

Chapter 3 – MISCELLANEOUS INFLUENCES IN *STRANGER THINGS*

2.1 The music

To devise the comfortably familiar atmosphere of the series, the creators of *Stranger Things* used an extensive selection of classic films and books from the 80s. But the charm of that fruitful decade is equally tangible in fitting choices of musical pieces accompanying the series.

The original soundtrack is composed by a Texan dark electronic band S U R V I V E. The band is comprised of four members: Michael Stein, Kyle Dixon, Adam Jones and Mark Donica, but for the original *Stranger Thing* score the first two members of the ensemble are responsible: Michael Stein and Kyle Dixon. The compositions created by S U R V I V E are rich in synthesizers, heavy and predominantly dark. In an interview for *billboard.com*, Kyle Dixon, co-composer of the score, recalled how the band managed to become a part of the project:

They [the Duffer Brothers] had a preliminary mock trailer they made to pitch the idea and they used the last song on our first LP, Dirge. They sent it to us and said, 'we have this show we're working on, are you still a band?' (...). They asked if we had any other music and we went through our Dropbox -- that's how we share songs so everyone can listen -- and we sent them 50 songs the next day.

The characteristic synth/electronic music quickly became the trademark tune of the series and garnered attention of the fans and the critics alike, which resulted in a nomination for the 2017 Grammy Award and winning for Michael Stein and Kyle Dixon a Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Original Main Title Theme Music.

Choosing this particular band for the original soundtrack was a well-informed

decision on the Duffers' part. The type of the music they went for – electronic, brimming with the sounds of synthesizers – was vastly popular in the 80s. According to Jon Hunt, a music columnist of a culture magazine *l'étoile*, the major influences of synthwave are as follows:

70s and 80s **Horror movies**. The DIY aesthetic and the soundtracks, especially those of John Carpenter and Goblin (from Dario Argento's movies, especially his 80s films like *Phenomena*)

70s and **80s Sci-Fi movies**. Especially any that have the stink of "B movie" about them — see the first *Terminator* as possibly the biggest touchstone.

70s and 80s **Action movies**. You know the *Beverly Hills Cop* soundtrack by Harold Faltermeyer? That.

Anything **Tangerine Dream** and **Vangelis** did in the 80s. Particularly their soundtracks — *Blade Runner* for Vangelis and *Legend* for Tangerine Dream.

NPR's "**Music From The Heart Of Space**." Remember that show? If you were a stoner in the 80s, you sure do — it was a mellow-as-hell space-music and New Age show. It all sounded like *Cosmos*. It ruled

Clearly, these influences are strictly connected with the 80s so the synthwave music is more than fitting for *Stranger Things*, especially because it emulates the mood of horror and science-fiction movies of the decade – the mood *Stranger Things* showrunners wished to conjure. Aside from the songs composed by S U R V I V E, music connoisseurs will find on the non-original soundtrack other psychedelic pieces from classic electronic ensembles, such as "Exit" or "Green Desert" by Tangerine Dream, "Fields of Coral" by Vangelis or New Order's heart-wrenching "Elegia". The Duffers underlined the importance of the 80s vibes in episodes recap for *EW.com*:

Their [Survive's] electronic soundtracks, while very modern and cutting-edge, also inevitably evoke the sounds of '80s music (most notably Tangerine Dream, Vangelis, and John Carpenter). So we felt that having a synth soundtrack would do exactly what we wanted to achieve with the show: It would feel both modern and nostalgic at the same time.

In fact, according to Dixon, music composed by S U R V I V E was so important that it was used during auditions to create the atmosphere of the show – the goal was to help the auditioning actors easier get into character: “They made the decision to play our music over the auditions and that was the deciding factor in casting.” says the composer. In the same interview Dixon states that while S U R V I V E specialises in darker music, working on *Stranger Things* gave the band the opportunity to compose more happy and upbeat pieces as well. All in all, electro-synth music composed by the group goes equally well with heavy, dramatic scenes and more light-hearted and playful sequences.

