

BLINDED BY THE RETRO

What sound aesthetics reminiscent of the 1980's reveal in the personas of The Weeknd and Charli XCX

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Abstract

This essay examines the effect of eighties synth-pop influences on modern day pop music production. The study analyzes retro aesthetics in the music of Charli XCX and The Weeknd, with the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the effect the 1980's have on mainstream pop music. Synthesizers, drum-machines, rhythm, vocals, effects and timbre of these songs are analyzed to reveal how retro sound aesthetics work in conjunction with contemporary aesthetics. These aesthetics are then analyzed from the perspective of persona. The analysis of each artist's persona reveals how sound aesthetics convey different messages and identities. Additionally, interviews and YouTube comments provide context through perceptions on The Weeknd's and Charli XCX's personas. This thesis aims to problematize the term *retro* and analyzes ways in which retro and contemporary influences work together in the creation of new music and personas.

Key words: synth-pop, sound aesthetics, persona, retro, contemporary

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

1.3 Theory and Method

1.4 Research Overview

1.5 Demarcation and Material

1.6 Definitions

1.7 Disposition

2. Perceptions of Personas and Retro Influences

2.1 Analyzing interviews and YouTube comments

3. Sound and Persona

3.12 Identifying sound aesthetics of The Weekend and Charli XCX

3.13 Analyzing persona in sound aesthetics

4. Discussion

5. Conclusions

6. Sources

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Modern day pop artists like The Weeknd and Charli XCX are highly influential when releasing music stylistically borrowing from synth-pop of the 1980's. An example of the resurging commercial success of synth-pop is *Blinding Lights* by The Weeknd, which has surpassed 2.6 billion streams on Spotify alone. *Blinding Lights* has record-breaking significance since the song was on the Billboard singles chart for 90 weeks, making it the longest running single of all time.¹ The fact that modern music, on the largest scale, influences listeners through 1980's retro sound aesthetics is interesting to say the least. Music critic Simon Reynolds writes in his book *Retromania, Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011), about the phenomenon he calls *Retromania* which is a concept that holds weight over a decade later. The concept of *Retromania* does need to be developed further however. Charli XCX is an artist that seamlessly travels between the past and the most futuristic edge of the present. Her music is at times nostalgic and at times a great effort in pioneering the future of sound production. A juxtaposition between 1980's aesthetics and contemporary counterparts is perhaps the winning recipe for pop music production today.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

One of the main purposes of this thesis is to analyse aesthetic features of certain songs by The Weeknd and Charli XCX. Some of these features closely resemble sound production aesthetics from 1980's synth-pop and it is interesting to show the relationship between these retro aesthetics and contemporary aesthetics. Furthermore, these aesthetic features reveal information about the personas of these artists. The study of persona has a purpose since it reveals the primary ways in which 1980's influences become repackaged for a modern audience.

Research questions:

1. What sound aesthetic features, both retro and contemporary, can be extracted in the music of The Weeknd and Charli XCX?
2. What do the sound aesthetic features reveal about the respective artists' personas?
3. How can the concept of *Retro/Retromania* be developed into a more complex and inclusive concept?

¹ Ruiz, M. I. The Weeknd's "Blinding lights" named no. 1 billboard hot 100 song of All time. *Pitchfork*. Pitchfork, 2021

1.3 Theory and Method

As a guide for analysing style and persona in the selected recordings, Allan F. Moore's book "Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song" is used. Moore's work is also highly applicable in the analysis of interviews; particularly chapter 7, *Persona*. The chapter lays a foundation for which analysis of persona is done in this thesis, following Moore's theory and terminology. Moore writes about the primary attention given by the listener to the singer of a recorded song. This listening is more helpful when perceiving the singer as a persona, rather than an individual expressing him or herself directly, according to Moore.² One of the main ideas encapsulating theory on persona, is how the identity of the singing voice operates at three levels that sometimes overlap. These levels are: "The *real person*, (the performer as human being), the *performance persona* (the performer as social being) and the *character* (Frith's song personality)", mentions Moore, based on work by Simon Frith. This thesis utilizes two of the levels, *performance persona* and the *character*. Since I am not analyzing lyrics, writing about the real person would be redundant. The focus in this thesis lies in analyzing how sound aesthetics build a persona.

Chapter 2, *Shape*, is highly applicable in the identification of sounds. Moore writes about the different textures of sound and how different instruments can be categorized into different layers. These layers are: The *explicit beat layer* (main beat pattern), the *functional bass layer*, the *melodic layer* (primary and secondary melodic lines), and the *harmonic filler* (details and registral space)³. I use these layers to categorize sounds in the selected recordings. The chapter also explains the term *timbre*, or the perceived tone quality that gives color to the sound. In this thesis *timbre* is analyzed mainly through visualizations of frequencies. Each song has its own frequency spectrum which shows how loud the low-end, mid-end and high-end registers are played at different times throughout a song. Accompanying graphs in a software called *Voxengo Span* are screenshotted by myself and shown in this thesis. In chapter 4, *Delivery*, Moore writes about melodic contour. He describes differences between melodies in songs with sectionalized structure and melodies in songs less structured, through analysis of blues songs.⁴ In my work I use the concept of melodic structure to describe the effects of the primary synthesizer melody in *Blinding Lights*.

² Moore, A. F. *Song means: Analysing and interpreting recorded popular song*. London: Routledge, 2012, chapter 7

³ Moore, A. F. *Song means: Analysing and interpreting recorded popular song*, chapter 2

⁴ Moore, A. F. *Song means: Analysing and interpreting recorded popular song*, chapter 2

For the interview method, Lars Lilliestam provides inspiration with his book “Lyssna på musik, Upplevelser, mening, hälsa”, which translates to “Listen to music, Experiences, meaning, health”. His work consists of 10 in depth interviews. Each time, his informant is asked beforehand to think about roughly three songs, that they then discuss during the interview. Lilliestam’s aim is to answer two main questions: “What people say they hear and perceive when they listen to music and what impact they experience music listening has on their wellbeing and health.”⁵ Lilliestam’s work is influential, without being strictly followed. The subject matter in Lilliestam’s interviews differs greatly from mine, since his work focuses on meaningful musical experiences. What is influential about Lilliestam’s work, in this setting, is the method. The reasoning behind different questions, how they are posed and to whom are all aspects of interview procedure in general. For this thesis, the interview method has its purpose in providing opinionated context. The interviews reveal some associations that these individuals make when listening to *The Weekend* and *Charli XCX*. The informants also provide opinionated context on the subject of *Retro* and how music as a whole can develop further both with and without retro sound aesthetics. Other subjects like commercialism, for example, were sometimes brought to light by the informants without an explicit question regarding the subject. Commercialism is a theme that I develop further into an analysis of the artist’s persona, through the concept of authenticity.

