

Bachelorarbeit im Studiengang Audiovisuelle Medien

The Sound of the Upside Down :
A Sound Design Analysis of the Netflix
Series “Stranger Things”

**STRANGER
— THINGS —**

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Seit ihrem Debüt im Jahr 2016 hat sich die Netflix-Serie *Stranger Things* als feste Größe in der Popkultur etabliert, und ihre Beliebtheit steigt mit jeder neuen Staffel weiter an. Die Serie stützt sich stark auf den Sound, der eine eingehende Untersuchung verdient. In dieser Arbeit wird eine Sounddesign-Analyse der Serie *Stranger Things* vorgestellt, wobei der Schwerpunkt darauf liegt, wie das Sounddesign die Erzählung unterstützt und eine eindringliche Atmosphäre schafft. Durch die Analyse spezifischer Szenen und Sequenzen wird gezeigt, wie der Ton die Handlung der Serie vorantreibt und die emotionale Wirkung verstärkt, und welche Funktion bestimmte Geräusche haben. Die Arbeit beleuchtet auch die spezifischen Techniken, die von den Sounddesignern der Serie verwendet werden, einschließlich des Einsatzes von Musik, Soundeffekten und Dialogen, um die Themen der Serie und die Entwicklung der Charaktere zu unterstützen. Die Analyse zeigt, dass das Sounddesign von *Stranger Things* eine entscheidende Komponente für den Erfolg der Serie ist, da es zu dem fesselnden und spannenden Aufbau der Welt beiträgt, der das Publikum in seinen Bann gezogen hat.

Abstract:

Since its 2016 debut, the Netflix series *Stranger Things* has established itself as a pop-culture staple and its popularity continues to rise with each season release. The show relies heavily on sound, which merits an in-depth examination. This thesis presents a sound design analysis of the series *Stranger Things* with a focus on how sound design supports the narrative and creates an immersive atmosphere. By analyzing specific scenes and sequences, it is demonstrated how sound drives the show's narrative and enhances the emotional impact, as well as what function specific noises have. The paper also highlights the specific techniques used by the show's sound designers, including the use of music, sound effects, and dialogue, to support the show's themes and character development. The analysis shows that the sound design of *Stranger Things* is a critical component of the show's success, as it contributes to the immersive and suspenseful world-building that has captivated audiences.

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1. Introduction

Sound design plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and emotional impact of audio-visual media. It is an integral component of film and television production that often goes unnoticed by the casual viewer. However, it is the careful and deliberate use of sound that can transport audiences to another world, intensify the dramatic effect, and heighten the overall experience of watching a movie or TV show. In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation for the art of sound design, particularly in the realm of streaming television series. One of the primary benefits of the streaming model is that it enables the creation of high-quality original content, which can attract subscribers and provide a competitive edge over traditional media. Netflix, one of the world's leading entertainment services, has invested heavily in producing original series, with a particular focus on compelling storytelling and high production values. One such example is the critically acclaimed series, *Stranger Things*, which has become a cultural phenomenon since its release in 2016. *Stranger Things* is a prime example of how Netflix has changed the game in the world of television production. It is a show that embodies the best of both traditional and modern television, blending nostalgia with innovation, and providing a fresh take on familiar genres. The show's success is due, in part, to its masterful storytelling and visuals, but it is also thanks to the artistry of its sound design.

It is evident how influential this series is on both the audience and the television and music industries, as songs from the '80s featured in the show are experiencing a resurgence in sales, topping the charts and trending on social media platforms. In June 2022, Kate Bush's 1985 song "*Running Up That Hill*" reached number one on Billboard's Global 200 chart after featuring in the fourth season of *Stranger Things* and being an important plot element.¹ Aside from the music, the show has established a sonic vocabulary that is authentic to its otherworldly universe and makes it stand out from other creative works.

This thesis examines the sound design of *Stranger Things* and how it contributes to the story. For this purpose, a variety of literature sources on sound design were used, as well as interviews with the creators and sound designers of the show.

The first section of the paper provides an overview of the series and its genres, and a thorough summary of the complex plot to better understand the setting and context. The chapter also sheds light on the inspirations and influences that helped the show's creators shape the *Stranger Things* universe.

The second section focuses on the analysis of the show's sound design by providing examples from selective scenes. The sound elements are dissected according to their significance within the framework of the show. The use of sound and the interplay

¹ Billboard, 2022

between different audio elements are studied in relation to characterization and storytelling, as well as how they help convey the characters' emotions. A brief breakdown of the creation process of individual sounds and the sound designers' choices to reinforce the mood are also included. Finally, all of the observations and outcomes are summarized.

Temporal information on the examined sample scenes is denoted by the notation *SxE: Title of the Episode* [hh:mm:ss], where the number following the 'S' stands for the season's number and the number following the 'E' represents the episode's number.

2. Netflix : The impact on modern Television

The advent of streaming services has fundamentally changed the way we consume media, and Netflix is widely regarded as the pioneer of this revolution. The company was founded in 1997 in California and has grown to become one of the largest and most popular streaming services in the world, with over 230 million subscribers in more than 190 countries.² Netflix's success has been attributed to its innovative business model, which offers a vast library of films, documentaries, and television shows, including original programming, that can be streamed at any time, from any device, with a monthly subscription fee. The platform is available on a variety of devices, including computers, smartphones, tablets, streaming devices, and smart TVs. This model has created an on-demand culture of media consumption, and it has transformed the way we engage with audio-visual content. Furthermore, the company has had a major impact on the way that TV shows are produced. Among the ways in which Netflix has changed the narrative of TV shows include:

1. Shifting to streaming: Netflix was one of the first major platforms to move away from the traditional model of releasing TV shows on a weekly basis and instead make entire seasons available for streaming at once. This "binge-watch" model has become very popular and has changed the way that many people consume TV shows, without any commercial interruptions.³
2. Allowing for longer running times: Netflix has also been more willing than traditional networks to allow its shows to have longer running times, with some episodes running for up to an hour or more. This has given show creators more time and freedom to tell their stories and allowed for more complex and nuanced narratives.

² Netflix, *Company Profile*

³ Binge-watch is a term used to describe the act of watching multiple episodes of a television show or a whole season of a series in one sitting.

3. Embracing diverse voices: Netflix has made an effort to give a platform to a wider range of creators and stories, including those from diverse backgrounds. This has led to a greater diversity of perspectives and stories being told on the platform.

3. Stranger Things : The Series

3.1. Overview

Stranger Things is an American Netflix Original series created and directed by the Duffer Brothers. The show was released on Netflix in July 2016 and has since gained a large following. There are a total of 34 episodes spread across the show's four seasons. In February 2022, the series creators Matt and Ross Duffer published an open letter to fans via Netflix's blog, in which they revealed that the show has been renewed for a fifth and final season.⁴ The release date, however, remains unknown.

The average length of a *Stranger Things* episode is approximately 50 minutes. The shortest episode (*S1xE7: Chapter Seven: The Bathtub*) runs for 42 minutes while the longest episode (*S4xE9: Chapter Nine: The Piggyback*) is 2 hours and 22 minutes long.

The hit show is set in the 1980s in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, and follows the story of a group of young friends as they encounter supernatural forces coming from an alternate dimension and a mysterious girl with psychokinetic abilities who helps them in their quest to save their missing friend. As they uncover the truth about his disappearance, they also uncover a larger government conspiracy involving secret experiments on supernatural phenomena.

The series has received critical acclaim for its performances, direction, cinematography, visual effects, soundtrack, and nostalgic tribute to 1980s culture.

According to Netflix, *Stranger Things 4* is currently the most viewed English-language show on the platform with over 1.35 Billion hours viewed in the first 28 days of its release.⁵

⁴ Netflix Staff, 2022

⁵ Netflix Top 10, *Global Top 10 - Most Popular TV (English)*. URL: <https://top10.netflix.com/tv> (Retrieved January 10, 2023).

Throughout its run, *Stranger Things* and its cast have received numerous awards and nominations including the Primetime Emmy Awards (51 nominations, 12 of which it has won) and the Golden Globe Awards (four nominations). In total, the show has won 97 awards out of 291 nominations.⁶

It's worth noting that the Sound and Music of the series, which will be the focus of this paper, received high recognition from various awards, including the major honors:

- Primetime creative arts Emmy Awards⁷ :
 - 4 wins out of 4 nominations for Outstanding Sound Editing for a Comedy or Drama Series.
 - 1 win out of 4 nominations for Outstanding Sound Mixing for a Comedy or Drama Series.
 - 1 win out of 4 nominations for Outstanding music supervision.
 - 1 win out of 1 nomination for Outstanding Original Main Title Theme Music.

- Grammy Awards : 4 nominations for Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media and Best Compilation Soundtrack For Visual Media.

3.2. Genre

The *Stranger Things* TV series is a blend of the following genres: Science Fiction, Horror, Supernatural, Coming-Of-Age, Adventure, Thriller, Mystery, Fantasy, Comedy, and Historical Drama. The show also explores the themes of friendship, family, and the power of love. It combines elements of these different genres to create a compelling and immersive story, anchored by the solid performances of its young leads.

Some of the horror elements incorporated in the show include jump scares, suspenseful music, creepy monsters, the fear of the unknown and uncertainty. The show's use of unsettling sound design, lighting, and camera angles cultivated an eerie atmosphere, which contributed to the sense of suspense and tension it successfully conveyed.

Due to the protagonist's psychokinetic superpowers and an alternate universe populated by humanoid creatures, the show also fits under the supernatural and sci-fi classification. The series' setting in the 1980s provides a layer of nostalgia for those who lived through that decade. The usage of 1980s Pop and Rock music, old Slang words, and vintage costumes serve to establish the show's context and enhance its nostalgic feeling.

⁶ IMDb. URL: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4574334/awards/?ref=tt_awd (Retrieved February 19, 2023)

⁷ The Creative Arts Emmys are a category of Emmy Awards given for technical and equivalent achievements in American television programming.

3.3. Target Audience

Stranger Things is primarily aimed at an audience that consists of teenagers and young adults who appreciate science fiction and horror genres. Since its release, the show has been well-received by a wide range of viewers of different ages and backgrounds.

The series has a nostalgia-based aesthetic and plot elements that also appeal to older viewers who reminisce about their past and lived experiences, while also featuring a cast of young actors that appeal to younger viewers who are eager to explore the charm of that retro era. However, the show is not suitable for children and is rated 16+ in Germany as it includes violence, gore, grisly death, grotesque-looking monsters, and disturbing content.⁸

3.4. The Upside Down

In the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, the Upside Down is a parallel dimension that is central to the show's plot. It is depicted as a dark and dangerous mirror of the real world, that is devoid of human life and inhabited by a variety of monstrous creatures, known as the Demogorgons, which prey on anyone who enters their dimension. These creatures' only weakness is fire. This realm is also home to the supernatural being known as the Mind Flayer. The Upside Down is accessed through portals and is connected to the town of Hawkins, Indiana. In *S1xE5*, The young characters' teacher explains the physics behind accessing a potential alternate dimension :

“ Well.. you'd have to create a massive amount of energy. More than humans are currently capable of creating, mind you, to open up some kind of tear in time and space, and then .. you create a doorway.. like a Gate. If it did exist, it will disrupt gravity, the magnetic field, our environment... Heck, it might even swallow us whole.”⁹

The characters in the show often find themselves navigating the Upside Down in order to save their friends and uncover the truth behind the mysterious happenings in their town. This nightmarish reflection of the world is characterized by its dark and gloomy atmosphere, with thick fog, decay, and vines (tendrils) spread all over the place. The environment is harsh and inhospitable, with spores (particles) floating around, which makes the air toxic to humans. Visually, it is dimly lit with a blue hue contrasting the bright warm colors of the real world.

⁸ IMDb. URL: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4574334/parentalguide> (Retrieved January 11, 2023)

⁹ *Stranger Things, S1xE5: Chapter Five: The Acrobat and the Flea* [00:20:30]

The Upside Down influences the electromagnetic field of the human world, often resulting in malfunctioning power and electronics. Therefore, electricity serves as a communication medium between the two realms. Sometimes, when traces of electrical activity are present in the real world, luminescent golden particles would occasionally surface in the Upside Down; these particles could be controlled by a trapped person in the Upside Down to impact electronic items on the other side.¹⁰ Sounds coming from Hawkins are slightly heard as an echo in the Upside Down. On the other hand, sound from the Upside Down is not audible in Hawkins unless it can pass through a nearby portal.