The non-original and non-instrumental soundtrack contains a tasteful collection of the greatest radio hits from the 80s. Catchy and easily recognisable songs such as Toto’s “Africa”, “I Melt With You” by Modern English or other pieces sang by revered artists such as Peter Gabriel or Dolly Parton naturally prompted nostalgia for the old-school classics. The theme song of the series, “Should I Stay Or Should I Go” by The Clash strictly connects with Will. Trapped in the Upside Down and left with little hope, the boy kept using this song throughout the season to connect and communicate with his friends and family. Now The Clash’s hit reigns supreme as the unofficial anthem of the series.

Not only are these choices of music alluringly retro, but also the physical packaging of the soundtrack tunes is designed to take the fans back in time: last year Lakeshore Records and Invada Records announced an exclusive limited edition of both volumes of the soundtrack in vinyl. Lakeshore Records also offered a limited cassette version of the S U R V I V E’s score which was meticulously stylised to look like a VHS tape.

The Duffers emphasize the importance of music by writing one of the characters as a bit of a music snob. Jonathan Byers' identity is largely based on the songs he enjoys and he uses music to bond with Will. In the second chapter, triggered by "Should I Stay or Should I Go" playing on the radio, Jonathan revisits a memory of his brother: the boys are sitting in his bedroom, their heads bobbing in the rhythm of the song. The hit is one of the pieces Jonathan put on the mixtape which he gives to Will. *All the best stuff is on there* he promises his younger brother, and lists his favourites: Joy Division, Bowie, Television, the Smiths. For Will's friends and family members music – specifically The Clash's hit – is a thread that keeps them tethered to the boy who is trapped in the unknown. Will too uses the song as a reference point, a medium which forces him to remember his home and motivates him to hide from the Demogorgon and persevere. For the audience of the series the soundtrack music fulfils the same function: it compels the viewers to associate it with the 80s, it brings back the memories and lures the audience with its retro charm.

2.2 The posters

The importance of paratexts in promoting a film or a TV series is unquestionable. They are tangible representations of the story the series or the movie seeks to present and they give the viewers an opportunity to see what the product is about and decide whether it looks interesting enough to consume it. Jonathan Gray stresses the weight of movie posters in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* and enumerates their functions:

To see advertising's intricate acts of meaning construction at work, we can turn first to movie posters. Though rarely as densely packed with meaning as are their video cousins, trailers,

posters can still play a key role in outlining a show's genre, its star intertexts, and the type of world a would-be audience member is entering. (52)

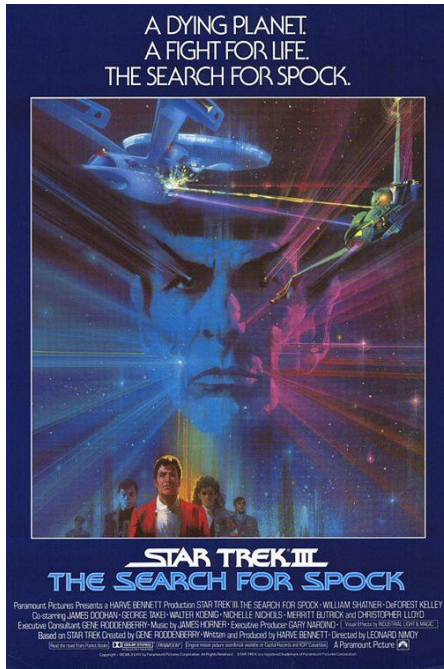
Naturally, perfectly constructed trailers, ads, posters and other paratextual materials will seek to strike a balance between revealing enough to intrigue the potential viewer and keeping the pivotal moments and plot twists in secret so the viewer will not find out too much about the movie or the series just from the aforementioned sources. After all, the viewer's interest must be sustained but not satiated so she or he will be inclined to watch the advertised product.

Although Netflix has employed a plethora of means to promote *Stranger Things*, the main focus of the following part of the thesis will be on the first official poster of the series, which was created by a digital artist and illustrator Kyle Lambert. Lambert on his website discusses the creative process behind the poster, explaining that his aim was to “create a piece of artwork that celebrated the 80's era of hand-painted movie posters.” The illustrator points out that his poster was inspired by the most revered artists from the field: “I began by studying my favourite posters by several of the legendary poster artists such as Drew Struzan, Bob Peak, John Alvin and Richard Amsel”, says Lambert.

