

Whatever, I'll Watch It, Season 1 Episode 11

Stranger Things Transcript

[ambient hip-hop softly plays]

Alexia [A]: Thank you for listening to whatever I'll watch it, a podcast bringing queer of color critique to movies and TV. Each episode me and a guest will pick a film or TV series we love or love to hate and we'll talk, gender, race, sexuality and all things representation. I'm your host Alexia and today we're talking Seasons 1-4 of Stranger Things.

I, like so many of you, have been non-stop thinking about Stranger Things since I binged Season 4. My number one past-time on the internet as of late has been reading Stranger Things memes and theories, so I figured why not produce more content for those of you who are as obsessed as I am?

Originally, I thought I would organize this mini-episode by character, but this show has an enormous cast! So I'm going to move around a bit between characters and themes, and as a treat, I will be bringing on a special guest to help me dive deep into the explicit and coded queerness of Stranger Things.

But before we get sexy, let's talk about trauma! That's totally queer, right? One of the things Stranger Things does so well is to write complex, multi-layered characters who go through emotional story arcs, especially as it relates to going through and grappling with the impacts of trauma. A lot of shows throw all kinds of traumatizing experiences onto their protagonists and then never deal with the after-effects, which is not at all the case here. So this is your content warning – this episode deals with trauma, mental illness, and suicidality – which of course are major themes of the show, especially season 4, but I also will be bringing in some of my own experiences as well.

So let's start with Joyce's family. Winona Ryder is so good at playing the traumatized mom and her depictions of anxiety and PTSD are so real. After Will is lost and recovered, we see Joyce triggered every time the phone rings and she keeps having panic attacks when she can't find Will. Years after my sister died, I was hanging out at a friend's house in the country and didn't have service. When I eventually was able to check my phone I saw a lot of missed calls from my mom and she was just completely hysterical, convinced something bad happened to me. Not quite to the same extent, but I also have similar reactions when my partners take longer on errands than I expect them to. Thank God for location tracking and that my partners are willing to let me surveill them to help manage my PTSD.

So those reactions are very real manifestations of trauma that impact who Joyce is as a person and what it means for those around her to love and support her. But just because Joyce is

frazzled and fragile and jumpy and sleep-deprived doesn't mean she's weak. She's consistently shown to be resilient and strong, putting herself in harm's way to protect the people she loves. I think it's an important message that you can be traumatized and anxious but still have a huge capacity to take care of yourself and others; that just because you've been through some shit doesn't reduce your autonomy or your agency. It doesn't mean you need to be saved.

I find Jonathan's character really heartbreaking. I think his upbringing is familiar to anyone who had to grow up too fast because they parented a parent or a younger sibling. I'm constantly amazed by his tenderness with both Will and Joyce and that he doesn't get resentful of his responsibilities. But I don't think that means he's handling it well. It's very clear he just stuffs all of the stress and responsibility deep inside, probably disassociating a lot of the time, which makes a lot of sense considering he becomes a chronic stoner in season 4. Getting high is probably the only coping strategy he has that helps him self-regulate and escape the anxiety of his everyday life.

Jonathan's tendency to shut down comes up in other interesting ways. In Season 3, there is a really fascinating scene where he and Nancy are fighting because she is unhappy about her sexist treatment at the local paper and is acting out in ways that might (and eventually do) get them both fired. Nancy tells Jonathan he just doesn't understand because he's not a woman and he doesn't deal with the same discrimination she deals with at work. Jonathan points out that he doesn't have her class privilege and never expected to be treated well by an employer in the first place. He doesn't have the luxury of pushing for something better; he just needs a job to support his family. So it's very clear Jonathan's way of navigating the world is just to put his head down, keep his emotions in, and try to make it until the next day. It's pure survival, and there's not room for much else.

Jonathan's response to trauma is pretty different from what we see from Hopper. We know from the start that Hop is a veteran, his daughter died, marriage fell apart, and he moved back to the small hometown he came from and developed addictions to alcohol and pills. But in season 4, it's revealed that Hopper was actually drafted into the army and was assigned to a chemical unit in Vietnam, where he was exposed to agent orange. Unlike many of the soldiers he worked with, he was successful in reproducing – but it is suggested that his daughter died of cancer at a young age, a death he blames himself for. In a beautiful through-line between season 1 and season 4, Hopper says he called for a daughter and sentenced her to death, just as he called for Joyce and was going to sentence her to death as well. We do see that trauma cycle disrupted somewhat when Joyce survives and Hopper realizes that he may have an important role to play in the fight ahead, and especially in protecting 11 – is this a daughter he doesn't have to lose?