3.5. Plot

3.5.1. Season 1

November 6, 1983 - Hawkins, Indiana

As 12 years-old Will Byers cycles home from a “Dungeons and Dragons” game night at his friend’s house, a menacing creature suddenly emerges. Will attempts to flee and conceal himself, but he is abducted. Will's friends, Mike(12), Lucas(12), and Dustin(12), become determined to find him. While looking for him in the woods, they encounter a mysterious head-shaven young girl wearing a hospital gown who looks lost and afraid. Mike lets her stay in his basement, hiding her from his parents. The group learns that her name is Eleven and that she possesses psychokinetic powers. She has a “011” tattoo on her wrist.

Nancy(15), Mike's older sister, attends a pool party hosted by her new boyfriend Steve(16), accompanied by her best friend Barb. When left alone by the pool, Barb is abducted by the monster.

Joyce(41), Will’s mother, notices strange events influencing the house’s power as the lights keep flickering. She believes Will is trying to communicate with her. Joyce uses Christmas lights to connect with Will, with each bulb hanging over a letter painted on the wall.

In the meantime, police chief Jim Hopper becomes suspicious of the Hawkins National Laboratory after discovering a torn hospital gown outside the Lab's gates. Hopper investigates Dr. Martin Brenner who works in the laboratory. The investigation leads to the discovery of a secret government Lab (the Hawkins Lab) conducting strange experiments.

¹⁰ Stranger Things Wiki: *The Upside Down*

Will's body, or what looks like it, is found in a quarry. However, Eleven confirms to her new friends that Will is still alive by psychically controlling radios to transmit Will's voice calling for help.

Hopper finds out that the Lab faked Will's body to close his case and cover up their involvement in the strange events in Hawkins. Hopper breaks into the Laboratory where he discovers Eleven's bedroom and a massive, expansive portal to an alternate dimension. The agents knock him out and implant hidden microphones in his apartment to spy on him.

Nancy heads to the woods near Steve's house looking for Barb and sees a humanoid faceless creature. She teams up with Jonathan(16), Will's brother, to find and kill the monster in hopes to save Barb and Will.

After gathering all their information and theories about the otherworldly events, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas set out to find the Gate to the Upside Down hoping to save their captive friend. They use a compass for directions.¹¹ The boys find out that Eleven has been misguiding them from the path by manipulating the compass through her powers to protect them from danger.

During the course of the season, Eleven has a series of traumatic flashbacks about the laboratory experiments performed on her by Dr. Brenner, whom she calls "Papa". During the experiment, she was placed in a sensory deprivation tank that makes her teleport to spy on Russians. However, she makes contact with a creature while in a deep psychic state and accidentally opens a gate to the Upside Down with her powers. It turns out she escaped the Lab after that event and now the government is after her.

Joyce and Hopper visit Eleven's mother and learn about Project MK Ultra¹². Joyce, Hopper, Nancy, and Jonathan get in touch with the kids. They come up with a plan to make a sensory deprivation tank in Hawkins Middle school to boost Eleven's powers so she can see Will and Barb without physically going into the Upside Down. Eleven reveals that Barb is dead and that Will is still alive, hiding in his makeshift fort, "Castle Byers". On a mission to save him, Joyce and Hopper break into Hawkins Lab to get through the gate

¹¹ The compass's needle is naturally drawn to the Earth's magnetic North Pole. However, if there's the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power. The gate to the Upside Down would have so much power, it disrupts the electromagnetic field. Meaning, if one follows the compass's north, it should lead to the gate.

¹² MK Ultra was a secret CIA operation that took place in Hawkins Lab from 1953 to 1973. Its goal was to expand the boundaries of the mind that could be used against enemies during the Cold War. The participants were put in sensory deprivation tanks, were given psychedelic drugs, and suffered physical and mental abuse. The experiments lead to several deaths. Eleven's mother was being experimented on during her pregnancy which affected Eleven in the womb.

but the security holds them captive. Interrogated by Dr. Brenner, Hopper eventually gives away Eleven's location in return for access to the gate.

As they enter the Upside down, Joyce and Hopper uncover the creature's lair, where an unconscious Will is strung up by his neck by a tendril. Hopper attempts to revive him. The three make it back through the Gate after Will is revived.

Meanwhile, to ensure the rescue mission, Nancy and Jonathan try to distract the monster by setting a trap at the Byers' house and attracting him with their blood. Steve joins them and the three of them attempt to kill the creature. Despite being injured, the Demogorgon manages to escape.

Dr. Brenner and his agents break into the school to take Eleven but she kills most of them. The monster appears in the school since he sensed the bloodshed and attacks everyone. Eleven steps up to save her friends. She pins the Demogorgon to the wall and uses all her powers to kill and disintegrate it, but she vanishes as well. Mike is left with tears, as he grew feelings for her.

One month later, Hopper inexplicably hides a box of Eggos waffles in the woods (Eleven's favorite food). The season ends with Will receiving a brief glimpse of the Upside Down when he coughs up a slug-like thing in his bathroom sink, but he keeps it a secret from his family.

3.5.2. Season 2

The second season picks up in October of 1984 in Pittsburgh, with police chasing a young woman who has psychic skills and the number 008 tattooed on her wrist.

Back in Hawkins, the show introduces a new character Max Mayfield (13), and her stepbrother Billy (17) who moved from California. Max quickly catches Lucas and Dustin's attention and joins the friends' group. Will frequently experiences visions of the Upside Down where he sees a big shadow monster in the sky. In the vision, the creature shoves a tentacle into Will's throat. Joyce and Hopper take him to see Dr. Owens, the new head of Hawkins Lab.

Meanwhile, Nancy and Steve pay a visit to Barb's parents and learn that they have hired local conspiracy theorist Murray Bauman to locate their daughter since they still believe she's missing.

Mike has unsuccessfully attempted to communicate with Eleven for almost a year since her disappearance. Later, it is revealed that Eleven is alive and lives secretly with Hopper in a cabin in the woods. Hopper has been hiding her to protect her from the government. In a flashback, Eleven turned up in the Upside Down after defeating the Demogorgon and disappearing. After escaping and then witnessing federal officials at Mike's house looking for her, she fled into the woods.

After reports of sudden rotten pumpkins, Hopper investigates the field. While digging in the pumpkin patches, he discovers a tunnel leading to the Upside Down where he gets trapped and passes out from the toxic air. Will sees Hopper in his visions and scribbles his location in the Upside Down. Joyce's new boyfriend Bob recognizes the place and they both head there to rescue Hopper, along with Mike and Will. The scientists then arrive and set the tunnel on fire to kill the monsters but this indirectly causes excruciating pain in Will that makes him collapse. They rush him to the Lab where he displays memory loss. Dr. Owens realizes the shadow monster is like a virus that has infiltrated Will's brain and is manipulating him. He believes the creatures in the Upside Down operate on a hive mind, which explains why disrupting the tunnels was so harmful to Will, making him connected to the monsters.

Dustin finds a small creature chirping in his bin, he decides to keep it as a pet and names it "Dart". Dustin later finds out that Dart is a baby Demogorgon that ate his cat. The creature grows big in a short period. Dustin calls for Steve's help to kill him. Max and Lucas team up with Dustin and Steve and attempt to lure Dart to a junkyard, only for him to show up accompanied by similar monsters. Amid the attack, the creatures suddenly change their minds and run away in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, Will claims he knows how to stop the shadow monster and points out the spot in the Upside Down that the monster wants him to avoid. Owens sends a team there to investigate but the pack of monsters, who were about to attack the group in the junkyard, show up and attack them. It turns out that the possessed Will was manipulated by the shadow monster that they called "The Mind Flayer". He unwillingly became a spy. The creatures later enter the Lab and kill many of the workers.

Eleven visits her birth mother Terry for the first time. Terry seems mentally unstable and only says a few specific words on repeat. Eleven communicates with her through her powers. She accesses her memories and discovers that Dr. Brenner forcibly took away Terry's newborn daughter "Jane", raised her among other young test subjects at Hawkins National Laboratory, and renamed her Eleven. The mother was then subjected to shock therapy which left her mentally crazy. In the memory, Eleven also finds out there was another girl at the Lab playing with her: 008.

Eleven then goes to Chicago to join 008 (named "Kali") and her rebellious gang. Kali teaches her to channel her anger, which enhances her powers. Eleven then returns to Hawkins after having a vision that Mike and Hopper are in great danger in the Lab.

Back in the Lab, Mike convinces Joyce to sedate Will, to prevent the creature from tracking them. Hopper, Joyce, Mike, and Will successfully escape the Lab while Bob is caught by the pack of monsters in the lobby and gets killed. Nancy, Steve, Jonathan, Dustin, Lucas, and Max arrive outside the Lab and save them. They all escape to the Byers' house.

The group concludes that since Will is connected to the Mind Flayer, only *he* knows his weakness and how to stop it. Will wakes up enraged as he finds himself tied up. Joyce, Jonathan, and Mike recall their favorite memories of Will and sing him his favorite song trying to bring the real Will back. Using Morse code, he taps out a message that says "Close Gate". In the meantime, the Demogorgons approach the Byers' house but before attacking, Eleven shows up and kills them. She finally reunites with her friends.

Joyce recalls Will saying something about the monster "he likes it cold". So they put Will in a very heated place to get rid of the Mind flayer's infection. Meanwhile, Hopper and Eleven head to the Lab to close the portal while Steve, Dustin, Max, and Lucas head to the tunnel and ignite it, to distract the monsters from the Lab and leave it unguarded. Eleven succeeds in closing the gate with her telekinetic powers by channeling her anger from her past trauma. The monster eventually snaps out of Will.

A month later, the government officially closed the Hawkins Lab following Nancy, Jonathan, and Murray's public revelations that the Lab was behind Barb's death. Dr. Owens creates a birth certificate for Eleven, giving her the name Jane Hopper. The season ends with the kids attending the school's annual dance "Snowball". The final scene reveals that the Mind Flayer is still alive in the Upside down, keeping an eye on all of them.

3.5.3. Season 3

June 28th, 1984, Kamchatka, the Soviet Union

The season opens up with Russian scientists attempting to open a gate to the Upside Down using a powerful machine. However, the mission fails. Under Stepanov's order, hitman Grigori kills the scientist while giving the other scientist Dr. Alexei one year to make the machine succeed.

By the summer of 1985, Starcourt Mall opened in Hawkins, where Steve works at an ice cream shop with his coworker Robin (17). Dustin sets up a radio tower to communicate

with his new girlfriend Suzie(14), who lives in Utah. He accidentally intercepts a secret Russian transmission that he records and takes to Steve. Robin successfully decodes the Russian message that references a shipment coming to the mall that night. With the help of Lucas' sister Erica (10), they sneak into the suspicious shipping room, leading them to a secret Russian Laboratory hidden beneath the mall where a gate is being opened. Steve and Robin are caught by the Russians but Dustin and Erica manage to save them.

The machine used to open the portal causes a power outage in Hawkins and demagnetization. Joyce notices her fridge magnets falling off and raises suspicions. Upon investigation, Hopper and Joyce hold Dr. Alexei hostage and take him to Murray for translation. He confesses about the Russians' plan to open a portal to the Upside Down beneath Starcourt Mall.

A bunch of strange rats swarm in an abandoned mill and erupt into a new physical form of the Mind Flayer. On his way to a rendezvous, Billy gets knocked off the road by a creature, that drags him inside the steel mill. The Mind Flayer inhabits his brain and guides him to capture his coworker Heather and feed her to the creature. Both become servants of the Flayer and subdue other people to be possessed, creating a whole army of hosts.

As part of a game, Eleven uses her powers to spy on Billy and finds out about his evil actions. When confronting him, he reveals that she's the monster's target seeking revenge for closing the gate and threatening of killing her and her friends. All the Flayer's hosts melt and merge into a large creature. Eleven uses her powers to defend her friends (Mike, Max, Lucas, Will, Nancy, and Jonathan) from the monster's attack in Hopper's cabin but she ends up getting injured with a crawling Mind Flayer fragment invaded in her leg. The group flees to the mall after locating Dustin through Eleven's psychic projection.

Hopper's group searches for the children at the 4th of July celebration in the fairground but Grigori the hitman spots them and shoots Alexei for being a traitor. The group learns that the Russians are looking for the kids at the mall.

