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Patterns And Recurring Themes In The Music Of John Carpenter

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Abstract

Despite being one of the most popular cult film directors of the late twentieth century, very little has been written about John Carpenter's work and even less about the scores that he wrote for his films. Indeed, landmark film scoring texts such as *On The Track* do not even mention his name among the hundreds of other composers they highlight.¹ This research examines Carpenter's film scores and later album work in order to find out what makes his music idiomatic: whether this be through similar musical themes or structures, or prevailing patterns and other consistent stylistic features that appear throughout his work.

The research project starts from Carpenter's film *Dark Star* (1974) and extends to his last feature film *The Ward* (2010) and will include his three *Lost Themes* albums and his scores for other directors, including *Halloween* (2018) and *Firestarter* (2022). It will look at these works and break cues down into basic musical fundamentals such as melody, timbre and rhythm, and also identify where and how Carpenter places these cues in the context of his films. Although the majority of Carpenter's output consists of horror films, with a few exceptions such as *Big Trouble In Little China* (1986), an action film with elements of science-fiction, attention will be paid to how Carpenter uses or dismisses common genre tropes in his writing.

Carpenter's ostinato driven scores differ from the majority of contemporaneous film scores because they seem more akin to the pop and rock music of the time. However, elements of Carpenters scoring style can be seen in the works of composers such as Hans Zimmer and Michael Giacchino. This indicates that Carpenter's scoring style aided in the popularisation of synthesizer-based film scoring and ostinato driven scores. His most heavily recognised cue, the theme for *Halloween* (1979), works around a 5/4 quaver pattern that drops a semitone and then rises again as the bass slowly creeps up a minor third and then a semitone. Carpenter's father originally taught him the quaver pattern on a

¹ Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright, *On The Track: A Guide To Contemporary Film Scoring*, (Abingdon: Routledge, second edition 2004).

pair of bongos when he was a child which he later adapted into the iconic horror theme.² Throughout the research will discover who Carpenter's other influences were and how they affected the writing of his music.

By contextualising Carpenter's work and comparing it to the work of his peers in the film music industry an effort will be made to see how typical of the period Carpenter's scores were. Films such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956), scored by Louis and Bebe Barron, will be compared to Carpenter's body of work as Carpenter's reliance on synthesizer-driven music can be seen as a natural progression from the early electronically scored films.

Key Words: synthesizer, film music, horror, science-fiction, auteur

² Ann Lee, 'John Carpenter on Halloween Kills, Ennio Morricone & how music is the purest art form', *Composer Magazine* (2021), <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/john-carpenter-on-halloween-kills-ennio-morricone-how-music-is-the-purest-art-form> (accessed 31/10/2022).

Patterns and Recurring Themes in the Music of John Carpenter

‘Despite his fanatical fan base, Carpenter is self-deprecating. “I don’t evaluate myself,” he says at one point, when asked about skill as a filmmaker. The comment is made not with false modesty, but rather a disbelief that anyone would take the time to analyze his oeuvre — let alone call it an oeuvre.’¹

Introduction

The stage went dark. The concert venue, which had once been an old church, went silent as the band donned dark sunglasses. Bright light emanated from the screen behind the band, a black-on-white message simply commanding those present to ‘OBEY’ as the band played an opening blues riff of E-E(8va)-E-G-E. The crowd cheered: they recognise this as the main theme of *They Live* (1988).

The gig was devoted to the music of John Carpenter and took place on 21 October 2018, at the Albert Hall in Manchester, England (fig. 0.1). Legions of Carpenter fans all wearing memorabilia and clothing from a wide variety of his films, filled the venue. Even though Carpenter is mainly known for his direction and writing, the gig was purely focussed on his music and was a sell-out.

¹ William Earl, ‘At 75, Legendary Director John Carpenter Isn’t Done Raising Hell in Hollywood’ (2023), <https://variety.com/2023/film/features/john-carpenter-career-interview-director-halloween-the-thing-1235485167/> (accessed 07/03/2023).



Figure 0.1. John Carpenter and his band performing at the Albert Hall on 21/10/2018 (author photo)

Since the release of *Dark Star* in 1974, John Carpenter's films and, more importantly for this research project, his music has been enjoyed by fans across the globe. Carpenter is a film director mainly known for his low-budget horror and science fiction films; in 2010 he retired from his role as a filmmaker and focussed primarily on composition and film scoring in 2015, after a five-year break. As the budgets for the films would often be extremely tight, Carpenter would normally perform multiple roles on the film, from directing to writing or editing, which led to him often being described as an auteur filmmaker.² Yet, in much of the literature about film scores more generally, Carpenter is rarely mentioned as a composer, his work in this field often limited to a paragraph about his score for

² John Carpenter and Todd McCarthy, 'Trick and Treat: John Carpenter Interviewed by Todd McCarthy', *Film Comment* 16/1 (1980), 17.

Halloween (1978).³ The fact that he has often been overlooked as a composer is significant because, as I will argue here, his music is key to the identity of his filmic output. More so this thesis will demonstrate Carpenter's role as an unrecognised pioneer by highlighting how his working practices have been utilised by various composers following him. This thesis analyses what makes Carpenter's music idiomatically his, through his choice of melodic ideas, rhythms and timbres. These aspects all culminate to produce what I determine as the 'Carpenter Sound'. The 'Carpenter Sound' is here defined as a type of music that is predominantly synthesizer-based, uses rock and roll influences (specifically those of the rock and roll ostinato) and is led by a heavy, often heartbeat-like, pulse.

John Carpenter acknowledges low-budget, non-classic cinema as film he himself consumes:

In film school we studied all the classics...I knew right away that with a few exceptions I didn't really enjoy or love any of the classic films...so let's talk about flops and trash. The Poor, The Awful, The Stupid – movies I dearly love and would much rather watch than classics.⁴

This statement implies that he celebrates the idea of his own films being low brow and is surely a defensive move against potential criticism. When asked by *Film Comment* to talk about films that he enjoyed and had influenced him, Carpenter chose to talk about the B movies and 'guilty pleasures' that he had enjoyed going to the cinema to see as a child/teenager.⁵ Carpenter's comments reinforce the idea that these low-budget science fiction or horror films are viewed as not being worthy of critical discussion in the space of a prestigious film school like University of Southern California (Carpenter's alma mater). By describing Carpenter's views as low brow, I echo Ted Cohen's comments on high and low art and high and low audiences, in which when an artist makes a piece of high or low art they then

³ Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright, *On The Track: A Contemporary Guide to Film Scoring*, second edition (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2004); Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 266; Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 316-217.

⁴ John Carpenter, 'John Carpenter's Guilty Pleasures', *Film Comment* 32/5 (1996), 50.

⁵ Ibid.

see themselves as either a high or low artist.⁶ As Carpenter himself infers the difference between high and low art in his comments ('flops and trash' in comparison to 'the classics'), it implies that Carpenter aligns himself with Cohen's comments about there being a separation between high and low art and he positions himself towards the low brow side.⁷ It has been argued that Carpenter may be forgotten in the wider world of American film directors, due to the low brow nature of his films, and critics such as Kent Jones have argued that this should not be the case.⁸

Carpenter's music has often been described in critical reception and broader scholarship with words synonymous with low brow, such as 'fast and cheap', as deployed by David Burnand and Miguel Mera in their article of the same name.⁹ The words 'fast' and 'cheap' also appear frequently in the wider discourse on independent horror and science fiction films, not only those by Carpenter, suggesting a more general perception of these genres as low brow and, by association, also their scores.¹⁰

All of this can be fundamentally incorporated into Carpenter's choice to primarily score with synthesizers throughout most of his career. While synthesized and, more generally, electronic film scores have often received criticism for many reasons, including a perceived lack of musical complexity and the replacement of live musicians,¹¹ Carpenter has, for the most part, chosen to stick with synthesizers as his primary instrument in scoring. As noted above, and further explored below, often both synthesizer-based music and the horror/science-fiction genres have been overlooked by scholars in the period that he was composing, suggesting they're not worthy of analysis. The combination of a

⁶ Ted Cohen, 'High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57/2 (1999), 139.

⁷ John Carpenter, 'John Carpenter's Guilty Pleasures', *Film Comment* 32/5 (1996), 50; Ted Cohen, 'High and Low Art, and High and Low Audiences', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57/2 (1999), 139.

⁸ Kent Jones, 'John Carpenter: American Movie Classic', *Film Comment* 35/1 (1995), 26.

⁹ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Cynthia Lucia and Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, Volume IV (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 35; John Carpenter, 'Halloween – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

¹¹ Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 280-341.

synthesizer score and these genres was something that Carpenter specifically brought together throughout his career, as he became the leading exemplar of this combination. I argue that Carpenter's music – which both uses synthesizers and depicts these genres, and despite their neglect and disdain by scholars – has enjoyed enduring public appeal right up until the present and this research will explore why that might be.

This thesis will situate Carpenter's oeuvre within the wider context of electronic scores in motion pictures during the period that he was composing, i.e., from the 1970s to the present day. Carpenter's career so far can be split into three main periods: 1974-1988, when he produced most of his body of work, starting in independent productions before moving to major studio pictures, and then returning once again to independent cinema until his brief hiatus after *They Live* (1988); 1992-2001, when he returned to the studio system before returning once again to independent pictures; and finally 2015-2022, when he came out of retirement to purely focus on his music with his son Cody Carpenter and his godson Daniel Davies.¹² Each of these periods have been chosen for similar reasons: they all follow a brief hiatus in Carpenter's career, they all take place during important developments in synthesizer based film scoring, and finally the films within each period vary greatly in their levels of critical and commercial success.

This thesis will be split into four chapters accordingly: one for each of these periods of Carpenter's career and an introductory chapter about the wider use of electronics in film scoring aside from Carpenter's films. This first chapter will explore various arguments surrounding the synthesizer including: the description of the 'cold' nature of the synthesizer, the various genres the synthesizer can envelop and the comparison of orchestral film scores and electronic film scores.

¹² Although Carpenter produced three works between 2001 and 2015 (two episodes of the *Masters of Horror* series (2006-2007) and the feature *The Ward* (2010)), he did not contribute to the music on these projects so they will be discussed briefly rather than having their own section.

The second chapter will look at the first period of Carpenter's career, 1974-1988, in depth with four of his films as case studies: *Halloween* (1978), as it is his most popular score and demonstrates many of the archetypes of a Carpenter score; *The Fog* (1980), as it was released soon after the previous film and is also a horror film yet scored much more subtlety than *Halloween*; *The Thing* (1982), as Carpenter did not score most of this film and instead hired Ennio Morricone to create a score very similar to Carpenter's previous work; and finally *Big Trouble In Little China* (1986), because many technological innovations had been made by this point in the world of electronic film scoring which Carpenter embraced for this score.

The third chapter will follow a similar pattern and look at the middle period of Carpenter's career, 1992-2001, a period in which the synthesizer was starting to fall out of popularity, something replicated in the way Carpenter scored his films. The chapter will have three case studies: *In The Mouth Of Madness* (1995), the first film that Carpenter scored himself this period, which starts to bring his rock and roll as well as metal influences to the forefront of his scores; *Vampires* (1998), which divides its score into a synthesizer section and a rhythm-and-blues section; and finally *Ghosts Of Mars* (2001), Carpenter's most poorly received film by both critics and audiences and with a purely metal inspired score.

The final chapter will look at the most recent period of Carpenter's career where he acts solely as a composer after his retirement as a filmmaker. The chapter will look at his *Lost Themes* (2015-22) trilogy of albums and his *Anthology* (2017) album that were the first non-soundtrack albums that Carpenter had released. The chapter will then look at *Halloween* (2018) and *Firestarter* (2022) in depth because they are two of the four films that Carpenter has scored since his return as a composer. Each film varies in its critical and commercial success, the latter of the two not receiving very much of either, and they each display how Carpenter's musical language has evolved since he started scoring films in 1974.

Chapter 1 Scoring With Electronics

I can distinguish three ways of composing music nowadays. The first is well known, that of writing music as I do. It continues. A new way has developed through electronic music and the construction of new sound sources for making music by performing it, rather than writing it. And a third way has developed in recording studios, which is similar to the way artists work in their studios to make paintings. Music can be built up layer by layer on recording tape, not to give a performance or to write music, but to appear on a record.¹

– John Cage 1987

It is important to begin by considering the wider history of scoring films with electronics, so that an understanding of Carpenter's music can be situated within an appropriate context. Scoring with electronics has been a divisive issue for many years among critics, scholars and composers, because of certain advantages and disadvantages that electronics bring. The first of these issues, and perhaps the most frequently discussed, is the supposed 'cold' sound of the synthesizer, compared to the 'warm' sound of acoustic instruments, in particular those of the orchestra.² This was particularly an issue when composers seemingly used synthesizers to replicate acoustic instruments, with the end result lacking when compared to the sounds of the original instruments.³ Some composers have instead sought to use this 'cold' sound to their advantage: for example, Maurice Jarre said that he embraced the 'coldness in the sound' when scoring *Witness* (1985).⁴ The film follows a group of Amish people, for whom music comes from the devil, and so Jarre decided to represent this through the

¹ Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 310.

² Terry Atkinson, 'Scoring with Synthesizers', in *Celluloid Symphonies*, ed. Julie Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 425; Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 267.

³ Richard Davis, *Complete Guide To Film Scoring*, Second Edition (Boston: Berklee Press, 2010), 51.

⁴ Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 312.

'cold' sound that electronics provide.⁵ Elsewhere, Janet Maslin, a critic for the *New York Times*, argued that electronics can be used in horror films as the 'cold' sound can create an 'ominous quality', but that its overuse can be 'numbing'.⁶ She further argues that when used in a different context, such as in *Chariots of Fire* (1981), that the synthesizers can sound 'a little cold, a little impersonal'.⁷

Part of the reasoning for synthesizers being described as 'cold' is they allow for very little spontaneity from a performer. John Barry (composer for many films including *Dr. No* [1960] and *Dances With Wolves* [1990]) argued that he enjoyed working with synthesizers but preferred orchestral scoring as an orchestra gives you a certain spontaneity.⁸ What Barry perhaps meant here was that electronics had to be programmed in by the composer and they would programme each element of the music in separate layers, but an orchestral score is achieved by recording multiple layers at once, and you cannot guarantee it will be note perfect.

Although Maslin has reservations about the score for *Chariots of Fire*, many others did not: it garnered the composer, Vangelis, an Academy Award for his score, only the second time a fully electronic score had won the accolade. The score has been argued to demonstrate the lyrical abilities of synthesizers in film scoring which suggests 'warmth' rather than the 'cold' sound that Maslin argues for.⁹ Vangelis, unlike many film composers at the time, came from a rock and roll background and used this to his advantage.¹⁰ Vangelis used what he knew about the synthesizer from his time playing in bands and releasing solos albums, and exploited this experience to score scenes his own way, rather than how it would be scored by a conventional composer.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Terry Atkinson, 'Scoring with Synthesizers', in *Celluloid Symphonies*, ed. Julie Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 425.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 332.

⁹ Richard Davis, *Complete Guide To Film Scoring*, Second Edition (Boston: Berklee Press, 2010), 49.

¹⁰ Peter Larsen, *Film Music* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005), 175.