So I want to talk about their father-daughter relationship a bit. While I think it's beautiful that Hopper gets a daughter back by taking in Eleven, it makes sense that he's not automatically going to be the perfect dad. You don't just shake off your depression and PTSD now that you have someone who brings joy into your life. So while it's hard to watch Hopper being so unreasonably strict in Season 2 – not even letting El go trick or treat completely hidden in a

costume – his outbursts of anger make a lot of sense considering that he has not really processed any of his grief or trauma surrounding his daughter's death. I do have less patience for his weird possessive behavior over El's body and the way he can't communicate like an adult with him and 11, but I think we shouldn't forget the fact that 1) it's the 80s and 2) he's a literal cop and emotional regulation and sensitivity isn't exactly encouraged by either the prison or military industrial complexes.

So with El, we also see outbursts of anger that are connected to her PTSD, but she is not as closed off as Jonathan or Hopper. She is still very open to forming meaningful connections and trusting the new people who are brought into her life. The way that Max expands her world beyond Hopper and Mike, and encourages her to find her own voice, style, and perspective is so healing and one of my absolute favorite aspects of the show. In general, I think Eleven tries to see the best in people. When she is being bullied in class in season 4, she has the most heartbreaking smile, showing that she's trying to laugh alongside the kids and be part of the joke. Even lying to Mike about the bullying – I think part of it is saving face, but I think there's also a part of her that's in denial, that just wants to believe that people are good.

But back to Max. Dude. Sadie Sink deserves all the awards, over and over again, for her performance in season 4. I also lost my sibling when I was around her age, and spent the next school year in a deep depression, dealing with constant suicidal ideation, and listening to bands like The Cure and Thursday on my headphones in a constant loop because it shielded me from having to interact with people or be present with my thoughts. I think she did an absolutely incredible job of capturing all of those emotions, which is especially impressive when you consider that those are emotions that aren't very expressive—in a lot of ways depression is the numbing of feeling, and she just plays that so gracefully. Her arc with the guilt she carries about Billy's death is so real to anyone who has lost a family member, and especially to anyone who has lost a family member to suicide. Sadie does such an incredible job capturing Max's depression that it's easy to forget that wasn't her personality before Billy's death. In my rewatch I was pretty stunned by how lively Max is in Season 3; it's like a completely different character than what we saw in season 4.

Even Billy is giving some backstory in his arc; while he's a racist, abusive, piece of shit, there is a glimpse into the abuse he himself endured, reminding us that people are not born monsters. I don't quite agree that Billy's arc was one of redemption and I don't blame Max for the guilt she feels, although it makes a lot of sense. Billy was her abuser and she has every right to feel relieved that he is no longer in her life.

I want to transition a bit here and give Lucas a big shout-out. I love the arc he gets in season 4. His feelings for Max are genuine and he shows a lot of maturity in caring about her more than his own ego. I love that he keeps trying and trying, even though she constantly shuts him down. This isn't like Say Anything, low key stalking a girl to win her back, this is being a solid friend who keeps showing up even when you aren't being appreciated because you can see the person you love is struggling. I also like that his dedication to his friends is tested in Season 4, because few people remain besties with their childhood friends once they get into high school,

especially if they develop new interests like getting onto sports teams. I don't blame Lucas for being tired of being picked on, and I think the fact that he was not just a nerd but a Black nerd probably impacted the bullying and sense of alienation that he experienced.

We obviously can't talk about character growth without bringing Steve Harrington into the mix. Like the rest of the internet, I also love Steve and his relationship with Dustin is one of my favorite aspects of the entire show. Steve and Robin also end up being an incredible duo, and I'm so grateful that a romantic relationship wasn't forced between them and we were able to see two people of different genders sharing intimacy and trust and vulnerability because they are FRIENDS and nothing more. I really wish the writers had applied the same tactic to El and Mike, but instead, we got the complete trash that is the majority of Season 3. Steve also shows that it's literally not that hard to be an ally. Like just support your gay friends and don't be weird about it. Don't out them without their consent. Don't try to flirt and force heterosexuality onto them. And you're good. Overall he's a great model of masculinity and leaning into protection, loyalty, and community instead of prioritizing yourself. Who would have ever guessed we'd be saying this about Steve in Season 1?

Nancy Wheeler is also a character who does a complete 180. I think she's low key the Buffy of the show – she doesn't have supernatural powers but she's a tiny little fighter who is not afraid to kick ass. She is probably the most transformed between the seasons and is definitely the teenage MVP of the entire series. I'm obsessed with all the memes making jokes about Nancy and her guns cause honestly they are not wrong. And even though Nancy is always ready to blast a shotgun, she refuses to forget about Barbara even though everyone else does. Once again, her trauma is dealt with! But her response to trauma is to step the fuck up and do what she needs for survival and protection.