When analyzing interviews, Steinar Kvale’s “Doing Interviews” provides insight through his “Six steps of analysis”⁶. During the first step the informant is asked to describe their “world view” as Kvale writes, meaning their relationship to the subject at question. The second step includes any new meanings and opinions the informant might find through their spontaneous descriptions without judgement from the interviewer. Thirdly, the interviewer condenses information and sends it back to the informant to check for any misunderstandings. In the fourth step, the interviewer alone analyzes meanings through transcription and multiple readings of the answers. This step includes the researcher’s own knowledge and interpretation to build on the information provided by the informant. The researcher may afterwards send the analysis to the informant and perhaps receive corrections and/or additions to the original answers. Finally the sixth possible step includes action from the informant prompted by inspiration from the interview. This step is typical of therapy

⁵ Lilliestam, L. *Lyssna på Musik. Upplevelser, Mening, hälsa*. Göteborg, Sweden: Bo Ejeby Förlag, 2020

⁶ Kvale, S. *Doing interviews*. Los Angeles Calif.: SAGE, 2007

sessions for instance.⁷ All steps are used throughout the interview process in this thesis except for the sixth step.

Three informants around the age of 20 representing the target demographic of pop listeners were chosen for the interviews. Additionally, they all create music and have university-level studies in music theory and production. The main questions asked throughout the interviews are:

- Have you heard the music before?
- What does the music make you feel?
- Are lyrics or the sound more important?
- Are you familiar with the artists?
- How would you describe The Weeknd's persona?
- Charli XCX's persona?
- Would you say that you base for instance The Weeknd's persona more on sound or lyrics?
- What do you associate with 1980's pop?
- Do you prefer intimate or grandiose music?
- What do you think of new music being made with great resemblance to 80's pop?
- Would you say that retro influences drive the development of music or hinder it?

The method used for analyzing sound aesthetics is *focused listening*. With this, I mean listening to the same complete recording a number of times, focusing on different elements of the sound production each time. Obviously, and especially being a fan of the artists that are analysed, some pre-existing associations are had. These associations are impossible to completely withdraw, since I have been listening to the music of these artists for a while and I happen to follow both of them on social media. These associations are however helpful when analysing their personas.

This element of retro aesthetics of 1980's synth-pop in modern pop music provides the major theme for this thesis. To provide context and a wider understanding of the subject, Simon Reynolds' book *Retromania, Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011) is used. The theories here explain some of the social and cultural aspects behind retro music, along with Reynolds' mostly negative views on music

⁷ Kvale, S. *Doing interviews*

of this kind. Although he many times reaches conclusions similar to mine, he does not, in my opinion, always represent the music scenes of the time fairly. This combination of accurate descriptions as well as flaws, provides many valuable areas of discussion. It is to be noted that Reynolds' work is not of a scientific nature, since the book functions as a highly opinionated critique.

1.4 Research Overview

Some research has been made following theories on persona in music. Notably, Philip Auslander's work *Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto* (2004) studies the way artists, like David Bowie for example, undergo a series of identities in the span of the same song. His work closely analyzes how "Both the line between real person and performance persona and the line between persona and character may be blurry and indistinct".⁸

Simon Reynolds' work in *Retromania* is highly subjective but nonetheless provides research on different musicians and their way of using retro influences. He also writes about the use of YouTube as a way to gather nostalgia and samples of past cultures and music.⁹

1.5 Demarcation and Material

When analysing recordings, I have chosen to focus on sound production aesthetics. One choice that separates this thesis from others, is the lack of analysis of lyrics. Consciously, this choice is made since the focus lies in retro and contemporary sound aesthetics and what they reveal in persona. Adding analysis of lyrics would be too significant of a choice that cannot be encompassed entirely in this thesis. Arguably, lyrics reveal most information about the singer's identity, but do this most obviously, in my opinion. The instrumentation and an artist's performance of music reveals information that would not be accessible through lyrics alone.

The three interviewees are in the target audience demographic for pop listeners. Additionally, they all have university-level education in music production and music theory. The choice not to include older interviewees that would have been alive in the 1980's was made for one main reason. This reason is that older listeners would perhaps not be as accustomed to modern pop music. The goal

⁸ Auslander, P. Performance analysis and popular music: A Manifesto. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 14/1: 1–13, 2010

⁹ Reynolds, S. *Retromania: Pop Culture's addiction to its own past*. London: Faber, 2011

with the interviews was to find listeners that are accustomed to modern genres and the music of the 1980's, resulting in knowledge of the past and the present. If my thesis were to be written entirely around listeners' perceptions of retro aesthetics, I would definitely include varying demographics. For this thesis the interviews provide context for the in-depth analysis.

Since the process of analyzing sound aesthetics and persona is in depth, the process is limited to two subjects, The Weeknd and Charli XCX. This process is also limited to one song per artist with The Weeknd's *Blinding Lights* and Charli XCX's *I Don't Wanna Know*. These songs were chosen because they highlight different retro aesthetics of 1980's synth-pop. When diving into great detail for each song, many realizations on the use of retro and contemporary aesthetics are made.

1.6 Definitions

Sound aesthetics

The meaning of sound aesthetics entails the entirety of audible material in a recording. This terminology eases the description of sound ranging from vocals to instruments, effects and further components of a song recording.

1980's synth-pop

When I refer to 1980's synth-pop sound production I am primarily referring to certain iconic synthesizers and drum machines. For instance the Juno-60 synthesizer or the TR-808 drum machine. These machines are all iconic in their own ways and have all had tremendous influence. The Juno is known for its chorus effect, which adds a warm, fuller texture to the sound. A chorus effect layers the original sound with copies that differ slightly in pitch and timing. Almost like a choir would. For reference to the genre, some popular artists of the decade include: a-ha, Michael Jackson, Alphaville, Phil Collins, The Human League, Tears For Fears, and the list could continue.

1.7 Disposition

This thesis is organized into five chapters. This chapter is the introduction. The following chapter sets context through interviews and YouTube comments. Insight into the ways that listeners perceive certain artists and the subject of retro is provided here. To make the interviews clear and concise, the main points of each interviewee are summarized under different sections placed before the full-length, detailed interviews. The third chapter, *Sound and Persona* is built from two main sections.

Its first section is where my focused listening and analysis of sound aesthetics takes place. The second section entails analysis of persona through the identified sound aesthetics. The last two chapters are the discussion and conclusion.

2. Perceptions of Personas and Retro Influences

2.1 Analyzing Interviews and YouTube comments

The following interviews provide context for this thesis. There are two main purposes of the interview method. The first is to understand how listeners perceive The Weeknd and Charli XCX. The second purpose is to understand their views on the ethics of retro influences. It should be clear that the interviews provide opinionated context to the study. The goal is to explain the reasons for these opinions both in this chapter and chapter 3, which takes a deepdive into sound aesthetics and persona.

Following are the areas of discussion and the main views highlighted from each interviewee:

Retro influences and innovation

Bailey: Appreciates The Weeknd's "full on" retro approach. He does not immediately associate *I Don't Wanna Know* with the 1980's. He presents the idea of making music according to the following recipe: "a third should be completely new, a third inspired by other music, and a third of shameless copying. It feels like this balance is distorted with the 80's trend."

