



“The Damned Don’t Cry”: Melancholia and White British Masculinity in 1980s Synthpop Music

Mica Hilson

American University of Armenia

hilsonmica@gmail.com

In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud describes the primary symptoms of melancholia as “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity of love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings.” This is also a fairly accurate description of early 1980s synthpop music, which was full of white male British singers who maintained a numbed affect as they performed lyrics about loss, inaction, and inability.

Although some critics have derided this music as unemotional, this article explores how 1980s synthpop songs dramatize a kind of self-splitting, wherein the intense affect of grieving is displaced onto women and machines, while the singer maintains his impassive melancholy. Examining such popular acts as Blancmange, Thomas Dolby, A Flock of Seagulls, Ultravox, and Visage, it analyses both the songs themselves and their accompanying music videos to examine the performance of masculinity within them.

Drawing from Derrida’s work on hauntology, it also considers how 1980s UK synthpop performers were both haunted by Britain’s past and frightened that it may have no future. Enacting a repressed affect – the so-called “stiff upper lip” – that had served middle-class white men well in Britain’s imperial glory days but served little purpose by the 1980s, these singers dramatize the dilemma of not knowing how to develop alternative modes of sensitive yet emotionally direct masculinity.

Mica Hilson is an Associate Professor at the American University of Armenia, where he chairs the English & Communications program. His research on modern literature, popular culture, and queer theory has appeared in such journals as *Pacific Coast Philology*, *The Comparatist*, *Doris Lessing Studies*, and *Harold Pinter Review*. He has also been published in such essay collections as *ReFocus: The Films of Michel Gondry*, *Embodying Contagion*, and the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Masculinity in American Literature and Culture*.



In today's popular imagination, the term "1980s music" describes a bright, upbeat sound – the sonic equivalent of the neon colors that defined the visual aesthetic of MTV. Indeed, it is undeniable that, in America, the rise of MTV inaugurated a sea-change in musical tastes. As the Buggles' prophetic 1979 hit put it, video killed the radio star, and by late 1982, America saw a new British invasion as videogenic UK acts like Duran Duran, Culture Club, and A Flock of Seagulls stormed the charts. Yet most of this British synthpop had a profoundly melancholy undertone, one that complicates a cheerfully nostalgic perception of "1980s music." Just consider a few of these song titles by 1980s synthpop acts: "Cry" (Godley & Creme), "Cry Boy Cry" (Blue Zoo), "The Damned Don't Cry" (Visage), "Tears are Not Enough" (ABC), "Tears Run Rings" (Marc Almond), "Hold Back the Tears" (Wang Chung), or "Dancing with the Tears in my Eyes" (Ultravox). Not to mention group names like Tears for Fears or Teardrop Explodes.

It is worth noting that all the acts I have listed are entirely male. One of the very few songs I can find by a female-fronted UK band of that era with a tears/crying motif – the Eurythmics' "Never Gonna Cry Again" – provides an instructive contrast. There, singer Annie Lennox specifies that the crying – an expression of frustration and sadness over a failing relationship – is a thing of the past, never to be repeated. Although the numbed vocal performance of this early Eurythmics single is a far cry from the soul diva stylings Lennox would later employ in songs like the Aretha Franklin duet "Sisters are Doing it for Themselves," lyrically this falls in the same category as soul songs like "I Will Survive," celebrating female resilience and triumph over past traumas.

That lyrical affirmation of self-determination is rare in the male-dominated UK synthpop that will be this article's focus. A typical example might be the chorus from Blancmange's 1983 hit "Waves," another song about the aftermath of a failed relationship: "What are these waves?/ They're coming over me/ It must be my destiny." The singer is represented as a passive object, helplessly overwhelmed by the force of the waves rushing over him, seemingly unable to choose a different future for himself. Yet tellingly, even though these massive waves are depicted as external forces, they are actually expressions of the singer's innermost feelings, waves of sorrow over the lost love object referenced in the song's verses. This dynamic of self-splitting, wherein the male singer's intense feelings of pain and grief are displaced and reimagined as external forces, is precisely what I want to examine in this paper.