Erica is another character who is introduced as a flat stereotype and then is finally rounded out a bit in later seasons. I honestly did not like Erica at all in the beginning, and felt like the writers were really falling into racist tropes with both her and Lucas's characterizations. So in Season 1, Lucas is the only Black character, and he is set up to be the antagonist to El's protagonist, constantly questioning and challenging her and demanding that she leave. El is given our sympathy right away, so the audience is set up to automatically not like the one Black character from the start, which sucks. Erica was also introduced as this antagonistic character who was getting in the way of her brother's plans and creating problems for the heroes (by turning off Lucas's walkie talkie when Dustin is shouting code red, for example). It also very much falls into the sassy black girl trope – so we have the antagonistic black boy and the sassy black girl, essentially. I do think Erica has grown on me over time and I really love that she got the arc of leaning into being a nerd and playing D&D alongside people much older than her. I'm curious to see how Max's injury and Lucas's mourning impacts Erica's inner world and if we get to see more softness and vulnerability from her.

That is a side to Black characters that we don't get to see until Lucas shows up for 11 in season 4. Even among the traumatized youth that Vecna targets - Patrick, the sole Black victim, isn't given any of the emotional depth or background that the white characters - Christie, Fred, and

Max all receive. We get a few shots of him seeing and hearing the clock, but that's it. We later learn from Lucas that he sometimes showed up to school with black eyes; we're left to just guess the burdens he was carrying.

Most of the white characters are given emotional depth from the beginning. Dustin in many ways is the heart and soul of the group; he's kind, compassionate, curious, and really intelligent—I feel like he's often the one making the breakthroughs for the rest of the team. I mean who else could befriend a demogorgon and ensure safe passage for their friends? And his friendship with Steve and Eddie is arguably their basis for inclusion in the show.

For all the complaints we may have about Mike in season 4, he is undeniably endearing in season 1 when he stumbles across El and immediately fights for her. He is given strong emotional moments when Will is possessed in season 2 and then later in season 4 when El needs support to fight Vecna. But for all his compassion, it's pretty weird that he doesn't notice his bff literally having a breakdown in the car after not so subtly expressing his love. It kind of feels like his progression stopped after Season 2. I liked how intelligent and caring he was in earlier seasons, but cannot stand the useless, girlfriend-obsessed character he's become. I've never been a fan of his relationship with El – I understand why he had a crush on her, and I think that comes across authentically in the early seasons, but I hate this compulsory heterosexuality that is put on El when she literally just escaped a secret government testing center and probably has never been exposed to romance before. Like why does her first meaningful relationship have to be romantic? I think a deep friendship that is built on trust and mutual respect would be so much more satisfying for their characters. Or a quick crush that gets resolved quickly, because really, who sustains a relationship at that age?

I have to be honest, I'm also really ambivalent about Joyce's relationship with Hopper. I absolutely hated the endless bickering between them in Season 3 – it made the series borderline unwatchable for me. In fact, I actually stopped before the finale and only re-returned to the series when Season 4 came out. I think Joyce and Hopper make a great team, which does tend to make for great partnerships on television, but there's an element of trauma bonding there that concerns me. I can see how – if there's only other adult human in the world who knows everything you've been through and has been by your side for all of it – how you may develop a romantic connection, but I'd really prefer that Joyce end up with someone like Bob (RIP), who is going to provide that levity and stability that Hopper—who is also deeply traumatized, and not taking care of himself—is not going to be able to do. She honestly just deserves a break and dealing with her own PTSD alongside Will's and Jonathan's and Hopper's just really sounds like too much tbh. Hopper has a lot of healing to do and that is work he should really be doing on his own before dragging Joyce into his mess. This isn't some, how are you going to love someone else without loving yourself neoliberal Ru Paul bullshit, but I'm just saying it's really hard to heal from trauma if you're in a relationship with someone who is also traumatized but not taking responsibility for how that's impacting their day to day.

So I think that combination of trauma and romance moves us right along to my discussion with Leo Tuilefuga on the queerness of *Stranger Things*.

But before I do that, a quick reminder this is a DIY queer of color podcast, which means I can really use your support. If you're liking the episode so far, please take a second, hit pause, and leave a 5 star rating and review wherever you listen to your podcasts. Posting about the podcast and tagging us at whatever tv pod or using the hashtag whatever tv pod helps bring in new listeners and make this effort more sustainable. Or you can just send a link to the podcast to some of your friends. Now, back to your regular programming.

