authors

While the interviews focus heavily on constructing legitimate presence in subcultural markets, an equally strong rhetorical pattern is the way the Brothers *distance* themselves and *Stranger Things* from ideas of fandom, reframing all citations in terms of original authorship. Just as the fan identities are a way to create built-in audiences for *Stranger Things*, presenting the Duffer Brothers as auteurs is intended to capture the value systems of tastemaker audiences. As Timothy Corrigan (2003) argues, auteurism is a commercial strategy that seeks to control reception through the use of an author’s reputation, which is built extratextually. Catherine Johnson also notes the value of controlling certain kinds of reception for branding purposes, as in the case of HBO, which “depended upon critical acclaim [of its programing] to support its claims to be the home for creative talent” and quality content (2012, 32). In *Stranger Things*, this translates

into the creation of a genre auteur persona for the Duffer Brothers that supersedes all other identities constructed in the promotional discourse, especially fan identities.

A pre-launch press release for Season One, for example, described the Duffer Brothers' appeal in terms not of their homage style but of their originality as genre authors: "Matt and Ross are emerging filmmakers with an unmistakable passion for genre [and a] unique voice . . . that will captivate our global audience" (Spangler 2015). In interviews the Brothers also separate their passion for certain films from their identity as original authors; for instance in the way they explain Season Two's monster:

Ross: We always saw [the Demogorgon] as like a shark, as if in *Jaws* [but] once we started talking about season two, we . . . talked a lot about . . . Voldemort. You need a threat that isn't just a shark . . . that has plans and goals–

Matt: But not something that you can understand. That was sort of like the Lovecraftian approach to horror. It's like a cosmic horror, something often from another dimension. . . . And it wasn't called the Mind Flayer for the longest time. We . . . were re-researching–

Both: *–Dungeons and Dragons* monsters.

Matt: And we stumbled–I'd forgotten about the Mind Flayer–stumbled across the Mind Flayer (Dempsey 2017b).

Mentions of *Jaws*, *Harry Potter*, Lovecraft, and *D&D* are all paratextual bonding attempts to guide interpretations of the series (Proctor 2020), claimed in terms of subcultural capital and personal memory. Nevertheless, this interview passage is focused primarily on demonstrating how the Brothers *network* these texts, mixing and matching them for their own original purposes. There is a constant preoccupation with showing how the Brothers' personal vision and experience comes before any citations in the creative process: the Mind Flayer needed only *re*-research and already existed as a character before the Brothers "stumbled across" the name in a *D&D* manual. Moreover, it was only once they had "decided that the Eighties would be the best time [to set their idea in]" that the Brothers "realized it would allow us to pay homage to all the things that inspired us most" (Grow 2016); only after coming up with a missing child plot set in the early 1980s that "we hit upon the idea: . . . this allows us to also pay homage to the films we grew up on" (Chaney 2016).

This narrative is what allows the Duffers to say that although "some of it came from movies that we watched," *Stranger Things* is "autobiographical in the sense [that] our imagination would always take us there" (Thrower 2016). The series is therefore not to be read as a text about specific fandoms but about "what it felt like growing up," "a love letter to our own childhood" (Davidson 2017). Even when a reference is claimed as aesthetically important, the Brothers are quick to divorce it from the larger meaning of *Stranger Things*, often in the same breath:

> Will in the shed [is] obviously a reference to *E.T.* [but] when we're in the writers' room, we're not really talking about other movies, we're just like, "What would Joyce do?

> Her son's missing. What's her next step?" Just going from there, and trying to capture the feel of these movies, but it's not us trying to specifically reference the movies (Fienberg 2016).

In other interviews the point is made clearer by implications that the series' references are not necessarily homages but merely the product of a close link between the Brothers' original creative aims and the storytelling qualities of their inspirations. The Duffers' process is not about "the references or whatever" but about trying to "capture the feel of these movies" (Leon 2016); "We weren't trying to directly reference them" (Grow 2016). If the 1980s ended up a focus of the series, this is only because the Brothers love a particular kind of storytelling and "the peak of those type of ordinary-meets-extraordinary stories was in the '80s" (Chaney 2016). As Matt Duffer explains:

> All these images or ideas were in our heads . . . they're so much a part of our DNA. But [in the writers' room] very little time is spent referencing other movies. Mostly you're just trying to tell the story . . . Otherwise it would just be a jumble and a mess. . . . Sometimes I see people write about it and they say they like that the show is "self-aware." And I guess I really didn't want it to be self-aware. We . . . didn't want to wink at the audience. We wanted it to play like one of those movies would've back then (Leon 2016).