This article will apply several different theoretical lenses – including Freud's ideas about mourning and melancholia, Derrida's notion of hauntology, and Raymond Williams' work on structures of feeling – in order to better understand how and why we get this displacement of emotion in so many synthpop songs. Specifically, I want to consider how this unique self-splitting (wherein affect is withdrawn from the human voice and channeled into the mechanical instrumentation) relates to the performers' identities as white British men and why it emerged at this particular historical juncture. However, since as scholars like Allan F. Moore have noted, the song's lyrics are only one small component of how its meaning is encoded (Moore 2012, 109), the paper will also analyze the relationship between the lyrics, the singer's vocal performance and persona, the song's instrumentation and production techniques and, in certain cases, the memorable music video imagery that helped to popularize these songs.

"Waves" is a quintessential example of how the displacement of emotion is also encoded in the vocals and production of many synthpop songs. Blancmange vocalist Neil Arthur sings in a relatively flat croon, sounding not at all like a man drowning in a turbulent sea of emotion. However, to judge by the YouTube comments under its official

video, many listeners do experience “Waves” as an intensely emotional song; a typical comment reads, “It haunts me...I can still feel this track and the pain I used to feel listening to it”.¹ That intense listener response becomes easier to understand when we consider all the production flourishes that surround Arthur’s relatively affectless vocals: dramatic strings, swelling synth lines, and soulful female backing vocals hitting the high notes. Arthur’s vocals, which express a kind of detached bemusement at his own emotions (“What are these waves?”), thus serve as a kind of static object around which the more fluid and overtly tear-jerking sounds swirl.

The stolidity of Arthur’s performance might be related to the gender norms observed by cultural critic Robyn Warhol, who writes that “In British and US mainstream culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, weeping openly and emotionally [...] is an activity associated with girls and women” (Warhol 2003, 29). A man who similarly indulges in “having a good cry” will usually be perceived as “making a spectacle” of himself, a display that overflows and overwhelms the strict limits of normative masculine gender performance. One might then say that rather than “having a good cry” over his pain, the synthpop vocalist is “taking it like a man”. Yet, as David Savran reminds us in his book *Taking It Like a Man*, this phrase “seems tacitly to acknowledge that masculinity is not a function of social or cultural mastery but of the act of being subjected, abused, even tortured” (Savran 1998, 38). Furthermore, he notes the presence of the qualifier “*like* a man”, which implies that normative masculinity is not a stable state of being, but something that can only be temporarily approximated through performance. The drama of a song like “Waves” then comes not from the simple performance of a man expressing his emotions, but from the dramatic reenactment of a man’s struggle to “take it like a man” and prevent the tempestuous waves of emotion from knocking him off his tenuous perch of masculine self-control.

“Waves” is not an isolated case. There are numerous other UK synthpop hits that followed a similar formula. For instance, in Visage’s 1982 single “The Damned Don’t Cry”, singer Steve Strange delivers affectless vocals depicting his intense feelings of alienation and loneliness, including his “trembling face”. Once he gets to the chorus, “Ah, the damned don’t cry”, he is joined by haunting backing vocalists who eventually build to a high-pitched cry, mixed so that it sounds like a cross between a Theremin and a soprano’s high note. The “damned” male singer might not be able to directly access his emotions by crying, but he is able to outsource this emotional labor to women and machines.

In some cases, the lyrics themselves evade any direct disclosures of feeling. For instance, the chorus of A Flock of Seagulls’ 1982 hit “Wishing” features singer Mike Score flatly intoning, “If I had a photograph of you/ Something to remind me/ I wouldn’t spend my life just wishing”. Note the odd use of the conditional tense in these lyrics. Score is not directly admitting that he longs for his lost love; rather, we are left to infer this from a tangled web of counterfactual conditional statements (“If I had...[then] I wouldn’t”). As with songs like “Waves” and “The Damned Don’t Cry”, the white male singer appears so disconnected from his own feelings that he seems to be suffering from a form of emotional disability. In that sense, the synthesizer serves as a prosthesis, making audible the intense emotion and grief that the singer is unable to vocalize or verbalize himself.

¹ Viktoria Szilvasi. “Waves,” YouTube. Accessed July 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwjFw6UxcD0>.