At Starcourt mall, Eleven's group prevents the Russians from shooting Dustin's group. However, Eleven collapses because of her injured leg. She telekinetically removes the Flayer's piece embedded in her wound, resulting in losing her powers. The Mind Flayer and Billy ambush Eleven's group in the mall. The kids attack the monster with fireworks

as Eleven frees Billy from its control using the power of memories and nostalgia. Billy makes a selfless sacrifice to protect the children and dies.

Undercover, Hopper's group rushes to destroy the machine that's opening the gate in hopes to kill the monster. Hopper gets trapped near the machine while confronting Grigori. Out of time, Joyce had no choice but to blow the machine to close the gate, resulting in Hopper's presumable disintegration. The monster then dies and military troops arrive to arrest the Russians.

Three months later, Joyce and her kids, along with the powerless Eleven, move out of Hawkins to California. A post-credit scene shows Russian guards in Kamchatka, being instructed to feed a prisoner with the description "not the American" to a Demogorgon they're keeping.

3.5.4. Season 4

Joyce receives a porcelain doll from Russia with a secret letter claiming that Hopper is alive. In a flashback, Hopper survived the Machine's explosion beneath Starcourt Mall but was caught by Soviet forces and imprisoned in Kamchatka¹³. Joyce and Murray fly to Alaska in pursuit of Hopper.

Chrissy, a cheer captain at Hawkins High school, is tormented by visions of her abusive mother and a chiming Grandfather clock. While purchasing drugs from Eddie in his trailer, Chrissy is possessed and slain by a humanoid creature, whose body is covered with moving vines. Two other students get killed the same way in different locations. Jason, Chrissy's boyfriend, suspects Eddie of being part of a satanic cult and becomes determined to find him. Dustin, Max, Lucas, Erica, Steve, Nancy, Robin, and Eddie start investigating the murders. All clues point towards the Upside Down and 'Vecna' (a name assigned by the kids for the new monster). The investigation leads them to a certain Victor Creel who was imprisoned after allegedly killing his family in 1959. Nancy and Robin visit him and learn that his family was tormented and killed by demonic supernatural powers. Victor claims "a voice of an angel" has saved him, which the girls assume was the radio song "*Dream a little dream of me*" that he kept humming. The rest of the group breaks into the school counsellor's office and finds out that Vecna's victims suffered the same symptoms before dying, dealing with past trauma. Max, who is still struggling to accept her stepbrother's death, appears to be the next victim as she starts hearing the clock's chimes and Vecna calling her name in her vision.

¹³ *The Kamchatka Peninsula is situated in eastern Russia, across the Bering Strait from Alaska and on Siberia's Pacific Coast.*

When visiting Billy's grave, Max gets possessed by Vecna and finds herself inside his mind. Nancy and Robin inform Steve, Dustin, and Lucas, who are with Max, that music is the key to breaking Vecna's curse. As they play Max's favorite song "*Running Up That Hill*" on her Walkman, a mental window opens up that allows Max to return to reality.

Meanwhile, in California, Eleven is arrested for brutally injuring her Bully. However, she gets intercepted by Dr. Owens, who informs her about a new danger that threatens her friends at Hawkins, which compels her to cooperate with Dr. Brenner, a.k.a Papa, to regain her lost powers by being part of the Nina project. At the secret facility, Eleven gradually regains her powers and memories, but one specific memory repeatedly haunts her that involved a massacre of her fellow test subjects in 1979 at Hawkins Laboratory. In the memory, Brenner keeps asking her "*what have you done?*" But she can't seem to recall the events of that fateful day and assumes she committed the massacre. Eleven recalls befriending a Lab orderly, who cautions her about trusting Brenner. She also remembers being bullied by 002, which led her to feel responsible for the Lab bloodbath as an act of revenge.

In Hawkins, a malfunction in Dustin's compass leads the group to a new gate to the Upside Down at Lovers Lake. Steve dives down to check it before getting pulled into the Upside Down by a vine and assaulted by bat-like creatures called "Demobats". Nancy, Robin, and Eddie rush after him.

Dustin, Lucas, and Erica hypothesize that Vecna has created a gate at each murder scene. They transmit the message to Steve's crew in the Upside Down by electricity. Both groups rejoin inside Eddie's trailer, where Chrissy was killed; Robin and Eddie escape safely, while Vecna captures Nancy. Trapped in a trance state, she discovers that Vecna is in fact Victor Creel's son Henry, who used his psychokinetic powers to murder his mother and sister before slipping into a coma and being put under Brenner's care. Henry became subject 001, whose powers had been retained by a chip implanted in his neck by Brenner. He later turned out to be the orderly that befriended Eleven. Eleven now recalls that One (001) tricked her into removing the chip with her abilities and when he restored his powers, he committed the Lab massacre and attempted to murder her for refusing to further assist him. As a result, Eleven banished him to the Upside Down by opening the first portal between the two realms, which transformed him into Vecna, who controls the Mind Flayer. Before releasing Nancy, Vecna reveals his intentions of mass destruction and shows her a vision of a future Hawkins split apart. The group concludes that his plan requires four gates, which means he needs one more kill. The Hawkins group comes up with a plan to take him down: At the Creel house, Max, Lucas, and Erica lure Vecna into possessing Max. While he's distracted by taking his final victim, Nancy,

Steve, and Robin attack his physical form in his lair in the Upside Down. Meanwhile, Dustin and Eddie distract the Demobats by summoning them with a guitar solo. As the mission was hindered by Nancy's group getting strangled by Vecna's vines, Eddie sacrifices himself to the bats and dies.

All the way in Russia, Hopper, Joyce, and Murray find the particles from the Upside Down, and decide to kill the Demogorgons to help the kids with their mission by weakening Vecna through the hive mind.

Eleven, on the other hand, uses psychic projection and enters Max's mind to fight Vecna. However, he drags the girls into the Mind Lair and restrains them with his vines. Max starts to elevate in the real world and her bones break, referring to her near death. Just as Lucas was about to play her favorite song to save her, Jason interferes and breaks her Walkman, as he thought Lucas was trying to curse her. Eleven eventually gathers her strengths and breaks Vecna's control over Max but Max dies from her injuries. In the Upside Down, Nancy's group is finally released from the vines and set Vecna's body on fire. Vecna is gravely injured but escapes before the group can kill him. Eleven uses her powers to resurrect Max but her brief death caused Vecna's gates to open and rip through Hawkins. Two days after the "earthquake", the Hawkins community is still recovering, Max remains in a coma, and Will senses Vecna's presence. Shortly afterward, a supernatural storm erupts from the four gates, and spores from the Upside Down fall onto Hawkins.

3.6. Inspirations

The Netflix series *Stranger Things*, originally named "*Montauk*", incorporates a variety of homages and references to popular films and novels from the 1980s, especially the work of Steven Spielberg, Stephen King, and John Carpenter. When developing the show's idea, the Duffer Brothers started discussing government experiments near the end of the Cold War, leading them to set the story in the late 70s and early 80s. The brothers were stoked about this idea since it would enable them to pay tribute to the films they grew up watching and loving. Matt Duffer described this combination as a "*nice marriage*".¹⁴ The creators of the show have cited several inspirations that helped them form *Stranger Things*, including King's novel *IT* (1990) and films such as *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982), *The Goonies* (Donner, 1985), *Stand by Me* (Reiner, 1986), *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) and *Firestarter* (Lester, 1984).¹⁵

¹⁴ Goldman, 2016.

¹⁵ Fienberg, 2016.

In the show's original pitch deck, the Duffer Brothers tried to evoke the feeling of the intended show through movie references :

*“The feeling of fear and wonder as Elliot approaches a fog-drenched shed in **E.T...** the helpless dread that consumes Chief Brody as he watches a boy and his raft dragged under the water by an unseen monster in **Jaws**.. the crackling television in **Poltergeist**... the horror of a cackling clown in **It**... the friendship and adventure of **Stand By Me**... If Mike is the Elliot of our show; Eleven is our “E.T.”.*”¹⁶

Since the creators started casting the four boys – Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas– at an early stage, they didn't have enough material. Hence, they had them audition with lines and scenes from *Stand By Me*, Rob Reiner's adaptation of Stephen King's novella *The Body*(1982).¹⁷

Considering the soundtrack, it was intended to seem both “period and timeless” by using both classic songs and original music that is “cinematic, eerie, modern synth sound, inspired by classic early John Carpenter scores like *The Thing* and *The Fog*.”¹⁸

Furthermore, the show's story is inspired by the urban legend of the Montauk Project, an alleged government conspiracy involving secret experiments on children.¹⁹

The show was originally sold to Netflix as “Montauk” which was supposed to be set in Long Island, New York. However, filming in that area during the winter would be practically difficult and quite expensive. Therefore, the creators changed the setting to the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, and filmed the show in Atlanta.²⁰ This resulted in changing the show's title from *Montauk* to *Stranger Things*, which sounds like Stephen King's novel *Needful Things*(1991).²¹

The 80's films and novels weren't the only things that influenced the Duffer Brothers. The Video game *Silent Hill* (1999) helped shape the Upside Down, along with the video game *The Last of Us* (2013).²² In addition, Matt Duffer mentioned how the anime *Elfen Lied*

¹⁶ See *Stranger Things Bible*

¹⁷ Leon, 2017.

¹⁸ See *Stranger Things Bible*

¹⁹ See *ibid*.

²⁰ Fienberg, 2016.

²¹ Leon, 2017.

²² See *ibid*.

(2004), which he described as “ultraviolent *E.T.*”, inspired them in developing Eleven’s character.²³

Overall, the show is an ode to the 80s, with a mix of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and nostalgia that creates a unique and captivating story.

3.7. Cast

Eleven - Millie Bobby Brown	Joyce Byers - Winona Ryder
Mike Wheeler - Finn Wolfhard	Jim Hopper - David Harbour
Will Byers - Noah Schnapp	Nancy Wheeler - Natalia Dyer
Lucas Sinclair - Caleb McLaughlin	Steve Harrington - Joe Keery
Dustin Henderson - Gaten Matarazzo	Robin Buckley - Maya Hawke
Max Mayfield - Sadie Sink	Jonathan Byers - Charlie Heaton
Erica Sinclair - Priah Ferguson	Billy Hargrove - Dacre Montgomery
Vecna - Jamie Campbell Bower	Murray Bauman - Brett Gelman
Dr. Brenner - Matthew Modine	Eddie Munson - Joseph Quinn

3.8. Sound Crew

The sound crew of *Stranger Things* is composed of a team of highly skilled and experienced professionals who are responsible for creating and designing the soundscape of the show.

Craig Henighan, the Lead sound designer, sound supervisor, and re-recording mixer, has been an integral part of the *Stranger Things* sound crew from the very beginning and throughout the whole seasons, establishing the show's signature sound and tone. Among Henighan's numerous film credits are *Black Swan* (2010), *Roma* (2018), *Deadpool* (2016), and *The Batman* (2022).²⁴

Many talented members have worked in the sound department throughout the show's four seasons. The first two seasons included Brad North as sound supervisor, Jordan Wilby as Sound Effects editor, and Adam Jenkins as a re-recording mixer. In the third and fourth seasons, Henighan brought his own crew, which consists of re-recording mixers Mark Paterson and Will Files, making them the “three main guys”.²⁵

These are the main members of the sound crew, but many other individuals contributed to creating the immersive sound world of the show, including season three and four’s

²³ See *ibid.*

²⁴ IMDb. URL: https://m.imdb.com/name/nm0003357/?ref_=m_ttfcd_cr1 (Retrieved February 18, 2023).

²⁵ Kross, 2020

Lead sound effects editor Angelo Palazzo and sound effects editor Katie Halliday.²⁶ Composers Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein are responsible for the show's iconic theme song and the synth-heavy score, which significantly creates the show's atmosphere and tone. They are also members of the Austin-based band S U R V I V E.

“At the end of the day, there's a lot of people who work on the show. But in terms of making big, big decisions, say in post-production, shaping the sound and the music of the show, .. it's a pretty, actually, tight-knit group.”²⁷

4. Sound Design Analysis

In the Netflix series "*Stranger Things*," sound design plays a crucial role in creating the show's unique atmosphere. By the fourth season's release, Netflix exclusively reserved a customized opening logo for its hit show that immediately immerses the audience in the mood and setting of the show. The animated “N” logo appears against a red sky accompanied by crashing thunder and shrieking sounds following Netflix’s iconic “TA-DUMM” sound. This way, as soon as an episode begins playing, the spectator is already drawn into the *Stranger Things* world.