Moa: Believes in the fundamental necessity of using past influences in today's music. She does not think negatively of retro music.

Marie: Has a generally positive attitude towards retro influences and sees *Blinding Lights* as its own work of art.

Grandiosity and intimacy

Bailey: Mentions the need to listen to Charli XCX's lyrics more than The Weeknd's since *I Don't Wanna Know* lacks the "wall of sound" that is heard in *Blinding Lights*. To my understanding, Bailey feels more intimacy with Charli XCX than with The Weeknd.

Moa: Enjoys the full-scale, grandiose production of *Blinding Lights*.

Marie: Generally prefers intimacy over grandiosity except for club-listening.

Vulnerability

Bailey: From my analysis, Bailey perceives more vulnerability in Charli XCX since he says the production is scaled down and the lyrics matter more in *I Don't Wanna Know*.

Moa: Shares her difficulties with autotune (pitch-correcting and robotic-sounding effect). Autotune sets a boundary between herself and Charli XCX since the effect narrows vulnerability, which would otherwise be shown through slight imperfections in pitch.

Marie: Prefers natural voices without too much processing like autotune, meaning she probably finds The Weeknd to be the more vulnerable artist when compared to Charli XCX.

Authenticity and commercialism

Bailey: Sees The Weeknd as a pioneer that develops sounds of the 1980's further. Many other artists like Veronica Maggio copy him, he says. In general he says he is frustrated with the "retro trend". He appreciates Charli XCX and is a fan of many of her songs, though not all.

Moa: Expresses some reluctance to *Blinding Lights* due to its immense popularity although she appreciates the quality of the song. She states: "I think music needs to be modified for the mainstream masses using the popular sounds of today. I don't see a song made to sound completely like the 80's having commercial success."

Marie: Shares a more positive outlook on commercialism than Moa. She states: "From a selling perspective I think it is very smart to make this kind of 80's influenced music since many people can be pulled in as fans through the retro influences and nostalgia".

Following are the interview answers and analyses in full detail:

Bailey

Bailey appreciates The Weeknd's approach of using synthwave as an influence without restrictions, stepping into the role fully. He does believe The Weeknd makes the style his own however. He makes a description of the soundscape, mentioning the iconic kick drum and the washy synths like the Juno-60. Bailey says he imagines a "DeLorean car driving down a sunset". Here he mentions another relic of the 1980's, the DeLorean car that allows Marty McFly and Doc Brown to travel through time in the 1985 film *Back To The Future*. This image is probably strengthened by the synthwave genre itself, being closely associated with a certain stylistic approach to video. Oftentimes the videos include cars driving through Tron-like settings, lit up with saturated color schemes. Paul Ballam Cross describes synthwave in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (2021). He argues that the genre is highly nostalgic and its imagery follows a form of collective, imaginative self-soothing.¹⁰

In many ways, *Blinding Lights* detours from the dark RnB sound that The Weeknd is known for and Bailey mentions this: "He has in some ways left his old dark rnb sound and I've heard many fans are upset over that. At the same time I think new fans are listening to The Weeknd before having heard groups of the 80's, making the retro connection to the 80's less obvious compared to the associations a 50 year old would make".

Bailey says the retro aesthetics are clear from the first listen to the song but also mentions not putting "...too much thought on these retro influences, I see his work as a continuation of the style, more than a copy".

"You can get really tired and frustrated by retro influences today. I think The Weeknd does it really well. He is the biggest with the sound and is a pioneer at the moment of borrowing from the 80's. It feels though that recently, many try to copy The Weeknd. An example is Veronica Maggio, who feels cheap and the style is done on a surface level. The Weeknd has made this sound trendy, and all of a sudden people jump on it. Charli XCX has more history with the sound. Her latest single *New Shapes*

¹⁰ Ballam-Cross, P. Reconstructed Nostalgia. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33/1: 70–93, 2021

is great but *Good Ones* has a cheap 80's sound. It feels like a generic pop song, and that she is jumping on a trend. It made me sad because I see Charli XCX as a pioneer most of the time. I do forgive her to some extent however, since the latest song *New Shapes* is so good.”

Bailey makes multiple comments on authenticity here. For one, he sees The Weeknd as a pioneer, borrowing from the 80's in his own way. He mentions the Swedish artist Veronica Maggio and calls her “cheap”, perhaps due to the drastic stylistic shift from her previous work to the latest album. With Maggio clearly being influenced by The Weeknd, it is understandable that Bailey feels she is jumping on a trend, especially since *Blinding Lights* is both recent and one of the most streamed songs of all time. Bailey is upset over Charli XCX, specifically over “Good Ones”, once again using the word “cheap”. He generally thinks of her as a pioneer however and jokingly forgives her.

What adds to the authenticity Bailey feels for The Weekend's persona is the continuation of synth-pop/synthwave rather than a copy of the style. He goes on to mention: “Music that is clearly retro can hinder musical development somewhat. Right now it feels like a lot of music is just copying the 80's sound instead of looking for inspiration. With Veronica Maggio, from what I heard so far, I don't think there will be much innovation of the 80's sound.”

It seems to me that Bailey sees authenticity in pioneers; Artists that use influences both retro and contemporary in their own ways.

“I think when making music, a third should be completely new, a third inspired by other music, and a third of shameless copying. It feels like this balance is distorted with the 80's trend.”, says Bailey.

It is interesting to note the recipe for music that Bailey presents. The idea that music should be partly influenced by what is retro rather than a complete representation of music of the past is somewhat similar to Simon Reynolds' views on the subject.¹¹ Simon Reynolds' puts more emphasis on innovation however, criticizing music that overly resembles the past. It is difficult to put Bailey's theory into practice, since nothing that is ever created can be completely new, though I do understand Bailey's point on innovation. Although he appreciates both The Weeknd's and Charli

¹¹ Reynolds, S. *Retromania: Pop Culture's addiction to its own past*.

XCX's efforts in reviving the synth-pop sound of the 1980's, he seems to be irritated with the trend as a whole.

Bailey talks about the radio-friendly commercial aspect of the music of The Weeknd and Charli XCX: "Creating new music with a retro soundscape is a very easy way to get listeners to recognize the sound and enjoy it. People that were alive in the 1980's might not always latch on to music of later generations, but do so when listening to music like *Blinding Lights* which appeals to them. If you want radio-friendly music, and I do not mean that as a diss, it helps if listeners are used to the sound."

He notes that he does not frown negatively upon the commercial aspect of retro music but later on adds that: "Making radio-friendly music is limiting, since it hinders you from trying new things, and it won't be as easy to listen to the first few times. It won't take as much mental energy for people listening to the car radio to listen to music they have heard a thousand times before." Perhaps he might be contradicting himself somewhat. Limitations in the music-making process and easy-listening production are not necessarily negative traits in music. The aspect of innovation, that Bailey mentions earlier, does however become marginalized, though perhaps to a third, according to his recipe.