Those themes of emotional disability become even more apparent when one contrasts these songs with the rock music that was in heavy rotation on MTV at the same time. Both lyrically and visually, those North American rock stars presented themselves as energetic, strong-willed, and physically able men of action; think of Bryan Adams swearing he's going to "Run to You" or Van Halen yowling "Jump" as they leap around the stage. Not coincidentally, the music videos for both of these songs are largely performance clips, filled with close-ups of the band members' muscular arms as they perform in cut-off shirts. The rationale behind these videos seems to be that the sight of these men's athletic bodies in motion as they play music is, in and of itself, a compelling spectacle, so that the video does not need the cinematic narratives, effects, or surreal imagery that characterized many early MTV clips. They serve as celebrations of both male physical prowess and a North American go-getter spirit; as Adams boasts, "when the feeling's right I'm gonna run all night/I'm gonna run to you".

Synthpop bands, however, employed both a different visual aesthetic and a different verbiage, more in keeping with the themes of male disability, passivity and immobility. On the few occasions that these bands used a word like "run" in the lyrics, the result was something like Bronski Beat's "Smalltown Boy", which advises its traumatized titular character to "run away, turn away". More likely, they opted for another verb entirely. In keeping with the trope of disability, "fall" was especially popular; see the Comsat Angels crying out "I'm Falling" or Real Life begging "Catch Me I'm Falling". Even a more guitar-friendly UK synthpop band like The Fixx – who regularly got played on American album-oriented rock stations alongside Van Halen – only gives listeners the option to "Stand or Fall". The video for that song is a good illustration of the different aesthetics synthpop employed. The one image that might seem to evoke heroic masculinity – a three-second shot of singer Cy Curnin standing beside a white horse on a windswept beach – is immediately undercut by repeated slow-motion shots of the horse toppling to the ground, later echoed by a shot of Curnin clutching his head in pain then falling to the floor.

Ironically, even though early 1980s synthpop videos featured the high-impact imagery and kinetic editing that went on to influence such action-packed, aspirational Reagan-era blockbusters as *Flashdance* and *Top Gun*, the musicians in them usually appear quite static. The singers might be looking out of windows (Tears for Fears' "Mad World"), sitting in front of television screens (Peter Godwin's "Images of Heaven"), or typing on computers (Flock of Seagulls' "Wishing"), but in any case, they display a limited range of motion. The sense of kinetic energy and emotional intensity one gets from watching these videos comes mainly from the camerawork and editing tricks – quick pans, zooms, and cuts between different shots. The relationship between the singer's relatively inert body and the post-production frippery required to make these scenes emotionally dynamic is analogous to the relationship between the singer's relatively flat voice and the synth-heavy production that makes these songs sound intensely moving. In both cases, we can note technology being used as a prosthetic to help enliven the listless British white male singer, allowing him an apparent range of both motion and emotion that he is otherwise unable to perform.

Of course, the synthesizers themselves were often prominently displayed in these videos, with the performers stuck behind them, barely moving. While synthesizers and keyboards had been prominent components of earlier genres like 1970s prog rock, those musicians aped their guitar-playing bandmates by presenting an energetic spectacle in their concerts and videos. As Theo Cateforis puts it when describing the ways

synthesizers were used by acts like Gary Numan, OMD, and the Human League, “the new synthesizer players refused to engage with the specific modes of masculine mastery and virtuosic display that had typified the keyboard and synthesizer players of the early 1970s” (Cateforis 2011, 180) like Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman.

A video that serves as an especially good illustration of this era’s crisis of masculinity – and thus deserves to be analyzed in greater detail – is the Blue Nile’s “Stay” (1984). It opens with a fast-paced, jittery keyboard motif that runs throughout the whole song, conveying a sense of restlessness that contrasts with singer Paul Buchanan’s more sedate vocal. In the first few seconds of the video, that keyboard is accompanied by quick shots of a diver falling into a swimming pool and white paper falling in the air; as Buchanan begins singing, we then see him seated at a writing desk in a white room as the paper falls around him. A woman dressed in white is seated on the floor, but he ignores her, even as she touches his shoulder; he is busy writing in a notebook, and doesn’t even appear to register when she leaves the room. The video then cuts to a room full of folding chairs, where Buchanan and his two bandmates (Robert Bell and Paul Joseph Moore) sit facing forward, mouthing the words in the song’s chorus: “Stay, stay, stay, I will understand you.” The room is lit so that we can see the static shadows of the three men on the wall, but towering above them, we can see the shadow of a figure in motion: the conductor who is presumably orchestrating the moving music that accompanies these vocals.