These rhetorical distinctions are still aligned with Tompkins' observations about the marketing discourse of reboots, especially the way the Brothers express ambivalence toward adaptations and remakes as a way to bolster their own credentials. In an interview especially focused on this issue, the Brothers are adamant about the need to protect canonical texts ("There is some John Carpenter stuff that they're floating around. It makes me uncomfortable") and quick to denounce the perceived commercial motivations of such projects. Noting *The Thing* (1982) as a rare example of a well-made remake, Ross Duffer explains that this is because Carpenter "had a very specific and a clear point of view, and it was not about . . . cashing in on this, [that's] the difference. Ninety-nine out of 100 times, you don't result in a classic movie like that." This comment is about reaffirming the canonicity of John Carpenter and therefore evidencing the Brothers' insider status in horror subcultures, as before, but it also serves to separate *Stranger Things* from "cash-ins," as both brothers clarify in this same interview: Matt Duffer frames it as a question of artistic integrity ("I like that it's our own original story that's inspired by this stuff, but if we screw it up we're not screwing up anybody else's work. . . . It's all our material.") while Ross Duffer extends the point to good storytelling ("audiences . . . want to see original stuff out there. I think people are embracing this, because it's really us just going, 'Hey, these were the movies we loved, these were the types of stories we loved' "; Fienberg 2016).

The emphasis on creative integrity and rejection of commercialism further helps to explain some of the anachronisms in the Brothers' memory narratives. Whereas with *It* the ambiguous memory narrative resulted from a need to conform to canonicity, for *Ghostbusters* a constructed memory serves to highlight the Brothers' interest in quality (film) *stories* rather than fandom. As the Duffers claim, they "watched [the *Ghostbusters*

film] too many times as children" (Wired Staff 2019) but they never mention the other parts of the franchise, such as the spin-off cartoon *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986–1991; and a second cartoon spin-off in 1997, *Extreme Ghostbusters*), which spawned popular toys (Kenner, 1986–1991) video games (Nintendo Game Boy, 1993), comics series (NOW Comics, 1988–1992), and other merchandise and tie-in promotions related to both the films and the cartoon series (e.g., McDonalds in 1992). These texts were a major integral part of what *Ghostbusters* was and what it meant to fans at that time, possibly even more so than the isolated films: for instance, when *Ghostbusters* was included in the Universal Studios parks (*Ghostbusters Spooktacular*, 1990–1996) the film's motifs were amalgamated with the *Real Ghostbusters* cartoon brand, evidencing its centrality to the franchise's identity.

We know the Duffers' engagement with *Ghostbusters* included at least some of these texts, as when the reference is discussed in *Beyond Stranger Things* the editing cuts to a photograph of the brothers as young children wielding the toy proton packs from Kenner's *Real Ghostbusters* line. However, even here the Brothers do not discuss *Ghostbusters* as anything other than a prestigious *film*, going on to suggest that their interest in roleplaying came from creativity and storytelling—the qualities of auteurs—rather than fan practices potentially associated with immaturity, commercialism, or obsession. These same distinctions are made in the series' official blurb, which describes *Stranger Things* as a "nostalgic nod" but immediately flags up that it "has earned dozens of Emmy nominations, including three for Outstanding Drama" (Netflix n/d). These prestige terms, not fandom, are what's supposed to guide the series' reception.

Distinguishing Netflix

The third pattern in the promotion of *Stranger Things* concerns Netflix itself: the interviews weave a narrative of Netflix's identity into the boundaries they establish for interpreting the series and its creators, focusing on ideas of "quality" and distinction. This is achieved through a game of comparison and contrast with film and television (and, crucially, *not* with direct streaming rivals) that presents Netflix as something unique that captures the "best" of each media: cinematic aesthetics and film prestige in character-driven, creator-led programing. Importantly, the Brothers don't present Netflix as a disruptor; Netflix is instead interpreted as a paradigm of dis/continuity in industry practices and cultural capital.

This narrative is anchored on repeat assertions that Netflix improves the film industry's risk-averse practices and that it embodies the latest chapter in the history of "quality" television: *Stranger Thing*s is "so much a product of the present that it could not have been made 10 years ago. Shows like *True Detective* had to exist before it" (Nobil 2017)), and "I could have pitched *[Stranger Things* as a movie] 'til the end of time and no one would have made it . . . [But TV,] that's a world that's willing to take chances. [Netflix] just took a leap of faith on us" (Fienberg 2016). This dis/continuity is based on Netflix's approach to talent ("Netflix felt

comfortable giving some newer voices a shot, which is really what they gave us"), an attitude the Duffers present as a "new paradigm." Matt Duffer explains:

> They've figured out, "what's working really well is we're giving these filmmakers we respect basically total creative freedom" . . . and it's actually resulted in a lot of success for them. [W]e were like Phase Two, where they're like, "Let's try it with people who . . . don't have an established track record." The good thing is [it's] working out for them (Fienberg 2016).