A: So, before we get into it Leo, can you let our listeners know a little bit about yourself?

Leo [L]: Well hello listeners. My name is Leo Tuiletufuga. My pronouns are they/them. I am a licensed marriage and family therapist. I am queer, I am non-binary, and I am a rabid consumer of media and all things encoded queer [laughs].

A: So why were you so excited to talk about the queerness of Stranger Things?

L: I was super excited to talk about the queerness of Stranger Things. I recall watching the first season and definitely after every episode just feeling that internal, queer joy of like wow, this show is so queer, but a very particular kind of queer. I will say, dating myself, I grew up in the 80s and so I was really used to consuming media and looking for the messages, the queer codes. This show, I know its set in the 80s which we will talk about, but I was used to decoding those queer messages and it felt so satisfying for me to just wow, there's so much queer experience embedded in this show.

A: So I'm curious to just jump into it because I think the obvious things are Robin and Will, but you're talking Season 1 here, so what are the things that jumped out to you as queer about the show?

L: Okay, so season one. The way the show plays with gender performance, presentation, and then desire, queer desire. So initially watching Season 1, Mike for all intents and purposes, cisgender, hetero, young white male. His attraction to El's masculinity feels very queer to me. The way that gender is exposed as a performance and a construct really, really interested me, right?

A: When they put El in that wig and dress it's like she's in drag.

L: Exactly! For me, Mike's attraction to El is a callback to a lot of the 80s teen movies, like Just One of the Guys and how delicious the playing with gender and sexuality is in that movie. If you all haven't seen it, please do yourselves a favor.

A: It's so good and it's so gay.

Leo: It's so gay and it's so good. It's with some older kids so they can do some other things that don't occur here but I feel like it's satisfying for the same reasons.

A: So two parts. First, what makes you read El as masculine? Is it just that shaved head haircut or is there something else about it? The second thing I was thinking about, that kind of annoys me about El's characterization is that she's supposedly been living in this government lab, hasn't had any exposure to societal norms and as soon as he's released she sees the pictures of Nancy in Mike's house with the long hair and it's like this longing for femininity and the compulsory heterosexuality of her instantly having a crush on Mike. How would El even have a notion of romance or of romance towards a boy? I clearly am not someone who believes we are innately born hetero, I just don't, so that's something that bothered me, that compulsory heterosexuality of her character.

L: Thank you so much for bringing all those points to the conversation, I think it's so important. It's important to unpack this reading of Eleven as masculine and maybe it's more I'm reading El's gender presentation is very dominant and discursively masculine, like the hair, her mannerisms being raised in a lab by a male doctor. But I think there is a larger question that's coming up which you're posing like, what up with the compulsory heterosexual longing for femininity? Or the compulsory heterosexual desire for this boy Mike. Super bizarre and I think within that, for me, that did feel like a metaphor for indoctrination into dominant societal norms.

A: Gosh I'm thinking so many things. First of all, I read Eleven as more androgynous than masculine. There's this way in which masculinity gets equated with androgyny where like, gender neutral means masculine.

L: Yes, yes! Say that.

A: But then I'm also thinking, Mike is kind of femme too.

L: Mike is very femme.

A: So I'm like, is Mike having his own queer awakening seeing Eleven's androgynous presentation? Is it awakening something in himself related to his own queerness? I'm team bisexual Mike, I like thinking that he has some sort of feelings for Will. I don't doubt he has feelings for Eleven, especially rewatching it feels genuine. If anything Eleven is the one I don't quite buy the attraction.

L: Right. Right? Right. [laughs]

A: But then the other thing, the 80s was really gay.

L: Very gay.

A: Like on the one hand it wouldn't be safe to be outwardly gay at school but on the other hand all of the aesthetics, the camp, the-- I'm sure we will talk about Eddie's character, the metal bands, Prince, all of these things are so gay.

L: It's in my notes Alexia, it's in my notes! Yes. So again about the 80s, it's so genius. the 80s were really, yes, there was the HIV/AIDS crisis in the background but in the foreground, in mainstream capitalist popular culture, it's all gay. Prince, the hair bands, Cinderella, Poison, men wearing makeup, that being the pinnacle of attractiveness for men at the time. And so there is in that time and the time the show is being set, there's a lot of playing with gender roles, gender presentation I would say. We think about David Bowie and all these mainstream popular forms of art that are really pushing on gender. I think, thank you for talking about Mike, he's very, I think portrayed as feminine. so thinking about 11 not as masculine but as androgynous or maybe agender. I think that's a great framing because oftentimes, and I did it too, we default the agender to masc. I'm reading the codes of short hair, masc. Which it's like hello, no.