To reference the title of a Ric Ocasek song from the same era, this video is all about “Emotion in Motion” and, more importantly, about emotionlessness in motionlessness. The men in the band are depicted as fundamentally inert; they spend almost the entire video sitting and writing, not engaging with the women and objects around them, which are in a flurry of motion (much like the fast-paced keyboard motif that runs through the song). The only scene where we see a bit of movement from the men comes when the very similar-looking Buchanan and Bell trade places. The two are seated across from each other at identical writing desks, in rooms separated by a sliding door; Buchanan, dressed in a blue shirt and white pants, is in a room with white furniture and black walls, and Bell, dressed in a blue shirt and black pants, is in a room with black furniture and white walls. When they pass by each other trading places, they do not interact, but rather appear to melt through the walls like ghosts. Each man is thus represented as fundamentally alienated, in his own little box, and unable to even commiserate with other men in the same situation.

However, the men do not appear to be completely emotionless; the plaintive chorus suggests that they are feeling intense emotion. Rather, they would be better described as affectless – not expressing emotion through their bodily gestures or facial expressions. The dissonance between that inner emotion and outer lack of affect is hauntingly depicted by the video’s final scene, in which the girl re-enters the white room, where Buchanan is still seated at his desk; he briefly locks eyes with her, but does not get up. As she moves over to him and places her hand on his shoulder, he looks away from her and begins writing in his book once more. In a final close-up shot, we see him scrawling the words in the song’s chorus: “Stay Stay Stay”. The expression of feeling and desire in these written words do not match up with his inexpressive, inert body language. This final shot thus serves a perfect capper for the video’s representation of masculinity as a form of disability – a paralysis that renders the man incapable of performing either the motions or emotions necessary to sustain a healthy relationship.

Writing about American new wave bands like Talking Heads and Devo, Theo Cateforis also makes the connection between white masculinity and disability. He notes how the singers of these bands performed nervousness, often displaying spasms and tics that matched the jerky rhythms of their music. As he notes, this spastic affect served several different functions: “New wave musicians could invoke nervousness as a critique or commentary on the physical tensions of white middle-class society, specifically its obsessive focus on bodily control and emotional discipline,” but this nervous aesthetic also “helped reinforce new wave’s rejection of a specific authenticity connected with the expressive history of the blues and other African American styles” (Cateforis 2011, 94). Although US new wave and UK synthpop often get lumped together, appearing on the same compilations and playlists of “1980s music”, this is one area where the two genres diverge significantly. The singers of UK synthpop songs rarely display a nervous affect, but instead manifest symptoms of a very different psychopathology, what Freud termed *melancholia*.

In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud diagnoses the condition based on the following symptoms: “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity of love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings” (Freud 1957, 244). As we have already seen, “inhibition of all activity” and a withdrawn affect are two defining features of 1980s synthpop. The distinction Freud draws between melancholia and the healthier psychological process of mourning hinges on the different ways that each responds to “the loss of a loved object” (245). Although the mourner might temporarily feel a sense of emptiness without the lost love object and thus withdraw from the world, he is able to return to relatively normal social interaction once he has processed that grief. The melancholic, however, cannot so easily bounce back because the sense of loss has shattered his feelings of self-worth; as Freud puts it, the melancholic “represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement” (246).

This description certainly matches up with the synthpop lyrics we have thus far examined, which dwell on the singer’s sense of helplessness and belief in his own powerlessness. Peter Godwin’s “Images of Heaven” provides an excellent illustration of this; in one of the opening verses, Godwin croons, “Somebody killed me/They tore out my heart, my love/Somebody filled me/ With photos of you.” As in A Flock of Seagulls’ “Wishing”, the lyrics reference a photograph of the love object: a trace that signifies her absence. However, in “Wishing,” the singer suggests that he would be satisfied with merely the photographic memento; in Godwin’s song, the photographs are “images of heaven that send me to hell,” torturous reminders that “They tore out my heart, my love.” In the chorus, Godwin then repeats “And there’s *nothing* I can do” (emphasizing the word “nothing”) because “You don’t exist”. As Freud suggests, the mourner eventually takes action to build connections with other love objects, but the melancholic refuses to entertain this possibility; the way Godwin seems to luxuriate in his own helplessness here certainly fits that profile and also calls to mind Jing Tsu’s observation that “melancholia is, oddly, a wounding that enjoys the labor of repetition, of rewounding itself” (Tsu 2005, 28). In other words, the melancholic not only “represents his ego to us as worthless” he *re-presents* his ego as worthless, compulsively performing this abased role before an audience.