When analysing electronic and synthesizer film scores, many scholars and composers have often grouped all such scores into a single genre. However, when listening to film music such as Clint Mansell's score for *Moon* (2009), and comparing it to Giorgio Moroder's score for *Midnight Express* (1978) and Howard Shore's score for *Scanners* (1981), for instance, there are key differences between how each of these scores sound. Roger Hickman argues that there are 'three principal styles of synthesizer music:

- Modern: In keeping with its original association with electronic music, the synthesizer can be used to create an electronic score with new colours
- Traditional: Using its ability to imitate acoustic instruments, the synthesizer can replace the sound of an orchestra, create the sounds of individual instruments within an orchestra (piano, harp, drums, etc.) or augment the sounds of an instrument family in a recording, such as the violins. In these roles, the musical style imitates the traditional sounds of postromanticism
- Popular: Largely through its association with rock musicians, the synthesizer has become an important element of the popular music film score'¹¹

The three categories listed above can each be described using Hickman's three principles. *Moon* has a score by Mansell, who started his musical career in a band called Pop Will Eat Itself.¹² The band split up and Mansell moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in film composition, but he had no formal musical training, only the musical knowledge he acquired while he was with his band.¹³ Technology allowed Mansell to become a composer as DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) enabled him to play the music directly into the programme through MIDI and edit it from there on.¹⁴ Mansell's background perfectly fits Hickman's description of 'popular' synthesizer scores, as he was a rock musician who

¹¹ Roger Hickman, *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2006), 358.

¹² Sound of Cinema: The Music That Made the Movies, New Frontiers, 23:00 07/07/2018, BBC4, 60 mins, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/05B420DE?bcast=127049449> (accessed 21/06/2023).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

used his previous experience to craft his film scores. A specific example would be the opening cue from *Moon*, titled 'Welcome To Lunar Industries' on the film's accompanying soundtrack,¹⁵ which features a main ostinato focussed on B and Bb in octaves and a four-chord repeating bass part, that then repeats throughout. All of these elements – ostinatos, ostinatos in octaves and four-chord patterns – are typical of rock music and thus fit Hickman's description.

A score such as Howard Shore's for David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981), which follows a group of 'scanners' who are able to use their telepathic abilities for good or evil, would fit more into Hickman's categorisation of a 'modern' synthesizer score. *Scanners* contains a score that uses textural electronics – sine, square and saw waves – to create sounds that do not imitate other acoustic instruments, but instead create tonalities of their own. Shore remarked that he had access to synthesizers that he didn't really understand and thus spent many hours improvising on them to create themes, melodies and textures that he would record on a cassette recorder and then edit later on.¹⁶ Shore also remarks that his score for *Scanners* contains 'more pure electronics: pink noise and white noise, static' that derived from the Elektronische Musik movement, popularised by composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen, that was eventually replaced with the 'pre-packaged sound' that came about with modern synthesizers and Wendy Carlos' album *Switched-on Bach*.¹⁷ Carlos would later go on to score Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) by recording synthesized versions of classical music by composers such as Purcell and Beethoven.¹⁸ This type of 'pure electronic' sound is what dominated scores for early science fiction films, namely Louis and Bebe Barron's score for *Forbidden Planet* (1956). *Scanners* uses the synthesizer to replicate these sounds, thus placing it in Hickman's 'modern' category.

¹⁵ Clint Mansell, *Moon (Original Score)*, Black Records CMCD001, 2011, CD.

¹⁶ Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 339.

¹⁷ *Op Cit*, 340.

¹⁸ Pauline Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 27-28.

Hickman's final category of synthesizer music is the type that has fuelled the 'cold' and 'warm' sound debate due to its imitation of acoustic instruments. Moroder's score for *Midnight Express* (1978) does exactly this: the synthesizer is used to replicate the sounds of an acoustic orchestra rather than create new electric tonalities. However, it is with a score like *Midnight Express* or the previously discussed *Chariots of Fire* that Hickman's categorisation starts to fragment as both scores, under Hickman's descriptions, emulate acoustic instruments. This would mean that they should be listed as 'traditional', but both composers came from a rock and roll/disco background thereby also putting them in the 'popular' category that Hickman has described. As such it is worth stating that Hickman's categories here have only been used as a guide for the wide range of styles of synthesizer scores. The argument here is that there are instead two important factors when listening to an electronic score: whether the electronics work in a more timbral sense (i.e., the use of 'pure electronics' in *Forbidden Planet*) or whether they work in a more melodic sense (i.e., the use of synthesizers as a key melodic instrument in *Midnight Express*).

Another frequently discussed aspect of synthesizer music is its relation to the genre of the film it is accompanying. Due to the synthesizer's ability to create futuristic sounds, the instrument has often been associated with the science fiction genre, ever since electronics were used as the sole instrument on *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Carpenter cites his first viewing of *Forbidden Planet* as the moment he knew he would score with electronics.¹⁹ The score was created by Louis and Bebe Barron on early synthesizers that Louis had created: machines that contained oscillators, filters and ring modulators, all part of the core components of a modern synthesizer.²⁰ The couple built a score for the film remotely from their studio in Greenwich Village, New York while the production was based in

¹⁹ Ed Condran, 'John Carpenter waxes about his new album and his time shooting 'The Ward' in Spokane' (2021), <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/feb/04/john-carpenter-waxes-about-his-new-album-and-his-t/> (accessed 07/03/2023).

²⁰ Gergely Hubai, *Torn Music: Rejected Films Scores* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 2012), 30.

Hollywood.²¹ This marked the first time that MGM had contracted for a score produced outside of Hollywood; this was mainly because the equipment the Barrons used was ‘large and cumbersome’, so having to move it to the west coast would have required a great amount of effort and expense.²² Already the score proved that electronics had an advantage over orchestral scores in the fact that they could be completed remotely, across the span of the entire continent and only required two people to work on them. Despite the fact that the film was a pioneer in the world of film music, the Barrons were treated with animosity by most of Hollywood; they weren’t accepted into the American Federation of Musicians or eligible for an Academy Award for their work and they weren’t credited for the music for *Forbidden Planet*, they were instead credited with ‘Electric Tonalities by’.²³ This treatment of the Barrons set an early precedent for electronic scores versus the studio system. I argue that the treatment of the Barrons in this way foreshadowed Hollywood’s disdain for electronic scores until the time of *Midnight Express* and *Chariots of Fire*.

A much earlier example of an electronic film score was Miklós Rózsa’s score for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945), in which Hitchcock wanted Rózsa to use a new sound that hadn’t been used in any of the scores for his previous films.²⁴ Rózsa chose to use the theremin, invented by Leon Theremin two decades previously, and integrated it within an orchestral setting which hadn’t been seen frequently in the world of film scores.²⁵ Rózsa used the theremin to symbolise John Ballantyne’s (Gregory Peck) mental attacks that would plague him throughout the film.²⁶ Bernard Herrmann would

²¹ Ibid.

²² Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 268.

²³ Gergely Hubai, *Torn Music: Rejected Films Scores* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 2012), 31.

²⁴ Sound of Cinema: The Music That Made the Movies, New Frontiers, 23:00 07/07/2018, BBC4, 60 mins, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/05B420DE?bcast=127049449> (accessed 21/06/2023).

²⁵ Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 311.

²⁶ Sound of Cinema: The Music That Made the Movies, New Frontiers, 23:00 07/07/2018, BBC4, 60 mins, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/05B420DE?bcast=127049449> (accessed 21/06/2023).

also use electronics to symbolise psychological disturbances in later films that he composed that were not directed by Hitchcock.²⁷ Between *Spellbound* and *Scanners* there is a continuing theme that electronics are used to symbolise the powers of the mind, which Carpenter also exploits. *Spellbound* was a commercial and critical hit, winning the Academy Award for Best Score that year, the first time a score with electronics had done so. However, the score was only partly electronic and the theremin was not used on its own: it was also doubled by acoustic instruments such as the violin. The theremin then went on to become a staple of science fiction films like *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), scored by Bernard Herrmann. Russell Lack argues that the theremin in Herrmann's score is 'a source for sound effects' where there are 'two theremins duelling dementedly' throughout the score.²⁸ Lack calling the theremin 'a source for sound effects' diminishes the theremin's status as a musical instrument, as it implies that the instrument is not capable of carrying melodic or harmonic responsibilities and it can only create sounds used to accompany visual cues.²⁹ *Forbidden Planet* also blurs the distinction between score and sound effect, with diegetic sounds such as the spaceship flying and doors opening sounding very similar to the non-diegetic tonalities of the score.

Spellbound was not the only time that Hitchcock would push the boundaries of electronic scores; the score for *The Birds* (1960) also highlights another argument revolving around electronic scores: what constitutes music and what constitutes sound design? Many at the time did not realise *The Birds* had a musical score and in a sense it does not: the musical track is taken up purely by sampled bird sounds performed on the Trautonium (an early sampler).³⁰ Although there could be an argument that the samples of birds are sound design rather than a musical score, Hitchcock argued that 'if you put music to a film, it's just another sound really', and argued that the bird sounds are what make the movie

²⁷ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 211.

²⁸ Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 311.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 200.

scary rather than having a more traditional musical score in their place.³¹ *Forbidden Planet* also frequently blurs the line between sound design and music, as the same tonalities that are used for the nondiegetic score are also used for the diegetic sounds of the space ship and doors opening and closing.

Scholars such as Lack have similarly argued that synthesized scores have ‘blurred the dividing line between music and sound effects and even dialogue’, leading to a different relationship between the film and the music.³² Indeed, the synthesizer was used throughout the 1970s to create sound effects for films such as George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Ben Burt, who was the sound effects designer on *Star Wars*, used ‘a synthesizer for the first time’ when creating the sound effects for the film.³³ Yet in *Star Wars* there is a large orchestral score by John Williams, leaving no confusion as to what is sound effect and what is music. *Apocalypse Now*, however, blends the sound effects and music much more subtly, especially in scenes such as the helicopter charge on the beach where the rotor blades of the helicopters blend with ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ by Richard Wagner.³⁴ The sound effects here heighten the music and add an extra layer of dramatism to the already dramatic opera score. Although the Wagner piece is scored for orchestra, the film contains three types of music throughout: pre-existing classical music, pre-existing songs by The Doors and a synthesizer score by Coppola’s father Carmine Coppola. The latter of these has received criticism over the years for the way the score has aged over time with critics calling it ‘dated’ and ‘tinny’.³⁵ This is because technology evolves at an accelerated rate compared to traditional musical instruments, so the difference of twenty years of progress is much more noticeable on a

³¹ Sound of Cinema: The Music That Made the Movies, New Frontiers, 23:00 07/07/2018, BBC4, 60 mins, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/05B420DE?bcast=127049449> (accessed 21/06/2023).

³² Pauline Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 24.

³³ Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 319.

³⁴ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 428.

³⁵ Murray Leeder, *Devil’s Advocates: Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2014), 11.

synthesizer than it is on a violin, for instance. There is a scene in *Forbidden Planet* in which Dr Morbius plays some music for Commander John J. Adams with the preface that 'this [music] was made by Krell musicians half a million years ago'. The diegetic music that the audience hears is no different from the non-diegetic score composed by the Barrons. This suggests that even though the Barron's music was a pioneer in film-scoring, they believed that, in years to come, this type of electronic music would not be as outlandish as it once was.

Finally, throughout this chapter, many arguments have been condensed to comparing an electronic score to an orchestral one. The major argument surrounding this is the question of whether a synthesizer is able to achieve the same level of 'prestige' as an orchestral score and frequently the synthesizer has been condemned as not at the same level of 'prestige'.³⁶ For example, when Christopher Young was hired to score the second *A Nightmare On Elm Street* film, *Freddy's Revenge* (1985), he was asked by Robert Shaye (founder of New Line Cinema and producer for the series) to write an orchestral score for the film as it would 'lift the film's production value'.³⁷ The first film, *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984), was scored by Charles Bernstein and contained a fully electronic score that Bernstein recorded by himself in his studio.

By associating an orchestral score with a higher 'production value', Shaye has inadvertently described synthesizer scores as being cheaper and less prestigious than a full orchestra. And this is exactly what Thomas Newman (composer for films such as *American Beauty* [1999] and *Finding Nemo* [2003]) described as the thoughts of many directors in Hollywood.³⁸ Newman argues that directors see orchestral music as a sort of 'ritual' for making films and that it's a way of 'bringing class' to the film, even if he does not necessarily agree with the statements.³⁹ As such an electronic score could be seen

³⁶ Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

³⁷ *Op Cit*, 340.

³⁸ *Op Cit*, 272.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

as breaking away from this 'ritual' and upsetting the standard of a Hollywood film. This 'ritual' also acts as a reliable source of income for many orchestral session musicians who wouldn't be needed if the score was performed by electronics. This has led to many further grievances with electronic scores and enhances Newman's point that Hollywood has a standard for how the industry expects film scores to sound and electronics create an exception to this sound.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 267.

Chapter 2 Heyday: 1974 – 1988

This chapter explores Carpenter's most prolific period for both his film direction and compositions. During this period Carpenter directed eleven feature films, two made-for-TV movies, produced and wrote two sequels to *Halloween* (1978), and composed the music for eleven of these projects. By far his most prolific period of work, Carpenter applied his love for rock and roll music to the synthesizer, creating what can be defined as the distinctive 'Carpenter sound'.

Carpenter's first feature film was released at the start of this period entitled *Dark Star* (1974). It was made in collaboration with Dan O'Bannon – who would go on later to write *Alien* (1979) – during their time at USC film school. *Dark Star* also marked the first time that Carpenter would compose a score for a feature film featuring various synthesizer beeps and boops that blur the line between diegetic sound effect and non-diegetic score. *Dark Star* received a lot of criticism for the music particularly in the way it did not develop over the course of the film;¹ this is a criticism that would plague many of Carpenter's scores throughout this period. However, *Dark Star* was not Carpenter's first foray into film music: this was his Academy Award winning short film *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy* (1970) that tells the story of a young man who is weary of the big city and dreams of being a cowboy in the old West like in the films he had watched. The 21-minute film doesn't feature any synthesizers but instead features guitar, harmonica and whistling, all in a country-and-western style. It ends with a song titled 'Broncho Billy' very much in the style of songs that appear in John Wayne westerns such as *True Grit* (1969) or *El Dorado* (1966). When *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy* won the Academy Award for Best Short Film (Live Action) the music that played behind the acceptance speeches was orchestral instead of music similar to Carpenter's score for the film. This further enhances the argument that orchestral music is the Hollywood 'ritual'.²

¹ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 51.

² Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

Halloween (1978)

Halloween brought Carpenter's filmmaking and his music to the mainstream. Although not an immediate success the film slowly rose to prominence after strong word-of-mouth recommendations and favourable reviews from Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert. *Halloween* takes place in Haddonfield, Illinois on Halloween Night as Michael Myers, who murdered his sister when he was six years old, returns to the town after escaping prison to terrorise babysitters, including Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis).

As previously noted, Carpenter's music for *Halloween* is the most frequently discussed of his scores, perhaps due to the film's commercial success and widespread appeal; the love for the film has translated to love for the score. Perhaps another reason for it being so widely discussed is because it was the first of its kind, a slasher film with a low budget that went on to spawn a whole host of imitators.³ Part of this success is down to the main theme for the film, marked by a 5/4 ostinato over a low bass synthesizer that uses its irregular metre to disorient the audience (fig. 2.1). The main theme is deeply rooted in minimalist practises: a recurring ostinato that adds layer upon layer of music as the piece progresses. Stan Link argued that the growing trend of minimalism in film music started with the use of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* (1972) in William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), which took minimalism from the concert hall – by composers such as Philip Glass, John Adams and Steve Reich – and attached it to the genre of horror.⁴ Carpenter's music has been frequently described as minimalist yet Carpenter himself denies that he is influenced by any of these minimalist concert composers and is only primarily 'influenced by three composers mainly: Bernard Herrmann,

³ Murray Leeder, *Devil's Advocates: Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2014), 15; Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 278.

⁴ Stan Link, 'Horror and Science Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 202.

Bernard Herrmann and Bernard Herrmann. He got the most out of the least means.’⁵ Carpenter expands this latter point by referencing Herrmann’s score for *Psycho* which was scored using only a string orchestra.⁶ As Carpenter has rejected the influence of minimalism, this could suggest that Carpenter’s love for the ostinato could instead have come from silent film music, wider film scoring or perhaps even opera or ballet where ostinatos are prevalent.

