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Research In Context

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‘The Sublime’ is described by Edmund Burke in his 1757 publication *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* as “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling..”(1757). When considering the notion of *The Sublime* in the context of Television and Film it is hard to avoid the idea of *Nostalgia* and how it relates to *The Sublime*. In many ways they are one and the same: *The Sublime* relies on memories and conventions relating to aesthetics and beauty that are created by a society over time, and these memories and conventions are the result of nostalgia for past aesthetic movements.

The way that filmmakers (and those in the related disciplines) utilise sound and image to explore and present these ideas of *Nostalgia* and *The Sublime* in their works varies greatly, though the intended result on the viewer is almost always

the same: to evoke emotion. This emotion being, as Burke asserts, the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling.

Symbolism and *The Self* are ideas that can be seen as being separate (and it is important to treat them as such when appropriate), but- like with the above examples- they are also intricately related and there is argument to show that *The Self* is the result of experience, these experiences being influenced heavily by semiotics (and by symbolism more generally). A popular take on this is the concept of 'Nature versus Nurture' or 'Environmental Determinism versus Biological Determinism'. Environmental Determinism or 'nurture' is defined by The Encyclopaedia Britannica as "A view ... that environmental features directly determine aspects of human behaviour and society" (2020), conversely 'Biological Determinism' or 'nature' is the idea that it is our biology or genetic makeup that largely determines our 'self' or who we are as a person.

Relying on the assumption that environmental determinism is a more dominant factor, this paper will explore the effect of symbols and semiotics (and their representation in Nostalgia and *The Sublime*) on *The Self*;

Why do we react so viscerally to certain stimuli, and why is much of that reaction based on nostalgia and The Sublime and what is the effect on The Self?

Where can we see effective examples of that in Film and Television (and in the music contained within), is this phenomenon understood by the filmmakers and composers, and to what degree?

Example One;

28 Days Later (Feature Film): Story, Soundtrack and Picture

The Sublime, The Weird And Eerie

In Danny Boyle's 2002 film '28 Days Later' British film producer John Murphy composed a soundtrack that highlights the relationship between sound and moving-image through use of ambient sound and, often times, a soft ethereal musical palette that takes advantage of simple chord progressions to give a sense of wide-open space. This is something that works with the picture, especially at the beginning of the film where the main character is shown walking around an abandoned apocalyptic London. The wide-open spaces shown through very wide shots, and the soundtrack working to further widen the scene by itself having a sense of spaciousness. In his 2013 publication *Hearing the Film: The Emotional Effect of Sound in Film* Alec Richardson makes the point that;

“Throughout its history, film has offered a rich variety of sound to accompany its pictures. These sounds do not come from the pictures themselves. Instead, they are emanated, through speakers, into the theater, where the viewer unconsciously takes it all in with the pictures.”

(2013)

It is by taking in and combining the picture and sound that the viewer can, among other things, unconsciously create the illusion of a heightened sense of space in the picture.

The situation that is being explored in the story is one of an apocalyptic world, it is a zombie horror movie. As previously mentioned, the protagonist is introduced to the viewer as in a hospital bed having woken up from a coma in the midst of this apocalypse. As he leave the abandoned hospital and walks around an abandoned central London the emptiness of his surroundings forces the viewer to ponder what may have happened for the human population to have fled. The sense of the weird and eerie is built up as the scenes progress, this is done through the sense of fear and confusion portrayed by the protagonist as well as by how his surroundings are portrayed: the emptiness, the quiet diegetic sound of lack thereof, and the soundtrack or non-diegetic sound providing a sense of not only space, but of impending doom and

increasing the increasing sense of worry that the viewer shares with the protagonist.

Example Two;

Rise Of The Synths (Documentary): Story (Synthwave, Vaporwave/first-order Nostalgia)

Symbolism, The Self, The Sublime

The documentary film *The Rise Of The Synths* (2020) explores first-order nostalgia and the development of an audio-visual movement and musical subgenres known as *Synthwave* and *Vaporwave*. This movement focuses heavily on and employs eighties and nineties symbols and motifs as part of music and video production. It has been extremely successful at attracting not only those who lived during the eighties and nineties, but audiences that were born in the two-thousands. This is done by employing what is described by Fred Davis' 1979 paper *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* as 'first-order nostalgia', this form of nostalgia "harbors the largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful, healthier, happier, more civilised, more exciting then than now)" (1979) and it is this belief surrounding a more explorative aesthetic, a more experimental phase in humanity, and a

better world that attracts even those who may not have themselves lived through these decades.

The exact origin of this aesthetic movement is hard to pinpoint, but according to Wikipedia;

“The genre developed in the mid-to late 2000s through French house producers, as well as younger artists who were inspired by the 2002 video game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Other reference points included composers John Carpenter, Jean-Michel Jarre, Vangelis (especially his score for the 1982 film *Blade Runner*), and Tangerine Dream. Synthwave reached wider popularity after being featured in the soundtracks of the 2011 film *Drive* (which included some of the genre's best-known songs) and the 2010s Netflix series *Stranger Things*. “.