Ambiance, music, dialogue, Foley, and sound effects are all combined to create a film or TV show's sound design, which also takes into account genre considerations and expectations.²⁸

Since the series falls under the sci-fi-horror genre, the first section of this chapter will examine the sound design conventions of these genres and how they are implemented in the show. The following section will focus on the specific otherworldly sounds of *Strangers Things* and their role in the narrative.

²⁶ IMDb. URL: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt4574334/fullcredits/sound_department (Retrieved February 18, 2023)

²⁷ Matt Duffer, 2022. In Sound + Image Lab: The Dolby Institute Podcast [00:03:33]

²⁸ Whittington, 2007, p.220

4.1. Sound of Horror

Horror, as a genre, is a generator of anxiety, driven by people's fear of death.²⁹ It thrives on the audience's apprehension of ambiguity and the fear of the unknown. Generally, the uncertainty surrounding forthcoming events is what generates the tension and suspense that the genre ought to produce.³⁰ As Whittington notes "*Uncertainty is key to unlocking the unconscious and accessing primal terrors.*"³¹ In sci-fi horror, sound design is often used to create a sense of tension and danger, as well as to establish the presence of supernatural or malevolent forces in an unfamiliar landscape. This can be achieved through the use of distorted or unsettling sounds, as well as through silence and sudden bursts of noise to create a sense of unease and keep the audience on the edge of their seats. Ominous music is also often used to set the mood and create an eerie atmosphere.

"in general, horror films use music and sound effects to establish emotive intensity and impact far more aggressively and conceptually than any other genre".³²

The horror genre depends on shock points that usually reveal an evil menace. The most common technique to get a startling response from the viewer is the use of stingers that can either be in the form of diegetic noises (such as screams or a loud phone ring) or non-diegetic (such as an orchestral hit or a sudden sound effect). Amplification of certain noises to unexpectedly jolt the viewer and magnify the dramatic effect is thus central to this genre. The abrupt volume shift, however, is best effective when preceded by silence or soft sounds that heighten anticipation and enhance the following impact. Bringing the soundtrack down is also quite needed between high-energy action peaks.³³ If the audience is given a moment to catch their breath and relax their hearing, the power and loudness of the following sounds will seem much greater than they really are.³⁴ Yewdall analogizes this concept with roller coasters :

"If the soundtrack is constantly active and loud, the sound has nowhere to go when it must go up for the action moments. It is exactly like riding a roller coaster:

²⁹ Whittington, 2014, p.170

³⁰ Lehne & Koelsch, 2015

³¹ Whittington, 2014, p.170

³² Whittington 2007, p.130

³³ Yewdall, 2012, p.23

³⁴ See *ibid.*

*you cannot enjoy the thrill of the high-drop runs unless you have come down to the bottom, paused, and anticipated the climb back up to the top again.”*³⁵

The juxtaposition of subtle and loud noises establishes a recurring pattern of tension and release in horror, making it an essential -if not defining- auditory feature.^{36 37} A perfect example of this sound convention is present in *Stranger Things S3xE7: The Bite* [00:09:15 - 00:13:15] when the Spider Monster (the physical form of the Mind Flayer) attacks the group in Hopper’s cabin. The scene is highly intense in sounds, from the shrieking of the monster to the gunshots and screams of the characters. The occasional stillness between the actions magnifies the dramatic effect while allowing the ear to rest for a brief moment. This contrast of sound levels activates the body’s stress response, resulting in an increase in adrenaline and heart rate. On another note, the brief silence before a foreseen clash plays with the “*hierarchy of knowledge*”, creating a moment of tremendous tension by keeping the viewer in the dark about how to exactly interpret the information of the soundtrack in connection to the oncoming action: Is this stillness an indication that the threat has passed? Or is it a cue for the audience to hold their breath and clench their teeth before the thrill of terror begins?³⁸

In the first episode of the show, the scene of Will Byers’ disappearance, which will shortly be analyzed, is a prime illustration of the plot’s horror aspect, introducing the show’s main theme.

S1xE1: Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers [00:05:40 - 00:08:30]

The scene starts with Will riding his bicycle home after a game night at Mike’s place. The ambiance is dauntingly quiet with only diegetic sounds present such as the bike’s spinning wheels. The sound of the woods and wind create a haunting and eerie atmosphere, setting up the expectation that something unsettling and bad is about to happen. This is what’s generally known as the *calm before the storm*; an expression of the anxious expectation of disaster.³⁹ The silence is broken by the sound of the bicycle’s headlight flickering. While the audience is distracted by the flickering sound, a sudden burst of noise occurs with an abrupt cut to a shadowy figure that crossed Will’s path. This was a way to manipulate the viewer’s attention in order for the jumpscare to be more impactful and unexpected. The flicker also plays a role in the narrative that will later be

³⁵ See *ibid.*

³⁶ Whittington, 2007, p.135f

³⁷ Grøn, 2013

³⁸ See *ibid.*

³⁹ Görne, 2017, p.144

revealed as the story develops. The stinger consisted of a jarring growl that clearly belonged to the mysterious figure. The sound of Will's bike crashing and the crunching of leaves and twigs underfoot add to the realism and help to anchor the audience in the scene. Along with a delayed non-diegetic bell sound that triggers a sense of dread, we hear the indistinct growling while the figure is still in the shadows. If one were to rely solely on the image, it would be impossible to determine whether the silhouette is human or monstrous. With sound, however, one could discern that this creature is otherworldly and menacing. As soon as Will runs away, the spinning noise of his bike's wheel stops, just prior to the next shot, which takes us to his backyard. This contributes to the spatial and temporal continuity of the scene, as it indicates the change in location and time between the shots (a few moments after the encounter). Along with Will's panting, the ambient sounds put the viewer in an uneasy state. As soon as Will enters his house, the dog keeps constantly barking, sensing the presence of danger. This continuous bark while Will is trying to find his mother adds tension to the scene. The monster is again partially revealed by the window with screeching sounds layered with the howling wind. The soundtrack now consists of bass hits with a shrill high-pitched synth playing a sustained note, eliciting a leap in anxiety and making the listener alert. Will uses the telephone but the line ringing is disrupted by a static crackling and indistinct screeching. This detail, just like the light flicker previously, is part of the planting and pay-off concept, which suggests a link between electricity and the supernatural event (later to be revealed as the Upside Down). Additionally, the screeching in the phone only adds to Will's helplessness, suggesting that the monster is surrounding him everywhere and that there is no escape. The bass thump intensifies as the monster's shadow is seen behind the door, growling. The tension is heightened by the dog's barking and Will's whimpers, placing the audience in a horror mindset. The metallic sound of the door lock being opened telekinetically by the creature is layered with the sound of a loud gunshot. There is no firearm in sight, but rather the sound was used to foreshadow impending doom. Furthermore, this dissimilarity between sound and image leads to the feeling of strangeness and alienness, resulting in strong emotional reactions and catching one's attention.⁴⁰ Since the danger is now closer than ever, Will flees to the cabin outside his house and the intense soundtrack fades out. While he's loading a hunting weapon, the howling wind is emphasized along with his heavy breathing. There is a significant role that wind plays in sci-fi horror, which Vivian Sobchack highlights :

"[...]The other is the sound of natural forces which are usually out-shouted in modern life by man-made noise, natural forces like the wind and the sea made alien and threatening by the amplification and isolation of their sound on the track

⁴⁰ Görne, 2019, p.21

—*crashing surf, screaming wind, both become aural icons, metaphors for extreme desolation.*⁴¹

Will is now holding the weapon, breathing shakingly, generating suspense. We hear growling and intensified screeching behind him along with the bass hit. The monster, however, is not revealed but represented by a close-up of a light bulb that continues to overshine and buzz, punctuating the soundtrack. As the light's intensity abruptly decreases, the screeching stops and the soundtrack falls into complete silence for ten seconds straight till the end of the scene. Will is nowhere to be seen, and the audience is left with uncertainty about his fate. The piercing silence might symbolize the absence of life. As Flückiger aptly notes: "*Only what is dead is still*".⁴² But the silence here also implies an unresolved mystery, leaving the viewer yearning for an answer or explanation.

4.2. Symbolism

According to Görne, the semantics of a sound has several levels. The first-order semantics characterizes the "being" or thingness of an object, while the second-order semantics is an object's communicative content or meaning.⁴³

Symbolic sounds are sound objects with second-order semantics, i.e with an explicit meaning that reinforces story elements. These sounds may be served as signals, symbols, key sounds, or leitmotifs.⁴⁴

In *Stranger Things*, there are a few noises with significant dramaturgical functions and symbolic charge that play a major role within the diegesis of several episodes. These sounds are recurrent narrative elements that highlight the story's underlying theme and are strategically placed in important scenes.

⁴¹ Sobchack, 1997, p.218

⁴² Flückiger, 2001, p.233. Translation for "*Nur was tot ist, ist still.*"

⁴³ Görne, 2017, p.106

⁴⁴ Flückiger, 2001, p.158

4.2.1. The Grandfather Clock

Clocks are generally associated with time. However, when paired with chiming bells, they convey a far deeper connotation. In her case study on these two sounds, Flückiger addresses the historical development and mythological aspect of bells and their relationship to the clock, which symbolizes the notion of impermanence and mortality.⁴⁵ These sounds, therefore, tend to carry negative connotations and point out potential danger. Schafer points out that the bell-mortality axis is a fundamental aspect of Christian ideology, sustained through the historic connection between the bell and the clock:⁴⁶

“The association of clocks and church bells was by no means fortuitous; for Christianity provided the rectilinear idea of the concept of time as progress [...]. Time is always running out in the Christian system and the clock bell punctuates this fact. Its chimes are acoustic signals, but even at a subliminal level the incessant rhythm of its ticking forms a keynote of unavoidable significance in the life of Western Man. Clocks reach into the recesses of night to remind man of his mortality.”⁴⁷

In the fourth season of *Stranger Things*, Vecna, the main antagonist, infiltrates his victims' minds, feeding off their pain. When his targets are hunted and hallucinating, they hear the Grandfather Clock, signaling that they have less than a day to live. They also hear it a moment before their death, with Vecna telling them that it's time for their suffering to end. The clock is, therefore, a sign of impending death.

S4xE3: Chapter Three: The Monster and the Superhero [00:58:40 - 00:59:50]

The ticking of the clock is followed by a distorted foreboding chime that slides down in pitch. Thematically, the chimes are reminiscent of funeral bells. Both the character and the spectator experience stress and anxiety due to the disconcerting nightmarish chiming. Henighan, the show's sound designer, refers to the fourth season's sound as “almost like a touchstone” for what actually intrigues and terrifies humans:

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, p.166

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p.170

⁴⁷ Schaffer, 1993, p.56

“A lot of times, it’s not the big, aggressive, gory horror sounds, it’s the simplicity of a clock and the psychological thing of Vecna being in your mind and playing around with your memories,”⁴⁸

When making the Clock’s sound, Henighan used a recording of a classic Westminster Grandfather clock as the core sound and layered three different types of ticks: one is placed in the center and two are panned to the right and left channels.⁴⁹ He also added a cello thrum across every pendulum swing.⁵⁰ The bell chime of the Westminster clock is pitched down six or eight semitones layered with another distorted chime using a pitch envelope so it would slow down until the following gong hits.⁵¹ So as the clock gongs, it gives the impression that time has slowed down or even halted. Underneath the clock, there is a ripping sound undulating, which is a reference to the rift later on in *S4xE7*, when Eleven opens up the gate to the alternate dimension and throws One (who becomes Vecna) into it.⁵²

The reason behind choosing the clock as a motif resides in Vecna’s developing contempt for humans and their made-up rules, such as *Time*.

S4xE7: Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab [01:23:40 - 01:26:00]

During his monologue in Eleven’s memory, One (also known as Henry/Vecna) reveals the truth behind this hatred :

“Where others saw order, I saw a straightjacket -- an oppressive, cruel world dictated by made-up rules. Seconds, Minutes, Hours, Days, Weeks, Months, Years, Decades. Each life a faded, lesser copy of the one before. Wake up -- work -- eat -- sleep -- reproduce and die. Everyone is just waiting.. waiting for it all to be over. All while performing in a silly, terrible play, day after day. And I could not do that. I couldn’t close off my mind and join the madness. I could not pretend. And I realized -- I didn’t have to. “

Meanwhile, we witness Young Henry fixated on the clock with his eyes closed, and the clock abruptly stops ticking. The clock then starts to wind backwards, with the Minute and Second hands reversing at an accelerated rate, whirring.