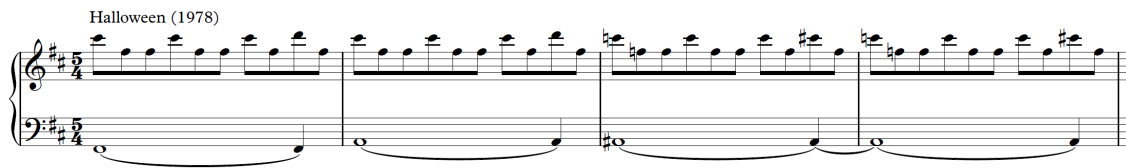


Figure 2.1. *Halloween* Main Theme (author transcription)

Isabella Van Elfren, a scholar in the field of sound and horror, has argued that ‘horror film and television are more bearable with the sound turned off’ and *Halloween* is a prime example of this.⁷ Carpenter has frequently discussed how the score made the film much more frightening for its audiences.⁸ He showed the first cut (a cut before the music was written) to a young executive from 20th Century-Fox, who wasn’t scared by the picture when she saw it; after the music had been composed and the final cut completed six months later the same executive saw it and was terrified by it, even though music was the only thing that had changed between the cuts.⁹ As Van Elfren argued, the music added the layer of fear and dread to the film that affected the viewer.

⁵ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 337; Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 316-317; Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 176.

⁶ John Carpenter, ‘Halloween – Soundtrack’ (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

⁷ Isabella Van Elfren, ‘Sonic Horror’, *Horror Studies* 7/2 (2016): 1.

⁸ John Carpenter, ‘Halloween – Soundtrack’ (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

⁹ Ibid.

The argument for synthesizers blurring the lines of music and sound design, as discussed earlier, evolves in *Halloween* as Burnand and Mera argue that the screeching synthesizer sounds heard throughout the film are a symbol for a woman screaming.¹⁰ They argue that the opening musical motifs emulate the screams of Michael's sister when she is murdered by him.¹¹ Burnand and Mera's argument regarding the synthesizer 'screaming' suggests a less obvious use of synthesizer sound design than the diegetic beeps and boops of spaceships in science fiction and more a symbolic use of sound design. They argue that this is a novel contribution of Carpenter, although a pre synthesizer form of this has existed in classical programme music for example. It is not different to the manner in which composers such as Claude Debussy used sounds as symbols – in the first movement of his symphonic sketch *La Mer*, using harp arpeggios to symbolise the movement of water in the sea.

Carpenter's music has not warranted scholarly scrutiny in the way that Debussy has due to the low brow context of Carpenter's music; Debussy's symphonic sketch filled elegant concert halls, while Carpenter has been cast as a lowbrow slasher director both by critics and by his own admission.¹² A closer example to Carpenter of this symbolic sound design is the infamous shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), scored by Bernard Herrmann. The 'screeching' violins could symbolise both the downwards motion of the knife, as the bows of the violins are also used in a downwards motion, and also Marion Crane's screams, as the violins are playing notes near the range of a female scream.¹³

Compared to the present day, synthesizers appeared in a much different form when the score for *Halloween* was composed. Carpenter, along with *Halloween* musical creative consultant Dan

¹⁰ Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1997), 319; Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 58.

¹¹ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 58.

¹² Cynthia Lucia and Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, Volume IV (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 35; John Carpenter, 'John Carpenter's Guilty Pleasures', *Film Comment* 32/5 (1996): 50.

¹³ John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 15.

Wyman, who had worked with Carpenter previously on *Assault On Precinct 13*, had to tune the synthesizers individually and had to create sounds themselves rather than use synthesizer samplers, as the first of these were due to be released a year after *Halloween's* premiere.¹⁴ Carpenter also had to score the film in what he dubs the 'double-blind mode' as he was unable to sync the tape machine to the picture at the time.¹⁵

As previously discussed, the synthesizer has been described frequently as a 'cold' sounding instrument lacking the 'warmth' that acoustic instruments provide.¹⁶ There have been arguments from Roger Hickman and Murray Leeder that the music used in *Halloween* represents Michael's 'cold' and 'ruthless' nature.¹⁷ The 'machine' nature of the synthesizer has also been compared to 'killing machines, which appear to be highly efficient (perhaps like the machines of the synthesizers)'.¹⁸ Where the use of the synthesizer has drawn criticism for its lack of 'warmth' in films such as *Chariots of Fire*, Carpenter's choice to score with electronics here suits the character of the story and enhances his use of symbolism in the music, the 'cold' nature of the synthesizer matching the 'cold' nature of Myers as a ruthless killer.¹⁹ Randall D. Larson also argues that, although the score

¹⁴ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016); Megan Lavengood, 'What Makes It Sound '80s? The Yamaha DX7 Electric Piano Sound', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31/3 (2019), 76.

¹⁵ John Carpenter, 'Halloween – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

¹⁶ Terry Atkinson, 'Scoring with Synthesizers', in *Celluloid Symphonies*, ed. Julie Hubbard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 425.

¹⁷ Roger Hickman, *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2006), 359; Murray Leeder, *Devil's Advocates: Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2014), 50.

¹⁸ Stan Link, 'Horror and Science Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 203.

¹⁹ Terry Atkinson, 'Scoring with Synthesizers', in *Celluloid Symphonies*, ed. Julie Hubbard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 425.

is 'devoid of any orchestral warmth', the music creates a sense of terror that only the synthesizer is 'equipped to evoke'.²⁰

Hitchcock was another director who also used electronics as symbols (the theremin in *Spellbound* [1945] as previously discussed) and his film *Psycho* (1960) has often been used as a comparison for *Halloween*.²¹ Part of this may be the naming of Dr. Loomis (Sam Loomis is a character in *Psycho*), the casting of Janet Leigh's daughter Jamie Lee Curtis and Carpenter's affection for the films of Hitchcock and the scores of Bernard Herrmann.²² Herrmann's influence can be heard in the main theme for *Halloween* when the theme moves down a semitone in a 'Herrmannesque' way.²³ Randall D. Larson argued that most synthesizer music owes its stereotypes to Herrmann's style of scoring, in particular the slow-moving chord progressions and the soft beginnings of pieces that grow in force and fade out again.²⁴ Although this second example is not specific to synthesizer music – many pieces start softly, grow and then fade – both examples can be seen in the main theme for *Halloween*. The piece only changes chord each bar, which at 136bpm in 5/4 can be considered 'slow' and the piece works like many minimalist pieces by starting softly and adding layers until a final fade out.

The score for *Halloween*, like the score for *Dark Star*, drew criticism for its lack of musical development and was also called a 'pedestrian' score by some reviewers.²⁵ Part of this could be due to the fact that Carpenter scores each scene individually rather than creating a basis for the score as

²⁰ Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 281.

²¹ Cynthia Lucia and Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, Volume IV (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 168.

²² Ibid; Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 176.

²³ *Op Cit*, 59.

²⁴ Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 267.

²⁵ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 60; John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 72.

a whole and prefers to use the sounds of the synthesizer to achieve continuity.²⁶ Carpenter will then create ‘three, four or five pieces of music that you put in various places’ throughout the film.²⁷ Arguably this criticism is also rooted in the fact that Carpenter’s style of scoring is heavily influenced by both rock and roll ostinatos and minimalist scoring rather than conventional Hollywood scoring methods of the time. That is not to say that ostinatos are not commonplace in conventional Hollywood scoring, quite the contrary, the ostinato is a common business practice in Hollywood however they are usually implemented into larger pieces or larger orchestrations which is where Carpenter differs. As Carpenter becomes rooted in ostinato based scoring it can have the tendency to seem repetitive if the ostinatos are overused. However, even between *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Halloween*, Carpenter’s musical development advances; in *Assault on Precinct 13* Carpenter only really uses three pieces of music (the main theme, the Fender Rhodes theme for Julie and the high pitch synthesizer drone when the gang attacks the station) whereas in *Halloween*, Carpenter expands the number of different cues he uses to seven separate musical elements. As Carpenter’s experience progressed the extent to which he would develop his scores would also progress.

Although the score for *Halloween* received some criticism, the score and film itself gave birth to a whole host of imitators looking to cash in on the success of Carpenter’s film. Many of these scores would replicate Carpenter’s musical style by having a low bass synthesizer drone with a high piano melody on the top.²⁸ A non-exhaustive list of these imitators includes: *He Knows You’re Alone* (1980), *The Boogey Man* (1980), *Maniac* (1981), *Graduation Day* (1981), *Student Bodies* (1982).²⁹ As the list of imitators would suggest, although Carpenter and his music may not have been worthy of

²⁶ John Carpenter and Peter Jason, ‘Commentary’, Disc 1, *Prince of Darkness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1987 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018).

²⁷ Daniel Griffith, ‘Retribution: Uncovering John Carpenter’s The Fog’, Disc 2, *The Fog*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1979 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018); John Carpenter and Austin Stoker, ‘Interview with Write and Director John Carpenter and Austin Stoker’, *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016).

²⁸ Randall D. Larson, *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Film Music in the Fantastic Cinema* (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1985), 282.

²⁹ *Op Cit*, 282-283.

critical debate at the time he certainly witnessed its popularity with the sheer number of people trying to copy his success. In the years since *Halloween's* release the score has also affected music not written for film including Dr Dre's 'Murder Ink' from his hit record *2001*, which samples the main ostinato from the *Halloween* theme but changes it to a 4/4 time signature. Dr Dre was a great admirer of the film and because of this he hired Howarth (who would write the music for the next five *Halloween* sequels) to compose introductory music for a few music videos including 'Murder Was The Case'.³⁰

The Fog (1980)

Carpenter's next feature film after *Halloween* was the first of a two-picture deal with Avco Embassy titled *The Fog* (1980). *The Fog* is presented to the audience as a ghost story, where we learn about the night that a mysterious fog containing the ghosts of pirates returns to Antonio Bay to enact their revenge. The score for *The Fog* continued Carpenter's collaboration with Dan Wyman who had programmed and tuned the synthesizers in both *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Halloween*.³¹

Carpenter has argued that his music acts as a 'carpet' for the film:

Well, what I do in a movie is carpet the scene so that you watch them and my music supports the sequences – so it's like a carpet in that sense. I come in and I'm like a guy who carpets your house. I put down carpet on the floor, and you walk across it and it's very comfortable.³²

³⁰ Alan Howarth, 'BBC Interview' (2019), <https://alanhowarth.com/interviewspodcasts/> (accessed 15/04/2023).

³¹ John Carpenter, 'The Fog – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/the-fog-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

³² Lanre Bakare, 'John Carpenter: 'Could I succeed if I started today? No. I'd be rejected'' (2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/oct/10/john-carpenter-interview-anthology-film-scores> (accessed 03/10/2022).

On the commentary for *Prince of Darkness* (1985), Carpenter expands this statement by arguing that there are two types of scoring films: underscoring and mickey-mousing.³³ While there have been definitely more than two ways of scoring, Carpenter argues that Max Steiner and John Williams are prominent mickey-mouse composers, writing music that aligns with every action on screen whereas Bernard Herrmann, especially in his score for *Vertigo* (1958), does not score every action but more supports each scene with generous underscore.³⁴ Carpenter argues that he sees himself as more of the latter, providing a stable base for each scene rather than scoring each action individually.³⁵

Carpenter's comments are not entirely correct, however. Williams, for example, uses underscore in *Star Wars* (1977) when C-3PO and R2-D2 cross the Tatooine desert to a cue reminiscent of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) and Herrmann uses mickey-mousing in the previously discussed shower scene in *Psycho* first with the violins being cued when the shower curtain is pulled back and then the style of the piece changing when Mairon Crane dies. Carpenter's comments act more as a generalisation of the different ways a composer can score a scene and where he views his compositions to fit in these categorisations. Although Carpenter says that he primarily underscores and lays down the 'carpet' for the scene that have been many instances where he uses mickey-mousing in his scores, especially in *Halloween* and *The Fog*.³⁶ Carpenter's comment could also suggest how he perceives himself musically. He compares his art to that of a trade (in this instance carpeting) perhaps implying that he views his music as effective rather than artistic. He also distances himself from prominent composers that he admires in Steiner and Williams, perhaps suggesting that he also does not perceive himself as being a composer to the same degree.

³³ John Carpenter and Peter Jason, 'Commentary', Disc 1, *Prince of Darkness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1987 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lanre Bakare, 'John Carpenter: 'Could I succeed if I started today? No. I'd be rejected'' (2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/oct/10/john-carpenter-interview-anthology-film-scores> (accessed 03/10/2022).

K.J. Donnelly argues that Carpenter's film music can be dissected into separate categories: repeated themes, atmospheric music, 'stingers' that usually accentuate violent action, 'heartbeat'-like pulses and repeated ostinatos or drones.³⁷ In a film like *Halloween* this is clearly evident as there is a strong main theme, a theme for Laurie Strode, a stinger for when Michael is seen on camera and a variety of drones to create atmosphere. Comparatively, *The Fog* contains all of these aspects too, but with a higher emphasis on the drones and atmospheric music than on the repeated themes. This is not to say that *The Fog* does not have repeated themes throughout the film; on the contrary, there are two main themes that can be heard particularly over the opening shots and when Andy Wayne finds a piece of driftwood with the word 'DANE' inscribed on it. The 'stingers' that Carpenter uses are the mickey-mousing he employs in his score, which is arguably most notable when Myers appears on screen in *Halloween* (fig. 2.2), or in the white-noise 'stingers' that occur in *The Fog* when the fishermen are murdered by the pirates. In Carpenter's viewpoint these 'stingers' simply act as the 'carpet' that supports the narrative of the film, even though they are mickey-mousing.

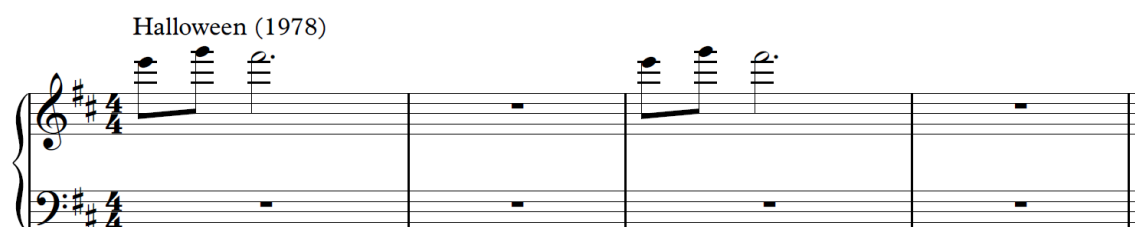


Figure 2.2. *Halloween* 'Stinger' (author transcription)

These categories of Carpenter's film music by Donnelly closely aligns with Van Elferen's categorisation of Hammer Horror film music.³⁸ Van Elferen argues that Hammer Horror films have an 'enormous and repetitive supply of leitmotifs, stingers, and musical forebodings of danger' that can

³⁷ K. J. Donnelly, 'Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980)', in *Music in the Horror Film*, ed. Neil Learner (New York: Routledge, 2010), 154.

³⁸ Isabella Van Elferen, 'Sonic Monstrosity', *Horror Studies* 7/2 (2016), 14.

be 'referred to as a musical reference bank for future horror-film composers'.³⁹ There is just scope to believe that Van Elferen's 'musical forebodings of danger' could either be the 'drones' or 'heartbeat-like pulses' that Donnelly prescribes to Carpenter's music as these elements of Carpenter's music are often used to build tension and suspense during heightened moments of the film.⁴⁰

Carpenter's scores are, more often than not, written on a short turnaround due to the fast pace of the post-production of his films. This often means that only one version of the score is made as there is little chance to re-score the picture before its release. *The Fog* is an exception to this however, as the first cut and score for the film did not work as Carpenter commented: 'The movie I had made was clunky, clumsy and awful. The music was heavy-handed and obvious.'⁴¹ The film was then completely remade in post-production with extra scenes being shot, a new cut and a completely new score being written for the film. Carpenter described the new score as: 'What was missing from both the movie (the first, aborted version) and [its] score – a lightness of tone, a softer understated fear – was achieved.'⁴² Nothing remains of the original score to *The Fog* so it cannot be analysed and compared to the new score here.