Bailey describes Charli XCX's *I Don't Wanna Know* as a beautiful ballad with lots of reverb. He mentions how the voice takes up most of the soundscape. "There is not the same wall of sound that hits you", he says in comparison to *Blinding Lights*. He feels forced to listen to the lyrics more due to the scaled down production, creating intimacy. "Her voice matters more in this song than The Weeknd's in his", he says.

Moa

Moa reveals early on that she enjoys *Blinding Lights* and appreciates the quality of the writing and production. She mentions feeling some reluctance to enjoying the song however because of its immense popularity. Later in the interview she says: "The commercial part of the music industry is only about plagiarizing successful sounds rather than to create something new." This comment, although not directly made against The Weeknd or Charli XCX, seems to disregard the authenticity

of these artists. At the very least, Moa may not see these artists as pioneers, pushing boundaries of sound. At the same time she says:

“I don’t think retro influences can stop musical development. We will never go one hundred percent back to anything, but we will use sounds, modify them to create something new and the cycle goes on. In a few years we will use the sounds of the 2000’s. I think music needs to be modified for the mainstream masses using the popular sounds of today. I don’t see a song made to sound completely like the 80’s having commercial success.”

This comment is interesting because it highlights the nuances of contemporary influences in the extremely popular *Blinding Lights*. Perhaps the immense effect that the song has is due to a relationship between retro and contemporary. The song is clearly influenced by 1980’s synth-pop but in its details like the vocal melodies and the overall perfection of the mix, the song is new. This seems to be the consensus throughout all interviews regarding *Blinding Lights*.

When talking about *I Don't Wanna Know*, her first reaction goes toward the vocal processing and autotune effect on Charli XCX. She says she is not sure whether she likes the effect or not and states: “It depends on the situation I think”. With autotune being directly linked to rap music and not as obviously to synth-pop, it is understandable that Moa may not be totally convinced about its use in this case.

Marie

Marie’s interpretation of The Weeknd involves Michael Jackson. She mentions the similarities in tone as well as the sound production in some songs, though not necessarily in *Blinding Lights*. Like Bailey, Marie finds *Blinding Lights* more stereotypical of the 80’s in comparison to *I Don't Wanna Know*. She mentions the synthesizers, the beat and the rhythm as the main stereotypes in *Blinding Lights*.

When asked if she prefers intimacy or grandiosity in music in general, she answers intimacy. At clubs she prefers grandiosity, making *Blinding Lights* more suitable for that setting. Marie’s general preference for intimacy is most likely due to the connection she feels to the artist through their vulnerability. Charli XCX’s vulnerability might however be overshadowed somewhat by the use of autotune in *I Don't Wanna Know*. In *Blinding Lights* The Weeknd’s vocals sound much more natural.

The vocals are however backed up by the many synthesizers and the faster rhythm, making the *character* less vulnerable in a different manner.

Marie also makes comments on commercialism: “From a selling perspective I think it is very smart to make this kind of 80’s influenced music since many people can be pulled in as fans through the retro influences and nostalgia”.

What makes Marie’s comment slightly different from Moa’s views is the optimistic phrasing. Marie appears to be more content with listening to music that is in the mainstream, which adds to the authenticity of these artists.

When asked about retro influences in these songs Marie states: “In some aspects perhaps retro music can hinder the development of music. If you’re too locked in looking for a specific sound maybe that stops you from moving forward in the creation of music. For the most part however, you learn from the music that has been created before and inspires ideas. Links between styles can be made to create a new sound. We need the older sounds to move forward.”

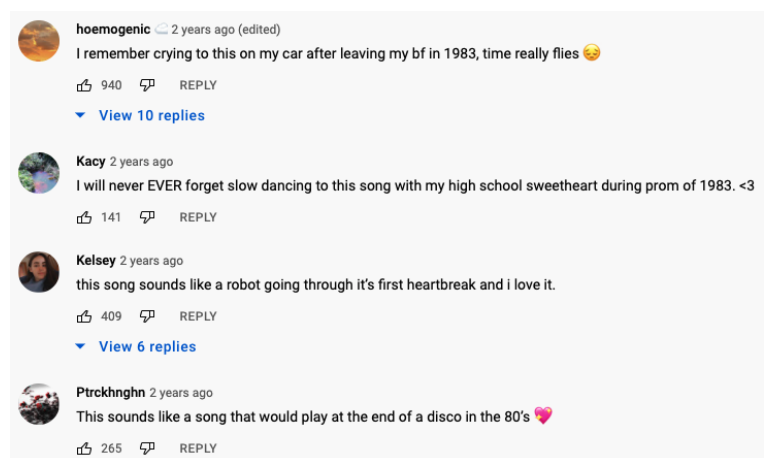
She adds to her comment by saying: “*Blinding Lights* is not too retro and functions as a piece of art in itself.” Marie is obviously not of the opinion that music relying on the past cannot hold its own weight. She sees artists like The Weeknd as independent, with creative freedom.

YouTube Comments

These YouTube comments describe the emotions felt by fans when listening to the songs in question.

I Don't Wanna Know

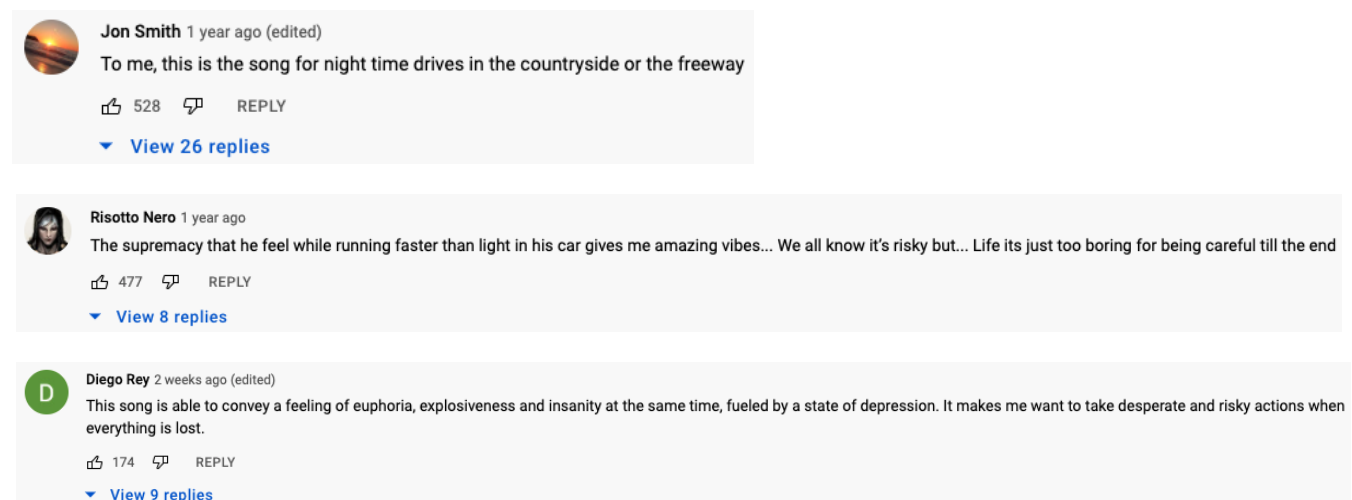
Under Charli XCX’s lyric video for *I Don't Wanna Know* many comments follow a similar line of humor. Some listeners comment the song as if it would have been released in the 1980’s,