This is a page taken from HBO's branding book and many arguments made at the time of the "It's not TV" campaign apply neatly to this "new paradigm," especially the way it institutionalizes a discourse of "quality": it was by relying on ideas of rule-breaking and risk-taking associated with authorship that HBO could create and capitalize on taste distinctions between its brand and other television options (McCabe and Akass 2008; Santo 2008). *The Sopranos*' use of strong violence, for example, was risky for television but became a marker of the series' quality because it was "justified by the 'intensely personal vision' of [David] Chase," the series' creator (McCabe and Akass 2008, 87). This idea of content unencumbered by the traditional expectations of television was reinforced by Chase and other creators associated with HBO's flagship series, who positioned the channel's commitment to *storytelling* (as opposed to commercial priorities) as a prerequisite for their creation's successful existence (McCabe and Akass 2008, 87–88). Netflix has used similar strategies by suggesting itself as "rewriting the very rules of TV storytelling . . . [fulfilling] the promise of textual novelty, of new storytelling practices that were unimaginable in the past" (Tryon 2015, no page).

In *Stranger Things*, the idea of an "eight-hour film" (McIntyre 2018) is a clear suggestion of this kind of rule-breaking. But while much has been made of the series' cinematic aspirations, in interviews the Brothers are clear that Netflix outmatches HBO by reversing expectations of *both* film and television. This position relies on the "battle" between film and television in pop culture, which, as Gray and Johnson (2021) point out, is a discursive play that simultaneously challenges and reinforces boundaries between the two media and the systems of value associated with them. Thus, the Duffers may insist that their creation is *film* ("I don't want to think about it as a TV show . . . I'm still doing movies, in my head, you know" (Nicholson and Hulley-Jones 2017)) and may correct interpretations that television is part of their inspiration ("It's not that we didn't watch things like *The X-Files* . . . but we fell in love with the movies, and that's why we're doing what we're doing" (Goldman 2016)), but they are equally adamant that television, as embodied by Netflix, is the antidote to film's flaws ("What's awesome about television is that it lets you do . . . character and story first" (Miller 2016)).

This "battle" framework is also how the Brothers address contemporary developments in the industry such as the *It* film adaptation, at the time set to be helmed by Cary Fukunaga. When asked if they would have liked to lead that project, the Brothers admit they would but affirm the canonical authorship of Fukunaga, who got it "because

he's established [and] we were excited just because we're huge fans of what he does, and one of the few people who hasn't made a bad movie." However, the Duffers are also quick to reframe this question in terms of the superiority of Netflix over film:

Ross: [Fukunaga's *It*] was exciting to us, but also, we were seeing trailers for *True Detective*, we're like, "I kind of want to see. How do you do *It* in two hours? Even if you're separating the kids, how do you do that right?" You don't really fall in love with them the same way you're going to when I read that book. So, how much more excited would I be if Cary Fukunaga was doing that for HBO or he was doing that for Netflix? . . .

Matt: It's like, "Could you be *truer to the sensibilities of It* if you had eight or ten hours?" [emphasis mine] We thought that you probably could more than if you were confined to 2 hours (Fienberg 2016).

The idea that only Netflix (or HBO) could generate an authentic interpretation of *It* is underlined in other interviews by the suggestion of television as a corrective to the problems of commercial film: movies "tend to follow a very similar pattern. Television has been breaking narrative rules" (Berkshire 2016a). Crucially, this framework doesn't seem to apply to all television but specifically to what the Brothers call "the great shows" (Leon 2016) like *Game of Thrones*, *True Detective*, and other examples of "increasingly cinematic" television (Nicholson and Hulley-Jones 2017), an approach which Netflix has transformed into the "dream [format of] cinematic, longer episodes without interruption" (Nobil 2017). The Brothers note the value of this approach to genre content specifically, where commercial expectations are stronger:

> If you're doing a movie, the minute you put a monster in it, it becomes a horror movie [so you're] trying to get jump scares every six, seven minutes. You just don't have the time to spend with characters. . . . But a place like Netflix, they actually care a lot more [so] we're able to tell these very character-driven stories and also [put] a flesh-eating monster in it (Cohen 2016).

In this narrative of "quality," Netflix stands worlds apart from all other content options: it is film without the commercial imperatives, television without the restrictions, and genre that is both authentic and elevated, prompting nuanced taste distinctions that nevertheless present Netflix as all things to all people in a world where no other streaming options are legitimately considered.