In 1982, two years after *The Fog's* release, Terry Atkinson discussed the advent of the new-found popularity of synthesizer scoring and considered questions about what the future of film scores looked like because of it.⁴³ Atkinson opens his argument by stating that synthesizers had long been used by rock bands and their popularity rose with their use in both *Midnight Express* and *Chariots of Fire*; even though *Halloween* was the most profitable feature by this point in history (in terms of

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid; K. J. Donnelly, 'Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980)', in *Music in the Horror Film*, ed. Neil Learner (New York: Routledge, 2010), 154.

⁴¹ John Carpenter, 'The Fog – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/the-fog-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Terry Atkinson, 'Scoring with Synthesizers', in *Celluloid Symphonies*, ed. Julie Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

gross profit compared to budget) and *The Fog* had continued to embed Carpenter's name in households across the globe, no mention of either are made in Atkinson's article.

The Thing (1982)

After working on *The Fog* (1980) and *Escape From New York* (1981), Carpenter's next directorial feature came in the form of *The Thing* (1982), which was Carpenter's first big studio film and the first of his 'Apocalypse Trilogy' of unconnected films that deal with the end of the world (*Prince Of Darkness* and *In The Mouth Of Madness* are the latter two in this trilogy).⁴⁴ *The Thing* followed a group of research scientists in Antarctica as they dealt with a shape-shifting alien intent on infecting the entire planet. For the first time in his feature-film career, Carpenter did not score the film, as he was not permitted to by the studio, and instead hired composer Ennio Morricone of whom Carpenter admitted he was a big admirer.⁴⁵

This was not the first time that Carpenter had been prevented from scoring his own film: during the making of his TV film *Elvis* (1979) Carpenter had to hire Joe Renzetti for an orchestral score as he wasn't allowed to score the film himself due to a decision by studio executives.⁴⁶ Renzetti recalls that because Carpenter was keen to do the score himself he would treat Renzetti harshly because of the decision made by the studio executives.⁴⁷ Although it is not known exactly why Carpenter wasn't permitted to do these two scores, it is reasonable to suggest that it adds to the argument of a synthesizer score being at odds with the 'ritual' of Hollywood film music and thereby not being as prestigious as orchestral score.⁴⁸ This is because the studios would have known by this point that Carpenter would have opted for the synthesizer instead of expanding his instrumentation choices

⁴⁴ John Carpenter and Gary B. Kibbe, 'Commentary', *In The Mouth of Madness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1995 (Hamburg: Warner Bros Germany, 2013).

⁴⁵ John Carpenter and Kurt Russell, 'Commentary', *The Thing*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1982 (Universal City: Universal, 2017).

⁴⁶ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 68.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

and so asked Carpenter to hire composers that would create orchestral scores to increase the prestige of each of the pictures.

Although the score here was not composed by Carpenter, it reveals some of his attitudes to scoring and the synthesizer when he is not writing the music. In a tribute to Morricone, Carpenter stated that the studio did not want him to score the film himself and Stuart Cohen (co-producer) suggested Morricone instead.⁴⁹ Although Morricone had experience in scoring with electronics, his first score for *The Thing* was fully orchestral. Daniel Schweiger, a film music historian, argued that this was because it was Carpenter's first studio film where he had a considerable budget at his disposal and, as Carpenter was a huge admirer of westerns, he could afford the man who scored Segio Leone's *Dollars* trilogy (1964-66).⁵⁰ However, this fully orchestral score wasn't what Carpenter wanted in order to achieve the dark mood of the film, so he played Morricone his score for *Escape From New York* and asked him to compose something like that.⁵¹ This led to Morricone hiring a synthesizer player and doing his own version of a Carpenter score.⁵² Still unsatisfied, Carpenter asked Alan Howarth (who he collaborated with on *Escape*) to help him compose five or six cues one afternoon, based on tone clusters, that he then inserted in the film.⁵³ This suggests that, even though his career was still young, Carpenter's sound as a composer was already identifiable enough for him to request a more established composer, such as Morricone, to emulate it.

⁴⁹ Clark Collis, 'The Thing director John Carpenter remembers the 'inestimable genius' of Ennio Morricone' (2020), <https://ew.com/movies/ennio-morricone-john-carpenter-the-thing/> (accessed 19/03/2023).

⁵⁰ Daniel Griffith, 'Who Goes There? In Search of The Thing', *The Thing*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1982 (Universal City: Universal, 2017).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Carpenter commented: 'All I said to him was, 'fewer notes'. If you see *The Thing*, the ultimate theme is the result of our conversation: really simple, synth driven, effective'.⁵⁴ Reflecting back on the film in 2014, Carpenter's comment about working with Morricone gives an insight into how he views music for his films. It implies that Carpenter perceives his music as more rhythmically driven (like a lot of synthesizer music) rather than being based around complex melodies. The end result of the main theme centres around a pulsating bass synthesizer that resembles the rhythm of a heartbeat (fig. 2.3) which has been a frequently used symbol and a trope in horror films since Universal Picture's *The Bride Of Frankenstein* (1935). Carpenter's music has often been compared to heartbeats by scholars regarding scores such as *Prince of Darkness* (1986), which Allen Malmquist described as 'taking command of your heartbeat'.⁵⁵ *They Live* (1988) has a score that has been described as 'throbbing' and 'repetitious', such that the music 'can plug into your heartbeat like the bass line on a video game'.⁵⁶ And finally K. J. Donnelly has compared Carpenter's bass pulse to heartbeats in his score for *The Fog* (1980), which Carpenter himself also highlights in the liner notes for the soundtrack album of *The Fog*.⁵⁷ Where screeching synthesizers in *Halloween* were argued to symbolise screaming, Carpenter's use of the lower end of the sonic spectrum has been argued to be a symbol in itself. Anne Billson argues that in *The Thing* the heartbeat suggests life 'but not necessarily as we would want to know it'.⁵⁸ Here she suggests that the 'heartbeat' pulse in the main theme suggests *The Thing* itself, a creature that, through the score, remains alive throughout the entirety of the film.

⁵⁴ Kory Grow, 'The Thing': Ennio Morricone and John Carpenter's Thriller Soundtracks Get Special Rereleases' (2020), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-thing-ennio-morricone-and-john-carpenters-thriller-soundtracks-get-special-rereleases-981073/> (accessed 19/03/2023).

⁵⁵ John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 133.

⁵⁶ *Op Cit*, 143.

⁵⁷ K. J. Donnelly, 'Hearing Deep Seated Fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980)', in *Music in the Horror Film*, ed. Neil Learner (New York: Routledge, 2010), 154; John Carpenter, 'The Fog – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/the-fog-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

⁵⁸ Anne Billson, *BFI Film Classics: The Thing*, Second Edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 32.



Figure 2.3. *The Thing* Main Theme Bass Pulse (author transcription)

Carpenter's comment above also suggests that he was trying to influence Morricone to write a Carpenter-style score instead of a standard Morricone score. This is something Billson also agreed with when she wrote that it was 'almost as though Morricone had studied the scores for' the Carpenter films that came before *The Thing*.⁵⁹ As with *Elvis*, *The Thing* displays how much control Carpenter actually wanted on the music. He hired Morricone, a very talented composer with a wide range of compositional styles, then influenced him to write a minimalist score filled with Carpenter traits.

Carpenter initially gave Morricone very little direction in how to score the film, so Morricone wrote several cues in different musical styles, one of these unused cues being instead employed as the basis for the orchestral score of Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015) which went on to win the Academy Award for Best Score in 2016.⁶⁰ This further enhances the idea that Carpenter's synthesizer scores were low brow and not critically acclaimed at the time, as Morricone's synthesizer music for *The Thing* was not considered for any awards; yet an orchestral cue taken from the scoring of *The Thing* can win Academy Awards.

Big Trouble in Little China (1986)

One of the last big-studio based features made by Carpenter during this period was *Big Trouble in Little China* which, like many of his films, has amassed a cult following in the decades since its

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Kory Grow, "The Thing': Ennio Morricone and John Carpenter's Thriller Soundtracks Get Special Rereleases' (2020), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-thing-ennio-morricone-and-john-carpenters-thriller-soundtracks-get-special-rereleases-981073/> (accessed 19/03/2023).

release.⁶¹ *Big Trouble in Little China* tells the story of Jack Burton, a truck driver, who must rescue his friend's fiancé from the evil sorcerer David Lo Pan in the setting of Chinatown. The film had a troubled production process with many involved in the film often citing Barry Diller, a studio executive who originated from Wall Street rather than the creative arts, as a disruptive influence who would ask Carpenter to change various aspects of the film.⁶² Nevertheless the film's score, which was the first of the big-studio films scored by Carpenter, was able to further expand the 'Carpenter Sound' and make use of the newest technological evolutions in electronic scoring.

A notable difference between the score for *Big Trouble* and the three previously mentioned films is the addition of Howarth in a collaborative roll in the music department. Howarth and Carpenter had worked together since their first meeting on *Escape From New York* (1981) which was Howarth's first time working on a film score. He got the job after a recommendation from the film's editor Todd Ramsey as they had both worked together on *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), with Howarth creating the sound effects for the film on synthesizers.⁶³ Howarth was hired for *Star Trek* as Paramount needed someone who knew how synthesizers worked and Howarth, at the time, was working as the synthesizer and keyboard technician for Josef Zawinul (of Weather Report fame) during his live shows.⁶⁴

Howarth's partnership with Carpenter would last for seven years in total with Howarth contributing with the programming of the synthesizers, adding the drum machine patterns, and adding extra sequenced textures.⁶⁵ Howarth commented on this: 'So I created the palette that is the sound of

⁶¹ Michael Blyth, *Devil's Advocates: In The Mouth of Madness* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2018), 8.

⁶² Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 172.

⁶³ Alan Howarth, 'BBC Interview' (2019), <https://alanhowarth.com/interviewspodcasts/> (accessed 15/04/2023).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Daniel Griffith, 'Purgatory: Entering John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*', Disc 2, *Escape From New York*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1981 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018).

John Carpenter starting from *Escape From New York* through to *They Live*'.⁶⁶ Howarth's comment gives valuable insight into the working process of Carpenter as it exhibits how during this seven year period many of the instrumental and timbral decisions would start with Howarth rather than Carpenter. In contrast, Schweiger commented that Howarth's partnership with Carpenter allowed Carpenter to be freed more as a musician.⁶⁷

The score was recorded at Howarth's Electric Melody studio that contained a full MIDI set up.⁶⁸

Howarth commented:

First, we'd create a pattern of notes that you hold down on the keyboard...Then the computer would pick through these notes on its own, randomly or in sequence. And once you've heard the rhythm it's come up with, you respond to it with your own melody, and build on top of the music. In the end, the film becomes an electronic colouring book, where you're adding layers and layers of digital samples. But it was always the images, and characters that drove the sounds we selected from the instruments.⁶⁹

MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) was a very important advance in the world of electronic scoring as it allowed synthesizers to connect to each other and also drum machines and computers.⁷⁰ MIDI would also allow composers to edit the music they played on the computer and re-arrange sections or notes or perhaps add new sections all together. Howarth's comment about how Carpenter and himself would use MIDI also demonstrates how Carpenter would use improvisation in his scores and also in his films. When shooting the film Carpenter commented that he wouldn't stick to storyboards and would instead allow the shots to be dictated by what the actors

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 338-339.

⁶⁹ *Op Cit*, 337.

⁷⁰ Roger Hickman, *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2006), 359.

did and how they would improvise around the script.⁷¹ Carpenter would also improvise most of his scores, saying that he wouldn't come up with anything beforehand except on a few special cases and come up with most of the score while watching the edited footage.⁷² One of the key reasons Carpenter chose to improvise his scores is because he wasn't able to read or write music.⁷³ Improvising film scores is not a novel invention by Carpenter however; early silent film scores would often have had improvised scores by a piano (or small band) accompaniment at screenings. The evolution of MIDI would have proved undoubtedly useful for Carpenter as it meant that he could review the music without the need for a score. The flexibility of timbre that the synthesizer provides also proved advantageous when scoring *Big Trouble in Little China* as Carpenter did not want to recreate Chinatown in melodic ideas or rhythms but instead recreate it in timbre.⁷⁴

Hans Zimmer also shares a few similarities with Carpenter as he also composes his sketches on the synthesizer. Unlike Carpenter however, the sketches are later expanded into 'a basic electronics-plus-orchestra formula' that has been met with much criticism over the past few years.⁷⁵ In a damning review of Zimmer and Klaus Badelt's score to *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Curse Of The Black Pearl* (2003), Christian Clemmensen wrote that the sketches for the cues are 'a useless, meandering collection of stock action cues with few cohesive elements of any significance' and these cues are 'heavily mixed in the bass region'.⁷⁶ When these sketches are then expanded into the 'electronics-plus-orchestra' formula the live instruments aim to replicate the synthesizer cues that are more

⁷¹ John Carpenter and Kurt Russell, 'Commentary', *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

⁷² John Carpenter and Peter Jason, 'Commentary', Disc 1, *Prince of Darkness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1987 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018).

⁷³ John Carpenter and Todd McCarthy, 'Trick and Treat: John Carpenter Interviewed by Todd McCarthy', *Film Comment* 16/1 (1980), 19.

⁷⁴ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 337.

⁷⁵ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 499.

⁷⁶ Christian Clemmensen, 'Review Of The Soundtrack Album To *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pear*' (2007), http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/pirates_caribbean.html (accessed 15/09/2023).

geared towards the bass region.⁷⁷ The end result then, in Clemmensen's view, creates an unbalanced mix, in which the final track is much more heavily geared towards the bass region, leaving little room for melodies in the mid-level or higher registers.⁷⁸ Clemmensen has a strong, seemingly trenchant opinion against this type of score labelling it as 'synthetic crap' in the review, as such it is worth comparing his viewpoint to one less visceral.⁷⁹

The composer Mark Isham – known for his scores on *A River Runs Through It* (1992), *Once Upon A Time* (2011-18) and *The Mist* (2007) – also commented on the nature of the 'electronics-plus-orchestra' movement, especially in the thriller genre.⁸⁰ His viewpoint is that the synthesizer provides the 'rhythmic drive' while the orchestra is overlayed to give it 'that big Hollywood quality', once again leaning into Thomas Newman's idea that the orchestra is a 'ritual' in Hollywood film music.⁸¹ Isham describes the music as having 'a very utilitarian role. It's just there – it's just churning along'.⁸² The words 'churning along' suggested a lack of melody driving the piece, which links it to Clemmensen's arguments above.⁸³ However, although Carpenter's music has received much criticism over the years, very little of the criticism has revolved around the lack of melody and is more to do with the simplicity of the music.⁸⁴ This suggests that, although Carpenter's music may be simple, it

⁷⁷ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 499; Christian Clemmensen, 'Review Of The Soundtrack Album To *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pear*' (2007), http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/pirates_caribbean.html (accessed 15/09/2023).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 499.

⁸¹ Ibid; Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

⁸² Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 499.

⁸³ Ibid; Christian Clemmensen, 'Review Of The Soundtrack Album To *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pear*' (2007), http://www.filmtracks.com/titles/pirates_caribbean.html (accessed 15/09/2023).

⁸⁴ John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 72.

achieves what Zimmer's music cannot and works musically in a smaller format and does not need to be orchestrated into the full Hollywood 'ritual'.⁸⁵

Although *Big Trouble in Little China* takes place in the modern day it wasn't originally conceptualised as so; the first iteration of the script took place in the Wild West until W. D. Richter (the screenplay writer) saw the success of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) being set in the modern day and decided to rewrite the script.⁸⁶ Carpenter was a big fan of Howard Hawks' films and there is little doubt that his influence can be found in the film, from the strong female characters to the male bond that is developed through Burton and Wang Chi.⁸⁷ Although this Hawks influence can be found in the body of the film, its influence on this particular score is less direct than in later Carpenter films, notably *Vampires* (1998).