A: So the other thing I'm thinking about with eleven is that she has these different trajectories in her gender performance that are kind of swayed by context. At the lab it's this androgyny perhaps masculine, and then Mike basically puts her in the drag of the wig and dress when he finds her, and then I'm skipping ahead but in season 4 we see her in Joyce drag, where she's wearing Joyce's hand-me-downs and Joyce's hair. I think the only time it feels like Eleven is really expressing her gender authentically is when she befriends Max and Max helps her pick out clothes that really define her and the clothes that she wears in season 3 are so cute and so incredible. And also, I can totally see that being a little agender baby.

Leo: 100. Yeah. I'm really appreciating what you're saying about Eleven's authentic gender presentation when she gets to exact that agency over how she's showing up in this world that she's still new to. So we get to see, what are the inner workings of Eleven? How would Eleven, now being on the scene, what does she want to look like? She really has her pick. I think that's such a special moment with her and Max. That's so sweet and special.

A: Do you think maybe we should talk about the debates here on queerbaiting?

Leo: I think that's important. So... the internet has been lighting up with, really interrogating instances of queer baiting and I think that's really important that we are able to identify queerbaiting, call it out, not fall under its seductive sway, and I think by definition, I do wonder about the difference between queerbaiting and representation.

A: And queercoding.

Leo: Queerocding is not queerbaiting, 100. And Netflix doesn't need to queerbait us [laughs] they're getting their money. There's overt and really great forms of representation.

A: Why are people even calling it queerbaiting? Is it because they think Will is just coded? Like I don't even understand where those critiques are coming from.

Leo: Word. From what I can assess, I feel like it's semantics. Because we are now in a time where coding doesn't really happen as much, things are just very overt and stated and declared,

that there's not a lot of coding that folks consume in the media. So I feel like there's a conflation between coding and baiting. It's coded to the point, with Will's character, I think we are all in agreement that it's clear what's going on.

A: Yeah it's not even coded, it's text.

Leo: Yeah it's text, it's not subtext, 100. And so I feel like for me, I love a code. I'll get out my decoda ring and my magnifying glass. Will's character isn't coded. I think the coding is taking place between Mike and El. I think their relationship, their presentation of gender, and the attraction and desire there. I think that's coded, for me. I think Hopper and Joyce are super coded. I was sharing with you, Hopper is the quintessential butch. Hopper is such that reliable, steady, solid stone butch. I was talking with Alexia about some of Jack Halberstam's work and the cultural phenomenon, that lineage of single moms partnering with butch women. And for me, Joyce and Hopper are that archetype [laughs] and when I view them through that lens, I'm like oh hell yeah, I get it.

A: Well Joyce's family alone is a queer family structure. Having a household with a single mom and children who are also playing parent roles, it is queering the entire hierarchy that's supposed to be imagined in a family.

L: Absolutely. I think what struck me as so queer through these lenses and also that absent but explicit phenomenon. It's Not being stated but it's so implied, that queering of the family structure, incredibly appealing to me. Not that heteronormative there's a mom, dad and kids. No. Joyce is getting it and then this butch comes along with an adopted child and there's some blending going on. It's so queer, I'm here for it all day.

A: I love that. So I'm thinking more about this queerbaiting debate. I forgot what I was thinking...

L: I guess as I was doing some digging around the queerbaiting debate in season 4, I think it's folks, and I love it, you know the saying, everybody's a critic. I think it's important we bring critique to the media we consume, I'm all for that, and there's a difference between wanting a certain character's arc to look and feel different than it actually does. It's like, then create [laughs]

A: I think too, Gen Z, feel free to come for me and tell me I'm wrong and correct me, but there's this part of me wondering if it's like, a lot of the youth they are growing up in a time where they have so much queer representation that we didn't grow up with and there's also very specific politics around naming all of your identities from the get-go, being super out, and I'm wondering if there's this kind of moral high ground that they're having where there's this expectation that this is how you are queer, how you do queer representation. For those of us who were growing up in the 80s, 90s, 2000s or earlier, that was not our experience. And also that coming out pressure is a very white thing as well, that doesn't resonate with all people of color and people from different cultural backgrounds. So I don't know if that's what's going on there but that's a thought.

Leo: Yeah come for us, feel free. I love the z's, y'all are indigo children, you give me life. And it's hard for me to be like, gather around children, in my day, you had to keep everything a secret.. and it was hotter [laughs]

A: I love, yeah. Part of why I love 90s and 2000s and 80s films is going back and no matter what you're watching, it's liek oh my god, this is so gay. It's all so gay.

