

Stranger Things, Season 3: Nostalgia for the 1980s meets anti-Russian hysteria

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Written and directed by Matt and Ross Duffer

On July 4, Netflix released the third season of the popular television series *Stranger Things* to its online streaming service. The show, created by the Duffer brothers, continues with its combination of 1980s nostalgia, science fiction and horror themes, but this time ramps up the anti-Russian hysteria that was a staple of American cinema during the Cold War and which has returned in a different form over the past several years to US political life.

Set in the 1980s, Season 1 introduces Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), an adolescent girl with paranormal abilities who has been held at a secret facility on the outskirts of a small fictional town, Hawkins, Indiana, and experimented upon by US government agents. Eleven was having her abilities developed by scientists so that she could spy on the USSR, but she escapes and befriends a group of local boys.

As a byproduct of the experimentation, a portal to an alternate dimension opens up, which results in a strange creature emerging that kidnaps and kills people in the town. Eleven teams up with the boys and a local sheriff (David Harbour) to stop the creature. In Season 2, a more dangerous creature emerges that possesses one of the boys and threatens the town, but Eleven is able to seal off the portal, thus restoring peace to Hawkins.

The series has quickly attracted a cult following, especially because it draws heavily on wistfulness for the 1980s, using imagery and music that faithfully recreates the pop culture of that time period. The young boys and Eleven form a team of heroes reminiscent of *The Goonies* (1985), the American adventure-comedy film directed by Richard Donner, based on a story by Steven Spielberg. To its credit, the first two seasons of *Stranger Things* at least emphasize the nefarious character of the US government and its intelligence

apparatus, which will go to any lengths to advance its interests against the Soviet Union and cover up evidence of its activities.

In Season 3, unfortunately, the creators decide to introduce another popular trope from films and television series of the 1980s: Soviet villains who operate secretly on US soil as crude, violent buffoons, resorting to torture and murder to keep their operations hidden.

The new season initially offers interesting commentary about economic changes in small-town America in the 1980s. A brand-new high-end mall has been built in Hawkins, causing disruption and dislocation. Local store owners and others affected regularly protest that the town's mayor has allowed such an operation to be built. Many of the downtown shops are nearly empty and threatened with going out of business, and residents are forced to take low-wage jobs in the mall itself. This was a real process that took place in many American towns and cities throughout the 1980s and 1990s, lending some semblance of historical accuracy to the story.

As the show progresses, however, the viewer discovers that the mall was actually built by "the Russians," who have bought up property and paid off the mayor. They have an underground facility embedded far below the mall, where they are performing their own experiments and trying to reopen the portal that Eleven closed at the end of Season 2. Their meddling means that the dangerous "mind flayer" creature is able to return, which prompts our young heroes to step in and save the day once again.

Stranger Things has a talented cast and production team, which makes the banality of the newest storyline and the general reliance on cheap mysteries and juvenile romantic plots to keep viewers engaged all the

more disappointing.

The creators have gone to considerable lengths to make the settings believable and, in the process, created a visually appealing program that pays tribute to 1980s pop culture, but this makes the unfolding drama all the more dissatisfying.

The overarching developments that take place are the teenage romance of Eleven and one of the boys, Mike (Finn Wolfhard), another more awkward romance between Sheriff Hopper (Harbour) and the mother of one of the boys (Winona Ryder) and an unconventional and rocky father-daughter relationship between Hopper and Eleven. The drama generated by these relationships is generally contrived and predictable.

But the most noxious aspect of Season 3 is the depiction of the Soviet intelligence agency and scientists who are undertaking scientific experiments beneath Hawkins. The creators decided to make use of bombastic, stereotypical caricatures directly out of films such as Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky IV* (1985) to depict the villains in an unflattering light.

Most of the Russians the young crew encounters are either emotionless, violent thugs or cocky military officers provided with terrible one-liners and idiotic dastardly plans that predictably go awry. Perhaps the most annoying character in Season 3 is a super-patriotic elementary school girl who joins the crew. She hates "communism" and makes cracks about "commies" who supposedly "don't pay their workers."

The creators and their apologists may argue this is no more than a satirical reference to the type of anti-Soviet or merely violent, paranoid film rubbish that emerged during the Reagan administration in the 1980s, such as John Milius' *Red Dawn* (1984), Chuck Norris' *Invasion U.S.A.* (1985), Mark L. Lester's *Commando* with Arnold Schwarzenegger (1985) and similar efforts. First of all, why bother? But beyond that, it is difficult to believe that the character of Season 3, at a time when the American population is under bombardment by anti-Russian propaganda, spearheaded by the Democratic Party and its liberal media outlets, is merely a coincidence.

The result overall tends toward the sophomoric and unconvincing, not helped much by the silly romance and action sequences. In Season 2 at least, Eleven sought revenge against the US agents who had experimented on her as a child and struggled with the

moral question as to whether it was acceptable to become a "vigilante" or not. However, that more compelling plot line has been abandoned in the latest batch of episodes.

Despite the hackneyed story, the talents of the actors genuinely stand out, particularly Millie Bobby Brown, who may have a serious career ahead of her, should she choose to take on more thoughtful projects. Too often the genuine talents of such young performers become submerged in blockbuster movie franchises where their abilities go to waste in one-dimensional characters and empty plots.

As one might have predicted, the season ends with a cliffhanger, leaving the series open for a fourth season, already in development.



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