As previously mentioned, westerns would frequently have songs relating to the title of the film; a memorable moment of the score for *Big Trouble in Little China* is the end credits song of the same name written and performed by Carpenter's band the Coupe De Villes comprising Carpenter, Nick Castle, and Tommy Lee Wallace. Carpenter originally wanted to use ZZ Top's 'Just Got Paid' over the end credits but due to how much the special effects on the film cost they could no longer afford the rights.⁸⁸ Carpenter stated that he persuaded 20th Century Fox to allow them to shoot a music video for the song and the studio obliged but said it must be shot in a single night.⁸⁹ The band were able to do so, and the video was eventually broadcast on MTV to help with promotion of the film.⁹⁰ In the video Carpenter is seen to be playing a Hofner bass guitar, Castle a Yamaha DX7 keyboard, Wallace a

⁸⁵ Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

⁸⁶ John Carpenter and Kurt Russell, 'Commentary', *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

⁸⁷ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016).

⁸⁸ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 338.

⁸⁹ John Carpenter, 'Return to Little China – Interview With John Carpenter', *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Les Paul Junior guitar and all three men sharing vocal responsibilities.⁹¹ Kurt Russell once stated that he didn't recognise it was Carpenter singing as it was much lower than his usual vocal range.⁹² Perhaps this is because Carpenter was trying to impersonate the low vocals of ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and, although they do sound slightly different, the riff for Carpenter's song and the ZZ Top track feel very similar (fig. 2.4). Carpenter frequently used rock and roll music as temp music when scoring films so there is a high likelihood that when he realised he wasn't able to afford the ZZ Top song, that he would create his own variation on it.



Figure 2.4(a). Big Trouble in Little China Song Ostinato (author transcription)



Figure 2.4(b). ZZ Top 'Just Got Paid' Ostinato (author transcription)

Conclusion

To conclude, this period introduced Carpenter as a filmmaking auteur and, more importantly here, as a composer with a strong identity mainly due to rock and roll influenced synthesizer scores. The choice of the synthesizer allowed Carpenter to lower the budget of his films, as he could compose them with only an additional person, while giving his scores a strong identity as he cemented the idea of synthesizer scores and horror/science fiction films.

⁹¹ John Carpenter, 'Music Video', *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

⁹² John Carpenter and Kurt Russell, 'Commentary', *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

Chapter 3 Middle years: 1992 – 2001

The next period in John Carpenter's career is defined here as 1992 to 2001 as those are the release dates of the films he made after his short four-year hiatus (1988-1992) and before his first retirement (2001-2010). This period is one in which Carpenter returned to studio-produced films, directed his first sequel for one of his own films, and started to see a decline in critical and audience reception of his films. Musically, this period in Carpenter's career saw him start to move away from the fully synthesized score and instead begin to integrate more elements of rock, blues, and metal into his scores; he also commissioned more orchestral scores from other composers during this period than other sections of his career.

1992 saw Carpenter exit his brief hiatus and return to the studio system with *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992) starring Chevy Chase and Sam Neill. The film was not a financial or critical hit and Carpenter often talks of the troubles he had trying to get the film made.¹ However, it was the first of two occasions on which he would collaborate with composer Shirley Walker (the second being *Escape From L.A.* [1996]), who had provided an orchestral score to give *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* a sense of prestige. This was the first major Hollywood commission for a female composer, once again displaying how Carpenter doesn't adhere to Hollywood's modus operandi.²

Although the film's predecessor, *Escape From New York* (1981), had worked well with an electronic score, Carpenter now succumbed to the 'ritual' of film scoring by commissioning an orchestral score.³ Unlike *The Thing* (1982) or *Elvis* (1978), for *Escape From L.A.* and *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* Carpenter was not forced to obtain an orchestral score, which suggests that by this point in his career Carpenter was leaning more towards traditional film scoring rather than his own Carpenter sound.

¹ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 339.

² Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 491.

³ Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999), 272.

Walker remarked that Carpenter had wanted to score the *Escape* sequel with synthesizers, but decided against it when he remembered how well the orchestral sound worked with *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*.⁴ She also added that Carpenter had no interest in doing the orchestral scoring himself.⁵ Although Carpenter had some orchestral experience through playing the violin as a child and watching his father play in the Nashville Symphony Orchestra, he never forayed into the world of orchestral scoring. This suggests that this type of music was outside his comfort zone, or too labour-intensive for him, to score pictures himself by this point in his career.

In The Mouth of Madness (1995)

The first feature film Carpenter scored himself since *They Live* (1988) was *In The Mouth of Madness* (1995), Carpenter's attempt at a film inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Rebecca Janicker argued that Carpenter aimed to rely on creating a 'Lovecraftian atmosphere' and 'evoke particular moods' rather than follow any of the source material closely.⁶ The film was written by Michael De Luca (who also wrote the sixth *Nightmare on Elm Street* film for New Line Cinema) and follows John Trent (Sam Neill), an insurance investigator, who is assigned with investigating Sutter Cane, a horror novelist reminiscent of Stephen King. This leads him to the town of Hobbs End where very Lovecraftian mysteries unfold. The film opened to very lacklustre reviews, not untypical of Carpenter's oeuvre, and slowly gained a cult following over the years that followed.⁷ Michael Blyth argued that the film was much better than it was given credit for at the time and that the poor reception was partly due to the film being released at a period of marked unpopularity for US horror cinema.⁸ He argued that the 1990s were host to 'the most significant lulls that US horror cinema had been witness to', due to a

⁴ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 339.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rebecca Janicker, 'Visions of Monstrosity: Lovecraft, Adaptation and the Comics Arts', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 26/3 (2015), 473.

⁷ Michael Blyth, *Devil's Advocates: In The Mouth of Madness* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2018), 8.

⁸ *Op Cit*, 13.

multitude of factors including the dominance of the horror sequel that started in the 1980s and that saturated the market to the extent that by the start of the 1990s audiences had lost interest in the genre.⁹ To combat this many directors started creating horror pictures with higher production values, A-list stars and leaned more towards the psychological thriller genre rather than the gory slashers of the 1980s.¹⁰ Films such as *Silence Of The Lambs* (1991) swept award seasons while notable horror directors such as Sam Raimi explored other genres such as westerns in *The Quick And The Dead* (1995), crime thrillers in *A Simple Plan* (1998) and superhero films in his *Spider-Man* trilogy (2001-03).

In 1995, the year in which *In The Mouth of Madness* was released, Carpenter himself argued that horror needed to 'turn a new corner' and needed 'a redefining of the horror film', which he tried to do with this new film.¹¹ Blyth argued that this 'redefining' came in the form of the meta horror movement, where the characters in the film would be aware of the tropes of horror films and actively combat them while also paying homage.¹² The first of these was *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), which moved the antagonist, Freddy Krueger, from the film world to the real world of the actors and writer/director Wes Craven. The film was a minor commercial and critical hit, but Craven's next film, *Scream* (1996), was the film that truly started the meta horror movement. *Scream* was a major commercial and critical hit and brought new life to the genre, but Carpenter wasn't able to capitalize on this for *In The Mouth of Madness* due to his film being released a year earlier than Craven's. In recent years it has been argued that *In The Mouth Of Madness* has built a large cult following as it was too far ahead of the curve at the time it was released.¹³ Blyth argues that *In The Mouth of Madness* 'anticipated the meta of *Scream* but in a more sophisticated think-piece' way and it didn't have the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Op Cit*, 15.

¹¹ *Op Cit*, 16.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ William Earl, 'At 75, Legendary Director John Carpenter Isn't Done Raising Hell in Hollywood' (2023), <https://variety.com/2023/film/features/john-carpenter-career-interview-director-halloween-the-thing-1235485167/> (accessed 07/03/2023).

identifiable villain that *Scream* had in Ghostface which is why it didn't perform anywhere near as well commercially or critically.¹⁴

In terms of the music of the three films – *Scream*, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* and *In The Mouth of Madness* – Carpenter's film stands out due to its use of his distinctive electronic sound. Although *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* contains electronic cues based upon the original themes from Charles Bernstein's score for the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the score is predominately orchestral, most probably in an attempt to achieve the 'higher production value' that Robert Shaye was looking for in the score to the second film. *Scream* follows suit in having an orchestral score by Marco Beltrami who is a specialist in the genre and is often typecast as such, yet Carpenter decided to score *In The Mouth of Madness* himself (with the help of Jim Lang) in his typical electronic style.

Although the majority of the score is written for and performed by synthesizers, the literature surrounding the film has been concerned primarily with the main title theme that centres on an electric guitar rather than a synthesizer.¹⁵ Audiences, too, had started to notice the trend in the 1990s: of Carpenter starting to prioritise the electric guitar over the synthesizer in his scores. At an audience Q and A with Carpenter and the actor Austin Stoker in 2002, an audience member asked whether there was any particular influence that led the auteur to explore scoring with guitar. Carpenter replied that he didn't agree with the question as his last four or five films were '90% keyboard orientated'.¹⁶

Part of this misinterpretation by audiences could be that the main title, centred around the electric guitar, is the most prominent piece of music in the film and there is very little distracting from the music during the opening montage. The opening scene of the film sees books being printed while the main theme plays thereby drawing the audience's attention to the music as there is very little in the

¹⁴ Michael Blyth, *Devil's Advocates: In The Mouth of Madness* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2018), 18.

¹⁵ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 62.

¹⁶ John Carpenter and Austin Stoker, 'Interview with Write and Director John Carpenter and Austin Stoker', *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016).

way of dialogue or sound effects to compete with the score. Carpenter would often use temp tracks while scoring his films, but instead of using music from other films or his own previous work, he would use rock and metal songs as temp music. For the main theme to *In The Mouth of Madness* Carpenter chose a similar piece, this time Metallica's 'Enter Sandman', as a temp track for the main theme.¹⁷

A key example of Carpenter's use of temp tracks previously is in the main theme to *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), where Carpenter said that he used Led Zeppelin's 'Immigrant Song' as a temp track, and the similarities can be seen in the rhythm of the guitar in the Led Zeppelin song and the rhythm of the bass synthesizer in the Carpenter piece.¹⁸ The similarities of the temp track and final Carpenter score in *In The Mouth Of Madness* are much closer than in the theme to *Assault on Precinct 13*, predominantly due to the instrumentation. Where, in the previous example, Carpenter's use of rock and roll techniques came across in the rhythm and the use of ostinatos, he stayed with the usual instrumentation of synthesizers, continuing the Carpenter sound. *In The Mouth of Madness*, however, not only uses heavy metal techniques with strong rhythms and power chords (root-fifth-root) harmony, but it also incorporates the instrumentation of heavy metal and forgoes the classic Carpenter sound because of it.

A key similarity between the main theme and the majority of the Carpenter sound is its use a strong pulse, like the 'heartbeat' pulse discussed earlier in *The Thing*.¹⁹ However, this key rhythmic drive, seen so often in Carpenter's music, is absent from the rest of the score, with the addition that there are no memorable themes apart from the main theme, which never returns throughout the film. Although *In The Mouth of Madness* boasts a very different soundtrack to his previous films, Carpenter

¹⁷ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 62.

¹⁸ John Carpenter and Austin Stoker, 'Interview with Write and Director John Carpenter and Austin Stoker', *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016).

¹⁹ Anne Billson, *BFI Film Classics: The Thing*, Second Edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 32.

never mentions it during the DVD commentary with Gary B. Kibbe (the director of photography) and instead focusses on how the lighting and filming for each shot was achieved.²⁰

A key aspect of Carpenter's scores not yet discussed is his use of pre-existing music in the soundtracks to his films and how he uses popular songs to create a sense of irony in his films. A notable example is in his debut, *Dark Star* (1974), where the song 'Benson, Arizona' plays over the final scene where Doolittle (an astronaut on the now-destroyed ship) surfs through space on a piece of debris towards a planet. 'Benson, Arizona' is a country-and-western song with lyrics by the film's special effects artist Bill Taylor, which Carpenter set to music. The song was suggested by Taylor who thought the 'sappy country ballad would underline the absurdity of the humour perfectly'.²¹ The song also provides many other layers than simply underlining the humour as it also reflected the men of the ship on a more human level.²² Where Carpenter's synthesized score relates to the electronics in space and on board the ships, 'Benson, Arizona' is much more human, being performed by a guitar and voice, and thereby becomes much more personal to the characters than the synthesized score, creating a distinction between what is human and what is machine. Burnand and Mera also point out that country-and-western music often deals with subjects of loneliness and there is no greater example than men who are thousands of miles away from their home, isolated in space.²³ However, it is evident that if the entire score was comprised of such music then this moment would lose most of what makes it culturally relevant: it is the direct comparison of the country-and-western music to the synthesized score that adds these extra layers of meaning to the song.

²⁰ John Carpenter and Gary B. Kibbe, 'Commentary', *In The Mouth of Madness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1995 (Hamburg: Warner Bros Germany, 2013).

²¹ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 20.

²² Daniel Griffith, 'Let There Be Light: The Odessey of 'Dark Star'', *Dark Star*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1974 (Iver: Fabulous Films Ltd, 2012).

²³ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 55.

Similarly, in *In The Mouth of Madness*, Carpenter uses a song by The Carpenters to add a sense of irony towards the start of the film. 'We've Only Just Begun' plays over the loudspeakers of the institute that Trent is being kept in at the start of the film, to which Trent cries out: 'oh no, not The Carpenters!'. Blyth argues that the song adds a level of humour to the scene, as it gives Trent 'the chance to express his director's name with obvious disdain' and shows that Carpenter is in control of the film and that the horrors of the film have only just begun.²⁴ This use of music adds to the earlier argument that *In The Mouth of Madness* was a precursor of the nascent meta-horror movement, but in a more subdued sense. Where a film such as *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* makes the meta-horror elements overt (having Craven face off against Freddy, his creation), Carpenter chooses a more subtle approach by including the meta-horror elements in the soundtrack. An approach like this is very subtle, which could be why it wasn't popular with mainstream audiences or critical reception.

Vampires (1998)

As the 1990s drew to a close, Carpenter decided to tackle a subject matter that had often intrigued him: that of the vampire movie. Vampires had often been a staple in horror cinema from Bela Lugosi's turn as *Dracula* (1931) to the Christopher Lee-led Hammer Horror productions of *Dracula* (1958-73), and to the resurgence of vampire movies in the late 1980s and 1990s with films such as Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1980). Although vampire movies had become a saturated market by the late 20th Century, Laura Wyrick has argued that going back to vampires, in a market where new villains appear all the time, can seem 'refreshing'.²⁵ In turn, Carpenter's response to the vampire-movie genre was not preoccupied with darkly lit castles and well-known names such as *Dracula* and *Van Helsing*, but instead infused Carpenter's love for the western genre with a group of vampire slayers. This fusion of western and horror had been done a couple of years prior in the film *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), written by Quentin Tarantino and directed by Robert Rodriguez, which followed a pair of criminals on

²⁴ Michael Blyth, *Devil's Advocates: In The Mouth of Madness* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2018), 81.

²⁵ Laura Wyrick, 'Horror At Century's End: Where Have All The Slashers Gone?', *Pacific Coast Philology* 33/2 (1998), 124.

the run to Mexico, when they find themselves in a bar full of vampires. Both *From Dusk Till Dawn* and *Vampires* create similar atmospheres and also have similar soundtracks, preferring to symbolise the south of America through blues rather than use an orchestral score, typical of previous vampire movies.