So why did so many British white male synthpop singers assume this role of the wounded, dejected, helpless melancholic and repeat it in song after song? One reason is that they were marking their difference from guitar rock bands and R&B singers who

performed a more aggressive, assertive, swaggering masculinity, often issuing direct commands in their song lyrics, from Rick James' "Give it to Me Baby" to ZZ Top's "Gimme All Your Lovin". UK synthpop artists were clearly rejecting those forms of masculinity, but they struggled to articulate an affirmative masculinity (with a healthy sense of ego) that might take its place; instead, they simply displayed their wounded egos as a badge of vulnerability. Although far less sexist than the preening rockstars and R&B lotharios of the time, male synthpop singers appeared no less self-absorbed. As "Images of Heaven" blatantly says, "you don't exist". Even a more sensitive song like the Blue Nile's "Stay" only goes so far as to promise, "Stay [...] and I will understand you", rather than making the effort to empathize with the beloved right now.

If UK synthpop artists had trouble imagining a totally new mode of masculinity, that might be because they took some of their cues from a much older set of white male popstars who still had a strong following in early 1980s Britain. In 1980, Don McLean had a UK Number One with his remake of Roy Orbison's mournful 1961 single "Crying", and the top UK single of 1979 was a similarly melancholy folk-rock tune by an older white American artist, Art Garfunkel's "Bright Eyes". Early 1980s synthpop thus tapped into a downbeat sentiment that was already popular on the UK charts, but updated it with local artists and cutting-edge production techniques that appealed to a younger audience.

One quality that synthpop singers borrowed from earlier melancholic artists like Orbison and Garfunkel was their apparent sincerity. That marks one of the key differences between UK synthpop singers and US new wave artists like Talking Heads and Devo, who also performed self-abasement, but in a winking, ironic fashion. Few listeners would have believed that David Byrne was *actually* a "Psycho Killer" or that the members of Devo were "not men" but devolved "pinheads" instead. However, the melancholy of 1980s synthpop was so pervasive that it seemed like more than simply a playful pose.

Yet synthpop and new wave shared a common ancestor: punk. The connections between punk and synthpop are myriad; punk singers like Howard Devoto, Pete Shelley, and Colin Newman all transitioned to synthpop in the 1980s, and many synthpop bands who emerged in the early 1980s were inspired by punk's DIY ethos, relying on the synthesizer's capabilities as a substitute for more formal musical training. Although the two genres tended to be quite different lyrically, one commonality was the sentiment that there was "no future". That phrase gets repeated many times in the Sex Pistols' incendiary 1977 single "God Save the Queen", although its meaning is somewhat ambivalent. At times, singer Johnny Rotten uses it as a taunt, jeering at the queen and those who support her "fascist regime" and traditionalist vision of British power that "There's no future, no future, no future for you". However, he oscillates between statements like "We're the future, your future" and the closing line, "No future for me". In these lines, we can clearly hear the punk movement's urge to destroy the status quo, but also its uncertainty over whether it would be willing or able to build anything to take its place. Despite having a more futuristic sound, synthpop tended to be even less optimistic about the future, with lyrics that dwell on being haunted by past loves and loss. Matthew Bannister makes a similar observation about another of punk's direct descendants, 1980s indie rock, which "was pessimistic, marked by an overall sense of loss – of innocence, of love, and (arguably) of traditional masculine power" (Bannister 2006, 133).