On the next page can be seen Lambert's poster for the first season of Netflix' hit production:



(Figure 7)
(<http://www.kylelambert.com/gallery/stranger-things-poster/>)



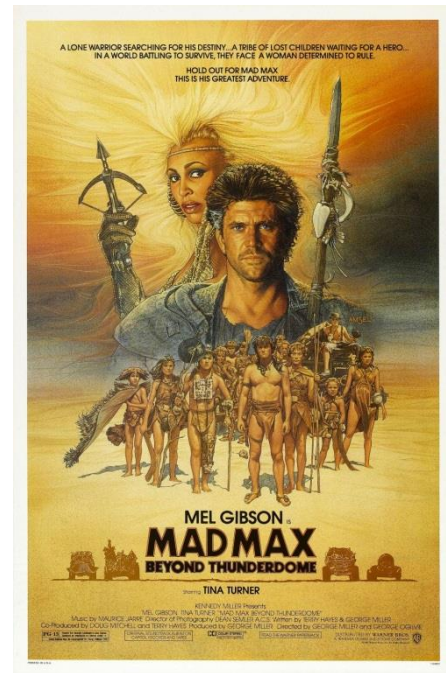
(Figure 8)
 (http://www.impawards.com/1984/star_trek3.html)



(Figure 9)
 (<http://www.impawards.com/1982/thing.html>)



(Figure 10)
 (http://www.impawards.com/1982/blade_runner.html)



(Figure 11)
 (http://www.impawards.com/1985/mad_max_beyond_thunderdome_ver1.html)

Drew Struzan is responsible for posters of classic movies such as *The Goonies* or *The Thing* and movies from *Star Wars* series. His influence is traceable in *Stranger Things* poster: *The Thing* reference can be found in the lower right corner of the poster where a mysterious figure clad in a spacesuit-like attire is visible. The figure seems to emanate cold light which is especially radiating from its helmeted face. A very similar figure is the centrepiece of *The Thing* poster (Figure 9), complete with a spookily luminous “face”. Struzan’s creature is kept in cool blue hues, as is the suited figure on Lambert’s poster.

The influence of Bob Peak is present in the poster’s colour scheme as well. *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* poster from 1984 (Figure 8) displays a reversed blue/red colour pattern, with reds and pinks on the right side of the poster and blues on its left side. Spock, being the key character of the episode, is positioned in the middle of the artwork, much like Eleven in *Stranger Things* poster.

John Alvin created posters to iconic films such as *Blade Runner*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* or *Batman Returns*. Lambert’s poster loosely establishes connection with Alvin’s *E. T.* artwork by including the blue-black colouring.

Stranger Things poster does not diverge from the schematic formulas established by the revered creators enumerated above, because Lambert does not strive to be innovative and willingly adheres to traditional norms such as the positioning of the main characters – the key characters with their attributes in the middle of the poster – or the long-established use of contrasting colours. His fidelity to the style of the veritable masters of poster design promptly visually alludes to the greatest cinematic productions of the 80s. The fact the creators who served as an inspiration for the poster worked on movies which the Duffers paid homage to in their series adds an additional intertextual

layer to the whole enterprise.

The composition of Lambert's poster is rather conservative. At the top of the artwork can be visible a centered caption reading "Netflix" in uppercase letters. All key characters are located in the middle of the canvas, starting with Will, who, being responsible for the majority of the action in the series, occupies the highest spot on the poster. On his left side Lambert placed his mother Joyce, and on his right side Hawkins police chief, Jim Hopper, whom he pictured with a walkie-talkie. Joyce and Hopper are the only adults who really care about finding and saving Will, therefore their presence near the boy is not accidental: flanking him from both sides, they seem to guard the child from danger. The portrait of Eleven, who is the main protagonist of the series, not only is the biggest character sketch but it is also situated right in the centre of the poster. Eleven, as the pivotal force of the series, gathers the remaining characters around her. Underneath Joyce, and on Eleven's left, appears Nancy Wheeler. Below her Lambert drew Jonathan Byers. The teenagers hold their attributes: Nancy has a baseball bat and Jonathan a camera. Finally, underneath all these characters the illustrator placed the boys: Lucas, Mike and Dustin. The kids are on their bikes, and Mike, tellingly, is in the middle of the trio, which places him exactly below Eleven. The poster implies a symbiotic relationship between the three kids: Will who gets lost in the Upside Down relies on El because she knows the alternative dimension. El, being a stranger in a normal world, relies on Mike's help, who houses her, feeds her, and socialises with her.

