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## **More 1980s than the 1980s: Functions and Connotations of Synthwave Soundtracks**

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After the boom of the academic study of vaporwave, synthwave is slowly starting to get the attention it deserves, especially when it comes to its retrofuturist features. On this special occasion I hope I will be able to contribute to this tendency as well, giving an overview of the development of synthwave in relation to cinema – and, particularly, its archetypical functions and connotations in the cinematic context. By doing so, I will distinguish between first-order and second-order associations between cinema and synthwave music, describing a total of four of them (association with sci-fi cinema, association with B-movies, age-synecdoche and aesthetic mediator). These associations are partly to be found in contemporary cinema and partly the 1980s cinema, in a dialectical process in which cinema and music are constantly implied one in the other (even when it comes to non-cinematic synthwave music). One of my aims will be to relativise the connection between synthwave and sci-fi iconography and themes, which is not sufficient to understand its full spectrum of connotations and contemporary uses. Just a couple of preliminary disclaimers: given that synthwave, as a genre, exists since ten to fifteen years ago, I will refer to its original musical models from the 1980s using the term ‘proto-synthwave’. In this category I include several genres (located at the crossroads between synthpop, post-punk, electronica, darkwave, etc.) which are mostly independent from contemporary synthwave, but were first associated with cinema and served as main inspiration for the contemporary genre, both musically and in its connection with cinema. Moreover, I will include under the ‘synthwave’ label equivalent and at least partially overlapping concepts like ‘outrun’, ‘retrowave’, ‘futuresynth’ (Dantas de Miranda 2018), as well as subgenres like ‘slasherwave’, ‘darksynth’, ‘dreamwave’ or ‘chillwave’.

Since many of these taxonomies reveal the connection of synthwave with film genres like science fiction and horror/slasher movies, this is a great point to start analysing proto-synthwave music and first-order associations, which have indeed a lot to do with sci-fi and with B-movies – especially horror. Science fiction is perhaps the genre that is the most frequently associated with synthwave. Here I will emphasize some reasons behind the success of this association. First, while the connection between sci-fi films and electronic music was not new in the 1980s (Corbella 2011), around that time synthesizers became the sound of the future more than ever before, capable of emulating virtually every acoustic instrument, but also of creating an entirely new world of sounds (Wierzbicki 2002, Schmidt 2010, Taylor 2001, Konzett 2010). Second, the biggest difference with the past was that the new films were featuring popular electronic music instead of avant-garde electroacoustic compositions, thus becoming more palatable for a wide audience and facilitating the diffusion of that kind of music in cinema and triggering cross-promotional processes. Third, several sci-fi movies featuring proto-synthwave soundtracks had a huge impact on popular culture. Particularly, two films made the association with sci-fi cinema even stronger, thanks to their success: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), scored by Vangelis, and *Giorgio Moroder Presents Metropolis* (1984), a version of Fritz Lang's classic film from 1927 edited and restored by the Italian music producer Giorgio Moroder, who also wrote a new soundtrack for the film, in an electronic style fitting the 'machine imagination' placed at the film's core (Smith 2016). Another important movie from that time is *Tron* (1982), with music by Wendy Carlos. *Tron* must be mentioned as it had a massive impact on the visual aesthetic of what would later be called 'synthwave aesthetic', although, musically speaking, the soundtrack is mostly quite different from the typical contemporary synthwave sound, as it features a lot of Carlos' typical 'neoclassical' synth-playing style and orchestral arrangements.

Speaking of sci-fi, another very prolific artist that was related to both proto-synthwave music and sci-fi imagination was the German electronic band Tangerine Dream (Lambert