One reason for this increasingly dour view of the future might be that, with the dawn of the Reagan-Thatcher era, cold war tensions increased, renewing concerns about the outbreak of nuclear war and what that might mean for the future for humanity. Quite a few songs in the genre directly mentioned or indirectly alluded to nuclear war in their lyrics; think of Men at Work's "It's a Mistake", Nena's "99 Red Balloons", the Fixx's "Red Skies", or even Duran Duran's notoriously tone-deaf lyric, "you're about as easy as a nuclear war". Even a song like Ultravox's "Dancing with Tears in my Eyes", whose melancholy lyrics are purposefully vague, with the singer "weeping for the memory of a life gone by" and "living out the memory of a love that died", could be framed as statement on nuclear annihilation given the right music video. In Ultravox's case, their video – which appeared two years before Chernobyl – was a terrifying and prescient imagining of what a nuclear disaster in Britain might look like. In the video, we follow a couple (the man played by Ultravox singer Midge Ure) who spend their final moments at home after receiving alerts of an impending core explosion at a nearby nuclear power plant; in keeping with the lyrics, they share one last sad dance, "weeping for the memory of a life gone by", then go to sleep underneath their white sheets, which become their death shroud once a bright light illuminates the room. In the final shots, we see home video footage of the couple that was presumably just annihilated in the nuclear explosion, with visible glitches signifying the age and fragility of the homemade recording. It is a very early example of a trope that would be used many times in later films and videos – degraded amateur videotape with glitches as a nostalgic way of representing the "ghosts" that still linger from the 1980s. This video, however, was made in 1984, before the decade was even half over.

The final shots of that Ultravox video are, in more ways than one, haunting images – perhaps appropriate since the word "haunt" appears in the lyrics of many popular Ultravox songs including "Vienna" and "Reap the Wild Wind" – and as such, they might be understood in terms of "hauntology". In his book *Specters of Marx* (2003), Jacques Derrida coined the term "hauntology" – a portmanteau of "haunting" and "ontology" – to describe how our experience of the present is inexorably haunted by traces of the past. We can see that very Derridean deconstruction of past, present, and future in the ways that Ultravox's video imagines a terrifyingly plausible near future, one in which the memories we are making now (through technologies like home video recorders) will soon become the only surviving traces of an irretrievable past.

Music critics such as Simon Reynolds have since adopted the term "hauntology" to describe a "largely British genre of eerie electronics fixated on ideas of decaying memory and lost futures" (Reynolds 2017, n.p.). While Reynolds' examples of musical hauntology all come from experimental 21st century electronica acts, his description of the genre could certainly apply to much 1980s synthpop. For instance, consider the 1983 song "Doot Doot" by Freur (the band who would later become Underworld); the lyrics to that song literally describe how "memory fades", depicting such memories as decaying film images that "flicker and fade" as we are "watching the screen". Like Ultravox's "Dancing with Tears in my Eyes" video, the song presents a very melancholic representation of futurity: the future is represented as the point at which what we are experiencing in the present fades into something ghostly, something that has been irretrievably lost.

By using echo effects and keyboard samples of sounds like rhythmic breathing and cricket noises while burying singer Karl Hyde's vocals low in the mix, Freur manage to create an eerie sonic atmosphere that compliments the song's lyrical concerns about

fading and haunting memories. As I have been arguing, the synthesizer was a piece of electronic hardware that served as a medium, providing the relatively affectless performer with an outlet to express his feelings. However, songs like “Doot Doot” demonstrate how the synthesizer acted as a “medium” in more ways than one; like the psychic medium conducting a séance, the device channels specters from the past. In particular, the Fairlight sampler, which allowed users to digitize sounds, then replay them on the keyboard, was used to haunting effect – summoning the ghosts of long-ago-recorded sounds at the push of a button.

Thus, even though it made use of cutting-edge technology, strong concerns with ghosts and the lingering past were encoded into UK synthpop on a both sonic and lyrical level. Indeed, the genre had an intense and complex relationship with nostalgia. Despite what titles like Thomas Dolby’s debut album *The Golden Age of Wireless* might suggest, it was not a cozy form of nostalgia, but rather hewed closer to the original definition of the term as a form of psychological illness, a pathological longing for a home to which one cannot return. Even a band like Ultravox, who often engaged in a kind of nostalgic cosplay in their videos, dressing up in smart mid-century suits and posing for shots that evoked classic Hollywood films like *The Third Man* and *Casablanca*, have lyrics that present a far more melancholic relationship to the past. For instance, “Reap the Wild Wind”, despite its apparently patriotic video with the band members playing World War II pilots, contains lyrics such as, “A footprint haunts an empty floor/ A fading coat that I once wore/ Oh, desolation where I once lived”. Ultravox’s work might reference a “golden age” for white British masculinity – specifically, the years prior to the postwar dissolution of the British empire, an era in which Great Britain was still a major world power – but it also continually asserts the impossibility of inhabiting such an imperial masculinity today.