LEo: It's all super gay, it's all coded. I think it's this idea that there's a right way to do queer represnetaiton adn if you stray from that you're wrong and oure queerbatiing us. Whereas there is so much complexity and nuance in life, as we know, all of us who are here living life. It's very complex. I think folks take issue with Will just not coming out and honestly that's super loaded. Who are we? We're not the arbiters of anyone's coming out journey. As long as that continues to be a thing that we have to come out, that will be individual , personal, and unique. Will can have that story too, babe. There are billions of people on the planet who are Will. Let Will have Will's life. Will doesn't need to come out in season 1 and be like, I like boys! However, thinking about Will's character, parts of his story for me, do harken back to a more painful time where homo representation when it was explicit was really shrouded in suffering, like this long suffering and longing and unrequited love. I see tinges of that in season 4 and for me it actually touches on some pain. Our stories were so seldomly told and when they were, it ended in a double suicide, a murder suicide, death. There was no joy or purpose or fulfilling, loving relationships. They were not represented. Nevermind us now having the privilege to sit back and say it's not represented well, girl I've got notes. So parts of Will's story I was like, ooh this hurts. And also, it's very 80s. It's a very cautionary tale for the homos. Becuase again there's an idea that its a chance to be prevous and deviant like other than to be outside of the norm, to be queer. And if you choose that, you're choosing a life of pain and suffering. So Will's story, I love that, it's authentic for many people's lives. However for me, I'm also like, oh gosh, this hurts.

A: So can we talk about Robin then? Because I think she gives us, she balances out that. Her coming out moment, she's a little nervous about it, but it's not.. it doesn't carry the weight that Will's storyline has and once she shares it iwth Steve it seems it's just not really an issue for her other than her navigating the constant queer woman struggle of, wait does hse like me back?

L: [laughs] Y'all that never goes away. That is life. Yeah, I love Robin. I know tehre's queers in the writing room so I felt comfortable and confident in that, they probably made a very decisive choice to balance out Will.

A: I think I actually read that Mia Hawke actually wanted her character to be lesbian. That was a request that the actress made. Feel free to fact check me, I'm on google right now, because I don't want to get people excited.

L: This is live y'all.

A: I'm very annoyed because the first thing I'm finding is people being like, is Mia Hawke gay in real life? And the first thing people are saying is no, she was walking down the street with her boyfriend. Having a boyfriend doesn't mean you're not gay. Anyways I'll table this for later, but that's what I heard on the internet, it could be true it could be not true.

L: Okay, either way I'm here for it. I love it when, as a part of production, every set is different, but the process sometimes involves actor collaboration and I think that's important. If the Hawk child fought for that, I love it. Even if she didn't, there's something in the balancing out of those two queer arcs and narratives. We have the long suffering trope and the lightness that is Robin. The joyfulness, unapologetically, I'm gay. I like this girl in band. Goofiness and sweetness. I do really appreciate. And it's definitely implied that the love interest is also interested. They're like volunteering and making sandwiches and kind of nervously talking and this is going down.

A: While Steve approvingly smiles over at them

L: [laughs] We love Steve! That's so good.

A: You had thoughts on Steve too, is that right?

L: Steve for me, I think...there's parts of his.. I appreciate his dimensionality. I appreciate that there's so much to him. I think in earlier seasons I was like, what's going on with Steve? I feel like he's just very pan [laughs].

A: I think this gender presentation falls into the general queerness that was everything 80s but there is some very real sexual tension with him and Eddie. So that scene where they're driving the truck and I can't remember word for word but basically Eddie turns around he says something to Steve like, you're driving big boy. That was improv-ed! That was Joseph Quinn throwing that in there and it's like yeah, they have such good chemistry.

L: They have incredible chemistry! Part of me wonders, is that between the actors and it's coming into the show? Is that existing between the characters? Whatever the case, it works. There's palpable tension between the two of them. It feels fun and hot.

A: Yeah. There's also that classic movie thing where if you have a little kid with these two unlikely guardians they kind of bring them together in a romance. I feel like that's kind of what's going on with Dustin where it's like oh these are my parents! Y'all should meet each other.

L: Right, my favorite people. And then there's that competitiveness but then 'I guess you're okay.' Yeah.

A: I definitely think Eddie is for sure bisexual.

L: Uhh, yeah [laughs]

A: Or straight up queer, you know. I think you're right with the chemistry thing, it might just be Eddie is that chaotic bisexual who has chemistry with everyone, you know?

