

IB Film: Textual Analysis
 Stranger Things: The Disappearance of Will Byers (Duffer Brothers, 2015)
 Sequence Chosen (00:00:28 - 00:05:28)

Word Count: 1749

The 2015 Netflix series, *Stranger Things*, sits at a peculiar crossroad between the criterion of success in popular culture (Duffer & Duffer, 2016). The unexpected commercial success and appraisal from critics of the series not only reflects the current rise of nostalgia but also its ability to resound with the masses whilst informing us about the ways we can deal with the frustrations caused by contemporary social issues. It is therefore unsurprising that the effectiveness of the text itself requires the aid of intertextual influences, genre conventions, recurring themes, mise-en-scene, and other film elements to convey a narrative and aesthetic that resonates with its audiences.

Stranger Things is set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana in 1983. It mixes Horror with Sci-fi and Mystery genres centered around a group of young boys, Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, and Lucas Sinclair on their search for their missing friend, Will Byers. A telekinetic laboratory runaway, "Eleven", escapes from a mysterious government facility on the very same night Will disappears. Through the use of their toys, board games, and fictional theories, along with Eleven's help, the boys begin to piece the clues together (Duffer & Duffer, 2016). The series was surprisingly successful particularly so since Netflix chose to believe in the "contagion factor" by not marketing it at all (Idato, 2017). These institutional factors become interesting when looking at the speed of throughput in mainstream media today, which runs on spontaneity and instantaneity of mass communication, making competition fiercer than ever before. Therefore, there must be particular qualities in the work that makes it capable of surviving this elimination process.

Nostalgia, without a doubt, is one of these qualities that accounts for the popularity of *Stranger Things*. Over the past few years, there is, in fact, a surging wave of revived material put back into the throughput of today's motion-picture industry (Antunes, 2017). *Stranger Things* makes numerous nods towards the aesthetics and narrative features in 1980s cinema, from the train track scene in "Stand by me" and archetypal analysis using "Star Wars" to nighttime bike rides in "ET" and Jack Torrance in "The Shining", which resonates with a majority of the series' audience - grown up Gen-Xs ("Influences &," n.d.) (Evans, Scheinman, & Reiner, 1986) (Kurtz & Lucas, 1977) (Spielberg, Kennedy, & Spielberg, 1982) (Kubrick, 1980). Intertextuality, however, has become "weaponized as a new form of emotional currency" in today's mass production of media and therefore cannot be accounted entirely for the show's success (Nerdwriter1, 2016).

Depicting the power of childhood and references to toys has reminded the Gen-X audience of a fonder time, in effect drawing an emotional connection to the story. Through the use of toys, the series' depiction of childlike creativity, imagination and innocence offer the audience a great contrast, remedy, and encouragement in the turbulent context of 2015.

Toys were used extensively by the three friends on their mission to recover Will. For example, when Eleven explains that Will is trapped in the “Upside down” by flipping over the “Dungeons and Dragons” campaign board, it shows us how children exercise their developing rationality and social awareness through toys, creating insatiable childhood “adventures” that fade away as people grow into adulthood (Wisecrack, 2017). This childhood spirit reminds and refreshes our audiences. 1980s Hawkins presents an idealization of a memory that juxtaposes against the backdrop of the contemporary complexities of political division, secretive agencies, technology, terrorist threats, populism, racial tensions, mass shootings, and the feeling of alienation and hopelessness that wears the everyday person down (K., 2017). These frustrations and the feeling of helplessness was reflected in data from Pew Research Center, with public trust in America’s government falling since 2000 to an all-time low of 19% in 2015 (Doherty, Kiley, & Tyson, 2015). *Stranger Things* speaks to the yearning for memories no longer present in today’s adulthood. The small town community depicted also reminds the audience of a simpler time where intentions are simple - find Will and evade the lurking monster - instead of the suspicions against worldwide cooperation and the liberal democracy. In this way, the depiction of children piecing things together, overcoming obstacles and reconciling with one another even serves to inform its audiences what the essential ingredients to the remedy against today’s frustration might be.