Conclusion

This article explored Netflix's contemporary branding narratives and aimed to understand how the promotion of specific content works to establish and control interpretations of the larger Netflix brand. As the analysis showed, ideas of authorship and distinction were key to the marketing of *Stranger Things*. By using franchise logic the Duffer Brothers' interviews were able to rhetorically associate the series with the canons and hierarchies of established subcultures; further drawing on the cultural discourses of

prestige surrounding film and television, this marketing narrative successfully negotiated the expectations of disparate viewer demographics, including tastemaker audiences, to position the series, its creators, and Netflix within a range of profitable contexts. The article thus made a double contribution: it clarified the specific branding strategy used in the *Stranger Things* case study and it extrapolated an argument about Netflix's relationship to author brands in a move away from both its previous image as portal and the HBO template of "quality" television.

We see further evidence of this move in the way that Netflix is now able to deploy franchise marketing logic entirely on its own terms, hooking new productions to the Duffer Brothers and *Stranger Things* as recognizable Netflix brands. This is clear in the launch of the Brothers' production company, Upside Down Pictures, which is set to develop a number of new projects for Netflix. Officially, Upside Down Pictures is the offspring of the Duffers' brand as established by *Stranger Things*: it aims "to create the kind of stories that inspired the Duffer brothers growing up - stories . . . where the ordinary meets the extraordinary, where big spectacle co-exists with intimate character work, where heart wins out over cynicism" (Netflix 2022). But its announced projects are clearly led by Netflix's portfolio: a live-action adaptation and reboot of *Death Note*, which Netflix had previously tried to relaunch with a (flopped) live-action film; an adaptation of Peter Straub and Stephen King's *The Talisman* with the involvement of Steven Spielberg, which capitalizes on the King/Spielberg mash-up brand of *Stranger Things*; an original series, *The Boroughs*, developed by the creators of Netflix's *Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*; and of course, the continuation of the *Stranger Things* franchise itself through spin-off series, both live-action and animated. Whatever the shelf-life of the *Stranger Things* brand, this slate suggests future-proofing for Netflix on different fronts, including by directing attention to franchises it already owns.

This direction seems to go against the concept of portal which defined Netflix and other streaming platforms at their inception, pointing instead to a company working to establish a strong catalog of exclusives and exerting full control over the development of those properties and their placement in a competitive market. More distinctly, perhaps, the Brothers' trajectory within Netflix reveals a new degree of control in the relationship between authors (or author brands) and Netflix. Though the Duffer Brothers are recognized as original creators, their success and identity is so tightly bound to Netflix that it is impossible to understand the Brothers' brand, their work, or their movements within the industry without also having to consider Netflix as their context and partner. Sarandos may debate the existence of "Netflix shows," texts made to fit a specific Netflix standard, but we should now also consider the existence of "Netflix authors," creators shaped and branded by their position in the company's market plans.

Netflix's Created By Initiative, launched in 2023 as part of the company's diversity commitment, shows one way this might already be significant: through the campaign, selected writers were given development deals and the opportunity to "hone their projects alongside Netflix executives [and] participate in a showrunner training lab designed to provide the essential skills needed to successfully run a *Netflix* series"

(Burell-Lewis 2023, emphasis mine). Though the authors' creativity was not necessarily compromised by the Initiative, its brief suggests Netflix as something beyond a "home for talent" since the authors were developed specifically in light of the company's practices and priorities.

Elsewhere, Netflix has already moved to position itself as creator above its authors, for instance in the way content is now introduced as "a Netflix series" in title sequences, suggesting a relationship which the label "Netflix Original" did not capture. Promotional discourse likewise contains emerging examples of authorial claims by the company itself. Djomi Baker, Jessica Balanzategui and Diana Sandars note how the promotion for *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019) "draws attention to Netflix's personalized algorithmic distribution model [reminding viewers] that Netflix is a portal [free] from the scheduling, content restrictions, and regulatory responsibilities [of linear television]," echoing Johnson's (2013) points about the authorial function of television channels. However, the trailer for this series does not just highlight the *experience* of Netflix; as Baker et al. note, the trailer shows the character Lemony Snicket "defer[ing] his role as creator [of the narrative world] to Netflix. This ironically obscures the reality that Daniel Handler is the primary creator . . . and instead situates the streaming service as *the true auteur*" (Baker et al. 2024, 72, emphasis mine).

As case study, *Stranger Things* indicates the currency of authorship and authenticity in marketing, and the powerful effect of tailoring those concepts to the expectations of different audiences. In a wider context, however, these emphases point to a move in Netflix's branding strategy toward significant growth aspirations, positioning itself as the source of its content's authorship and presenting its brand as the unifying element in the context of a fragmented streaming market.

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