L: [laughs] Oh my god, 100. Where it's just like, yeah I'm on the scene, I'm open and available.

A: Yeah. So for those who don't follow me on Instagram, first of all you should, it's at whatever tv pod. I posted a picture of Joseph Quinn who plays Eddie alongside Vecna/Peter - do you know that actor's name? We do not. But either way there's a photo of them promoting Stranger Things and it's so gay. There is so much chemistry between the two of them.

L: It's gorgeous. It's so beautiful. Just dripping sensuality.

A: It might just be Joseph Quinn.

L: I was like oh wow, sizzle. Fire.

A: Do you want to talk about our gay villain?

L: I do and that was a great segway, you mentioned Peter/Vecna. I'm on the fence but it's so important to explicitly name that we know about the homo as the villain phenomenon in representation.

A: If you don't know, go rewatch any Disney movie and see that all the villains are gay.

L: Uncle Scar, Ursula...

A: Jaffar.

L: Everyone, homo is a villain. The villain have these really overt stereotypical gay mannerisms, way of speaking, they're always childless, and with Vecna/Peter/One, all of that is at play. All of that is on full display. And I found that irksome like this is a really smart callback to the 80s, like problematizing this practice by enacting it? I don't know that they went that deep with it. It was reminding me of there's this question about homosexual narcissism. It's this old belief that homosexuals are narcissists because of their deep attraction for the same sex.

A: Oh god. Those are the same frameworks they've tried to use about trans folks right? Saying they're not actually trans, they're... you know, we don't even need to get into that, it's gross.

L: We're not going to give it air time. So in thinking about that and Vecna/Peter/One's obsession with his own superiority and dominance, really I feel like feeds and fans the flames of those old ideas and psychological frameworks of what homosexuality is. So I took issue with that. How are you thinking about that?

A: I think it's one of those things where if that's the only representation you have, then you have every right to be pissed about it. I'm thinking about other situations in film where it's like, it's not a bad representation but if it's the only one we have, it's problematic. I think because Stranger Things does have so much other queerness going on and explicit queer characters, not just what we're picking up on, I feel okay with there bein ga queer villain becuase that' snot all that we're given. And he's not named or necessarily coded as queer. We just kind of look at him and we know, baby you're queer. I don't know if straight people are catching on to that or not.

L: Ooh I would really like to ask the straights [laughs]

A: I know there's a lot of girls on the internet who are really crushing on him. Which you can crush on queer men, of course, but little cis teeng irls are finding him suepr dreamy so..

L: Interesting.

A: If you're straight, please write to us.

L: Calling all heterosexuals. Are you picknig up that Peter/one/Vecna is queer? Or no?

A: So this is kind of related to the queer coding but anohter internet controversy, I spend a lot of time on Stranger Things forums looking at random memes and facts curated for me by algorithms. Something I've found in those comments sections is that straight people are really upset about all the queer ships for the show. They're very.. there's a ton of queer hshipping obviously, we've got into some of it, I have some more to share, but there' sa lot of poeple who are like, what are yout alking about? That's Not there. Do y'all not realize this has been a queer tradition since forever? So speakin gof ships, we talked about Eddie and Steve, we talked about mike and Will, El and Mike as queer, Joyce and Hopper as queer [laughs] basically everyring is gay people. But the last queer ship I feel very passionat eabout is Robin and Nancy. Again, they have such good chemistry and there's just these moments where they look at each other and they're so appreciative of the other's intelligence and wit and humor and I hate this Robin trying to push Steve and Nancy together. It feels heartbreaking to me because I'm like, girl no, Nancy! Nancy is your girl.

L: Yeah, yeah I agree. Another instance of fantastic chemistry and just interest. there's the energy of interest between the two of them that feels really genuine. it's not compulsory, what we're supposed to do, it's just there. I feel like, maybe if there' some rainbow children listening, if that story was being told now would there be more openness to that possibility? I hope so. Because it's clearly there. The energy is there, the vibe is there. We haven't talked about Jonathan at all.

A: I was going to ask if there was anyone else you wanted to touch on. Do you have thoughts on Jonathan in reference to this?

L: for me, Jonathan is incredibly queer. There are elements of Jonathan that feel also, very post-relationship.

A: I'm like, is it because he's depressed?

L: [laughs] Valid. No you're right, he's like meeting criteria for major depressive disorder [laughs], okay yeah. And also depression is not funny.

A: But sometimes you have to laugh at it, when you yourself are depressed.

L: [laughs] True.