The poster reveals as well key symbols or locations. In the upper left corner Lambert painted the previously mentioned alphabet wall and in the upper right corner the *E.T.*-like moon. In the lower left corner stands Byers' shack surrounded by the woods – the building in which Will tries to hide from the Demogorgon. In the lower

right corner Lambert sketched the Lab and aforementioned mysterious *The Thing* figure. Finally, the artwork is finished with a “Stranger Things” inscription in the series signature font. Underneath the title of the show a caption in uppercase white letters reads: “a Netflix original series”, and even lower on the right: “all episodes July 15”.

The concentric arrangement of the main characters brings to mind Drew Struzan’s *Star Wars* posters or John Alvin’s artworks – for example *Blade Runner* poster (Figure 10) – where the protagonists are usually seen in fragmentary, portrait-like style, and in *Stranger Things* almost all the characters are drawn in this portrait-like fashion. Lambert used graphics editors, but made sure to give his artwork a unique hand-painted feeling which can be found in Richard Amsel’s works for films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (Figure 11).

In *Stranger Things* posters play a particularly versatile role because they act as paratexts as well as inseparable elements of mise-en-scène. In the first chapter, the viewer will spot *The Thing* poster hanging on the wall of Mike’s basement. In the second episode, a poster of *The Evil Dead* in Jonathan’s bedroom can be noticed. In the same episode, the Duffers show *The Dark Crystal* affiche fixed on the wall of Mike’s bedroom and, finally, at the end of the chapter, a *Jaws* poster adorns the walls of Will’s room.

The inclusion of the posters representing the most popular films of the 80s allowed the Duffers a much more effective and believable interior design. By showing these posters the Brothers allude to the movies of the flagship directors from the 80s, artists such as Carpenter or Raimi. By interweaving in the poster of their own show elements alluding to posters of the blockbuster hits from the period, and by including in the interior design posters of such films, the showrunners entertained their viewers with

clever Easter eggs and set up subsequent intertextual connections which successfully stress the time period of the series.

2.3 The opening credit sequence and the font

Posters, adverts, trailers and similar paratexts are of paramount importance as they convey to the viewer the most basic information regarding the film or the series. In glimpses offered by these advertising materials the creators of the product have to present their casting choices, offer a brief plot summary, hint at the genre of their film or TV series – in short, do everything to entice the viewer to buy their creation. But what happens *after* the viewer, convinced by the paratexts, decides to watch the show? In most cases before seeing much of the promised action, the viewer will be faced with the opening credit sequence of the series. Jonathan Gray notes that:

(...) all opening credit sequences work in similar ways to create genre, character, and tone. Many involve remarkably fast editing, with more frames per second employed than anywhere else on television, as characters and character relationships are introduced. Colors, background music choice, and relative use of naturalistic or computer-doctored images can tell prospective viewers a lot. (74)

Opening sequences are usually the last paratext the viewer sees before plunging into the fictional world, so they need to impart as many engaging qualities of the product as possible while looking visually crisp and attractive – because they will most likely appear repeatedly at the beginning of the following episodes, and sometimes even stay unchanged in the remaining seasons.

In *Stranger Things*, depending on the chapter, the opening sequence is displayed after the first two to nine minutes of the episode. It lasts 52 seconds and invariably starts with a black screen. First, the viewer sees “a Netflix original series” caption in bold

white uppercase letters. Then fragmentary contours of the title letters start gliding lazily across the screen, looking alive and organic (Figure 12). The letters are vermilion and glow timidly with light as they move (Figure 13). Because of their colour, size and the constant movement, they dominate the screen.