(2020)

The eighties was a time of huge social unrest and change in the West: The height of the Cold War, increasing social freedoms for minorities, new technologies allowing for greater expression (and easier access to express oneself with technology like synthesisers and sequencers that were becoming ever more affordable), domestic government decisions affecting wages and decreasing labour union protection, all of these things providing both positive and negative social change. What links the artistic movements of the eighties

with today may be today's social unrest and the need for a form of organic expression after two and a half decades of formulaic pop-culture and corporate-culture throughout the nineties and two-thousands. Ken McLeod asserts in his 2018 publication *Vaporwave: Politics, Protest, and Identity* that; "Although there is much ambiguity in the overall attitude and message of vaporwave, its main unifying ideology is the re-configuration of pop music from the 1970s and '80s in order to critique and parody consumerism and corporate culture."

(2018)

This well informed assertion outlines the fact that it is not always a positive nostalgia or positive notion of the sublime that motivates these aesthetic movements, often times it is a scathing critique of the hyper-consumerism of previous decades, and the need for an appropriation or escape from that.

Example Three;

Hypernormalisation (Documentary); Story, Soundtrack, and Picture

The Weird And Eerie, The Self, Symbolism, The Sublime

Adam Curtis' 2016 documentary film *Hypernormalisation* is an audio-visual assault on the senses that takes full advantage of symbolism and the sublime

to present the weird and eerie reality of global affairs in a way that's provocative and impactful even to those who may not have an extensive knowledge of the subjects at hand. The use of what at first looks to be disconnected sound and image is really a carefully curated selection of archive material and soundtrack that creates an intense sense of heightened emotion in the viewer that is reminiscent of a feeling of nostalgia: in terms of documentary film, Adam Curtis' *Hypernormalisation* creates an overwhelming sense of *The Sublime* using an unexpected and unpredictable combination of moving picture and audio assets.

An article from news media publisher *The Guardian* gives some insight in to Curtis' thinking and from where he takes inspiration in terms of his story-telling format;

““Why I love Dos Passos is he tells political stories but at the same time he also lets you know what it feels like to live through them,” Curtis says. “Most journalism does not acknowledge that people live at least as much in their heads as they do in the world.””.

(The Guardian, 2016)

To evoke an emotion or a feeling in the viewer is seen as near equal in importance to the story that is being told. Using visuals of important past events to trigger nostalgia and memory, a sense of the negative-emotional-

sublime (and there is no reason to think that Edmund Burke spoke only of the emotionally-positive-sublime: as discussed previously, *The Sublime* is simply the strongest form of emotion that one can feel.). And what can be seen with Adam Curtis' *Hypernomalisation* is that the viewer is first surrounded by audio-visual stimulus, and then is made aware of the story to which these audio-visual emotional queues relate. Opening a sequence with strong symbolism and using the result of that- the positive or negative empathic and/or nostalgic effect on the self- to help one to understand the often complex and comprehensive information that is to come. The standard approach is to present relevant visuals and information at the same time, but *Curtis* shows that this is not necessarily the most effective way of presenting complex information when combined with narrative.

When considering these three examples of films it becomes clear that, while they are all very different, they also share an underlying set of properties and motivations. The main motivation being to evoke and take advantage of emotion in the viewer as a way to help them absorb information or to produce empathy (whether that empathy and enthusiasm be for an artistic/ aesthetic movement like Synthwave, or for a character such as the protagonist in the film *28 Days Later*.).

In *28 Days Later* we see that combining eerie visuals with strong emotive audio produces an overwhelming audio-visual representation of *The Sublime*, our emotions reaching their limit and that helping us to put ourselves in the place of the protagonist. It also helps us to understand the relationship between sound and image and how one might transform the other in ways that are unexpected: for example, using sound to increase the sense of space in a scene.

With *Rise Of The Synths* we see how a sense of nostalgia and *The Sublime* can be based on recycled or remembered symbols from decades ago, and that perhaps this is form of rebellion or a reflection of the contemporary human condition. We are reaching for a more organic form of popular culture, and the expressive and socially-mobile eighties is where an increasing number of modern artists seem to be able to find this. While the problems are quite different in many cases, we still have important social issues to address, and therefore there has been plenty of reason to make art in the Noughties, and there will no doubt be more to come in the Twenties.

Adam Curtis' *Hypernormalisation* takes the above examples and provides a less specific approach to explaining these phenomena of nostalgia and the sublime. Of the three examples this is the most abstract in its use of audio-visual assets, though it is similar to *28 Days Later* in that it relies on first introducing the

emotion, and then presenting the information. There seems to be a clear intention on the part of Adam Curtis to do it this way round;

“All reality is incredibly complex and chaotic. To make sense of it we have to tell stories about it – which inevitably simplifies. And that is what politicians – and journalists – do. What I try to do is to find new facts and data, things you haven’t thought about, and turn them into new stories. My aim is to use those stories to try and make the complexity and chaos intelligible.”.

(The Guardian, 2015)

This is why I see film and soundtrack used in this way as an example of a total artwork. A total artwork takes advantage of *The Sublime* and uses that emotion to allow the viewer to better witness what is being said. Emotional reactions related to *Symbolism* and *The Sublime* can be used to help the viewer absorb and understand facts and data that might otherwise seem abstract and unrelated to their life or to their sense of *The Self*.

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