Comments, *Charli XCX - I Don't Wanna Know (Official Audio)*

jokingly reminiscing on times of slow dancing in 1983 for instance. These listeners are obviously attached to 1980's culture since these visual descriptions sound cinematic, like they are retelling heartfelt scenes from 1980's films. It is interesting to note how listeners/fans seem to associate the song with the 1980's so congruently. At least the listeners that care enough to comment on the video. Perhaps the resurgence of the 1980's has been so potent that young listeners to young artists can successfully associate musical choices of today with the 1980's in a rather nuanced way. A comment that does not necessarily follow the nostalgic path of thought is the following: "This song sounds like a robot going through its first heartbreak and I love it". This listener is obviously referring to the heavy use of autotune in the context of a heartbreak pop song. It's interesting to see that this listener adds to the storyline of the song. This fan's interpretation is perhaps the goal for Charli XCX. The use of autotune has had the alienating effect that distances Charli XCX (the person) from the *character* of the song.

Blinding Lights



The image shows a screenshot of three YouTube comments on the official music video for 'Blinding Lights' by The Weeknd. Each comment includes a profile picture, the user's name, the time since posted, the comment text, and interaction icons for likes, replies, and a 'View replies' link.

- Jon Smith** (1 year ago, edited): "To me, this is the song for night time drives in the countryside or the freeway". 528 likes, 1 reply. [View 26 replies](#)
- Risotto Nero** (1 year ago): "The supremacy that he feel while running faster than light in his car gives me amazing vibes... We all know it's risky but... Life its just too boring for being careful till the end". 477 likes, 1 reply. [View 8 replies](#)
- Diego Rey** (2 weeks ago, edited): "This song is able to convey a feeling of euphoria, explosiveness and insanity at the same time, fueled by a state of depression. It makes me want to take desperate and risky actions when everything is lost." 174 likes, 1 reply. [View 9 replies](#)

Comments, *The Weeknd - Blinding Lights (Official Video)*

These comments under the official music video for the song, describe the imagery of the car driving in the night and the feeling of invincibility. One of the listeners mentions euphoria, explosiveness and insanity felt and fueled by a state of depression. He says the song makes him "want to take desperate and risky actions when everything is lost". The notion of risk-taking is congruent through multiple comments. Sonically this notion can be explained through the use of the primary synthesizer melody, being infectious and melodically powerful. The melody functions as a

post-chorus, symbolizing victory after the sorrow heard through the darker sounds of the verses. These darker sounds are for instance the deep bass synthesizer which loses attention to the primary synthesizer lead in the post-chorus. The primary synth-lead is in a much higher frequency range than the bass, providing a contrasting feeling of optimism. The darkness of the sonics could form part of the depression felt by one of the listeners.

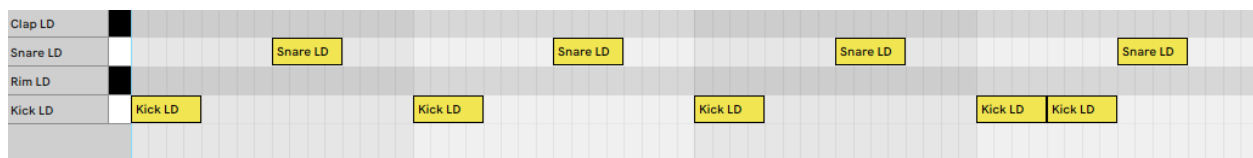
3. Sound and Persona

3.1 Identifying sound aesthetics of The Weeknd and Charli XCX

Blinding Lights

The *explicit beat layer* of the song consists of drummachines. The drums sound like samples either directly created using a LinnDrum machine, or resembling the samples of the extremely popular machine. The samples themselves already draw connections to the 1980's. It is however, in conjunction with the rhythm in which the drums are played that the sound feels most retro. This rhythmic form is achieved with the kick on every beat, and the snare on every half beat, creating a back and forth swinging feel to the rhythm. An additional kick is added between the last kick and snare of the bar. This constitutes the basic form of the kick and snare during the entirety of the song.

The image below visualises the rhythm of the kick and snare recreated as MIDI in the digital audio workstation Ableton Live. Occasional snare fills at the end of a bar, give energy to the end of a section, while also marking the beginning of a new one. It is worth noting the BPM of the song being 86, which makes the rhythm work in the sense that it feels uptempo. Generally speaking, 86 is a slow BPM, but since the snare hits on the half beat, instead of the second and fourth beats, a faster feeling of tempo is provided. This technique is often called “double time” and gives the feeling of the BPM being twice as fast.

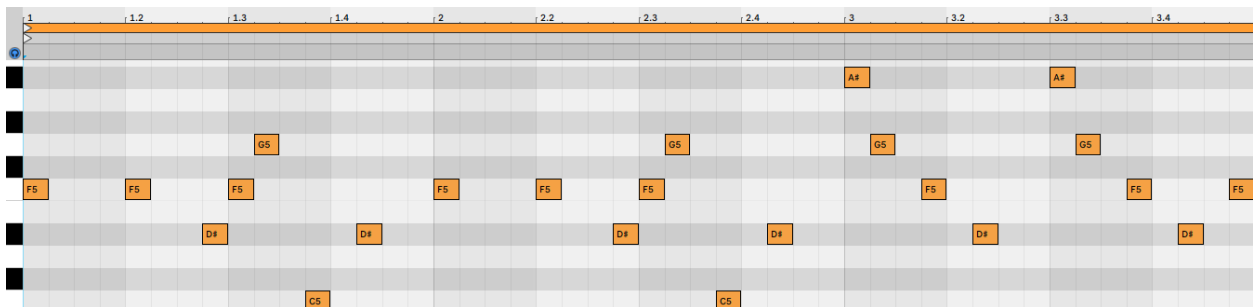


Blinding Lights shares rhythmic similarities to a-ha's *Take on Me*, creating an uptempo back and forth swing. Adding to the rhythm, a smaller sounding percussion instrument is played from the second

verse. This percussion is subtle in volume yet works as one of the most organic or live sounding elements of the sound production. The effect of this percussion may be slight but manages to juxtapose the synthetic atmosphere of the sound.

As for the *functional bass layer*, a distorted synthesizer is used from the first second of the song and onwards. The pattern mainly consists of root notes, with some filler notes usually added at the end of bars. The filler notes provide excitement as well as rhythm.