But these letters are not the only element visible: all the while, in the centre of the screen appear the opening credits, listing the cast and the crew members. This information is presented in the same style as the opening caption, but the white stocky letters of opening credits seem to possess some kind of flickering motion too. Eventually the huge letters of the show title neatly come together to form the name of the series (Figure 14). At the end of the opening sequence the title of each chapter appears, at first written in bold red uppercase font (Figure 15), then gradually growing larger and becoming more and more transparent until they become a window through which the viewer sees glimpses of the action (Figure 16). Finally, the caption disappears to give way to the proper screen.



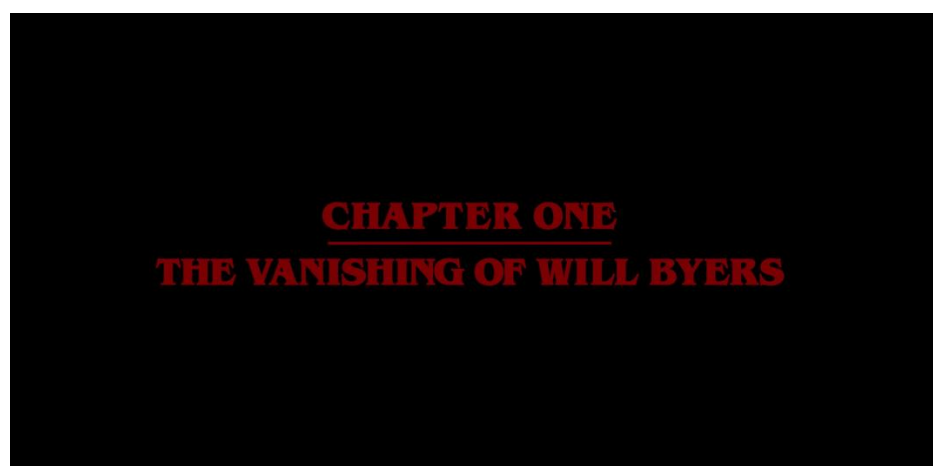
(Figure 12)



(Figure 13)



(Figure 14)



(Figure 15)



(Figure 16)

The languid and elegant opening of *Stranger Things* does not reveal much, but the theory in Gray’s book checks out – the viewer infers from the sequence that the show in question is live-action, rather than animated, and that it will deal with mystery, and possibly supernatural or science fiction themes. The opening sequence of the series conveys something more: the unmistakable atmosphere of the 80s. This ambiance is achieved thanks to painstakingly tailored audio and visual means. The music playing during the opening sequence – composed like the rest of the soundtrack by S U R V I V E and named, after the title of the series, simply *Stranger Things* – is delectably synthwave-like and inevitably draws comparisons with John Carpenter’s soundtracks from the 80s. The fact that Winona Ryder is listed at the very beginning of the opening credit sequence is another allusion to the 80s that will not go unnoticed. The retro vibes are reinforced by the font choice: the Duffers deliberately opted for a font that will allude to the time period they selected for the series. As revealed in the article on *Vox.com*, the Brothers commissioned Imaginary Forces, an esteemed creative studio, to contrive the opening sequence and establish the distinctive typeface. On its website, the studio acknowledges the deliberate nod to the 80s, stating that “The Stranger Things