Synthpop artists themselves sometimes directly made the connection between their work and the waning of Britain’s imperial power; as Thomas Dolby succinctly put it in 1982’s “One of Our Submarines (is Missing),” “Bye-bye empire, empire bye-bye”. Most of the song’s lyrics describe the sinking of a military submarine during the second world war and the deaths of the men inside it; that missing submarine serves as a phallic avatar for Britain’s imperial power, whose absence haunts the singer. However, the historical events recounted in the song get framed in highly personal terms, appropriately so given that Dolby is describing the submarine downing that killed his own uncle. Thus, in the chorus, Dolby suddenly switches to the first person: “And I can trace my history/ Down one generation to my home/ In one of our submarines”. With these lines, the song resonates as a statement on the plight of the post-imperial white male British subject, left in an untenable position as the traditional forms of masculinity he was taught to enact have been exposed as a “tired illusion drown[ing] in the night”.

Two of British Marxist theorist Raymond Williams’ key terms – “structures of feeling” and “residual culture” – are particularly useful in terms of understanding why, over a generation after the British empire crumbled, images of imperial masculinity so haunted many synthpop artists. Williams proposed that, to accurately analyze a culture, you had to understand more than just its ideas; ideology was also encoded within its dominant “structures of feeling,” which he once defined in terms of “a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones” (Williams 1979, 159). To give a concrete example, middle-class British restraint – the tendency to dampen one’s emotional outbursts in order to avoid conflict and appear polite – would qualify as a “structure of feeling”. Indeed, as Gill Plain notes in her study of actor John Mills, whose “still, bland, and inexpressive” (Plain 2006, 11)

face made him a major UK star in the 1930s and 1940s, restraint was frequently mentioned as *the* quintessential English value in nostalgic obituaries that praised Mills as “the definitive stoical everyman for a nation at war” (Andrews 2005, n.p.). The performance of masculinity that Mills embodied so effectively – keeping one’s steely composure, even in circumstances that might normally provoke intense displays of emotion – might best be described by the term “stiff upper lip”. This affective structure was taught to upper-to-middle class British men from an early age, as referenced in The Cure’s classic 1979 single “Boys Don’t Cry”. During the height of the British empire, such a stoic, stony affect may have served a useful purpose; many of the men raised to observe the “stiff upper lip” went on to become colonial administrators and soldiers, and they had a vested interest in appearing invulnerable before their colonized subjects. However, once the sun finally set on the British empire, the “stiff upper lip” gradually became what Williams calls part of “residual culture” (1977, 121-27) – traces of an earlier era that still sit alongside the dominant culture of a given moment. By the 1980s, the “stiff upper lip” became what we might term a *vestigial* structure of feeling; like a vestigial organ such as the appendix, it no longer served a practical function – and in fact only made one more vulnerable to maladies.

What I have been describing as the “flatness” or “affectlessness” of the vocals in synthpop songs could also be interpreted as a form of “restraint” or, quite literally, the product of a “stiff upper lip”. The relative rigidity of certain parts of the singer’s vocal instrument (including the lips, mouth, throat, and diaphragm) could account for that characteristically “flat” tone. For synthpop artists, that vestigial structure of feeling – the stiff upper lip associated with imperial masculinity – only serves to make them more vulnerable when overwhelmed by the “waves” of grief that periodically infect them. Like an infected appendix, that vestigial stiff upper lip is what transforms what might otherwise be a brief bout of mourning into a festering case of melancholia.

However, the “stiff upper lip” is not the *only* structure of feeling in this music. The sounds of the synthesizers and backing vocalists also provide a “pattern of intensities, restraints, tones” that runs counter to the singer’s emotional repression. As the synthpop genre continued to evolve over the course of the 1980s, the gap between these two structures of feeling began to narrow. The first two Tears for Fears albums provide a particularly good illustration of this. While the band named themselves after a phrase by Dr. Arthur Janov, the inventor of primal scream therapy, the songs from their first album, *The Hurting*, performed a melancholic wallow in trauma rather than a cathartic release. Thus, while the album is full of dramatic, emotive synthesizer passages, they accompany relatively detached vocals intoning lines like “Hide my head I want to drown my sorrow/No tomorrow, no tomorrow” (“Mad World”). However, the lead single of their second album was literally entitled “Shout”, and a bulk of the song consists of the repeated chorus: “Shout, shout, let it all out/These are the things I can do without”. On this song, bandmates Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith give far more impassioned vocal performances, matching the intensity of the pounding synthesizer riff. It feels as if, in keeping with the principles of Janov’s primal scream therapy, they have purged themselves of “the things they could do without” – the vestigial affective structure of the stiff upper lip – thus allowing them direct access to the emotion that had always been encoded in their synth lines.