The *melodic layer* consists of the most memorable elements of the song, as tends to be the case.¹² The primary lines are the vocal melodies in the verse, pre-chorus and chorus, sung by The Weeknd. Additionally, the synth lead melody functions as a primary line and makes appearances in the intro and the post-chorus. Two verses follow the same vocal melody right after the intro. By 0:51, a short pre-chorus melody is sung, building tension, and releasing with the vocal melody of the chorus. The chorus is then followed by the now recognizable synth melody that first arrived in the intro. By this time, all of the primary melodies have been established. *Blinding Lights* makes use of the iconic Roland synth Juno-60. It is perhaps most noticeable in the lead synth melody. A-ha did this similarly with *Take on Me*. Below is a recreation of the primary synthesizer melody.



The melodic contour follows the famous principle of question and answer. The first bar, which is played identically in the second bar, starts as stationary and then ascends to a G, creating a question. This question is then answered with the lower notes; C and D#. The highest note being A# is played in the third bar and is followed by a descending contour of four notes, played twice. From a broader standpoint, the first and second bar can be seen as the question that is answered by the descending melodies in the third bar. The entire melody ends like it starts, with an F, being the most

¹² Moore, A. F. *Song means: Analysing and interpreting recorded popular song*, chapter 2

repeated note. F is the tonic note which, in its ending, makes the listener feel like home, since they have been accustomed to the tonic from the start. One of the factors that allows repetition of the melody without tiring the ear is how the fourth bar is left empty. This allows the listener to “breathe” as tension and demand for repetition is built.

Some secondary melodies include an up-and-down moving melody during the verses that is played by a soft synthesizer. With soft I mean that the synthesizer is lacking sharp, high frequencies and is most likely mellowed down by a cutoff filter. A cutoff filter is traditionally a knob on the synthesizer that works like a low-pass filter. This means that the higher frequencies get removed when turning the knob counter-clockwise. A harmony to this melody enters in the second verse and is in a higher register, played using a pluck with faster attack, adding transients to the sound.

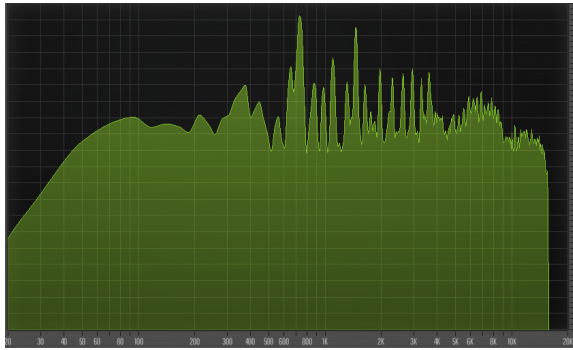
The *harmonic filler* layer is composed of details that enhance the sound production, generally without removing attention from any of the other layers.¹³ To add grandiosity to the chorus, background vocals are used. Additionally, the background vocals make a strong appearance during the post-chorus, with the lead melody being the focal point. The background vocals are sung by The Weeknd himself.

An arpeggiated synthesizer is played between sections to build tension. A riser which gradually gains a higher pitch, achieves a similar effect. In the build-up to the final post-chorus, the riser adds tension which releases with the lead synth. The outro (3:05) is completed with a mellow chord-playing pad and a final D note, played with a distorted synthesizer gradually going out of tune along decreasing volume.

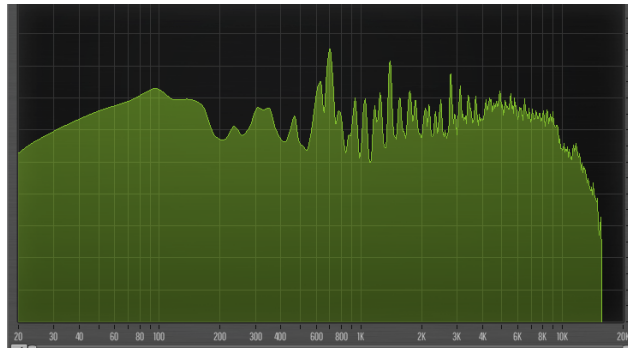
These layers together form the *Timbre*, or the perceived tone quality that gives color to the sound. The *timbre* of *Blinding Lights* is what modernizes the song the most and contrasts its retro aesthetics. What I immediately think of is the depth of the mix, with its rich low-end, meaning bass. The *bass layer* has throughout the recent decades become substantially louder. Technological development has allowed the reach for the lowest of frequencies and modern music is generally given louder bass than music in the 1980's. One can easily compare *Blinding Lights* to *Take on Me* once again.

¹³ Moore, A. F. *Song means: Analysing and interpreting recorded popular song*, chapter 2

Take On Me



Blinding Lights

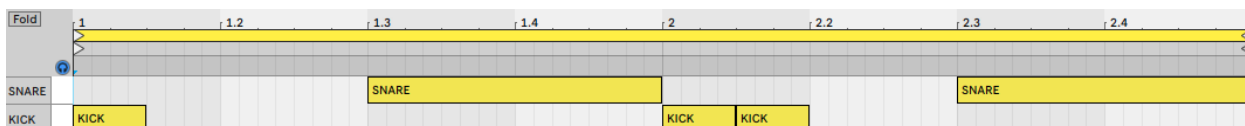


The images above visualize each song’s frequency spectrum during each first chorus. Quite simply, the x-axis represents the frequencies going from lowest (20 Hz) to highest (20k Hz) from the left to the right. The y-axis represents volume, meaning the tallest peak is the loudest. Both songs are played at around -9 LUFS, meaning they are almost exactly equal in loudness. While the images seem quite similar, it is easy to see how especially the bass frequencies, on each respective left side, differ. In *Blinding Lights*, the span between 20 Hz and 40 hz is substantially louder. Additionally, the entire low-end and low-mid end of the spectrum is louder in *Blinding Lights*. It can also be observed that the mid-end of *Take On Me* peaks at higher volumes than in *Blinding Lights*. The mid-end is what adds body to the timbre. There are also louder high-end frequencies in *Take On Me*, resulting in a brighter timbre. These differences in frequencies may seem subtle but are essential to making *Blinding Lights* a song of today.

I Don't Wanna Know

This song by Charli XCX is much more scaled down in its production, when compared to *Blinding Lights*. The minimalistic approach favors the style, sounding similar to ballads of the 1980’s.

The *explicit beat layer* consists of few elements, leaving plenty of space between notes. The kick and snare pattern is visualized below in a recreation of the rhythm.



The use of space allows the effect of reverb to play a large role in the sound aesthetic of the song. Reverb is not used sparingly, leaving a long tail with every hit. This stylistic choice can be connected to Phil Collins as well as Peter Gabriel and the use of gated reverb in the 1980's. Richard James Burgess writes about the creation of gated reverb in "The History of Music Production"¹⁴ In *I Don't Wanna Know* the snare is the sound with the most energy and the texture of the sound is reminiscent of the 1980's. I would describe the texture of the snare as airy and open. Most snare sounds have a clearer transient, meaning the first "hit" of the sound, which is where most of the sound's character is perceived. In this case the snare is so washed in reverb that the transience is somewhat sacrificed for the purpose of a huge, long-lasting sound. What gives air and openness to the sound is in part the reverb but probably increased high end as well.