2016). As pioneers of the *kosmische Musik* movement (Harden 2016), their music was already associated with cosmic sceneries far before it soundtracked many films from the 1980s, and this likely fosters our tendency to the overestimation of their musical contribute to sci-fi cinema. The most famous soundtracks by Tangerine Dream – like those for William Friedkin’s *Sorcerer* (1977) or Michael Mann’s *Thief* (1981) – but also albums that have nothing to do with film music – like *Exit* (1981) and *Hyperborea* (1984) – sound exquisitely synthwave, yet, ironically, most of the 1980s movies they recorded the soundtrack for do not belong to the sci-fi genre at all – with notable exceptions to be found in *Wavelength* (1983) and *Firestarter* (1984). The same can be said of John Carpenter, who wrote the soundtrack for most of his own films, only a few of which can actually be defined as purely science fictional, although many of them involve fantasy or supernatural elements (e.g. monsters, imaginary dimensions, paranormal phenomena). I argue that two of the most influential artists for contemporary synthwave – Tangerine Dream and John Carpenter – originally had much more to do with B-movies and geek culture than with sci-fi cinema, so I think another first-order association must be introduced: that between proto-synthwave and B-movies. Indeed, proto-synthwave music often appeared not only in sci-fi films, but also in horror and action movies, all typically belonging to the category of B-movies. There is often a lowbrow, sometimes even ‘cheap’ (if not altogether kitsch) connotation in a lot of proto-synthwave music, just as lowbrow are many B-movies featuring such music. A perfect match: unexpensive music for low-budget cinema; popular, commercial, easy-listening and ‘easy-watching’ products for the masses, and especially for geeks and nerds. An association so powerful that its consequences are visible in contemporary second-order associations as well.

In fact, the sounds and colours that characterised B-movies from the 1980s acquired a bittersweet taste as, with the pervasive diffusion of the postmodern condition, an hauntological feeling (Fisher 2012, Fisher 2014) concerning the 1980s began to emerge, and synthwave became one of the many ghosts haunting our present time. The first-order

association with sci-fi can now be reinterpreted under the light of 'retrofuturism', as a kind of nostalgia for an image of the future that was implied in the popular culture of the past, where it now lies forsaken, thus blending the 'not yet' and the 'not anymore' together (Guffey 2006). Yet today, not differently from the past, synthwave is not exclusively linked with science fiction. Ironically, it seems easier to find sci-fi imagery in the artworks, lyrics and concepts of non-cinematic synthwave music (Dantas de Miranda 2018). Science fiction (and especially its dystopic and cyberpunk declinations) has penetrated the collection of synthwave clichés, thus making the field of 'stand-alone' synthwave music the most literally 'retrofuturistic' one. Nevertheless, as a hauntological genre, synthwave remains connected with nostalgia. The latter is particularly effective when the people involved in the revivalist process can relate with what Benjamin Woo calls 'geek culture' of that period – thus being fascinated by science fiction, fantasy, 'cult' movies, video games and comic books, and often taking that passion to a higher level by reproducing their favourite icons via graphic arts, action figures, roleplaying, and so on (Woo 2018).

So, these are the main coordinates for the first second-order association between synthwave and contemporary cinema, in which synthwave soundtracks serve the purpose of bringing back to life not only a style of music, yet the entire 1980s era to some extent depicted in the movie. That era can be represented in both explicit and implicit ways, as we can witness from two examples. First, the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016-in production) deliberately celebrates the 1980s geek culture and revives the feeling of watching a B-Movie or a Blockbuster production from that age (McCarthy 2019), thanks to the vast use of narrative *topoi* from that world, and also to the inclusion of hit songs from the same decade (Landrum 2017). Composers Michael Stein and Kyle Dixon are both members of the synthwave band Survive, so the original soundtrack employs synthwave archetypes to achieve the hauntological aim of reviving the 1980s (O'Neal 2016) quite spontaneously. While *Stranger Things* clearly contains sci-fi elements, its primary goal is rather to revive the

peculiar '1980s feeling' as a whole – or, at least, to wink at the geeky popular culture from that time. Synthwave works here as a synecdoche for an entire era, or at least for its geek culture and lowbrow connotations, both things that were already present in the first-order associations, which now get remediated by the music. Here, the representation is explicit, given the years in which the story is set, the music the characters listen to, the abundant citations and the general celebration of geek culture and B-movies from the 1980s. Other relevant examples of this process can be found in less-known products, all set in the 1980s and featuring synthwave soundtracks, like: *Summer of 84* (2018), the episode 'San Junipero' from the *Black Mirror* series (music by Clint Mansell); the series *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014-2017), with music by Tangerine Dream's Paul Haslinger.