Carpenter's *Vampires* (1998) is adapted from the John Steakley novel 'Vampire\$' and follows Jack Crow (James Woods), a vampire slayer, as he hunts down Valek (Thomas Ian Griffith), a vampire master, who has murdered the rest of his vampire-slaying crew in Texas, where the entirety of the film is based. The film was made for a relatively modest budget of around \$20 million, which is an increase on the budgets for Carpenter films of the past, but still much smaller than the big budget films of the late 1990s.²⁶ The score for *Vampires*, when listened to out of context, may seem like a departure from Carpenter's typical method of scoring but, when listened to in detail, many of Carpenter's idiomatic types of scoring appear. The score also boasts the fact that it is one of Carpenter's only award-winning scores: it won the Saturn Award for Best Score in 1998.²⁷

Vampires, in effect, contains two Carpenter scores, one a rhythm-and-blues score, which Carpenter dubs 'Roadhouse Blues' on the DVD commentary and which dominates the first half of the film, before returning for the end credits;²⁸ and the other a more stereotypical Carpenter score revolving around the synthesizer, and which dominates the second half of the film. However, both scores are distinctive as coming from Carpenter. This is not the first time that Carpenter had drawn on the rhythm-and-blues or country-and-western music: for example, *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy* (1970) or *They Live*. The latter of these used blues music to create the downtrodden atmosphere of L.A. in the Reagan

²⁶ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Vampires*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1998 (Bordon: Powerhouse Films Ltd, 2019).

²⁷ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 261.

²⁸ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Vampires*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1998 (Bordon: Powerhouse Films Ltd, 2019).

years.²⁹ For the most part, vampire movies until this point had been scored with gothic-inspired orchestral music with the key exception of the previously mentioned *From Dusk Till Dawn*, which uses a blues score similarly to Carpenter's film. As *From Dusk Till Dawn* was released two years prior to *Vampires* there is a likelihood that Carpenter would have watched the film and been inspired by its soundtrack. There is no specific evidence of this, however.

The blues score was performed by a blues supergroup that Carpenter put together for the film, consisting of Steve Cropper (guitar), Donald V. 'Duck' Dunn (bass), Rick Shlosser (drums), Jefferey 'Skunk' Baxter (electric guitar, dobro and steel pedal guitar), Joe Robb (saxophone), Bruce Robb (Hammond B3 Organ), E. 'Bucket' Baker (drums and percussion) and John Carpenter (keyboards, piano, guitar and bass).³⁰ This collective was aptly named 'The Texas Toad Lickers' by Carpenter, due to Carpenter's low brow humour and the film's setting of Texas, who performed on three tracks on the official soundtrack: 'Slayers', 'Motel Sex' and 'Cruel Highway'.³¹ The rock trio Stone (who only released one album in 1999) also contribute 'Teaser' to the official soundtrack in the same vein as The Texas Toad Lickers sound, but it did not feature in the final cut of the film.

The main blues theme of the film, titled 'Slayers' in the soundtrack album,³² is very similar to the main themes from *They Live* (1988) and *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). Both *They Live* and 'Slayers' centre around E minor, a particularly good key for blues as it is the most comfortable key on a standard tuned guitar, and features heavy improvisation over a continuing riff. Across the three themes, Carpenter's preference for rhythmic and melodic ideas becomes apparent. Although the three films are different in tone, style of score and were scored across three decades of technological evolution their main

²⁹ Daniel Griffith, 'Subversion: Exposing John Carpenter's *They Live*', Disc 2, *They Live*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1988 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018).

³⁰ John Carpenter, 'Vampires – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/vampires-soundtrack/> (accessed 20/01/2023).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

musical underpinning remains very similar (fig. 3.1). There is a preference to move in minor thirds, between E and G or A and C, for example, and the rhythmic idea emphasises the third degree of the scale for a longer period than the tonic (less evident in *Assault On Precinct 13*).



Figure 3.1(a) – Ostinato for *Vampires* ('v' symbol notates guitar string bend) (author transcription)



Figure 3.1(b) – Ostinato for *They Live* (author transcription)



Figure 3.1(c) – Ostinato for *Assault on Precinct 13* (author transcription)

Although 'Slayers' could be argued to be the main theme of the film (due to its repeated use throughout the film and its hummable riff), it isn't the theme chosen for Carpenter's *Anthology* album.³³ The theme for the film chosen for that album is titled 'Santiago', which appears in the second half of the score and was inspired by a piece from Howard Hawk's *Rio Bravo* (1959).³⁴ As previously mentioned, the second half of the score is composed primarily on synthesizer, with brief addition from

³³ John Carpenter, 'Anthology' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/anthology/> (accessed 22/01/2023).

³⁴ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Vampires*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1998 (Bordon: Powerhouse Films Ltd, 2019).

Jeff Baxter on the steel pedal guitar. For this score Carpenter started using the Korg Workstation synthesizer, which allowed for onboard sequencing and saving pre-set sounds. 'Santiago', like the majority of the score for *In The Mouth of Madness*, lacks a strong, clearly defined pulse that is typical of many of Carpenter's other themes found in the *Anthology* album.

Ghost of Mars (2001)

Ghosts of Mars (2001) was the last feature film that Carpenter made before his second hiatus and is often argued to be the worst of Carpenter's films and also Carpenter's scores.³⁵ The film is told through a series of flashbacks and follows the story of how a team of police officers in the 23rd century on Mars must transport a prisoner, Desolation Williams (Ice Cube), to a different facility. As they arrive, they find the colony has been taken over by the vengeful ghosts of Mars that possess the dead and seek to cause harm to the police group. The film has received much criticism and Tom Whalen has argued that the film uses various aspects of previous Carpenter films (possession and an outside entity), yet it 'refuses to conform completely to any of its generic conventions...or even to the conventions of a Carpenter film'.³⁶ This lack of convention could be why the film received such negative reviews; by this point in Carpenter's career the audience were expecting a certain type of film which *Ghost of Mars* did not provide.

The film features a very different style of score compared with Carpenter's previous films as he infuses the score with the metal genre, in a similar way to his use of heavy rock for *In The Mouth Of Madness* and rhythm-and-blues in *Vampires*. To achieve this, Carpenter hired certain metal and rock guitarists (Steve Vai, Buckethead, Elliot Easton [The Cars], Robin Finck [Nine Inch Nails]). He also reappoints the drummer E. 'Bucket' Baker who previously worked on the *Vampires* score, and hired the whole of the

³⁵ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 267.

³⁶ Tom Whalen, "This is About One Thing – Dominion': John Carpenter's 'Ghost of Mars'", *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30/4 (2002), 304-306.

bands Anthrax and Stone.³⁷ Perhaps one of the reasons for Carpenter forming this metal supergroup was to attract increased soundtrack album sales. This was becoming a common practice in film music during the start of the twentieth century. Joseph Tompkins argued that the metal music heard at the start of *Freddy v Jason* (2003) relates the soundtrack to the film, thereby increasing profits for both parties.³⁸ Although Carpenter would benefit from the soundtrack sales anyway, creating a soundtrack full of popular metal artists at the time would be expected to have led to an increase in sales to metal fans, who would not have necessarily bought a synthesizer-based Carpenter soundtrack. Another reason for this shift to metal could be the surge in popularity for the nu-metal genre during the late 1990s and early 2000s with artist such as Slipknot, Limp Bizkit and Korn for example. Effectively Carpenter wanting to cash in on one of the most popular sounds of the time. Contrarily, *Ghost of Mars* is the only film released before Carpenter's retirement that does not feature on his *Anthology* album.³⁹ The reason for this is unknown.

During this period of Carpenter's career, more composers started composing in a similar way to Carpenter: music written and performed at the computer using electronics on a lower budget. A similar example to Carpenter would be Charlie Clouser's score to *Saw* (2004) which was composed electronically, on a very tight deadline (five weeks in total) and features a memorable theme in 'Hello Zepp'.⁴⁰ The 'Hello Zepp' theme, although different in timbre to Carpenter's music, shares many traits of Carpenter's themes for his films: the main melody works upon a repeating ostinato based around a D minor stepwards motion, thereby making use of the semitonal tension between the perfect

³⁷ John Carpenter, 'Ghost of Mars – Soundtrack' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/ghost-of-mars-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

³⁸ Joseph Tompkins, 'What's The Deal With Soundtrack Albums? Metal Music And The Customized Aesthetics Of Contemporary Horror', *Cinema Journal* 49/1 (2009), 66.

³⁹ John Carpenter, 'Anthology' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/anthology/> (accessed 22/01/2023).

⁴⁰ Scott Wampler, 'The Sound Of Violence: An Interview With SAW Composer Charlie Clouser' (2021), <https://www.fangoria.com/original/charlie-clouser-interview-part-1/> (accessed 25/09/2023); Sean Wilson, 'Charlie Clouser on locating the sound of the Saw' (2023), <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/charlie-clouser-on-locating-the-sound-of-the-saw> (accessed 30/06/2023).

second and the minor third. Both the use of minimalism and semitonal movement are traits of Carpenters that are seen throughout his music, the main theme for *Halloween* (1978) being a key example. Clouser noted that he was heavily influenced by Carpenter's music, citing *Halloween* as one of his three favourite scores, and because of this used the same equipment Carpenter used including the Prophet V and Jupiter 8.⁴¹ However, because he was using the same equipment and was so influenced by Carpenter's work, Clouser deliberately avoided using any of the same timbres as Carpenter as he argued it would be too 'tongue-in-cheek' and so incorporated the nu-metal and industrial elements into his scores.⁴²

Similarly, standardly orchestral film composers also started to use electronics to create a mock version of the final score that they could then show to the director before recording the music with a full orchestra. This meant that any changes that the director wanted could be easily fixed by altering the MIDI rather than re-writing the music during the recording session with the orchestra waiting; it saved composers and studios time and money. A key advocate of this type of scoring was Danny Elfman (composer for films such as *Spider-Man 2* [2004], *The Corpse Bride* [2005] and *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* [2005]), who argued that when MIDI evolved to the point that he was able to 'block everything out accurately' and then 'print the notation from it', this saved him 'about six hours' of work' every day, thereby allowing him to focus more on the writing of the music rather than the notating of it.⁴³ Although Carpenter's music remained in the digital format rather than being notated and performed by live performers it is important to note how his use of MIDI from 1986, as seen in *Big Trouble In Little China*, paved the way for these later developments in wider film scoring.

⁴¹ Eric Allen, 'Masters Of Score: An Interview With Horror Composer Charlie Clouser' (2017), <https://vintageking.com/blog/2017/10/charlie-clouser> (accessed 25/09/2023).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Amon Warmann, 'Danny Elfman on the evolution of MIDI, composing ideas on voice notes & Tim Burton (2022)', <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/danny-elfman-on-the-evolution-of-midi-composing-ideas-on-voice-notes-tim-burton> (accessed 30/06/2023).

As previously mentioned, *Ghosts of Mars* was the final feature film Carpenter completed before taking a nine-year hiatus from feature film making. In an interview with Troy Howarth, Carpenter was asked: 'at what point during the making of *Ghosts of Mars* did you realise you were sick of making movies?';⁴⁴ to which Carpenter replied with 'it was at the end when I was doing the music' and further explains how there is a DVD extra of the making of the score where you can see him looking 'devastated' and 'burnt out'.⁴⁵ That DVD extra also gives a glimpse into Carpenter's working practice with other musicians.⁴⁶ Steve Vai, Buckethead and Anthrax are all listed as 'performers' rather than 'composers' or as providing 'additional music by' on the extra even though they provide artistic input on the score at various points (e.g., Scott Ian, lead guitarist of Anthrax, at one point suggests adding a 'hells-bells' sound when the lead ghost lifts up a severed head).⁴⁷ By allowing suggestions from other musicians for the composition of the cues yet not fully crediting them for it brings Carpenter's ethics of his working practice with other musicians under scrutiny. Although Alan Howarth has commented that when he and Carpenter worked together it was all Carpenter's work and he would just flesh it out, there can be reasonable doubts as to how legitimate this claim is due, given the evidence seen in this DVD extra.⁴⁸

After *Ghost of Mars* Carpenter did not direct a feature film until his return with the Amber Heard led *The Ward* (2010), where a ghost haunts a psychiatric hospital. Carpenter did not compose the music for *The Ward* however and hired Mark Killian to compose a traditional orchestral horror score. Unlike *Elvis* and *The Thing*, Carpenter hired Killian for the music of his own accord and stated in an interview

⁴⁴ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 380.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Laura Nix, 'Scoring Ghosts of Mars', *Ghost of Mars*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 2001 (Bordon: Powerhouse Films Ltd, 2020).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 403.

with *Post Magazine* that he did it because he was 'older' and that the music and composing was always 'the big issue for me'.⁴⁹

Part of the reason Carpenter came out of his retirement was due to his work on the Showtime-produced *Masters of Horror* (2005-06), an anthology TV series where each episode had a different director, full creative freedom, and a \$2 million budget per episode. Carpenter frequently states that he very much enjoyed working on the two episodes and, because of the delight that came from directing the show, decided to return to feature film directing.⁵⁰ Like *The Ward*, Carpenter did not write the music for either episode and instead hired his son Cody Carpenter, who had never composed a full score by himself, to write the music for both episodes.⁵¹ Instead of an orchestral score, Cody composed a music based around piano and synthesizers, very much in the style of his father with a strong identifiable theme for each episode that returns through their one-hour runtimes.

Conclusion

This period saw Carpenter develop heavily as a composer. Firstly, he scored fewer of his own films than in the previous period (eleven of thirteen before 1988 compared to four of six between 1992-2001) and chose orchestral scores for the films he did not write the music for himself. This period also saw Carpenter start to veer away from solely synthesizer scores and instead start to infuse more guitar and other rock and roll instruments into his scores. As the 1980s were a period where synthesizers were perhaps over used, audiences became fatigued with the sound and so the following decade saw a drop in the use of them in popular music and the same trend can be seen in Carpenter's scores.

⁴⁹ Iain Blair, 'Director's Chair: John Carpenter – 'The Ward'' (2011), <https://www.postmagazine.com/Publications/Post-Magazine/2011/May-1-2011/Directors-Chair-John-Carpenter-The-Ward.aspx> (accessed 03/04/2023).

⁵⁰ Ibid; Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 380.

⁵¹ John Carpenter, 'Commentary', *Cigarette Burns*, DVD, directed by John Carpenter, 2006 (Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2006).

The final key difference in this period is that Carpenter would musically develop his scores more than in previous years, highlighting his progression as a composer.

Chapter 4 Out of retirement: 2015 – 2022

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on Carpenter's career solely as a musician after his retirement as a filmmaker in 2010. During this section of Carpenter's career, he scored four films that were not directed by himself and further developed his musical career outside of film scoring. Carpenter's attitude to writing music also changed: from using words such as 'exhausting', 'washed up' and 'dead' to describe what the scoring process of his films was like, to making statements such as: 'But this is great! I mean, I can get a cup of coffee, make some music, then go watch basketball. I mean, what could be better?' when describing writing music after 2015.¹

Lost Themes and Touring Life

The Ward (2010) marked the end of Carpenter's feature film directing/writing/editing career and the five years that followed the film's release were spent playing video games and watching basketball.² Carpenter remarked that during his retirement, between playing video games, he would open up a Logic Pro session on his computer and he would compose music with Cody, not for commercial release or a score but simply for pleasure.³ Joining them to compose was Daniel Davies, son of Kinks guitarist Dave Davies, who Carpenter worked with on the score for *Village of the Damned* (1995), who Carpenter unofficially 'adopted' when Dave Davies was having many personal problems.⁴ Carpenter was also the god-father to Daniel.⁵

¹ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 175; Ann Lee, 'John Carpenter on Halloween Kills, Ennio Morricone & how music is the purest art form' (2022), <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/john-carpenter-on-halloween-kills-ennio-morricone-how-music-is-the-purest-art-form> (accessed 22/10/2022).

² William Earl, 'At 75, Legendary Director John Carpenter Isn't Done Raising Hell in Hollywood' (2023), <https://variety.com/2023/film/features/john-carpenter-career-interview-director-halloween-the-thing-1235485167/> (accessed 07/03/2023).

³ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 303.

⁴ *Op Cit*, 304.

⁵ *Ibid*.

Carpenter revealed that making music with Cody and Davies breathed new life into his compositional career: 'what I'm doing is taking my thirty-year-old children and exploiting the hell out of them and trying to make money off them'.⁶ On the surface this might seem like an exploitative comment by Carpenter: in reality it is him using his dark humour to cover up his true enjoyment for the music they made. It was only when Carpenter hired a new music attorney in 2015, who asked him whether he had any new music, that the music Carpenter, Cody and Davies composed was considered for a wider release.⁷ The record label Sacred Bones signed Carpenter because of the demo tracks they heard and gave him full autonomy with the album, something that Carpenter has been keen to have, since his debut film *Dark Star* (1974).⁸ The autonomy included a release date of Carpenter's choosing for the album.

The relationship between the label and composer proved successful; indeed, they have worked together on all of Carpenter's music since. The album that the three composers released on Sacred Bones was titled *Lost Themes* (2015), which 'asks Carpenter's acolytes to visualize their own nightmares' when listening to the music, as each piece was written as a main theme for an imaginary film.⁹ Many fans have tried to do this including the online magazine *Consequence* who released an article asking nine members of its writing staff to each imagine a film for the nine tracks of the first *Lost Themes* album including: a description of the film, a cast list, a release date and where the *Lost Theme's* track would be situated in the film.¹⁰ Of these release dates that were imagined for the synthesized tracks was one from the 1970s (1977), two from the 1980s (1985, 1988), three from the 1990s (1990, 1992, 1994) and three from the 2010s (2016, 2017, 2018).¹¹ Perhaps by design,

⁶ *Op Cit*, 303.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ John Carpenter, 'Lost Themes' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/lost-themes/> (accessed 22/01/2023).

¹⁰ Dan Caffrey, 'How John Carpenter's Lost Themes Warrant Nine Films' (2015), <https://consequence.net/2015/02/how-john-carpenters-lost-themes-warrant-nine-films/> (accessed 24/08/2023).

¹¹ *Ibid*.

perhaps by coincidence, the dates all align with Carpenter's musical career and miss out his retirement during the 2000s. They start at the beginning of his career right after the release of *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). The dates also miss out the end of the 1990s where, as discussed previously, mainstream audiences were noticing the guitar at the forefront of the Carpenter's work rather than the synthesizer.¹² Despite the fact that the tracks were all composed and recorded around the same time, the use of the synthesizer allows for a sense of nostalgia to generate this wide variety of dates.

After the success of the first *Lost Themes* (2015) album two sequels followed, *Lost Themes II* (2016) and *Lost Themes III: Alive After Death* (2022). A stand-alone album entitled *Anthology: Movie Themes 1974-1998* (2017) collated a single theme from each of Carpenter's films between 1974 and 1998 regardless of whether Carpenter was the original composer. Each track was re-recorded by Carpenter, Cody, Davies, and the backline that Jack Black and Kyle Gass use in their band Tenacious D – consisting of guitar, bass, and drums – invigorating each theme with updated audio quality and newer electronics than the technology used on the original recordings. These re-recordings are described as 'vital' on the album liner notes, which leans into the argument that because technology is constantly updating, what once sounded fresh and new can very quickly become overfamiliar.¹³ Thus the need for re-recordings of older synthesizer tracks can breathe new life into them and make them more relevant to the modern ear. However, this also rejects the kind of monumentalisation that is assigned to classic film scores (Herrmann's *Vertigo* [1958], Williams's *Star Wars* [1977] or Elfman's *Batman* [1989], for example) as it suggests that an electronic score needs to be refreshed and that the original recording will not stand the test of time.

¹² John Carpenter and Austin Stoker, 'Interview with Write and Director John Carpenter and Austin Stoker', *Assault on Precinct 13*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1976 (London: Second Sight Films, 2016).

¹³ John Carpenter, 'Anthology' (2017), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/anthology/> (accessed 22/01/2023); Sound of Cinema: The Music That Made the Movies, New Frontiers, 23:00 07/07/2018, BBC4, 60 mins, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/05B420DE?bcast=127049449> (accessed 21/06/2023).

A key moment during this period was that John Carpenter toured his music for the first time since the *Coupe De Villes* in the 1980s, once in 2016 and again in 2018, across cities in the US and Europe to sold out audiences. Carpenter has rarely toured his music as he states that he is scared of performing his music live.¹⁴ For the tours Carpenter was joined by Cody Carpenter on keyboard and Daniel Davies on guitar and also employed the Tenacious D backline.¹⁵ This line-up leans heavily into an expanded rock set, but expanded not via the adding of orchestral instruments, but rather through introducing more keyboard and guitar. Here the rock and roll influence on Carpenter's music can be seen, as he is able to translate years' worth of his music into this line-up showing that his scores are, at their most pure, centred around rock and roll. Although the concerts featured main themes from his films (those selected for the *Anthology* album) it also included material from his *Lost Themes* albums, the first of which had been released before the first tour. Film music concerts have been a recent trend in live music, with composers such as Hans Zimmer and Danny Elfman putting together special bands for the occasion.¹⁶ Therefore Carpenter was evidently tapping into this trend, building on the strong cult following of his films, which would provide ample audiences for his music.

Halloween (2018)

Horror has been a genre that has often been associated with sequels and reboots and *Halloween* has not been an exception to this. In 2018, after seven sequels, a reboot and a sequel to the reboot, *Halloween* was once again given new life by writers Jeff Fradley and Danny McBride and director David Gordon Green, who set out to create a sequel that would pick up directly where *Halloween* (1978) left off. The new *Halloween* (2018) sees Myers escape from prison once again to terrorise

¹⁴ Lanre Bakare, 'John Carpenter: 'Could I succeed if I started today? No. I'd be rejected'' (2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/oct/10/john-carpenter-interview-anthology-film-scores> (accessed 03/10/2022).

¹⁵ Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 305.

¹⁶ Hans Zimmer, 'Hans Zimmer Live' (2023), <https://www.hanszimmerlive.com/> (accessed 30/08/2022); Danny Elfman, 'Danny Elfman – Upcoming Events' (2023), <https://www.dannyelfman.com/upcoming-events> (accessed 30/08/2023).

Haddonfield; however, this time Laurie Strode has prepared for his return through gun training and trap setting. To aid the transition between original and new sequel, Gordon Green and Jason Blum (producer) hired Jamie Lee Curtis and Nick Castle to reprise the roles of Laurie Strode and Michael Myers respectively. More importantly here, however, was the addition of Carpenter, who worked as a creative consultant for the film and as a co-composer alongside Cody and Daniel Davies. This was the first time Carpenter had scored a film since *Ghosts of Mars* and marked Carpenter's return to synthesizer-focussed film scoring.

As *Halloween* (2018) is preoccupied with the look, feel and character of the original film, the choice of a synthesizer score adds to the sense of nostalgia surrounding the sequel. Megan Lavengood has explored the Yamaha DX7 keyboard, used in film scores by composer such as Jerry Goldsmith, and its role in creating the '80s' sound that has become familiar to listeners.¹⁷

First distributed in 1983 (five years after the first *Halloween*), the Yamaha DX7 was an affordable digital synthesizer that had popular pre-programmed sounds including ELECTRIC PIANO 1, that sounded like a Fender Rhodes, and BASS 1, that sounded like a synthesized slap bass.¹⁸ Both of these sounds dominated the charts in the 1980s, with songs like George Michael's 'Careless Whisper' (E. PIANO 1) and Kenny Loggins's 'Danger Zone' (BASS 1) from the motion picture *Top Gun* (1986).¹⁹ The affordability of the synthesizer led to a 'democratization' of synthesizers according to Bob Moog (creator of the Moog Synthesizer) and now meant that more artists were able to use them because of their relatively low price.²⁰ This affordability resulted in a massive influx of synthesizer-based music, which coupled with the ease of choosing presets soon led the sound to become greatly overused and caused it to fall out of popularity by the end of the 1980s.

¹⁷ Megan Lavengood, 'What Makes It Sound '80s? The Yamaha DX7 Electric Piano Sound', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31/3 (2019).

¹⁸ *Op Cit*, 75-76.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Op Cit*, 78.

Because of the popularity of certain synthesizer sounds in the 1980s, whether this be the Yamaha DX7, or the Prophet V that Carpenter used, when these synthesizer sounds are used now they create a sense of nostalgia for the 1980s. A popular example of this is the Netflix series *Stranger Things* (2016 onwards), which takes place in the 1980s and has an electronic score composed by Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein. The score utilizes these popular synthesizer sounds and employs the nostalgia surrounding them. Alan Howarth once admitted that The Duffer Brothers (creators of *Stranger Things*) had contacted him to let him know that they were openly inspired by what he and Carpenter did in the 1980s and translated it into the score for their series.²¹ It is reasonable to surmise that hiring Carpenter to compose the score for *Halloween* (2018), rather than an orchestral composer, for example, aims to further cash in on the nostalgia that the original *Halloween* (1978) provides.

Synthesizers haven't been used for all the *Halloween* sequels, however, with the most critically and commercially successful non-Carpenter sequel, *H20* (1998), using an orchestral score which 'marked quite a departure' from the Carpenter and Howarth scores of the previous films.²² John Ottman was originally hired to write an orchestral score for the film, the involvement of which would 'bump the film up to a slightly higher plane', once again reinforcing the idea that synthesizer music isn't accorded the prestige of an orchestra.²³ Ottman wanted to create a Hitchcockian score that would develop his own themes and translate Carpenter's themes to an orchestra. When the final mix was completed, Ottman's score was approved by the director and editor, but Miramax (the studio) wanted to replace Ottman's score with cues from Marco Beltrami's scores for *Scream* (1996) and *Mimic* (1997), which they fused with Ottman's *Halloween* theme orchestrations.²⁴

On a surface level, the majority of the *Halloween* (2018) score has the same character as the score from the original film, with the addition of updated electronic timbres and guitar. A noticeable

²¹ Alan Howarth, 'BBC Interview' (2019), <https://alanhowarth.com/interviewspodcasts/> (accessed 15/04/2023).

²² Gergely Hubai, *Torn Music: Rejected Films Scores* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 2012), 316.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Op Cit*, 317.

difference is a cue titled ‘The Shape Hunts Allyson’ on the soundtrack (fig. 4.1), which only lasts a little over forty seconds but marks a key stylistic addition to Carpenter’s repertoire.²⁵ The main arpeggiated melody is very similar to previous work of Carpenter’s, including ‘Rocks At Drake’s Bay’ from the soundtrack to *The Fog* (1980);²⁶ the difference comes in the form of the bassline, which is characterised by rising whooshes played by synthesizer – doubled with bowed guitar – as can be seen and heard on a DVD extra for the film.²⁷ The influence of Davies on the score can be seen here as he is playing guitar on the DVD extra and due to Carpenter’s working relationship with other actors and musicians, as previously discussed, there is a high likelihood that the bowed guitar was Davies’s input that Carpenter allowed on the final track.



Figure 4.1. ‘The Shape Hunts Allyson’ (Author Transcription)

Throughout Carpenter’s career, he has frequently embraced the rapid evolutions of music technology, whether through the use of scoring straight to picture in *Escape From New York* (1981) or the use of MIDI in *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), for example. *Halloween* (2018) continues this and the DVD extra titled ‘The Sound of Fear’ gives a glimpse into Carpenter’s current working method when scoring films.²⁸ Noticeably, in Carpenter’s home studio, are modern synthesizers including a Roland Plug-out System-1, which is used to control virtual synthesizer plug-ins from a

²⁵ John Carpenter, ‘Halloween – Soundtrack 2018’ (2018), <https://theofficialjohnncarpenter.com/halloween-soundtrack-2018/> (accessed 21/01/2023).

²⁶ John Carpenter, ‘The Fog – Soundtrack’ (2017), <https://theofficialjohnncarpenter.com/the-fog-soundtrack/> (accessed 19/01/2023).

²⁷ John Carpenter, ‘The Sound of Fear’, Disc 1, *Halloween*, Blu-ray, directed by David Gordon Green, 2018 (London: Warner Bros UK, 2022).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Digital Audio Workstation (DAW).²⁹ Alan Howarth argued in 2019 that another reason for the recent rise in the number of synthesizer scores may in part be due to the advent of the digital synthesizer, which can easily be accessed by anyone with a Digital Audio Workstation.³⁰ Whereas before, a composer would need to spend £5000 on a Prophet V synthesizer, they could now buy a digital version for £200 that could be carried around in a laptop rather than in a large tour case. The advent of DAWs did not see its progress limited to electronic scoring but also wider orchestral scoring. Elfman cites Pro Tools (a DAW made by Avid) as a technological evolution that made film scoring much easier for him as it allowed him to seamlessly record an orchestra and fix problems as they arose as he was able to fix individual bars rather than record from the start.³¹

Despite the ease of virtual synthesizers, Carpenter still combines his love for electronic instruments with acoustic instruments such as the piano, this time played by Cody – as Carpenter says that his son is a more accurate performer – and the guitar, played by Davies.³² Carpenter’s ethics of his working practice with other musicians has stayed relatively the same with his new co-composers and updated technologies, as he still improvises the score (for the most part: there would have been some pre-existing themes that he would have carried over from the original film) and he allows creative input from his fellow composers, as Davies remarks that he experiments on his own then brings it to Carpenter to see what he likes and what he doesn’t.³³

Halloween (2018) was very well received by audiences and critics alike and Universal Studios approved two further sequels to directly follow on, thus creating a trilogy of new *Halloween* films.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Alan Howarth, ‘BBC Interview’ (2019), <https://alanhowarth.com/interviewspodcasts/> (accessed 15/04/2023).

³¹ Amon Warmann, ‘Danny Elfman on the evolution of MIDI, composing ideas on voice notes & Tim Burton (2022), <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/danny-elfman-on-the-evolution-of-midi-composing-ideas-on-voice-notes-tim-burton> (accessed 30/06/2023).

³² John Carpenter, ‘The Sound of Fear’, Disc 1, *Halloween*, Blu-ray, directed by David Gordon Green, 2018 (London: Warner Bros UK, 2022).

³³ Ibid.

The ensuing films were titled *Halloween Kills* (2021) and *Halloween Ends* (2022) and continued the story of Myers and the Strode family. Carpenter, Cody and Davies returned to compose the scores to the two sequels, further continuing their professional relationship. *Halloween Ends* was due to act as a definitive end for the Myers/Strode storyline and Gordon Green used music to enhance this idea. Instead of using the Carpenter score during the end credits of the film, which would suggest continuation, he used Blue Oyster Cult's 'Don't Fear The Reaper' to give the film a sense of finality.³⁴

Notably, the album liner notes for the score to *Halloween Kills* (2021) contain some bold claims, including that:

His influence has been felt from the underground to pop radio, and played a foundational role in the modern Synthwave movement.³⁵

And:

Like the film itself, Carpenter's score to the second instalment of the new Halloween trilogy, *Halloween Kills*, stays true to the spirit of what made the 1978 original great while bringing it firmly into the present. The music is unmistakably Carpenter: the sinister vintage synth tones, the breath-stealing sense of menace that he conjures with just a few dissonant notes. But with a broader sonic palette, new digital techniques at his disposal, and a deeper sense of musicality, the *Halloween Kills* score is the work of a master artist who nearly 50 years into his career continues to push his creative limits and find new ways to thrill and terrify his fans.³⁶

The first of these claims is one of few to highlight the spread of Carpenter's influence, particularly on the 'Synthwave movement', which is a relatively recently established genre of music defined by the

³⁴ David Gordon Green and Andi Matichak and Rohan Campbell and Attila Salih Yucer and Hugo Garza, 'Commentary', *Halloween Ends*, Blu-ray, directed by David Gordon Green, 2022 (London: Warner Bros UK, 2022).