The kick sounds like a LinnDrum sample with modern mixing applied for a fuller and cleaner sound. It is interesting to note the complete lack of hi-hats or open hats in the song. The reasoning behind that creative choice is most likely to avoid the feeling of speed, in what is stylistically a ballad. Many songs of the 1980's discarded hi-hats. Peter Gabriel's third album, released 1980, includes no cymbals or hi-hats for instance. Hi-hats were unnecessary when the gated reverb effect came to fruition, sizing-up every sound, most notably snares. The effect was highly influential during the 1980's and it is no coincidence Charli XCX and her producer A.G. Cook wanted the same sound.

In the second chorus tom drums appear (2:11), adding energy to the climax of the song. They are distorted and hard-panned left and right, broadening the soundscape even further.

The *functional bass layer* is subtle. Consisting of a sub bass without much transience, it is difficult for the ear to separate the bass from synthesizers in higher frequencies. The pad sounds add to the higher frequencies of the bass layer as well. The pattern in which the bass plays is simple, playing root notes.

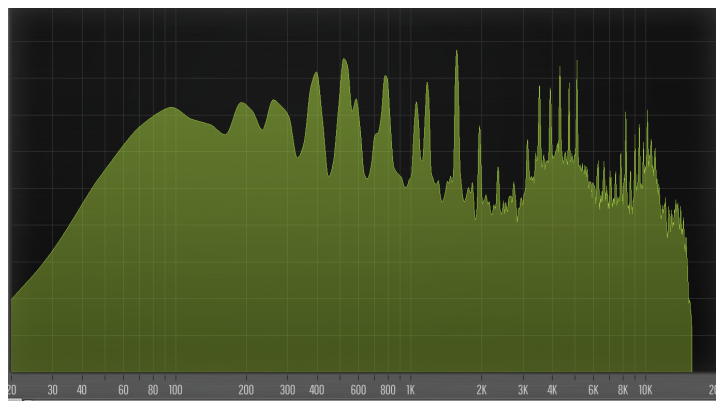
The *melodic layer* consists almost entirely of Charli XCX's vocals. The different sections of the song are melodically distinct from each other, especially considering the higher range in which Charli XCX sings the chorus. It is directly noticed how the vocals do not sound completely human, since autotune or a similar effect is applied heavily. The autotune effect is the key factor that distinguishes

¹⁴ Burgess, R. J. *Toward the Digital Age. The history of music production* p. 107-. Oxford University Press: New York, 2014

the song from the retro sound aesthetics of the 1980's that it builds on. In the chorus, a soft melody is played, without crystal clear distinction between notes. This melody becomes more apparent in the second chorus, when it's played in a higher octave.

Harmonic fillers of the song include the addition of pads, shimmering sound effects and crashes. For example, the chorus is presented with the addition of a brighter pad sound, slightly juxtaposing from the more melancholic sounding verse. The fuller sound adds power to the chorus and contrast from other sections.

The *timbre* of *I Don't Wanna Know* is interesting for its clarity that provides an open sound. This is in part achieved through low sub-bass frequencies between 0-40 Hz being low in volume. The curvature of the low end is similar to that of *Take On Me*, but in this case results in a louder peak at around 100 Hz. This results



in the bass being loud without sacrificed clarity. Clarity can be sacrificed in a mix if there is too much low-end. It's interesting to note the peaks at around 4k Hz and 10k Hz, which occur when Charli XCX sings the chorus of the song. These peaks of high-end play a big role in providing clarity to the sound.

3.2 Analyzing persona in sound aesthetics

The Weeknd

The *performance persona* (performer as social being)

The Weeknd bridges the gaps between R&B, Rap and Pop. He is known for his sexual lyrics sung with his trademark angelic voice in the tenor register.



(Duncan Loudon) The Weeknd

The explicit descriptions of sex often contrast the softness of the vocal approach. This tension created between lyrics and performance is what I believe to be The Weeknd's primary *performance*

persona characteristic. The instrumentation of his music has for a decade been characteristically dark and moody. Not only has The Weeknd avoided major keys, he has also consistently been living along synthesizers in low frequencies bathed in reverb. The percussion is given the same grand space caused by reverb and the emotional effect of the music is often psychedelic and sexual, fitting the lyrics.

The *character* (Frith's song personality)

With the song having a very full production, at times centered around the lead synth melody, the *character* or song personality does not always play the lead role in the song. The *character* is content with being in the background during these moments, when the synthesizer melody takes over. This effectively gives the *character* some level of anonymity. This anonymity sacrifices some intimacy, since

What the song lacks in intimacy is gained in grandiosity. One of the reasons for the song's tremendous popularity is most likely the feeling of euphoric invincibility. The production as a whole invokes this feeling, mainly in the post-chorus involving the lead synth melody. The sound production is done in a somewhat maximalist style, where the chorus and the post-chorus are given the peak of energy. Max Martin, probably the most successful Pop producer since the 90's is known for this style.

Maximalism in sound production evokes an instinctive feeling of grandiosity which makes the listener feel a higher sense of self and perhaps invincibility. The amount of instruments does not feel overwhelming and many details in the sound production, like the harmonic fillers, are subtle. What Max Martin and Oscar Wolter do effectively is the selection of few, quality sounds with a grandiose aspect to them. With effects like reverb and compression, the larger-than-life sound production style is achieved with relatively few instruments.

The song's double-time nature adds energy to the *character*. The listener may feel that the *character* is in a rush, perhaps driving. The use of double-time rhythm along with distinct, retro drum samples, is a way to give the song speed and nostalgia. One of the reasons for the effect of nostalgia is the connection between the rhythm of the song and that of *Take On Me*.

The *timbre* of the song, through the depth of the mix, adds darkness to the *character*. The low-end being full bodied with distorted bass provides this element of darkness. Darkness is often one of the

main features of The Weeknd's sound and his persona. If it weren't for the darkness in *Blinding Lights*, it would be difficult to see the authenticity of the sound and persona. The dark element of his music is usually more poignant, with earlier work like the album *My Dear Melancholy*, (2018) hitting the listener with an obscure persona embedded in the depth of industrialized sounds reminiscent of Techno. The presence of his darkness might not be as strong in *Blinding Lights* but it is certainly still there. Distortion on the bass synthesizer adds anger to the *character*. Distortion is the effect that pushes a sound wave to the roof of its limited space, clipping the sound wave. This results in the powerful effect that has become synonymous with most Rock music for instance. The effect instantly provides roughness which can easily be associated with hardness and anger.

Through a *timbre* that is darker and rougher than in much 1980's synth-pop, *Blinding Lights* sets itself apart from its retro influences.