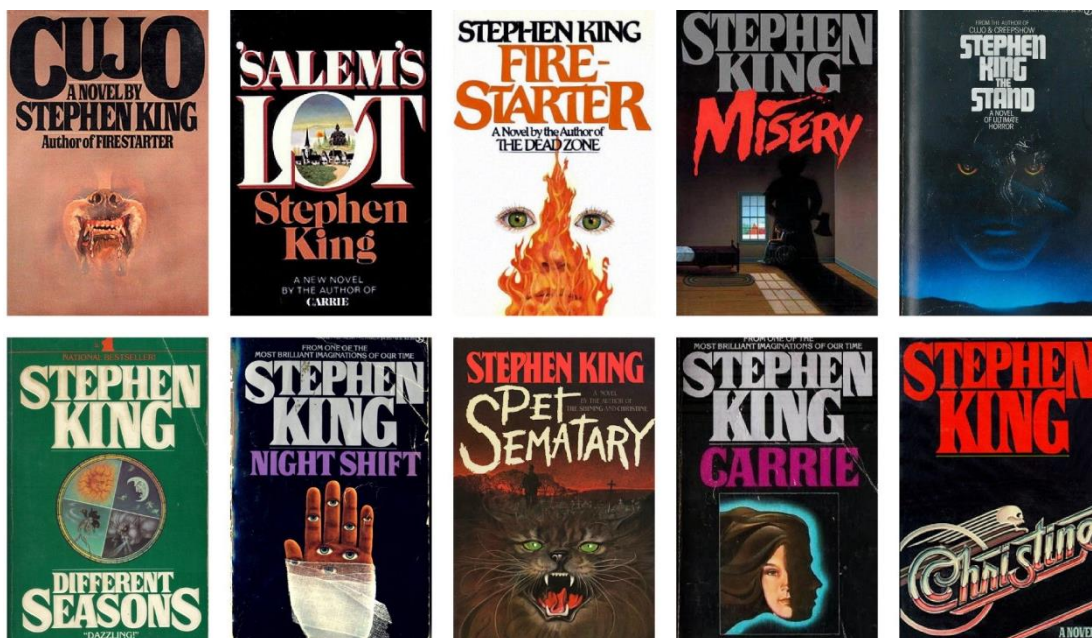
main title mimics an optical look which reflects the time period of the show, it also seems as if light is passing through film, creating a lush haptic quality”.

As reports *Vox.com*, Imaginary Forces used kodaliths – that is, high contrast films – and filmed “what it looked like when light shined through those film letters”. This measure resulted in a font with rich retro texture which conjures up the image of opening sequences from older films back from the pre-digitalization era. These handmade physical references were then used to digitally animate the title letters, but the creators made sure to preserve their unique vintage character.

The informative video prepared by *Vox.com* further explores the eye-catching font: the typeface which inspired the one used in the show title, ITC Benguiat, was created in 1978 by Ed Benguiat. It was featured on the covers of *Choose your own adventure* book series from the 80s and 90s and appeared on the cover of *Strangeways, Here We Come* album released by The Smiths in 1987. Moreover, as pointed out by font-lovers from fontinuse.com, a very similar typeface was used in the opening credit sequence of *House* – a 1986 comedy horror film by Steve Miner. Michelle Dougherty, Imaginary Forces’ creative director, explains in a conversation with *Vulture* that the variation of ITC Benguiat used in *Stranger Things* was modified by Jacob Boghosian who adjusted the contours of Benguiat’s typeface “to give it a unique and harmonized look up”. The designer shows on his website a collection of covers of various Stephen King’s novels, which he quotes as an inspiration for *Stranger Things* font. In yet another interview with *Vulture*, the Duffers confirm that their main inspiration for the font came from Stephen King’s paperbacks:

(...) in terms of the font and the title design, going back to those old vintage Stephen King books. We sent 12 different old covers to Imaginary Forces, who were designing the titles — we wanted it to be in the style of these novels.

A quick look at Boghosian's website and a browse through sites dedicated to King such as *stephenking.com* quickly results in finding a selection of covers which could be possibly picked by the Duffers: a paperback cover of the first edition of *Christine* from 1983, a paperback cover of the first edition of *Cujo* from 1981, a hard cover of the first edition of *Firestarter* from 1980 and many more. The list is long, but this is hardly a surprise given how great a visual influence King's works were.