The scene chosen for this textual analysis comes from the very beginning of the series. Naturally, the sequence has the duty to not only establish our characters, settings, themes, narrative and genre, but it also needs to reel in the attention of potential fans. Since there are certain conventions within the horror and sci-fi genre, the usurpation of them can deter them from continuing.



Figure 1: Flickering fluorescent lighting inside the government facility as the staff member tries to escape unknown force(Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

The series thrusts us into the chase of a staff member in a government facility by what is assumed to be the looming supernatural monster we encounter later on. This immediately links the government, supernatural forces, and mystery as a single entity, which resonates strongly as it mirrors the public distrust in the government and the feeling of helplessness. The flickering low key lighting in the dim environment, combined with the swift dolly, tracking, and panning camera movements, and rhythmic cuts done in conjunction with the sound creates a desaturated, dynamic, fast-paced, and suspenseful scene typified in the horror genre as seen in "Halloween" and "The Shining" from the 80s (Hill & Carpenter, 1980)(Kubrick, 1980). The bird's eye shot on the staff member as he slowly looks up also resembles how horror films create suspense: they reveal the reaction of the horror rather than the horror itself (Figure 2). Our character is placed in a position of complete vulnerability and danger - much like all of the eventual quest our characters will go through - against a petrifying dark force with telekinetic powers with the flickering fluorescent lights, foreshadowing the powers of Eleven from the "upside down". This opening chase scene clearly shows the embodiment of genre conventions in order to appeal to and prime the audience's minds with mystery and horror, hooking them on to the show.

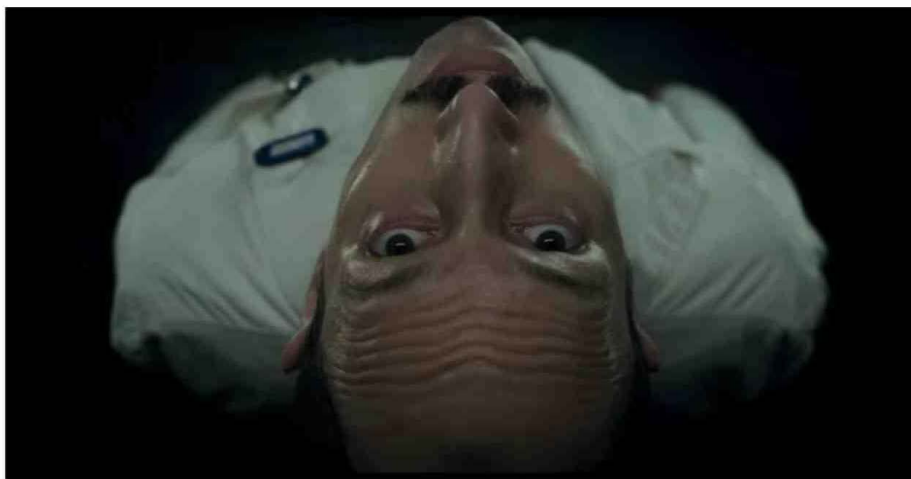


Figure 2: Birdseye shot on the staff member (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).



Figure 3: Close up on the sprinkler (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

The episode then transitions into the introduction of our protagonist, though not before a close up on the sprinklers (Figure 3). Although we have left the eerie facility, the air of suspense carries through with the mise-en-scene. This effect is coupled when the jittering movements of the sprinklers resembling the flickering of the lights and its rhythm also mirror the music in the previous scene (ScreenPrism, 2017). The suburban setting is also introduced, which is another convention used in the horror genre as exemplified by Spielberg's "The Poltergeist" (Marshall, Spielberg, & Hooper, 1982). A sound before vision is then used with the voices of the kids playing "Dungeons & Dragons" while having the sprinklers still occupying the frame, before it cuts to the vision of the kids, creating a sense of eeriness with the feeling that they are observed from outside the house.



Figure 4: Lucas framed by himself (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).