³⁵ John Carpenter, 'Halloween Kills – Soundtrack' (2021), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-kills-soundtrack/> (accessed 21/01/2023).

³⁶ Ibid.

use of the synthesizer to evoke the sound and feelings of the 1980s.³⁷ And the liner notes are not the only one to make this statement: other composer such as Charlie Clouser cite Carpenter as the sound that modern Synthwave composers are trying to emulate.³⁸ Mattia Merlini also concurs with the liner notes in his paper about the genre of Synthwave, stating that he believes Carpenter and the band Tangerine Dream are responsible for influencing the sound of the genre.³⁹ ‘Synthwave remains connected with nostalgia’ as it uses the sonorities popularised in the 1980s to evoke a sense of the past in modern media.⁴⁰ Examples of this include the previously discussed *Stranger Things* (2016-2024) TV series, *The Wolf Among Us* (2013) video game produced by Telltale Games, and the *Black Mirror* episode *Bandersnatch* (2019), all of which aim to recreate the 1980s not only through visuals but through the music of Synthwave.

Synthwave has also been used purely for the aesthetic it provides for visual media rather than to act solely as a vehicle for nostalgia. Examples of this include *Drive* (2011) and *It Follows* (2015), with scores by Cliff Martinez and Disasterpeace respectively; neither film is based during any specific period and the music acts purely as an aesthetic aid to influence the style of the film. The latter of these films has frequently been compared to Carpenter’s body of work, not only because *It Follows* (2015) is a horror film set in teenage suburbia that equates sex to death and makes use of widescreen and Steadicam, but also in the similarity of the scores.⁴¹ David Robert Mitchell (the

³⁷ Mattia Merlini, ‘More 1980s than the 1980s: Functions and Connotations of Synthwave Soundtracks’, *Conference: Musical Retrofuturism Symposium* (2022), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362776050_More_1980s_than_the_1980s_Functions_and_Connotations_of_Synthwave_Soundtracks (accessed 30/08/2023).

³⁸ Eric Allen, ‘Masters Of Score: An Interview With Horror Composer Charlie Clouser’ (2017), <https://vintageking.com/blog/2017/10/charlie-clouser> (accessed 25/09/2023).

³⁹ Mattia Merlini, ‘More 1980s than the 1980s: Functions and Connotations of Synthwave Soundtracks’, *Conference: Musical Retrofuturism Symposium* (2022), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362776050_More_1980s_than_the_1980s_Functions_and_Connotations_of_Synthwave_Soundtracks (accessed 30/08/2023), 3.

⁴⁰ *Op Cit*, 4.

⁴¹ Kyle Anderson, ‘It Follows’: The story behind Disasterpeace’s score’ (2016), <https://ew.com/article/2015/03/27/it-follows-score/> (accessed 30/08/2023); David Crow, ‘It Follows: A Homecoming for ‘80s Horror’ (2018), <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/it-follows-a-return-to-1980s-horror-john-carpenter/> (accessed 30/08/2023); Ben

director of *It Follows*) revealed in an interview that, because of the time restraints on the score for the film, Disasterpeace had to work closely to a temp score that Mitchell had created and which included some of Carpenter's music.⁴² Carpenter's music could have been used within the temp score because of the close association of the genre of horror between *It Follows* and the majority of Carpenter's oeuvre. Synthwave has also been strongly associated with certain genres in the past, especially science fiction, fantasy and horror.⁴³ This association is no doubt due to Carpenter's influence on the musical movement, as these were genres he was closely aligned with throughout his career.

During this period there has also been a shift in the way that horror have been perceived. With films such as *It Follows* and the works of young high-profile directors such as Jordan Peele and Ari Aster (*Get Out* [2017] and *Hereditary* [2018], for example), the line between high and low art in these genres has blurred and what would have once been called low brow now garner labels of 'serious' and 'auteur' films.⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that Carpenter's growth in popularity over the last two decades contributed to this shift as he laid much of the groundwork for these films to be made, both from a filmmaking and a musical standpoint.

The second statement from the liner notes argues that the score for *Halloween Kills* both aligns itself with the music of the original film yet also progresses Carpenter's musical language. This argument suggests that Carpenter is still revolutionising synthesizer music as he is pushing his 'creative limits'

Sachs, 'David Robert Mitchell pays tribute to John Carpenter with *It Follows*' (2015), <https://chicagoreader.com/film/david-robert-mitchell-pays-tribute-to-john-carpenter-with-it-follows/> (accessed 30/08/2023).

⁴² Kyle Anderson, 'It Follows': The story behind Disasterpeace's score' (2016), <https://ew.com/article/2015/03/27/it-follows-score/> (accessed 30/08/2023).

⁴³ Mattia Merlini, 'More 1980s than the 1980s: Functions and Connotations of Synthwave Soundtracks', *Conference: Musical Retrofuturism Symposium* (2022), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362776050_More_1980s_than_the_1980s_Functions_and_Connotations_of_Synthwave_Soundtracks (accessed 30/08/2023), 3-4.

⁴⁴ Dino-Ray Ramos, 'Jordan Peele Talks Being A Black Auteur And Disproving Myths Of Representation In Hollywood' (2019), <https://deadline.com/2019/03/jordan-peele-us-get-out-twilight-zone-ucb-ian-roberts-improv-comedy-horror-1202582578/> (accessed 15/03/2024); Matt Zoller Seitz, 'Hereditary' (2018), <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hereditary-2018> (accessed 15/03/2024).

because he has 'new digital techniques at his disposal'.⁴⁵ As previously discussed, Carpenter frequently embraces technological evolutions and uses them to his advantage, whether that be the ability to sync sound to picture in *Escape From New York* (1981) or the use of MIDI in *Big Trouble In Little China* (1986).⁴⁶ This pattern once again becomes evident in the new *Halloween* trilogy as it allows Carpenter to embrace software synthesizers and DAWs to aid his scoring.

Gordon Green, on the commentary for the *Halloween Kills* Blu-ray, stated that when he sends a cut of the film over to Carpenter there is a temp score attached which Carpenter uses to gain musical ideas.⁴⁷ It is unknown what music was used for the temp score and how this affected Carpenter's musical decisions.

Firestarter (2022)

In between *Halloween Kills* (2021) and *Halloween Ends* (2022) Carpenter scored a film solely in the composer role for the first time. Joined once again by Cody and Davies, the trio composed a score for Keith Thomas's *Firestarter* (2022), an opportunity that allowed them to create a wholly new score without relying on previous themes (as they had to in *Halloween* [2018]). *Firestarter* (2022) was a remake of the Drew Barrymore-led *Firestarter* (1984), both based on the novel of the same name by Stephen King. The story follows Charlie, a young girl who has the power to ignite objects using only her mind, and her father as they are hunted down by The Shop (a government agency). Carpenter was originally hired to direct the first *Firestarter*, but the production was shut down eight weeks before shooting was due to begin due to the financial failure of *The Thing* (1981) and the

⁴⁵ John Carpenter, 'Halloween Kills – Soundtrack' (2021), <https://theofficialjohncarpenter.com/halloween-kills-soundtrack/> (accessed 21/01/2023).

⁴⁶ Daniel Griffith, 'Malevolent: Unearthing John Carpenter's Prince of Darkness', Disc 2, *Prince of Darkness*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1987 (Issey-les-Moulineaux: StudioCanal, 2018); Troy Howarth, *Assault on the System: The Nonconformist Cinema of John Carpenter* (Chicago: WK Books, 2020), 337.

⁴⁷ David Gordon Green and Jamie Lee Curtis and Judy Greer, 'Commentary', Disc 2, *Halloween Kills*, Blu-ray, directed by David Gordon Green, 2021 (London: Warner Bros UK, 2022).

studio not wanting to take another risk in the horror genre and with the same director twice in a row.⁴⁸

When Carpenter was hired for the *Firestarter* remake he asked Thomas how he envisioned the completed score to which Thomas replied ‘dark, rhythmic, percussive and driving’;⁴⁹ Carpenter in turn laughed and replied ‘good ‘cause that’s the kind of music I make’.⁵⁰ This leans into Isham’s earlier argument that the synthesizer is used in modern film scores to provide ‘rhythmic drive’ rather than fill a melodic purpose.⁵¹ However, as Carpenter had been composing this type of music for over five decades by this point, it suggests that Carpenter could be the archetype for where the typecasting of synthesizers as providers of ‘rhythmic drive’ comes from.⁵² This also links to Carpenter’s early description of his music where he asked Morricone for ‘fewer notes’ as it provides further insight into how Carpenter views his own music.⁵³ Both viewpoints suggest that Carpenter views his music as more rhythmic and timbral rather than melody-driven.

Where Carpenter differs from other synthesizer-based musicians is in his search to progress with the technology and infuse it with existing technology rather than solely focusing on the past. Christopher Fox argued that music technology reached a point in the early twenty-first century where the development of new technology was paused to revel in the ‘quaint mechanical aura’ that old tape recorders and analogue synthesizers provided.⁵⁴ Rather than only use the technology he used in the

⁴⁸ Larry Franco, ‘Producing Big Trouble – Interview With Larry Franco’, *Big Trouble in Little China*, Blu-ray, directed by John Carpenter, 1986 (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2013).

⁴⁹ Keith Thomas, ‘Commentary’, *Firestarter*, Blu-ray, directed by Keith Thomas, 2022 (London: Warner Bros UK, 2022).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 499.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kory Grow, ‘The Thing’: Ennio Morricone and John Carpenter’s Thriller Soundtracks Get Special Rereleases’ (2020), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-thing-ennio-morricone-and-john-carpenters-thriller-soundtracks-get-special-rereleases-981073/> (accessed 19/03/2023).

⁵⁴ Christopher Fox, ‘Electronic Music’s Sound of Futures Past’ (2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/04/electronic-music-sound-futures-past> (accessed 23/02/2023).

past, when starting his new career solely as a composer, Carpenter decided to use newer technology like Virtual Studio Technology (VST) synthesizers and Logic Pro, and combine them with updated versions of the synthesizers he was familiar with – like the OB-5 – to create his music, rather than rely solely on his trusted instrument the Prophet V. Elfman also argues that this combination of analogue and digital synthesizers is what makes electronic scoring so unique: as technology progresses more and more composers start to use older analogue gear and combine it with updated digital technology to achieve a new combination of the two.⁵⁵

Fox further expands on his point by arguing that electronic music used to be appealing because of the ‘neutrality’ of the sounds it created;⁵⁶ a computer used to be able to only emulate a simple oscillator and/or filter, but as the technology progressed computers were suddenly able to emulate acoustic instruments near perfectly. This led to many composers and musicians using technology such as the DX7 or, more recently, software produced by companies such as Spitfire Audio, to replicate acoustic instruments rather than sound like the neutral oscillators they used to be. However, for the most part, Carpenter’s sound has been geared more towards the sound of the neutral oscillators rather than replicating acoustic instruments. Perhaps this is in an attempt to give his music similar tonalities to those he composed during his heyday in the 1980s.

As previously discussed, Carpenter’s musical language received a new sound in the cue ‘The Shape Hunts Allyson’ (fig. 4.1) from *Halloween* (2018) and the evolution of this new sound can be heard in a cue from the end of *Firestarter*, titled ‘Charlie’s Rampage’ on the soundtrack album (fig. 4.2).⁵⁷ The ideas presented in the *Halloween* cue are expanded from forty seconds of music to nearly five minutes, allowing the musical development of the piece to be explored further. Both the

⁵⁵ Amon Warmann, ‘Danny Elfman on the evolution of MIDI, composing ideas on voice notes & Tim Burton (2022), <https://composer.spitfireaudio.com/en/articles/danny-elfman-on-the-evolution-of-midi-composing-ideas-on-voice-notes-tim-burton> (accessed 30/06/2023).

⁵⁶ Christopher Fox, ‘Electronic Music’s Sound of Futures Past’ (2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/04/electronic-music-sound-futures-past> (accessed 23/02/2023).

⁵⁷ John Carpenter, ‘Firestarter (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)’ (2022), <https://johncarpentermusic.bandcamp.com/album/firestarter-original-motion-picture-soundtrack> (accessed 26/01/2023).

arpeggiated main melody, the whooshing bass synthesizer and the bowed guitar are present yet, where the main melody stays on one synthesizer in 'The Shape Hunts Allyson', the melody here moves between three synthesizer sounds and a piano with added reverb, through various moments of the piece. Of the three synthesizer sounds there are: a synthesizer with a medium filter cut-off, a synthesizer with a high filter cut-off and a synthesizer with a low filter cut-off, as well as heavy amounts of delay. As the melody moves between these different levels of filter cut-offs, tension is created and subdued, adding a sense of momentum to the piece rather than staying stagnant. A key criticism that Carpenter's music has often faced is that his music doesn't develop over the course of a film.⁵⁸ This could be due to the short time frame in which Carpenter usually composes his scores and the fact that his music is all improvised, leaving little room for him to thematically develop from the music that came before. However, this cue from *Firestarter* could show that Carpenter's music is developing between films: what was once a forty-second cue now takes place over the entire final climax of the film, where Charlie escapes The Shop and sets its agents alight.



Figure 4.2 – 'Charlie's Rampage' (Author Transcription)

Conclusion

This period saw Carpenter embrace the Synthwave movement that he helped start by returning to scoring films and, for the first time, release standalone albums. Carpenter also found frequent collaborators in Cody and Davies who would help re-define the Carpenter sound for the next period of his compositional life. As is typical throughout his career, Carpenter also embraced many of the new technological evolutions in synthesizer scoring including working with DAWs and using

⁵⁸ Ian Conrich and David Woods (eds.), *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 51-52; Murray Leeder, *Devil's Advocates: Halloween* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2014), 50.

updated synthesizers to modernise his sound. This return to scoring also saw Carpenter return to the synthesizer at a time when the instrument was once again gaining popularity but this time as a tool for nostalgia. Carpenter leaned heavily into this by scoring the *Halloween* trilogy which itself is preoccupied with the look and feel of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis, a recent John Carpenter concert was used to illustrate the fact that it was a sell-out gig with legions of adoring fans. Carpenter has amassed a large cult following for his directing, but the gig was not showcasing his directing talent, but music from them instead.

The key element surrounding Carpenter's career, and his frequent use of the synthesizer, is that his body of work directly follows, and often influences, trends surrounding scoring with the electronics from the mid-1970s to current day. His use of minimalist, rock and roll inspired riffs and ostinatos imbued most of his music in the 1980s, and when paired with catchy melodies created the inspiration for what is now regarded as Synthwave music. In the 1990s, where both the horror genre and the synthesizer were falling rapidly out of fashion, Carpenter started to use acoustic instruments to replicate the genres that influenced his electronic music: that of rhythm-and-blues, rock and metal. This replicated the rising popularities of genres such as grunge, heavy metal and nu metal with bands such as Nirvana, Metallica's *Black Album* and Slipknot during the 1990s and early 2000s. His return in the mid-2010s saw the rise of Synthwave music simultaneously gain popularity during the release of his *Lost Themes* albums and subsequent scoring of the David Gordon-Green directed *Halloween* trilogy. Where Synthwave is steeped in nostalgia for the 1980s so was Carpenter's music. He returned to the synthesizer with newer updated technology to infuse the sounds with which his audiences are familiar, with novel sounds that he created with the help of Cody Carpenter and Daniel Davies. With Carpenter's return to film scoring came a rise in the number of low budget horror films that were scored with synthesizers designed to sound like electronics, rather than synthesizers being used to replicate real instruments to save on scoring costs.

That these trends in Carpenter's work reflect the wider realm of scoring with electronics could be purely coincidental but the closely aligned nature of the trends suggest there is scope to conclude that Carpenter's work is a driving factor towards these changes in synthesizer music across the past five

decades. As such it showcases Carpenter's talents, not as a director or a writer, but as a musician who has been able to externally influence the sound of horror and science fiction films for five decades.

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