Of course, variations of the lyric “Shout, let it all out” had been a staple of rock and R&B for decades by that point, and Tears for Fears’ adoption of that lyrical idiom coincided with UK synthpop’s convergence with American rock and pop. By 1985, when

“Shout” topped the US pop charts, it was becoming increasingly difficult to tell the two styles apart. Simply on a lyrical level, a late-1980s synthpop hit like When in Rome’s “The Promise” (1988) has more in common with an American rock ballad like Bon Jovi’s “I’ll Be There for You” (1989) than it does with any of the early-1980s synthpop singles I have considered in this article. Thus, I have kept a very strict focus on UK synthpop produced in the first half of the decade (1980-1984) in order to offer a more coherent analysis of the genre’s seminal works and the cultural context from which it emerged.

However, synthpop found its way to other countries and did not die in 1985; even in 2020, there are plenty of young bands across the world that take their musical cues from the 1980s synthpop acts I have discussed. Many of these musicians grew up listening to a mix of 1980s synthpop and indie rock, making little distinction between Ultravox and REM. Further research is thus needed to explore the 21st-century hybridization of the melancholy masculinities Matthew Bannister observes in 1980s indie rock with those that this article has analyzed in 1980s synthpop. Such a study might also investigate the ways in which the genre has morphed and changed meaning cross-culturally (for instance, in the Philippines, where synthpop still has a very active fandom). However, evaluating the extent to which the emotionally restrained and melancholic masculinity of early-1980s UK synthpop still haunts the 21st-century musical landscape must be a subject for another article.

Works Cited

- Andrews, Nigel. 2005. “Sir John Mills dies aged 97.” *The Financial Times*, 23 April.
- Bannister, Matthew. 2006. *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock*. London: Ashgate.
- Cateforis, Theo. 2011. *Are We Not New Wave?* Ann Arbor: Michigan UP.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Specters of Marx*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1957. *Volume XIV: On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press.
- Moore, Allan F. 2012. *Song Means: Analyzing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. London: Ashgate.
- Plain, Gill. 2006. *John Mills and British Cinema: Masculinity, Identity, and Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Reynolds, Simon. 2017. “Why Burial’s Untrue is the Most Important Electronic Album of the Century So Far.” *Pitchfork*, October 26. Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/why-burials-untrue-is-the-most-important-electronic-album-of-the-century-so-far/>.
- Savran, David. 1998. *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Tsu, Jing. 2005. *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Warhol, Robyn. 2003. *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop Culture Forms*. Columbus: Ohio State UP.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism in Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Williams, Raymond. 1979. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: Verso.

Selected Videography

Adams, Bryan, "Run to You" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCBASSt507WA>

A Flock of Seagulls, "Wishing (If I Had a Photograph of You)" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opkzgLMH5MA>

Blancmange, "Waves" (1983). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwjFw6UxcD0>

Blue Nile, "Stay" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDGR8R5e0Qs>

Bronski Beat, "Smalltown Boy" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88sARuFu-tc>

Dolby, Thomas, "One of Our Submarines" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OsZTJ5vfUs>

Eurythmics, "Never Gonna Cry Again" (1981). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KLruiHP8Us>

Fixx, "Stand or Fall" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAofFHPRZTE>

Freur, "Doot Doot" (1983). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aexff90ZWiQ>

Godwin, Peter, "Images of Heaven" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://vimeo.com/150471991>

Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen" (1977). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqrAPOZxgzU>

Tears for Fears, "Mad World" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1ZvPSpLxCg>

Tears for Fears, "Shout" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ye7FKc1JQe4>

Ultravox, "Dancing with Tears in my Eyes" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSQWUZ8a2Ho>

Ultravox, "Reap the Wild Wind" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NevzImTG_U0

Van Halen, "Jump" (1984). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwYN7mTi6HM>

Visage, "The Damned Don't Cry" (1982). Accessed 13 November 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVsrmcW3Yc8>