Charli XCX

The *performance persona* (performer as social being)

Charli XCX is an artist that stands between the avant-garde and the mainstream. She is one of the pioneers that recently created the Hyperpop genre. Hyperpop is a type of electronic pop music that takes a maximalist approach to sound production.



(Cooper) Charli XCX

Hyperpop is attributed to layers of synthesizers modified in jarring ways that cut through the mix and attack the listener in bombastic fashion. The creation of the genre is often credited to a record label out of London called PC Music. The label was founded by A.G. Cook who is also the producer of many Charli XCX songs, one of them being *I Don't Wanna Know*. Hyperpop has most definitely a strong influence on Charli XCX's music, adding the avant-garde component. Some of her recent songs like "New Shapes" don't belong in the Hyperpop genre however. This particular style is reminiscent of the 1980's rather than a clear step forward in time, which is the pioneering aspect attributed to Hyperpop. What is interesting about Charli XCX is the way in which she comfortably utilizes the past as well as more groundbreaking, modern sound aesthetics. Charli XCX's *performance persona* strikes me as a confident and playful one. She tends to sing loudly and does not shy away

from using autotune, the immediate confidence-booster that corrects any off-pitch notes in a robotized fashion. The subject matter of her songs often pairs strength and vulnerability which is shown through her vocal style.

The *character* (Frith's song personality)

In contrast to the maximalist sound in *Blinding Lights*, Charli XCX takes on a somewhat minimalist sound. The song is composed of a few sounds which take up a lot of space, mainly due to reverb. As stated previously, there is a complete lack of hi-hats for instance. The minimization of instruments is what gives the song some elements of minimalism. It is problematic to call the song minimalistic however, since each individual sound is brought to stadium-level grandiosity. The juxtaposition between few ingredients and grandiose size makes it interesting to analyze Charli XCX's persona. One could argue the feeling of intimacy being portrayed since the vocals act as the primary melodies and lead the song into different sections. There is a lack of a lead synthesizer melody like the one heard in *Blinding Lights*. This allows the vocals to attract the most attention throughout the entire song.

To the contrary, the stadium-level grandiosity achieved through reverb provides a distance between the *character* and the listener. Distance is also achieved through the use of autotune and other vocal effects that dehumanize the *character* somewhat. Distance provides alienation from the listener.

Charli XCX has a history of using autotune in varying degrees. The perfectly polished autotuned vocals are what set apart the song from the retro influences it draws upon. The effect of autotune in this song bridges the gap between contemporary rap and pop music, since it is mainly associated with rap. It should however be stated that autotune arrived before its use in rap music. Most notably Cher used the effect heavily on *Believe* which was released in 1998. Nevertheless the effect is most closely associated with modern rap. The influence of rap music in the song gives the *character* less limitations as to what persona may be portrayed. Rap is often associated with the feeling of confidence through major artists of the recent years like Kanye West. This added confidence to Charli XCX's heartfelt ballad provides an extra layer to the *character's* personality. This layer works as a shield, protecting the *character* from her own vulnerability. Autotune is a shield for two reasons. Firstly, the effect fixes imperfections in pitch, meaning that the *character* is presented as a perfect one,

ridding the *character* from showing vulnerability in that sense. Secondly, autotune is used as a robotic effect, removing some of the human element of the *character* and replacing it with a futuristic voice.

This shield of autotune alienates Charli XCX to some extent from the listener. The vast size of the song, caused by reverb, adds to the alienation. It seems Charli XCX is content in sacrificing some relatability and vulnerability for the *character's* other-worldly existence.

The *timbre* of the song, with its open high-end, provides a level of optimism to the heartbreak balad. A sense of liberty is felt, especially in the chorus, when the *character* voice is in a higher register. Without analyzing the lyrics, it feels as though the *character* is ridding herself from heartbreak and a previous lover perhaps. The brightness of the chorus contrasts the darker verses, through the higher register of the voice and harmonic fillers.

4. Discussion

One of the main findings made during the creation of this thesis is the problematization of the concept of retro influence. Upon closer examination of the two songs and their portrayed personas, it is clear that retro aesthetics are used as stepping stones towards a new path. The fusion of 1980's sound aesthetics with contemporary counterparts becomes the new creation. This is at the very least my finding through the two songs analyzed here. It is clear, through modern mixing and autotune, that The Weeknd and Charli XCX still have a desire to move forward in time. Charli XCX is after all a pioneer with a major role in creating the Hyperpop genre, as mentioned earlier.

Simon Reynolds writes in *Retromania*: “Isn’t there something profoundly wrong about the fact that so much of the greatest music made during the last decade sounds like it could have been made twenty, thirty, even forty years earlier?”¹⁵ This narrative is one I actually agree with. I find disappointment in music that overly represents a specific cultural piece of the past. I prefer music that challenges norms over music that stays in specific comfort zones of sound. What differentiates my standing from Reynolds’ is my acceptance for blending retro with contemporary. I find Simon Reynolds to be merely glancing at the surface of certain music like Rap and R&B. These genres are almost by fact the ones that have progressed the most sonically in the last 20 years. Reynolds seems to ignore the extreme influence Rap and R&B have had and keep having sonically and culturally. Barely

¹⁵ Reynolds, S. *Retromania: Pop Culture's addiction to its own past.*, p. xxiii

mentioning some of the most influential artists of the 2000's like Kanye West, Rihanna and Beyoncé is a testament to this.

In part I share Reynolds' frustration with *Retromania* as he calls it, but only to some extent. When understanding both the obvious and more nuanced ways in which *Retro* music includes contemporary influences, appreciation for the style grows. When critiquing music I think it should be analyzed closely. To dismiss a song's contemporary relevance simply because of a 1980's-style beat would be ignorant. It is crucial to the understanding of *Retro* music to listen to all musical factors that contribute to associations.

5. Conclusion

The Weeknd and Charli XCX show numerous dimensions to their personas through the analyzed sound aesthetics. Grandiosity is felt in both *Blinding Lights* and *I Don't Wanna Know*, though the latter reveals more intimacy through the scaled-down production. The Weeknd favors invincibility over vulnerability in his song, but does this through some anonymity. This level of anonymity is achieved through the primary synthesizer melody, the most memorable part of the song. Charli XCX is a vulnerable character when given the most attention through the scaled-down production, yet only to some extent. Vulnerability is challenged by the alienating effect of autotune and grandiosity of the song's reverberation. The typically dark performance persona of The Weeknd brightens somewhat in *Blinding Lights*. He manages to keep the substantial part of his dark sound when recreating 1980's synth-pop, a generally brighter genre in timbre.

The personas built through the sound aesthetics in these songs are neither completely of today nor of the 1980's. These artists may not at all times be sitting on the driver's seat of pioneering. At the same time they do not blatantly copy music of the 1980's. What The Weeknd and Charli XCX achieve is nostalgia in modern shapes.

This attitude of blending old and new is not only successful commercially, but successful in broadening the boundaries of retro stylism.

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