⁴⁸ Strause, 2022

⁴⁹ Henighan, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:14:43]

⁵⁰ Hart, 2022

⁵¹ Henighan, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:15:00]

⁵² Strause, 2022

As the clock begins to chime, One adds: *“I could make my own rules. I could restore balance to a broken world. A predator but for good.”*

In conclusion, the manipulated clock was a symbol of his revolt against the human world system.

Vecna’s clock always chimes four times. This was his way of notifying the characters (and the recipient) about his intentions. In fact, each time Vecna kills a victim, a gate to the Upside Down is opened. His plan was to kill four people in order to open four gates that would tear Hawkins apart. *“Four chimes, four kills, four gates, End of the world.”*⁵³ In *S4xE9: Chapter Nine: The Piggyback* [01:45:53], with Max being the last victim, the ticking of the clock increases in pace. After a brief frenetic whirring of gears, the clock chimes four times faster than usual, indicating that Max has died and Vecna’s ultimate plan is finally accomplished. The four opened gates eventually result in a big tear in Hawkins.

4.2.2 The Flicker / Electrical Buzz

The flickering lights and electrical buzz in *Stranger Things* are visual and auditory cues that are used to indicate the presence of supernatural forces, and the manifestation of supernatural powers. They are often associated with the Upside Down and the creatures that inhabit it. As mentioned in section 3.4, the Upside Down affects the electrical field of the human world, often causing power malfunctions. Thus, electricity serves as a mediator between the two dimensions.

In *S1xE2: Chapter Two: The Weirdo on Maple Street* [00:46:00 - 00:48:00] Joyce (Will’s mother) gets a suspicious call that turns out to be from Will. The sound from the telephone is muffled but as soon as we hear him say “Mom” the lamp flicker. The buzzing is even emphasized in the non-diegetic low *brassy* sound effect, which highlights the importance of electricity in the scene. This is the first time we know anything about Will since his disappearance. And the flickering sound hints that something unordinary is happening. The telephone then gets short-circuited and we hear the electricity spiking. As Joyce was having a meltdown, the lights flicker again with a high-pitched sound that catches her attention. The house lamps start flickering each one after the other, guiding Joyce down the hallway to Will’s room. The stereo suddenly starts playing *“Should I stay or should I go”*, Will’s favorite song, and then we proceed to hear electricity crackling in his room. This is proof that Will is alive and he’s trying to connect with his mother but is trapped somewhere that seems to have a connection with electricity.

⁵³ *Stranger Things S4xE8 : Chapter Eight : Papa* [00:24:20-00:24:53]

In *S1xE3: Chapter Three: Holly Jolly* [00:40:00] the flicker served as a communication medium between Will in the Upside Down and his mother Joyce in the real world. Whenever she asks him a question, the answer is portrayed with lights flickering (one flicker for yes, two flickers for no). At [00:45:30 - 00:46:10] Joyce decides to hang the Christmas lights on the wall and painted letters under each bulb so that Will can communicate with words through flicker. Suddenly all lights start flickering in unison, raising the tension and sense of danger, and then a Demogorgon emerges from the wall. This means that when the flickering is at high intensity and the noise increases in pace, it becomes a cue for the presence of a threatening powerful creature, which is in this case, the Demogorgon.

Supernatural powers exude high energy, which means they affect the electricity when being used. In *S1xE7: Chapter Seven: The Bathtub* [00:32:00], Eleven was put in a sensory deprivation tank in the school's gym, to try to locate Will and Barb using her psychic powers. The electricity starts surging with light flicker. This indicates to the characters around her that her powers are working and she's successfully telepathing. When Eleven sees Barb dead in the Void, the electricity in the gym starts pulsating and transmits her emotional distress and panic. The buzz here conveys a sense of uneasiness.

Overall, the sound of electricity in *Stranger Things* serves as a symbol of the presence of the Upside Down and the danger it represents, as well as a source of communication between the two realms. It usually suggests that something sinister is happening or about to happen, and is also triggered when psychic abilities are being used. The sound is included in a lot of scenes throughout the seasons, making it a distinctive trademark of the series.

4.2.3. White Noise / Static

White noise is a type of sound that consists of a mixture of all audible frequencies, producing a uniform and flat sound. In *Stranger Things*, white noise is often used when Eleven is trying to enter the Void without undergoing complete sensory deprivation. Besides blindfolding herself, she listens to white noise since it helps with her concentration and removes any distractions. She uses the noise from various objects like running showers, radio static, TV static, walkie-talkies, and open refrigerators. Static noise is also used when Eleven interferes with the radio or walkie-talkie's frequencies with her powers to transmit a sound from the upside down to the real world. It, therefore, conveys the mental connection and the flow of information between her and the person or entity she is communicating with.

4.2.4. Alarms / Sirens

Generally, alarms and sirens are signals of emergency and connotations of danger, used as a warning for disasters, attacks, and so on.

S1xE1: Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers [00:00:45] In the opening scene of the pilot episode, the first audible element is the alarm of the Hawkins Laboratory, which blared continuously while a scientist was fleeing from something. The constant flickering sound is also present here and may allude to the supernatural aspect of the situation, but the alarm directly alerts the viewer of the peril and insecurity. The alarm thereby establishes the dangerous tone of the show from the very beginning, and even though the monster isn't revealed in the scene, the audience is aware that something dangerous and horrible is occurring based on the siren. The sound, hence, increases the tension, heightens the sense of urgency for the character, and highlights the threat facing the community.

In the course of the series, alarms and sirens are often used to symbolize danger and the approach of supernatural forces, especially at the Hawkins Lab where the *Mothergate* to the Upside Down is located, making it more susceptible to the Demogorgons' attacks. Sirens were also blaring in the Russian prison in Kamchatka when the Demogorgons they harbored attacked all the guards, in addition to when Hopper escaped the prison.

In S3xE6: Chapter Six: E Pluribus Unum [00:00:30], alarms are also heard in the Russian underground laboratory when they caught Steve and Robin spying on them. The sound, in this case, indicates the presence of an intruder.

4.2.5. Terry's repetitive words

In *Stranger Things*, Terry Ives (Eleven's mother) is a character who was used as a test subject for the CIA's mind control program Project MK Ultra and experiences repetitive speech as a symptom of her exposure to shock therapy, conducted by Dr. Brenner. Her repetitive words are intended to convey a sense of distress and trauma and to suggest that her mind has been damaged or altered in some way. The repetition of her words is meant to show the audience that Terry is struggling to communicate and is trapped in a cycle of trauma and bewilderment. Through this recurrent speech, the show's creators are able to depict the destructive effects of mind control and the devastating impact that it can have on an individual's mental health. They are also able to draw attention to the

real-life issues surrounding government mind control programs and to spark a conversation about the ethics and consequences of such programs.

The consecutive words that Terry keeps saying are :

Breathe - Sunflower - Three to the right, Four to the left - Rainbow - Four fifty

These seemingly unconnected words that lingered with Terry contributed to the narrative by uncovering the truth about Eleven's backstory.

In S2xE5: Chapter Five: Dig Dug [00:45:50 - 00:50:17] Eleven visits her mother for the first time in her life and tries to connect with her psychically in hopes to know the truth. Since Terry can only speak those words, she let Eleven get into her mind in order to reveal the circumstances surrounding her birth. The significance of those words is then revealed through the memory:

- Breathe: When Terry's sister was telling her to breathe when she was in labor.
- Sunflower: There were sunflowers near her bed in the hospital room after she gave birth to Eleven. It's when Dr. Brenner took Eleven (originally named Jane) and lied to Terry about the miscarriage. However, Terry didn't believe him and knew that her daughter was taken by him to the Laboratory for experiments.
- Three to the right, Four to the left: this was the instruction/code to her safe, which she opened to get the gun and head to the Lab to confront Brenner.
- Rainbow: This was the motif on the door of the room that Eleven and another kid were playing in. This was the first time Eleven acknowledged that she was not the only subject in the Lab's experiments, which led her later to search for 008.⁵⁴ This was how the arc of 008 was initiated.
- Four-Fifty: This was the amount of electric shock supplied to Terry by Brenner's team, which caused her mental condition to deteriorate. This shows Brenner's wickedness and immorality, which made Eleven despise him even more and seek revenge. She was hurt by his betrayal as she considered him a father. This will channel her anger which will help her close the gate later on.

⁵⁴ As revealed in the latest season, Eleven lost parts of her memory after the Massacre at Hawkins Lab. This is why she didn't know about 008, or rather forgot about her.

4.3. Characterization of individuals and monsters

In this section, we will explore how sound design reflects the personalities and emotions of the characters, as well as the nature and qualities of the monsters.

4.3.1. Eleven



Figure 1: Eleven undergoing an experiment

Sounds related to Eleven are a key element in creating her identity and characterizing her as a mysterious, powerful, and yet vulnerable character. Voice acting plays a significant role in this characterization. In fact, the way a character speaks and the inflections in their voice can convey a range of emotions and reveal a lot about their personality.

Eleven constantly sounds confused and scared in a world she is unfamiliar with, struggling to fit in. She's almost like an alien to this world, having spent her whole life 'imprisoned' in Hawkins Lab, subjected to experiments like a lab rat. Her isolation and detachment from the outside world are reflected through her minimalistic speech. She can barely form a sentence and most of the time resorts to nodding, which exposes her limited vocabulary and knowledge about the world. The tone of her talking voice is always calm and quiet with a bit of shakiness, which not only reflects her introversion and vulnerability but also establishes her innocence. Even if she has committed some bad things, she remains on the positive side of the story; a hero even. She's just a child that has been exploited her entire life at the Laboratory and endured a lot. Her constant confrontation with dangerous creatures also affects her, leaving her traumatized. The voice acting thus reflects emotions of constant fear.

Upon her initial appearance, Eleven was almost non-talkative, adding to the mystery regarding her and her past. Throughout the seasons of the show, and after making new friends, her poor vocabulary gradually improved and she became more confident with her speech, which contributes to her character development.

When using her telekinetic powers, the show often uses a sound effect that consists of low rumbling noise, accompanied by whooshes when moving objects. The sounds of objects she manipulates with her mind are usually amplified and have more low ends.⁵⁵ A loud door closing is a mere example. Another important element is the use of intense, percussive sound effects when she uses her powers, such as breaking glass or metal. These effects help to convey the destructive nature of her abilities and the danger she poses to those around her. Using high energy for her powers or experiencing frustration during her psychic projections results in flickering and electrical buzzing sounds.

When Eleven uses all her force, especially when closing the gate or fighting evil creatures, she releases loud reverbed screams that emphasize the pain and effort that she experiences, and underscore the intense nature of these powers. These screams are often high-pitched and piercing, which creates a sense of terror and urgency in the scenes. They are often manipulated and distorted in post-production to further emphasize their intensity and to make them sound supernatural. They also serve to humanize Eleven and highlight her emotional state. The screams imply that using her powers is a physically and emotionally demanding experience, and they help to convey the sense that Eleven is a young girl with extraordinary abilities that are sometimes too overwhelming for her fragile body to bear, which leaves her in pain and sometimes struggling to control them.

4.3.2. Billy



Figure 2: Billy Hargrove

Billy Hargrove, Max's older stepbrother and one of the antagonists of the show, appears to be a stereotypical "Bad Boy" but with dark tendencies. He is always angry and violent and often mistreats his sister. The sound designers use various techniques to create a distinct auditory identity for Billy that reflects his personality and motivations.

⁵⁵ The low end of the frequency spectrum ranges from 20 Hz to 250 Hz.

For instance, the sound effects used when he's involved in physical altercations, such as breaking glass or throwing punches or the sound of his car's engine and squeaky wheels when he drives at high speed, are often amplified and emphasized to further convey his violent nature.

The musical score also plays a role in characterizing Billy. For instance, when he's performing acts of cruelty or aggression, especially when he becomes possessed by the Mind Flayer, a dark and foreboding score is often used to reflect his actions and increase the sense of danger. Billy's taste in Rock and Heavy Metal music also reflects his *bad-boy* energy. Some of the songs he listens to on the show are "*Rock you like a hurricane*" by Scorpions, "*Shout at the Devil*" by Mötley Crüe, "*Wango Tango*" by Ted Nugent, "*Round and Round*" by Ratt, etc. This musical choice certainly helps in shaping his character and personality.