A: I definitely read him as queer in temr sof like, he's definitely the outcast and outcasts are queer figures. But I dont necessarily pick up on him having any specific genderqueer energy or any sort of... I don't really ship him with anyone on the show. Although, actually, I'm glad you brought this up because I totally forgot, I was rewatching part of season 4 yesterday. There is no way that he and Argyle haven't made out on mushrooms one time.

L: Oh.. my... goddess. 100%. They have done more than make out, Alexia.

A: Perhaps. I see it being a sweet little makeout.

L: Oh I went somewhere else. Thank you for bringing it back. I mean, you know, bodies [laughs] they're just bodies.

A: All that hair.

L: That gorgeous flowing hair. I agree with you [laughs]

A: Even Argyle's attraction to Eden in season 4. He's like, it's maybe similar to the El and Mike thing where he's like really into her strong energy and being rough with the kids and she's wearing all black, kind of goth look, and he has this long pretty hair and he's like I want you to step on my face, you know? You can tell that's his interest in her.

L: [laughs]

A: So the TLDR, everything is gay.

L: Everything is gay.

A: I feel like that's a great way to close this out.

L: I feel like that's the only way we could.

A: Leo, thank you so much. This was so fun.

L: This was such a good and lovely conversation. Have a gay day everyone!

Wow, I cannot thank Leo enough for joining me on that amazing and super gay segment. I hate to kill the vibe, but we just cannot wrap up an episode on *Stranger Things* without talking about the military industrial complex. So let's move on back to Hawkins Lab. Critiques of the US government and its investments in science and technology are pretty blatant with that whole storyline, but I think it's very relevant that the military is also acknowledged as a source of Hopper's trauma. Militaristic science and technology are again shown to be uncontrollable evils, as it's Agent Orange—a form of chemical warfare—that led to widespread birth defects among those working in Hopper's unit. Because the series is set in the 80s Cold War era, the Russians make an obvious antagonist, but they are not set up as the bad guy to the US government's good guy. Both sides are shown to be wrapped up in a senseless investment in violence that is beyond their comprehension and control. The Hawkins Lab, here, is not just this evil outlier, but is fully embedded within a larger military industrial technoscientific complex that the show consistently critiques. This is sometimes done subtly, and with irony, like when Mr. Wheeler – notorious for being completely out of touch and useless – is easily convinced the Hawkins government agents are on his side. When they are searching for Mike and Eleven, he says something along the lines of, "It's our government. Why would they ever harm us?" That middle-class white man ignorance is pretty hard to imagine in 2022 when pretty much everyone – regardless of political party – is pretty fed up with the US government and knows they're looking out for themselves and other elites. That Mr. Wheeler's patriotism is reflected in Erica's weird tendencies to wear an American flag and to assert that you can't spell America without Erica is a weird choice that I don't even know how to fully unpack, but I think it's just another sign of the writers not putting a lot of meaningful thought into their black characters.

But there's a different type of agency and intelligence I want to discuss – and that's among the youth. See what I did there? That's what we call a pun. I love the way this show uplifts youth as emotionally complex, intelligent people who are capable of adapting, overcoming fear, and solving difficult problems. The teens do a great job of protecting their younger teammates from the bulk of the danger, shoutout babysitter Steve and stoner Jonathan, who Joyce fully entrusts to watch the kids while she makes an impromptu trip to Russia. I know that wasn't her plan, but really, the fact that she didn't at least tell Jonathan the truth was wild. But back to the point – ageism and adult supremacy are legitimate forms of oppression in the world, and I think *Stranger Things* does its small part to say we shouldn't overlook anyone's worth or value based on their age, life experiences, or access to privilege and power. I mean, even stoner Argyle has some important breakthroughs in finding the military tire tracks and creating a sensory deprivation tank for Eleven.

In *Stranger Things*, everyone is given a chance to shine. Each of these characters has a pivotal role to play in the fight to come, even though they are very different people with different temperaments and strengths. While Eleven may seem to be the hero figure, she is not a savior

– this is truly a team effort, as evidenced by the cast of like, 20 people who are all collaborating to forestall the complete annihilation of Hawkins and the wider world. The importance of teamwork, collaboration, community, and chosen family is probably one of my favorite aspects of the show, and another thing that makes it queer at heart.

Before wrapping up today, I have a couple announcements to share with y'all – if you head on over to the This Ends at Prom podcast, you can listen to me chat Bend it like Beckham with hosts Harmony and BJ Colangelo. We chat about the myth of multiculturalism, femmephobic forms of feminism, and of course, how this move is very, very gay.

I'll also be releasing an episode soon on Broad City with another special guest, so make sure to subscribe to the podcast and follow me on social media for updates.

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