

Afb. 1: Stranger Things, *Stranger Things* logo, 2016. Bron: Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3MEfjMm>.



The Strangeness of Stranger Things

Fabienne van Wijngaarden

In this rubric, Fabienne van Wijngaarden examines the cultural accuracy of the hit series *Stranger Things* in this edition's *Onder een historische loop*.

Who isn't familiar with *Stranger Things*? There are not many people who can say they've never heard of the Netflix series. The American sci-fi horror series has been an enormous success since its premiere in 2016, and each new season brings a wave of additional viewers. Fans love the series for a variety of reasons: from the beloved characters to the unnerving music, there's something for everyone. The eighties nostalgia that is heavily featured in the series is also very popular among viewers - it sometimes even inspires trends. Eggo Waffles' sales spiked after Eleven's obsession with them had a central role in the first

season. And who can forget the viral *Chrissy Wake Up!* remix that was trending on TikTok last July? But how accurate is *Stranger Things*' cultural depiction of the 1980s, really? Is the only fiction in the series the Upside Down, or are there more strange things going on here?

The use of clothes tells an entire story on its own

While the series has been lauded for a multitude of reasons, the one thing that really caught my eye is the brilliance of the costume department. The costume department was tasked with creating outfits that were authentic to the period while also being practical for the actors to wear and move around in. The costumes

in *Stranger Things* are an important part of the show's visual storytelling and contribute to the nostalgic and atmospheric feel of the series. We know a lot about the characters just by looking at them - what clique they're in, what kind of social-economic background they're from. The use of clothes tells an entire story on its own. For example, not only did Steve Harrington's Members Only jacket fuel a frantic search on Vinted for a similar item in my size, but it is also an extremely accurate portrayal of what a popular guy might have looked like in the eighties. His look is a direct reference to the "preppy" style that was popular in eighties pop culture, while Nancy's clothes reflect the "good girl" look popularized by films like *The Breakfast Club*. And take a look at Lucas Sinclair - who started out as a nerdy kid but became a jock by Season 4. The change in his clothing style also represents the changes in his friend group. Sometimes the outfits worn by the beloved characters even spark debates - such as Eleven's legendary jumpsuit from Season 3. There was quite a heated debate among fans online if the piece was a recreation or an original, but luckily costume designer Amy Parris could clear it up. The jumpsuit was in fact made in the eighties and it was completely original. The origins of the suit are unclear, but Parris let the fans know that she hasn't found another copy yet. The jumpsuit seems to be a one-off. Besides sparking fiery debates, the costumes are more often than not quite iconic.

Another noteworthy piece of 1980s nostalgia is the set design and the use of props. They help create the show's distinctive look and feel. The show's production designer, Chris Trujillo, and his team worked to create a world that is both nostalgic and eerie, with many details that evoke the 1980s while also creating a sense of mystery and danger. For example, the Byers' house is decorated with vintage furniture and appliances, and features wallpaper that is true to the time period. The Hawkins Middle School is also a faithful recreation of a 1980s school, complete with linoleum floors, fluorescent lighting, and lockers that are covered in stickers. Nancy's bedroom is another example, with posters littering the walls and lots of vintage props. Even Steve's bedroom, which is completely covered in horrid plaid wallpaper, is historically accurate despite its mere seconds of screentime. The cars used in the series, from Joyce Byers' lime green 1976 Ford Pinto to Chief Hopper's Chevrolet K5 Blazer and Steve's burgundy 1983 BMW 733i, are all vintage cars as well.

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Afb. 2: Mr. Choppers, 1984 BMW 733i, federalized US-market version, 2012. Bron: Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3ODEt0a>.

Afb. 3: Antony Mayfield,
Funky Stuff mixtape, 2013.
Bron: Wikimedia
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Last but not least, there is also the amazing 1980s music that is featured throughout the four seasons. Not only has *Stranger Things* succeeded in making Kate Bush' *Running Up That Hill* and Metallica's *Master of Puppets* trending after Season 4, but the music used is also largely historically accurate. The eighties were a decade built on music, and *Stranger Things* embodies this iconic decade perfectly. From the songs of David Bowie and Duran Duran to the theme song of *The NeverEnding Story*, the soundtrack is flawlessly executed. Not to mention, every episode begins with a synth score. That's not to say the entire decade was taken up with a John Carpenter audio aesthetic, but it does set the tone perfectly for the 80s audio medium.

However, the music team also made some mistakes. While mixtapes were definitely a thing in the 1980s, *Stranger Things* seems to view them with rose-colored glasses, as the frequency with which they appear completely ignores the popularity of radio at the time. Jonathan also puts The Smiths on one of his mixtapes, a full year before they ever released an album.

Some fans and critics also comment on the unrealistic plot of Season 3. Their argument is that the large presence of Soviet soldiers and scientists in a small

town in Indiana isn't exactly historically accurate. And let's face it, of course that's not entirely plausible. To this I say, however, that if you don't take issue with the presence of Demogorgons and Vecna, some historically inaccurate Russian presence should be fine as well. Unlike the clothes or props, the Russian plotline would have never happened in real life. There was certainly no research into the Upside Down in the eighties.

It's safe to say that *Stranger Things* isn't entirely historically accurate, but in a series where odd occurrences seem to set the tone, it's strangely fitting. It's important to remember that *Stranger Things* is a work of fiction and is not meant to be a historical or documentary representation of the 1980s. While the show includes many references to the pop culture, fashion, and technology of the time, it also takes some creative liberties in order to tell its story. So, with that in mind, all we can do is hope that the team takes another creative liberty and Vecna shows up in a historically accurate double denim outfit with shoulder pads and a chunky belt next season.

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