Furthermore, Billy often exudes flirtatious energy and always has an intimidating presence, which is shown in the following example.

S3xE1: Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy? [00:17:10 - 00:19:22]

The scene takes place in the public pool of Hawkins. The atmosphere consists of kids playing in the water and shouting, with "*Rock This Town*" by The Stray Cats playing in the background (non-diegetic). When the Lifeguard Heather comes down from her chair to switch shifts with Billy, the music changes to "*Moving Stereo*" by The Cars, a more fitting song for Billy's character. The ladies by the pool fix their postures, in an effort to attract the charming Billy who just walked in to start his shift. The slow-motion of his walk along with the music and girls glancing at him flirtatiously isn't the only thing that shows his grand presence. As soon as he blows the whistle, everyone stops moving and keeps quiet, and even the music suddenly stops. Everyone's attention is on him. The silence is broken by Billy scolding a child for running by the pool. As he blows the whistle again, the ambiance resumes back to normal with the crowds' shouting and chatter and music playing. This scene perfectly illustrates his imposing and intimidating presence. On the other hand, in a later episode, when the other lifeguard Heather blows the whistle no one stops to listen to her or give her attention, even the background music continues playing.

4.3.3. Demogorgons



Figure 3: The Demogorgon

The Demogorgons are one of the central threats in the show, and their sound design plays a crucial role in characterizing them. These creatures are predators that inhabit the Upside Down and are part of the hive mind. They are murderous, violent, and fast, and have tall humanoid shapes with flower-like heads, sharp claws, and slimy skin. These monsters also possess telekinetic supernatural abilities.

The Demogorgons have an identifiable vocal. Their related sound design often features eerie and unsettling sounds, such as growls in staccato with lots of bass, snarls, roars, and screeches, which convey the danger and terror that they evoke. The sound effects used, when they move or attack, are often sharp and sudden, resulting in jumpscare. Their piercing shriekings are very irritating to the ear and trigger unpleasant feelings. The disturbance caused by these shrilling high frequencies is due to their association with the human scream.⁵⁶ Noises in the frequency range between 1 and 5kHz, in which the human ear is most sensitive, usually generate unnerving discomfort, sometimes leading to *goosebumps*, as well as induce fear, signify danger, and trigger tension.⁵⁷

The Demogorgons' sounds also elicit feelings of disgust with their trilling flesh-tearing noise, squishy blood, bones crunching, and body fluids gurgling. An example of the sound of a grown Demogorgon can be heard in [S4xE9: Chapter Nine: The Piggyback \[01:06:00-01:06:35\]](#).

⁵⁶ Flückiger, 2001, p.223

⁵⁷ See *ibid.* p.224

“The images are only half the story. Sound effects explore the body in ways that visuals cannot.”⁵⁸

In *S2xE3: Chapter Three: The Pollywog* [00:01:15-00:03:20] when Dustin found a small mysterious creature in front of his house, he decided to keep it as a pet and named it Dart, not knowing what it actually is. At first, Dart was chirping like a bird and chittering, which made Dustin feel safe around him. But as soon as he started making deep gurgling and warbling sounds and released a loud screech, its true nature is revealed; Dart is a newborn Demogorgon.

The core sound of the Demogorgons was made by recordings of seals’ vocals, which the sound designer Craig Henighan then pitched, masked, and manipulated.⁵⁹ As for the flesh sounds, Henighan discloses:

“When we get into the flesh, I recorded splatty sounds of water hitting flour and other splats. I also used some great stuff from Boom Library and my good friend Rob Nokes has done a lot of specific recordings for me over the years. I had other fleshy movement sounds and door squeaks, rubber yoga ball creaks. I did some dry ice recordings that are part of the Entity’s bigger roars and screams.”⁶⁰

4.3.4. Demobats



Figure 4: Demobats

Demobats are flying predators that inhabit the Upside Down. Just like the Demogorgons, they are part of the hive mind and serve as spies for Vecna. They are initially featured in Season 4, adding to the show’s darkness and the Upside Down’s hostility. These species

⁵⁸ Whittington, 2014, p.176

⁵⁹ Andersen, 2016

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*

resemble bats but with no eyes and a gaping mouth filled with sharp teeth. They use their vine-like tail to strangle any trespasser in the Upside Down.

S4xE6: Chapter Six: The Dive [01:09:15-01:10:10]: The Demobats are characterized by their frightening shrieking, chittering, and horrifying squawking, which distinguishes them from regular bats, exposes their aggression and retains their connection to this parallel universe. These creatures attack in unison and the chaos of their screeches and wing flapping aggravates the tension in the scene and the feeling of unease and irritation.

The sound of their screeches was created by recording a squeaky wooden closet door, which was subsequently tweaked. *“so what you hear is this organic, high-pitched wood that chitters at a high frequency and sounds fluttery. That works great when you set it to these ferocious berserk piranha bats moving in a swarm.”*⁶¹

The Demobats’ sounds were also made out of recordings of parrots, barn owls, a duck call being blown through mud, cappuccino makers, etc.⁶² The sound crew heavily depends on organic noises, which gives the sound of *Stranger Things* its distinctive and unique tone.

4.3.5. The Mind Flayer



Figure 5: The Mind Flayer

The Mind Flayer is a malevolent entity that serves as one of the primary antagonists of the show. Its spider-like body is formed solely of particles, giving it a hazy look similar to a shadow. All of the inhabitants and agents of the Upside Down are mentally linked to each other through the Mind Flayer, forming one massive organism.⁶³

⁶¹ Hart, 2022

⁶² Gilmore, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:34:30-00:35:10]

⁶³ Stranger Things Wiki: *The Mind Flayer*

The Mind Flayer is often associated with ominous and otherworldly sounds that reflect its vast and enigmatic nature. Its presence is often accompanied by red lightening, hence the crashing sound of thunder is associated with it.

This powerful creature communicates with its human hosts through a type of psychic link. When the Mindflayer possesses someone, their voice becomes distorted and their speech takes on a deep, guttural quality.

In *S2xE5: Chapter Five: Dig Dug [00:54:20-00:55:00]*, when the Lab workers were igniting the Upside Down in hopes to kill the hive mind monsters, Will experiences a painful seizure-like collapse and releases a long scream that slowly morphs into a distorted digital feedback type of noise. This sound is reminiscent of electricity, which is related to the Upside Down and its monsters. The scream then confirms to the characters that Will is connected to the hive mind, after being attacked by the Mind Flayer in a previous episode.

In *S2xE8: Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer [00:34:10-00:35:00]* Will is completely seized by the Mind Flayer as shown by its manner of speech. Will is originally a shy sweet boy who normally speaks quietly, softly, and timidly. In this scene, his family tries to release the Mind Flayer from him by exposing him to heat, the monster's weakness. Will's voice now sounds more forward, aggressive, and angry. When he starts to yell at his family, his voice becomes distorted and layered with a deep sinister voice. This translates to the frustration of the shadow monster that inhabited his mind and its reluctance to leave him alone.



Figure 6: The Spider Monster, The Mind Flayer's physical form

In Season 3, the Mind Flayer appeared in Hawkins, outside the Upside Down, and used rats, human body parts, and flesh to build its physical form (See *Figure 6*). It has sharp teeth for attacks and is bigger and taller than the other predatory creatures of the Upside Down, yet smaller than its original shadow form. When the physical form was created, the sound of rats and human bodies being decomposed and morphed together causes sensations of revulsion and discomfort for the listener. This *Spider Monster* is characterized by screeches, snarls, growls, and roars, deeper and bigger than the Demogorgons' sounds, with more squishy noises from its fleshy skin. This makes it seem more deadly and terrifying. An example of the noises it makes is heard in *S3xE8: Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt* [00:48:00-00:48:50] when the monster killed Billy.

4.3.6. Vecna / Henry Creel



Figure 7: Vecna

Vecna, also known as One or Henry Creel, is the main antagonist of *Stranger Things*' fourth season, who possesses psychokinetic powers. Henry is a human being that grew up being resentful of the human race and its artificial structuring that contradicted the inherent order of nature. He considers them parasites and weak species. Henry has a misanthropic and nihilistic philosophy and believes that powerful species are fundamentally superior to weak ones, as seen by his fondness for black widow spiders.⁶⁴ After he killed his family, Dr. Brenner took him to Hawkins Lab to study him, making him the first subject with superpowers and was designated the name One (001). He then became an orderly at the Lab, assisting Brenner. When banished to the Upside Down by

⁶⁴ Stranger Things Wiki: *Vecna*

Eleven, his body was exposed to lightning strikes, which severely burnt him and disfigured him. He transformed into a scary “wet” creature with vines squirming around his whole body and became *Vecna*, the ruler of the Upside Down (See Figure 7). He controls the Mind Flayer, which explains why the Flayer is shaped like a black widow spider. Vecna is therefore the root of the hive mind, controlling all the entities in the Upside Down through a telepathic link.

Vecna’s tonal qualities complement the association and his appearance. He is characterized by his dark and deep voice, the wet squelching, and the slithering sound of the vines. His presence is also associated with the chiming and ticking of the clock (as explained in section 4.2.1.) His footsteps make a deep reverberated thudding noise, giving off the impression of a heavy body mass of a monster and conveying the menace and danger he carries with him. An example of Vecna’s sounds is heard in *S4xE9: Chapter Nine: The Piggyback* [01:22:05 - 01:25:00].

Will Files, one of the re-recording mixers of the show, notes: “*The Duffers right away clued into this idea that we need to make him sound wet. They always wanted him to sound like he was gooey and always moving and undulating.*”⁶⁵ So for Vecna’s footsteps, the sound crew added layers of “*wet, slimy sounds, and then I processed them to give them a sort of larger-than-life sound.*”⁶⁶

To make the sound big, they applied an overdrive effect, analog-style distortion, and saturation.⁶⁷ Unlike the other monsters in previous seasons who are characterized by angry roars and wild screeches, Vecna is more restrained and internal, which is conveyed by his low-pitched voice. Jamie Campbell Bower, the actor who portrayed Vecna/One, delivered a great performance in making Vecna’s voice sound gutturally deep and sinister. The inflection and tone of his voice were hitting the correct frequencies, so the sound designer didn’t feel the need to pitch it down or make crazy manipulations. Henighan came up with a chain for the voice that simply consisted of EQs and lots of compressing to make the sound omnipresent.⁶⁸ The amplification of the lower frequencies of the voice, contributed to the portrayal of Vecna’s strength and mighty presence, triggering anxiety and inducing terror within the characters and the listener. In the scenes he’s featured in, his voice is always the biggest sound in the mix. The sound crew constantly had to ensure there wasn’t too much bass from other noises in the scene to make room for the massiveness of his voice and protect its bass.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Giardina, 2022

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Henighan, 2022. In *Sound + Image Lab: The Dolby Institute Podcast* [00:47:00]

⁶⁹ Files, 2022. In *Sound + Image Lab: The Dolby Institute Podcast* [00:51:40]



Figure 8: One / Henry Creel

In contrast, One/Henry, the friendly orderly, has an entirely different approach and a completely different pitch, that sounds like a normal person. The peacefulness and calmness of his vocal tone make him very approachable and disregard any connection to evilness. It tricked both Eleven and the audience into thinking he was a good man, which made the plot twist, later on, of him turning out to be Vecna more unexpected and surprising.

The sound of Vecna's powers, especially when he's elevating somebody, was inspired by Hans Zimmer's heavy trailer-esque sounds that include *Braams* and overly saturated, and overly compressed sound effects.^{70 71} This helped differentiate the sound of his powers from that of Eleven's, since they both have similar abilities. Henighan explains:

*"[...] the trade-off was like Eleven's powers, which were established in the other seasons but never needed to be amped up this high, and then Vecna's powers which were based in more like trailer braam sounds with some feedback and some other heavy overly saturated tonal things that I would manipulate from jets... I would take a look at sounds that had really solid foundational frequencies and sort of manipulate them and pitch envelope them and do things so that when he's doing his movement versus her movement there's a bit of a frequency difference."*⁷²

⁷⁰ *Braam* is a low, loud sound effect, originally produced by brass instruments and a prepared piano but sometimes made synthetically, included in film and trailer scores to increase audience stress. Source: Wiktionary <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/braam>

⁷¹ Henighan, 2022. In Sound + Image Lab: The Dolby Institute Podcast [01:04:45]

⁷² See *ibid.* [01:05:35]

The horrifying manner, in which Vecna murders his victims, is evidence of his cruelty. After telekinetically lifting them into the air, one hears the sound of their bones cracking, their limbs snapping, their eyes *sucking out* with a wet squelch, and their limp bodies crashing back to the ground. All of these sounds cause discomfort and distress among the audience by revealing the fragility of the body.⁷³ An example can be heard during Chrissy's death scene in *S4xE1: Chapter One: The Hellfire Club* [01:12:30].

