Stranger Things, Season 4 embraces psychological horror

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After a three-year hiatus, Netflix premiered the fourth and penultimate season of the hit science-fiction thriller *Stranger Things* on May 27. The streaming platform released seven episodes initially, and the final two (which total nearly four hours) aired on July 1.

The season broke multiple records for *Netflix*, including the most hours watched during a premiere weekend. Audiences temporarily crashed *Netflix* when the final two episodes were released on July 1, according to DownDetector.

Reviews have been largely positive, with a Rotten Tomatoes critic rating of 89 percent. *Variety*, virtually alone in criticizing what it generously calls a "distasteful" opening scene, asserts that the show has "high ambitions, and meets them."

Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana during the 1980s, the series follows a group of kids and their parents whose lives are upended after a government experiment gone wrong opens a gate to another dimension, the Upside Down. The kids are avid Dungeons and Dragons players and use the game's mythology to understand and outsmart the various monsters that emerge from the Upside Down. They befriend Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), a girl with paranormal abilities who was the test subject of the government's experiments and used as a spy against the Soviet Union.

The WSWS criticized the introduction of an "evil Soviets" theme in Season 3, placing it in the context of the anti-Russian hysteria cultivated by the Democratic Party. Season 4 combines this reactionary Cold War story line with an onslaught of grisly elements—and runs with them.

Eleven's adoptive father and Hawkins Police Chief Jim Hopper (David Harbour), thought to have died at the end of last season, survived and was taken prisoner by the Soviets. With the exception of the guard who arranges Hopper's escape, the Soviets are entirely one-dimensional, both brutish and buffoonish.

Back home, things are even worse. Premiering three days after the Uvalde, Texas massacre, the show opens with a content warning that states, "given the recent tragic shooting ... viewers may find the opening scene of Episode 1 distressing."

Jumping back in time to 1979, we follow Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine), the lead scientist who conducted experiments on Eleven, to the lab where a dozen children are busy with puzzles and displaying telekintetic powers. Something goes wrong. Dr. Brenner awakens to find everyone in the lab, including all of the children, brutally murdered. We see a young Eleven standing in the center of the carnage as Brenner asks, "What have you done?"

In present-day Hawkins, 1986, a series of gruesome murders begins to plague the town, and we are introduced to a new monster who, unlike those in previous seasons, is human-like and psychologically tortures his victims. The ignorant townspeople come under the influence of an evangelical vigilante basketball player who is convinced that the Dungeons and Dragons club is a Satanic cult responsible for the murders.

Meanwhile, Eleven, who lost her powers last season, is living in California with Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) and her children. After being bullied by a popular girl, Eleven violently clobbers the girl in a fit of rage. This disturbing outbreak is met mostly with indifference by the other characters, while it brings back flashes of the lab massacre for Eleven, who wonders whether she is a "monster." She leaves California with Dr. Owens (Paul Reiser), who says there is a way to restore her powers and enable her to defend her friends back home. To do so, she must confront her suppressed memories.

The fourth season moves away from science-fiction into the genre of horror. It features the torture and murder of children, animal mutilation and more gore and death than the previous seasons combined. The creators drew

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inspiration from Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), among other horror films.

Commenting on the new direction of the show, the Duffer Brothers reveal that, essentially, they simply felt like it. Matt Duffer said in an interview, "Thinking back to what scared us as kids... what kept us up in the night... [We wanted] to try our hand at creating a villain like that. Not that I wanted to make children not be able to sleep, but to capture what it felt like to experience that as a kid... It was a really fun challenge."

The Duffers stated elsewhere that the core group of kids, only freshmen in high school, "aren't kids anymore" and therefore it "felt right" to explore their trauma and difficult high school experiences through the medium of psychological horror.

None of this holds much water against the backdrop of unprecedented crises that have shaken the world, including the youth, over the past two years while the season was in production. Filming began in February 2020 but was shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resumed in September 2020 and concluded in September 2021. Post-production occurred up until the episodes aired.

What has taken place during this time? Over 20 million people have died worldwide due to a pandemic, including over a 1 million in the US. Sitting President Donald Trump attempted a fascistic coup to overthrow the government with the support of most of the Republican Party and sections of the military and intelligence agencies, while the Democratic Party made no effort to stop him. The U.S. instigated a long-planned proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and is recklessly careening toward a potential nuclear third world war.

The younger generations in particular, which comprise the show's main audience, have themselves been through a great deal. In the summer of 2020, tens of millions of youth throughout the world protested the police murder of George Floyd and were met with tear gas, beatings and arrests. During the Delta and Omicron waves of the pandemic, millions of children were infected with the debilitating virus in the U.S. and at least 1,000 died. Thousands of students walked out of school in protest at dangerous conditions, and thousands protested again following the Uvalde massacre.

At most the creators seem vaguely aware that there are existential anxieties in the minds of the youth. But their disorientation is palpable. Daring to introduce, in general terms, major social-political issues (mass violence, war, government conspiracies), they not only neglect to bother with the slightest serious explanation of these phenomena, but do so in a manner that amounts to grubby entertainment. Referring to creating Season 3, Matt Duffer stated that it felt like playing "in a sandbox with all our toys." Nothing has changed in Season 4.

No doubt many youth have identified with the characters who confront both the problems of adolescence and the fate of the world. However, *Stranger Things 4* provides an unhelpful orientation rooted in individualism and escapism. The "clueless masses" are portrayed as having no idea of what's unfolding beneath their noses and, therefore, saving the world is the task of a few individuals in the know; the U.S. Government, while it engages in torture and murder, can be a force for good; above all, "evil" results not from an exploitative economic system that subordinates human life to private profit but from a psychotic outcast.

To add insult to injury, the show is characterized by aggressive and cacophonous aesthetics. The incessant, emotionally manipulative music and loud sounds, breakneck editing and overbearing close-ups add up to a product lacking in artistic nuance. One feels one's senses, and sensibilities, have been thoroughly assaulted throughout the viewing, and to no worthwhile end.

The finale concludes with the characters realizing that the Upside Down has begun to overtake Hawkins, setting up Season 5 as the final showdown between Vecna and Eleven, with the future of humanity hanging in the balance. The Duffers have stated the final season will be a continuation of the fourth.

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