An implicit representation of the 1980s can be found in *It Follows* (2014), a horror film directed by David Robert Mitchell and scored by Richard Vreeland – better known as Disasterpeace – in a style that hybridizes classic synthwave with idiomatic traits of horror film music. The film is set in an unspecified time, but hints at the past via the celebration of its main cinematic influences, thus occupying, to use Joseph Barbera words, “a space within our collective, pop cultural, consciousness” (Barbera 2019). Those influences are that of classic horror-slasher movies from the late 1970s and the 1980s, and those directed by John Carpenter and George Romero in the first place – as David Crow puts it, the film is set in “John Carpenter's backyard” (Crow 2018). As many of those films do, *It Follows* tells an apparently straight-forward, compelling and entertaining story in an aesthetically effective way, and with a lot of subtexts and possible further levels of comprehension (in this case an allegoric tale about AIDS; Samolyenko 2018) – without ever sacrificing the lowbrow connotations of the film as an entertaining product of popular culture and without ever becoming snobby. *It Follows* uses synthwave music as one of the strongest indicators of the presence of a certain kind of cinema from the 1980s among Mitchell's influences. We can witness it in the way the film is written, shot, and in the way it sounds. It is a more reverential and self-

referential use of synthwave, which stages an intertextual game that is entirely played within the field of cinema, in which authors, genres and manners of doing cinema become more important than the connotations of the entire age, of which only a small portion is now being simulated. After all, this is another way (less direct, more subtle, and maybe even exoteric, but just as hauntological) of celebrating a long-lost culture, reviving it via a kind of music that was associated with it in the 1980s, now capable of remediating that same era in the form of an 'age-synecdoche'. Other examples in this direction are *Turbo Kid* (2015), by François Simard and the Whissell Brothers, *Starry Eyes* (2014) or *Bloodline* (2018).

Sometimes the reference to the 1980s can be just 'cosmetic', and this brings me to the last second-order association: that of synthwave as an aesthetic mediator. A preliminary and not completely ripe example is that of *Drive* (2011) by Nicolas Winding Refn: with that film, the Danish director began what I call the 'synthwave phase' of his cinema, also contributing to synthwave's popularity by using the track 'Nightcall' by Kavinsky in the titles scene. Refn had already shown a certain interest for surreal atmospheres and highly saturated colours in the most hallucinatory scenes from his films *Fear X* (2003) and *Valhalla Rising* (2009), but it was only with *Drive* that he began to employ such visual solutions systematically and also added the last ingredient to his mature style: synthwave soundtracks. *Drive* (2011), *Only God Forgives* (2013) and *The Neon Demon* (2016) are the three films directed by Refn – to which we could add the miniseries *Too Old to Die Young* (2019) – that feature that kind of music and, at the same time, take Refn's visual aesthetic to a whole new level. The three films can be put in a sort of conceptual continuum not only for some of their shared themes (Featherstone 2017), their dark atmospheres and their generally slow pace, but also for the hyper-aestheticization of the images (the obsession with beauty is also the main theme of *The Neon Demon*), the saturation of colours (red and blue in particular) and the presence of synthwave music – mainly composed by Cliff Martinez. Refn is not recalling the 1980s in his movies, nor is there an explicit or implicit connection with geek culture or ways

of making cinema from that decade – also given the fact that Refn’s cinema tends to be much more ‘difficult’ and ‘snobby’ when compared to previous examples. What we can find in his films is the saturation and the aesthetic perfection of an idealised version of those products, hauntologically coming back from the world of dead in its strongest incarnation. The shapes of postmodern cities, the neon lights, the promises of a wealthy future... all worn inside out, playing in reverse, and brought to its extreme consequences, but still there: “more 1980s than the 1980s”. Other examples of films and series with this kind of visual aesthetic and (at least partly) synthwave soundtracks are: *Beyond the Black Rainbow* (2010) and *Bliss* (2019), or the Malaysian neo-noir *Shadowplay* (2019), and the claustrophobic horror *VFW* (2019). All these (re)incarnations and celebrations of the 1980s go far beyond what the original phenomenon was. They refer to a version of that decade that dwells in our imagination and is being rebuilt day after day by such products. There is no nostalgia here, nor mockery or parody. Just the elegance and aesthetic emphasis that, especially when paired with synthwave music and its history of associations, cannot avoid reminding us of the 1980s, but with much more hiding behind its shiny and glossy semblance.

Both these second-order associations can be employed for ironic, nostalgic, or just ‘cosmetic’ purposes – which can also be mixed together. All these connections set cinema as a constant implication in every kind of synthwave music, including the non-cinematic one. One could say that contemporary synthwave music, regardless of its purposes, is essentially remediating the 1980s popular culture with only little interest for the accuracy of this simulative activity – thus sometimes leading to the paradox of creating a sort of postmodern ‘hyperreality’ that looks and sounds “more 1980s than the 1980s”.

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