The slimy vines that squirm around Vecna and strangle the victims have a wet writhing sound, as well as shriekings and chittering when attacking. Palazzo and Gilmore revealed that the gore sound was made of recordings of vegetable crunching, refried beans coming out of cans, and a lot of heavy wood creaks, that were manipulated and pitched down.⁷⁴

“And then I would do these different pitch ramping getting them to chitter and stutter just a bunch of different ways to do that with samplers and just, you know, processing them, so they kind of have a vocal element.”⁷⁵

The sound of the tentacles coming out of Vecna's back or thrusting onto him is made out of squishy pumpkin recordings as well as some “*explosion-y gunshots underneath*” to make it larger than what a regular noise of vines attaching sounds like, and make it authentic to the *Stranger Things* universe.^{76 77}

⁷³ Whittington, 2007

⁷⁴ Gilmore & Palazzo, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:31:20]

⁷⁵ Palazzo, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:31:50]

⁷⁶ Gilmore, 2022. In Tonbenders Podcast [00:37:10]

⁷⁷ Hart, 2016

4.4. The Soundscape of Locations

“[...]The soundtrack supports orientation both in the spatiotemporal network of the plot and in the narrative structures such as sequences, scenes, actions, and events.”⁷⁸

This section will examine the acoustic characteristics of certain locations in the show. Based on the soundscape of these places, one will be able to discern between them, especially when characters navigate between different environments in one scene. Memories, mindscapes, and alternative dimensions are examples of these settings, which are unfamiliar to the listener and hence require specialized sonic features to differentiate them from the actual world or “time”.

One of the most crucial factors that distinguish an area is its atmosphere which supports “spatial geography”.⁷⁹ The ambience is a powerful narrative tool that unifies the audio track. While its constancy over visual cuts implies that the action occurs in the same space, its abrupt change during a cut indicates a change in setting, scene, or perspective.⁸⁰ In conjunction with the musical score, ambience may convey to the audience what the place unveils and how they should feel within it.

The way sound behaves in a space also reveals information about the nature of the area. The spatial sound properties are determined by the room’s physical characteristics. The size of a room affects the delay and reverberation time, and the types of materials and objects in it dictate how sound travels through the space and is reflected off of nearby surfaces.⁸¹

The perceived auditory space, covered by the positions and dimensions of sound objects and immediate spatial perception, can be expanded, irritated, alienated, or fully dissociated and dissolved, resulting in surreal, intoxicating, or dreamlike experiences.⁸² The soundscape, thus, undergoes a transformation from naturalism to surrealism.

⁷⁸ Flückiger, 2001, p.298 Translation for : *[...]Damit unterstützt die Tonspur die Orientierung sowohl im raumzeitlichen Geflecht der Handlung als auch in den narrativen Strukturen wie Sequenzen, Szenen, Handlungen, Ereignissen.*

⁷⁹ Whittington, 2007, p.153

⁸⁰ Holman, 2010, p.148

⁸¹ Flückiger, 2001, p.301

⁸² Görne, 2017, p.183

4.4.1. The Upside Down



Figure 9: *The Upside Down*

In *Stranger Things*, the Upside Down is portrayed as a dark and dangerous parallel universe that looks like a haunted version of Hawkins and the sound design plays a crucial role in establishing its spooky, otherworldly, and menacing nature. This alternate dimension is represented through the use of unsettling sound effects, such as pulsating drones, distorted noises, echoes, delays, and unnatural sounds, which help to create a sense of disorientation and unease. The sound design plays a key role in selling the idea that the Upside Down is a hostile place that is fundamentally different from the real world, and that it is inhabited by creatures that are equally alien and strange. The Upside Down is also often depicted as a place of darkness and silence, with long periods of quiet punctuated by sudden bursts of loud, jarring noises. This helps to create a sense of tension and uncertainty, as the viewer is never quite sure what dangers may be lurking in the shadows.

In this example from the first season, we will study the distinct soundscape of this realm and how sound behaves in it.

S1xE6: Chapter Six: The Monster [00:00:15 - 00:02:15] Prior to this episode, Nancy and Jonathan were out in the woods looking for Barb and Will. When they separated ways, Nancy discovered a small portal in a tree trunk that sucked her into the Upside Down. While trapped there, she screams for Jonathan to come to her aid. The scene alternates between the real world and the Upside Down with both characters yelling each other's names. In the Upside Down, Nancy's screams are echoed with a reverse delay that alternates in the stereo image. Since this parallel realm is depicted as a reflection of the world, its reliance on echoes and delays acoustically makes perfect sense. One might

think of it as a “sonic mirror reflection”. The eerie atmosphere of the place is represented through the sound of the wind and the sudden growls of the monster that convey the hostility of this environment. The non-diegetic kick drum pulsating in the background emulates the sound of racing heartbeats, which reflects Nancy’s fear and vulnerability in this dangerous place. In contrast, in the real world, Jonathan’s voice sounds dry and flat and the ambience is quiet with only the occasional owl hoots in the background.⁸³ The pounding kick drum stops when the scene cuts to the real world, i.e Jonathan’s viewpoint, indicating that the danger lies on the other side of the world. The small gate in the tree trunk produces sounds of squelching and deep, low breathing, that make it alive. In a podcast interview, the sound designer Craig Henighan revealed how he made the unique sounds of the Upside Down;

“I wanted to make a creepy version of the real world... I think I took a lot of insects and crickets and cicadas .. that was sort of a bed layer of stuff and then I took a whole layer of wet sauna recordings and drips and little things like that, tree creaks and then mashing those all together and then resampling those and laying them back out on my keyboard and sort of performing movement so that it undulates.”⁸⁴

In subsequent seasons, the show’s sound design continued to evolve and expand. As it got darker, the Upside Down’s otherworldly ambience, became more sophisticated, detailed, darker, and scarier. The following scene is an example from the fourth season.

S4xE7: Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab [01:07:30-01:09:50]

The Upside Down’s atmosphere now includes thunder crashing which makes the environment more threatening and terrifying. The sound of thunder is magnified in a manner that sets it apart from the natural thunder of the ‘human world’. This reflects the rage of this season’s ultimate monster “Vecna” and his evil destructive intentions.

“Thunder is the expression of supreme, creative power and divine anger, it is the voice of the gods and the destroyer of spiritual enemies.”⁸⁵

According to Flückiger, there is no such thing as pleasant thunder; it is always associated with eerie moods, threats, and aggression.⁸⁶

The Upside Down’s ambience also includes the howling wind (more aggressive than in season one), the loud chattering of the season’s new creatures (the Demobats), along

⁸³ A sound is considered *dry* when no effects are applied to it.

⁸⁴ Henighan, 2022. In Sound + Image Lab: The Dolby Institute Podcast [00:53:00]

⁸⁵ Görne, 2019

⁸⁶ Flückiger, 2001, p.357

with echoed growls and indefinable low-pitched roars in distance. As the characters find the portal, we hear eldritch thrumming and the fissure writhing wetly. All these noises contribute to characterize the setting's hostile supernatural element. The ominous synthesized score also adds to the sense of danger. Near the portal, Dustin's voice, who's in the real world, travels to the Upside Down with distorted delay.

4.4.2. The Void



Figure 10: Eleven in The Void

The Void is a mental place in Eleven's mind, that she enters when applying psychic projection to locate individuals or spy on others. This can be accomplished by subjecting herself to sensory deprivation or via exposure to electrical static or white noise for a deep concentration. The place is a dark space that has no boundaries; an infinite expanse of nothingness.⁸⁷ Its only physical characteristic is a wet floor with a thin layer of water. Apart from Eleven, only the target to be envisioned is present in the space with one or two objects that serve as a clue for its actual location. These objects can be a bed, a bathtub, a car, a mailbox, etc. People and objects with whom she interacts are not physically present in the place, but rather mental representations of their physical existence.⁸⁸

S1xE7: Chapter Seven: The Bathtub [00:32:08 - 00:36:00]

The void is dominated by silence. The silence here can have several meanings :

- Isolation and detachment from the world, which also convey the supernatural aspect and surrealism of the space.
- Emptiness

⁸⁷ Stranger Things Wiki: *The Void*

⁸⁸ See *ibid.*

- Loss of communication
- Calmness
- Concentration and inner contemplation: Eleven must be immersed in a profoundly focused mental state to be able to psychically teleport, i.e. enter the Void.
- Loneliness in a place far removed from human life.⁸⁹
- Anticipating danger/calm before the storm: Whenever Eleven enters this space, she usually ends up being confronted with something shocking or perhaps dangerous for her to witness; whether it's accidentally encountering a Demogorgon (S1xE6), seeing Barb lying dead in a horrifying way with tentacles coming out of her mouth (S1xE7), Heather startling her while crying for help (S3xE3), or Billy suddenly grabbing her (S3xE6). The void, therefore, is not quite a safe place to be in and the uncertainty of what it may bring heightens the sensation of risk and danger.

The void is also characterized by the quiet splashing sound of water coming from Eleven's footsteps when she approaches the target. The dripping sound is reverbed, creating the illusion of depth. When Eleven sees Barb's decaying corpse, her horrifying screams are heavily echoed, giving the impression we're in a vast room, even though there are no boundary surfaces recognizable in the picture. This is what Görne calls "a metaphorical space".⁹⁰ Despite the visual metaphor, the sound design communicates a large room with boundaries for the sound to reflect. This contributes to the space's strangeness and surrealism.

When Eleven panicked, Joyce, who's sitting beside her in the actual world, attempts to reassure her. Joyce's voice in the Void is heard with an echo and a long delay that alternates between the right and left channels, panning around the room, and surrounding Eleven's head. This supports spatial irritation and dissociation from the real world.

When Eleven spots Will, we hear low distant rumbles reverberating. This is because she's projecting visual representations from the Upside Down, implying Will's whereabouts, which she's trying to uncover.

As soon as Eleven exits the Void, the thrilling background score also abruptly stops following the transitional sound effect, confirming the shift in place.

⁸⁹ Görne, 2017, p.144

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, p.185f

4.4.3. Memories

Memories are recalls of the past, hence they are distant in time. This temporal distance is typically conveyed in film through reverberations and echoes, regardless of the spatial distance or physical characteristics of the place.

In *Stranger Things*, there are numerous scenes that take place in memories, since the show focuses heavily on the psyche. The following example is a memory of Billy.

S3xE6: Chapter Six: E Pluribus Unum [00:40:00 - 00:42:50]

Eleven enters the Void to locate Billy and attempts to access his mind. Billy senses her presence and grabs her hand forcefully. As she tries to get rid of him, she falls back in slow motion. Her scream is heavily reverbed. The long reverb's tail suggests she's getting out of the void. During her slowed fall, we witness a rapid montage of Billy's recent events that sound distorted. This means Eleven is getting into Billy's head. She ends up stranded on a beach. It turns out she's now inside Billy's memory. Her whimpers and wails are distorted and echoed entirely in reverse. Eleven notices a woman, whose laughter and cheers are echoing. A young boy runs to her. It's Billy and his mother. They sound like they're in a grand hall, yet they are actually on a beach. This violation of the sound-space relationship unveils the surrealism of the place. As Görne points out: "*Auditory spatiality - the spatial simulation of reflections and reverberation - becomes a metaphor when it contradicts visual space.*"⁹¹ The metaphorical space is, thus, one of the characteristics for identifying the memory world of the character.⁹²

The echoed voices of Billy and his mother, however, are not reversed like Eleven's. This is due to the fact that Eleven isn't part of the memory, but rather an observer or, in a sense, an "intruder" of Billy's mind.

In addition to the ethereal background music, the sound of the waves and the seagulls' squawking bring serenity to the place. One concludes that this is a happy memory. The synth music then starts to take an ominous direction. We then hear a distant rumbling and thunder crashing. Eleven walks towards the sound.