Figure 5: Mike's mother intruding their game, shot on a low angle from the perspectives of the children (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

With this foundation of suspense and mystery laid, the following scene establishes the important prop choice of the iconic “Dungeons and Dragons” board game popular in the 80s to serve as a thematic centerpiece that propels the narrative. This prop acts as an “emotional currency” as reminds its audiences of the childhood memories when fictional realms are imagined to be of the highest importance. This can be seen by the familiar childlike and feverish squabbling as presented by the actors’ serious and worrisome facial expressions, strong gestures and loud voices as they compete for Will’s attention to decide his next move. This is combined with an erratic series of shot-reverse-shots with each character framed by themselves to amp up the intensity of an argument, thereby elevating the decision to one between “life and death” for the kids (Figure 4) (ScreenPrism, 2017). The familiarity with the concepts and thus the importance of this game to the kids justifies why it becomes the prop that allows them to render their troubles on the journey against the supernatural monster, establishing the power of childhood in contrast to the mundanity of adults. The game equips the kids with experiences of cooperation, comradery, and trust. However, this is symbolically rejected by adults as seen by the intrusion of Mike’s mother (Figure 5). The adults are overbearing and dismissive, such as when we first hear (faintly and coming from off-screen) Mike’s mother shouting “Mike! Mike!” and then introduced with a low angle full shot as she opens the basement door, demanding Mike to finish the game, followed by a reverse shot from a high angle of Mike pleading her to let them continue (Figure 6). This sets up the adults’ power and their reluctance to see things from the kids’ perspective, sowing in the seeds for the dichotomy between the approaches of adults and children (Duffer & Duffer, 2016). Later in the narrative, we see the power of childhood prevailing over the methods used by adults when both sides go to rescue Will, thus encouraging audiences of the series to render their current unpredictable frustrations with childlike bravery and comradery rather than adultlike rationality and diffidence.



Figure 6: Reverse shot on Mike from a high angle (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).



Figure 7: Close up on the "Demogorgon" figurine from the game with other figurines out of focus (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

With the well-established centerpiece of the narrative, it is revealed in the finishing sequence that Will was to be "killed" in the campaign by the "Demogorgon" when he rolled the die. The "Demogorgon" piece was emphasized with a closed in focus pull (Figure 7) previously in the gameplay when Mike slams it on the board as it foreshadows the monster's later capture of Will, and the friends using the "Demogorgon" concept to understand the supernatural realm. The recurring motif of lights and the distortion of it is also established as Will farewells Mike on his bike. The dimly lit long shot of the departure in front of the facade of Mike's garage makes the flickering of porch light noticeable as it occupies the center of the frame (Figure 8). While audiences are yet to be aware of the capture of Will in this scene, the porch light's resemblance with the eerie flickering lights in the government facility

foreshadows this (ScreenPrism, 2017). Intertextual referencing is used when the boys cycle off in the classic "ET" like fashion, but more importantly, the steady tracking wide shot of Will and Dustin on their bikes (Figure 9) makes their big headlights seem small and engulfed by the surrounding darkness, drifting saliently through the night in a vulnerable position, signaling the dark journey ahead of them ("Influences &," n.d.) (Spielberg, Kennedy, & Spielberg, 1982).



Figure 8: The lights on the facade of the garage flickers when Will rides away on his bike, (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).



Figure 9: The headlamps on the bikes (Duffer & Duffer, 2016).

The chosen sequence launches the series with the responsibility of hooking its audience with horror and mystery genre conventions and establishing the important parts of the narrative. It also employs intertextual references to awaken a nostalgic emotional response from its audience. With the aid of mise-en-scene, editing, lighting, acting and cinematography, the sequence lays the foundations for the key plot devices, recurring themes, and motifs that become essential later on to address the role and power of childhood. This concept, as presented by toys, not only reflects how the thematic centerpiece is shaped by the demands for nostalgia from mainstream culture but also functions as a key social centerpiece. *Stranger Things* reinstalls the power of childhood in an era where adult lives are dominated by alienation, distrust in government, and resentment.

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