(Figure 17)

(<https://blog.nelsoncash.com/the-typography-of-stranger-things-e35771f40d31>)

The rest of the design behind the opening sequence was heavily influenced by yet another famous creator, namely Richard Greenberg, whom Ross Duffer mentions in the interview for *Vulture*:

Then for the actual design, we're pretty obsessed with this designer Richard Greenberg who did so many great title sequences back in the day, whether it was *Alien* or *The Untouchables* or *The*

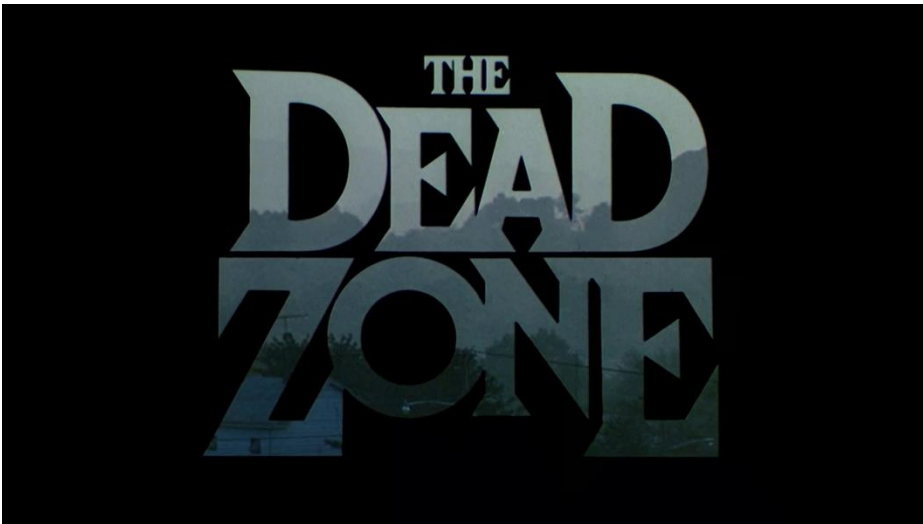
Goonies or *Superman*. *Altered States*. What he specialized in was using just graphics: title graphics, titles over titles. That's something we really wanted to do.

Greenberg's title sequences are like catchy songs – they stuck in the collective memory of older generations of moviegoers, and now, years later, they still look epic and recognisable. That is the effect the Duffers desired and if the amount of netizens fawning over the *Stranger Things* font is anything to go by, they achieved their goal.

The video prepared by *Vox.com* showcases genuine openings from the 80s which impacted the opening sequence of the series. As mentioned earlier, the transition from the sequence with a chapter title into the proper footage is obtained by zooming in the inscription which simultaneously grows in transparency, finally giving way to the actual footage. A similar (Figure 19) – but reversed (Figure 18) – effect is used in the opening sequence of *The Dead Zone*, a 1983 adaptation of a thriller novel written by Stephen King. *Altered States*, a sci-fi horror from 1980 boasts alike opening: the letters waltz on the screen slowly growing more see-through. *Stranger Things* alludes to *Altered States* on a plotline level as well: in the 1980 horror dangerous experiments are conducted on people locked in sensory deprivation tanks – something that happened to Eleven during her imprisonment in Hawkins Lab. There is another reference, not mentioned by *Vox* but nonetheless worth bringing up: *The Terminator* from 1984. In the opening sequence of James Cameron's iconic action movie the viewer see contours of the title letters moving languidly across the screen in a fashion that makes one think of *Stranger Things* intro (Figure 20). And the letters in *The Terminator* are electric blue: the colour looks stark and loud contrasted with the black backdrop (Figure 21) – hot iron red of *Stranger Things* letters reflects the same kind of aesthetic.



(Figure 18)



(Figure 19)



(Figure 20)



(Figure 21)

2.3 Casting choices

In *Stranger Things* clever and meticulously designed paratexts such as the poster or the opening sequence easily establish the mood of the series and inform its character, alluding to films, music and widely understood cultural phenomena of the 80s. But casting choices are not of a lesser importance: in the carefully assembled cast grand names of actors who were in high demand during that crazy decade stand out. The involvement of these old-time silver screen sweethearts – namely Winona Ryder and Matthew Modine – instantly and inevitably impacts the reception of the series among these members of the audience who are film-savvy or nostalgic enough to connect these actors with the 80s.

According to the Internet Movie Database, Winona Ryder took up acting in 1986 when she appeared for the first time in *Lucas*, a rom-com-slash-drama about throes of teenagehood and adolescent love written and directed by David Seltzer. But the decisive moment for her acting career came in 1988, when she starred in Tim Burton's