[00:48:50] The sound of the waves becomes lower in pitch as it fades out. The music becomes eerier and the thunder is crackling louder. A series of different memories of Billy's childhood flash by in front of Eleven, echoing between the thunderclaps and wind and rumbles. These are bad memories: Young Billy and his mother being abused by his father, his mother leaving and abandoning him, his resort to bullying, then eventually the

⁹¹ Görne, 2017, p.185 Translation for : "*Die auditive Räumlichkeit - die Raumsimulation aus Reflexionen und Nachhall - wird zu Metapher, wenn sie der visuellen Räumlichkeit widerspricht.*"

⁹² See *ibid.*

moment Billy got attacked by the Mind Flayer, which explains why the soundscape morphed into the Upside Down's ambiance. The thunder's rumbling and crackling become distorted and out of phase, swirling around the stereo field (probably using a flanger effect), while the clouds and lightnings form a circle above Eleven. This pinpoints the location that Eleven and her friends were seeking: The Source where the Mind Flayer is assembling all its possessed servants, including Billy.

All these sound modulations occurring in the memory contribute to capturing the surrealism of the setting.

This entire sequence always alternates between Eleven in the memory world and her in the real world at Hopper's cabin, where she describes what she's seeing in the memory to her friends. The intimacy, closeness, and dryness of the sounds in the cabin contrast with the largeness and wetness of the sounds in the memory.

After finding the source, Eleven tries to get out of Billy's head. A reversed montage of the previous slowed fall is displayed and Eleven is now at Hopper's cabin but her friends are no longer there. The proximity and dryness of the sound of her voice mislead the listener *and* Eleven herself that she's in the real world but as she looks for Mike, her scream is echoed, contrasting the illustrated space. Billy appears and his delayed and echoed voice is doubled with a low-pitched sinister voice (This is because his mind is infiltrated by the Mind Flayer). Eleven, then, realizes that Billy entered her mind and trapped her in a sort of illusion.

4.4.4. Vecna's Mind Lair



Figure 11: Vecna's Mind Lair

Vecna's Mind Lair, or Mindscape, is a visual depiction of Vecna's mind. It's where he takes his victims when he infiltrates their minds and induces hallucinations. This mental space is shrouded in a peculiar red fog with thunder and lightning raging in the sky. The place is filled with vines, unknown fluids on the ground, and objects floating around in the air, defying gravity. A demolished and shattered version of the Creel House (Vecna's childhood house) is located in the heart of the realm. While the visuals already evoke the otherworldliness of the location, the soundscape also plays a significant part in exposing the nature of the place, as the following example demonstrates.



Figure 12: Vecna strangling Max in the Mind Lair

S4xE4: Chapter Four: Dear Billy [01:08:15 - 01:13:50]

In this scene, Vecna possesses Max and transports her to his Mind Lair. As Max explores the place, we hear thunder crashing and rumbling, the constant ticking of the clock, wet squelching as she steps on the vines and fluid, invisible creatures chittering and indistinct disembodied screams reverberating, which presumably are sounds of the victims when being killed by Vecna and probably One's screams when Eleven threw him in the Upside Down after the massacre at Hawkins Lab; so basically sounds of Vecna's past engraved in his mind. As Max approaches the fractured Creel House, the menacing score intensifies, we hear the clock chiming along with thunder clapping, spiders chittering, squishy sounds, and shrilling distorted screams when Max sees Chrissy (the first victim) dead and strangled by the vines. All these sounds and ambiances convey nothing but a hostile environment, where evil prevails. It becomes clear to the character and the audience that we're inside Vecna's mindscape.

Vecna appears and telekinetically pins Max to a pillar using the vines and the rite of execution starts. His voice and Max's screams and whimpers are echoed, giving the sense of a large space. In the outside world, where Max's body is in a trance, her friends play her favorite song "*Running Up That Hill*" on her Walkman in order to save her from the curse. The song is a key diegetic piece. It plays an important role in the narrative and its lyrics' significance relates to Max's situation.

Back in the Mind Lair, a mental window to the real world appears on the horizon and the song is heard loud and clear. This is because Vecna and Max's minds are intertwined, allowing the audience to hear Max's mind. The song helps her gain strength and the will to live, while a compilation of her memories with her friends encourages her to hold on to life. As Manvell states:

*" All music is either the expression or the stimulant of human emotion."*⁹³

Max tries to escape and runs toward the mental window where she sees her real body levitating and her friends panicking. The music helps her break out of the 'hallucination'. As she runs, she dodges the falling rocks and objects that Vecna is trying to stop her with. The sound of these rocks thudding and crashing on the ground gradually becomes muffled, i.e, filtered, the closer Max gets to the escape window. This explains that the listener hears through Max's perspective, in her headspace. Her focus is shifted to the music that eventually guides her back to reality.

As observed in the previous examples of locations in this chapter, echoes, reverberations, and delays are always present in these spaces' acoustics, which is safe to say that these are standard sound design conventions for surreal settings. Nevertheless, the parameters of these effects differ from each location, making it possible for the ear to tell them apart.

⁹³ Manvell et al., 1975

4.5. Subjectification

Subjectification refers to a character's altered perception of sound in a certain context. It's when the recipient catches a glimpse into the character's inner state of mind and listening perspective. This shifted representation of reality might be as subtle as a minor overreaction or as dramatic as a hallucination.⁹⁴ Personal changed perception also includes instances of daydreaming, imagination, intoxication, illusion, panic, shock, etc. The techniques used to create the subjective auditory impression may include amplification of certain noises, suppression of noises, *slow motion* through Time stretching effect, emphasis on breaths and heartbeats palpitations, reverberation, dissociation of sound and image, and *anti-naturalistic* selection.⁹⁵ *Anti-naturalistic* selection means the shift in acoustic processing in which individual elements of the soundtrack gradually alter in relation to one another, with some being accentuated while others are pushed back.⁹⁶ Other subjectification strategies may involve combining dissimilar objects, disfiguring or distorting an auditory object, filtering frequencies, etc.⁹⁷ Sounds represented through subjective perception are considered meta-diegetic, a term introduced by Claudia Gorbman in her article "Teaching the Soundtrack", in which she described the meta-diegetic sound as a "*sound apparently narrated or imagined by a character as secondary narrator*".⁹⁸ Chion also refers to these sounds as internal sounds that "*correspond to the physical and mental interior of a character.*"⁹⁹

The sound design of *Stranger Things* heavily relies on subjectification, especially with the show's focus on the psyche and mind games. An example of subjective perception can be found in the following scene to be analyzed. Before diving into the analysis, a brief context must be provided.

When Billy was on his way to Karen's house (Mike's mother) for a date night, something struck his car's windshield. As soon as he got out of his vehicle, he was grabbed by the foot and dragged into the steel mill, where the Mind Flayer apparently implanted a portion of itself within him. The following scene takes place at the Hawkins community pool the morning after the accident.

⁹⁴ Barbosa & Dizon, 2020

⁹⁵ Flückiger, 2001, p.395-411

⁹⁶ See *ibid.* p.407f

⁹⁷ Görne, 2019

⁹⁸ Gorbman, 1976

⁹⁹ Chion, 1994 p.76

S3xE2: Chapter Two: The Mall Rats [00:15:45 - 00:17:35]

When Karen walks into the closet room to talk to Billy, her voice sounds reverbed even though they are in a small room. The reverberation of the sound is thus subjective to Billy. Her voice gradually becomes more echoed and his heartbeat poundings start to build up. Suddenly, Billy slams her head against the wall and the screen goes black. We hear Karen's echoed voice calling "Billy". Then the screen goes back to Karen trying to speak to him, with her voice sounding dry without any echo. This means that Billy was imagining hitting her and the sound of her natural voice without any manipulations confirms the return to reality. Billy is clearly not feeling well and that's shown in his sharp breathing and excessive sweat. As he exits the room to head back to the pool, he enters a hallucination-like state, which makes the atmosphere totally perceived through Billy's perspective. This subjectivity shift takes the sound out of the diegetic framework and into Billy's headspace. While Billy walks unsteadily towards his lifeguard chair, the sound design highlights the meta-diegetic sounds: electricity crackling, a constant chiming bell sound, which connects to his fate, reverbed panting and breathing, the sun seems to make a sound of electric static hissing that also sounds like something is deep frying and sizzling. The designation of noise to an object (the sun) that supposedly has no sound, corresponds to Billy's exaggerated reaction to heat exposure and irritation. As mentioned before, the entities that belong to the Upside Down have only one weakness, which is heat. This reveals that the Mind Flayer has infiltrated Billy's mind. As he walks by the pool in a drunk-like state, he becomes more sensitive to his surroundings. The sudden distorted screams of children as well as an emphasized sound of water splashing attract his attention. As his coworker Heather compliments him, her voice is echoed and delayed as well as the voices of the ladies by the pool greeting him. All of this is accompanied by whooshes sound effects during image transitions to indicate his focus shifts to specific things. The sound in this scene is mixed in such a way that it immerses the viewers in the character's head and allows them to hear things from his perspective. What is particularly noteworthy here is what is not heard: there are no ordinary sounds of children playing, laughing, or swimming or people chattering despite the crowdedness of the pool. This portrays Billy's dissociation and his loss of touch with reality. As he finally sits on his chair, his sigh is amplified and reverbed and a distant sound of a clock ticking is heard. The clock sound here may foreshadow the connection to Vecna for the next season, even though the symbolism of the clock wasn't revealed yet in the third season. The ticking sound of the clock could also be interpreted as Billy's slowed perception of time during the hallucination. When he looks at the sun, a sound that reminisces the crackling of fire is heard along with a rising drone that adds to the tension. Overall, the sound design in this scene successfully transmits the discomfort and irritation of the character through subjectification.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how the sound design of *Stranger Things* drives the narrative and plays a crucial role in creating the show's overall atmosphere and captivating the audience into its distinctive universe. The analysis of different scenes in this paper proved how rich and unique the show's sonic vocabulary is. Speech, sound effects, ambiance, and music work harmoniously together and complement each other to provide the spectator with the most vivid and emotionally impactful experience imaginable. The sound design elements were carefully crafted to transport viewers to the supernatural world of *Stranger Things* and establish a unique blend of genres, including horror, science fiction, and coming-of-age drama.

The Duffer brothers were able to create a cohesive world, with a strong sense of atmosphere and a cast of well-defined characters that made the show a hit.

The series is set in the 1980s, and the sound design is heavily influenced by the music and sound effects of that era. The synth-driven score serves as a central part of the show's aesthetic, and it effectively evokes a sense of nostalgia for the era, while also contributing to the show's overall eerie and haunting atmosphere.

The show also uses sound effects effectively to create a sense of tension and danger, particularly in scenes involving the Upside Down and the supernatural creatures that inhabit it. The use of distorted and supernatural sounds helps to establish the otherworldly nature of the Upside Down and its creatures.

In addition to contributing to the development of the plot, the sound design works in tandem with the visuals to heighten the audience's anticipation and fear and create moments of suspense and horror.

The show also incorporates symbolic sounds that support the flow of storytelling by establishing cognitive associations between key elements of the narrative.

In this paper, we were also able to examine the characterization of monsters and a few individuals through their specified sound elements, which exposed their nature, goals, personality, and power.

The sound design in *Stranger Things* has been consistently impressive across all seasons, but it has also evolved and grown in complexity over time with the introduction of new monsters, and the incorporation of characters' mindscapes and memories. The acoustical properties of action places serve the purpose of defining and characterizing a location while preventing any confusion for the listener when switching between different settings. The use of sound thus contributes to the differentiation between different realms and dimensions, each with its own distinct soundscape, and properly communicates different perspectives of the characters.

As the appreciation for television and film sound design continues to grow, it is essential to recognize the artistry and skill that goes into crafting an authentic soundscape, as demonstrated in *Stranger Things*. The analysis of the show's sound design provided valuable insights into the creative and technical procedures that went into producing such a successful series.

Taken together, this paper offers a novel perspective on how sound design plays a key role in establishing the show's unique atmosphere, bringing its supernatural elements to life, and immersing the viewer into its world. The creative and technical achievements of the sound designers in *Stranger Things* have contributed significantly to the show's success and popularity. The sound design elements not only provide an authentic and nostalgic atmosphere but also contribute to the show's narrative and character development. The Netflix series surely left an imprint on the way television programs employ sound design on a high cinematic level. With the fifth and final season in the works, one can only speculate on what new sounds this show may bring.

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