Memory, Culture, and Capitalism:
Reframing and Refracting the Past Through Vaporwave

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the aesthetic and cultural significance of vaporwave, an internet-born movement that blends music, visuals, and digital platforms to critique late capitalism and reimagine collective memory. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from postmodernism, media studies, and cultural theory, this research examines vaporwave's materiality, its relationship to the internet's rapidly expanding platform culture, and its status as both a critique and product of late capitalism. The study highlights vaporwave's use of recontextualized media, its DIY-inspired practice, and the ways it engages with globalized systems of communication to produce a genre that is at once ephemeral (or vaporous) and enduring.

Through close analysis of vaporwave's visual identity online, this thesis argues that the movement embodies a tension between cultural critique and aesthetic indulgence. On the one hand, vaporwave's reliance on platforms like YouTube reveals the transformative impact of digital spaces on cultural production, fostering new forms of community and redefining the concept of the music scene. On the other hand, vaporwave's reliance on pastiche, simulacrum, and cultural recycling, as well as its ambivalent messaging on consumer culture, raises questions about its potential as a form of political resistance.

Ultimately, this work positions vaporwave as a vital lens through which to understand the interplay of memory, culture, and capitalism in contemporary media, while also reflecting on the broader implications of internet-mediated art in the 21st century.

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Introduction

It has been over 10 years since *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* was released, and still much of vaporwave's origins remain a mystery. Created by Daniel Lopatin, who is mostly known for his work produced under the moniker Oneohtrix Point Never (OPN), *Eccojams* (fig. 1) is the result of a one-time experiment that has come to be recognized as the first ever vaporwave album. Propelled by the internet's tendency to make things 'go viral', it successfully created a template that has since inspired endless songs, music videos and artwork. Upon encountering this album for the first time, the curious listener might wonder: What is an Eccojam? Who is Chuck Person? And was Volume 2 ever released? These questions are certainly important, as they point to possible cultural influences that shaped the movement in its formative years. Indeed, the murky history of vaporwave has made it intriguing to many internet users, and for some – including myself – it has become a cultural object worthy of study.

Though these questions are specifically focused on the *Eccojams* project, their scope is broader: they lead us towards the essential yet impossible task of definitively characterizing vaporwave as well as delineating its boundaries as a genre. Certainly, the definitions that have been offered in various academic publications and online contributions so far are not entirely wrong in their understanding of vaporwave. However, I believe that this present study of vaporwave provides an excellent opportunity to revisit the ways in which we create definitions altogether. Indeed, there are several characteristics intrinsic to vaporwave that effectively challenge the inflexible and normative boundaries we often rely on when creating definitions. The most significant of these is that vaporwave is fundamentally a vaporous and undecided genre, featuring an ever-changing group of contributors and fanbase. Much like the vapor that arises from a steaming kettle, its limits are hazy. Trying to neatly fit cultural objects into the 'vaporwave' category quickly turns into a frustrating and unproductive exercise. Nor is

attempting to describe vaporwave as something solid and with strong foundations entirely helpful to the emerging field of study dedicated to this topic. Not only does this run the risk of reducing the movement to something that it is not, but it also fails to reveal just how spread out vaporwave's presence is on the internet and beyond. Thus, part of the characterization of vaporwave that I suggest throughout this thesis relies on the fact that nothing is quite set in stone and that this lack of formality should perhaps be treated as a defining feature.
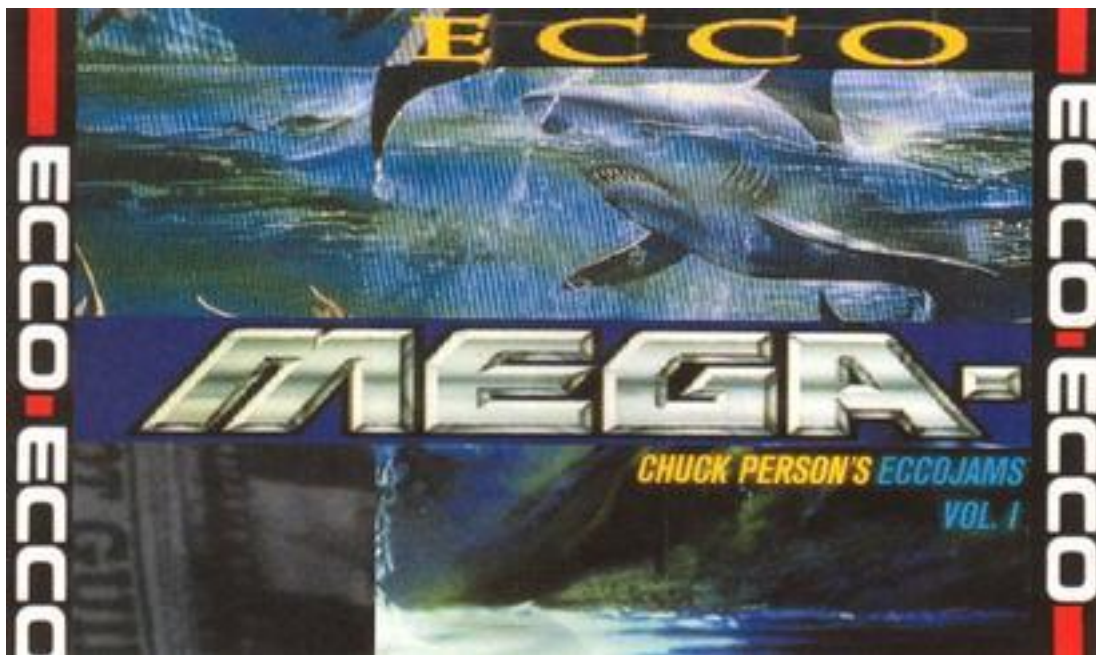
Fig. 1: Album artwork for *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1*

In order to create some continuity in my research it is still useful to draft up a provisional definition of vaporwave, while keeping in mind that vaporwave is a continuously evolving genre that encompasses many different elements of the internet's ever-changing culture. Accordingly, vaporwave can be defined as both a musical and a visual movement, born on the internet around 2010 and disseminated via platforms such as YouTube, Reddit and Tumblr. As alluded to above, scholars can't seem to agree on much more than this; in fact, the consensus among most vaporwave critics is that it is more easily defined by what it is not (McLeod; Harper; Nowak and Whelan; Trainer). Establishing the boundaries of any internet

movement appears to be a near impossible task. Scholars undertaking a study of vaporwave are immediately confronted with a glaring lack of information that affects everything from the origins of the term to information about who the artists really are. These artists are "deliberately anonymous, and this impersonality is a part of the intriguing alienation vaporwave courts" (Harper 121). Paradoxically, this lack of information is rather telling, as it explains a lot about the movement's core aesthetic values. It is precisely because of vaporwave's exclusively virtual emergence and existence that researchers simultaneously face an abundance and a drought of information. Indeed, the excess of data provided by the internet can easily drown out important details: a quick Google search of the term 'vaporwave' yields around 28,400,000 results[1]. The process of finding out where the term came from is much like attempting to find a needle in a haystack. This relatively new reality has affected researchers by both simplifying and complicating research, effectively forcing those interested to approach their analyses in different and unexpected ways. For instance, Connor D. Wilcox and Cristin A. Compton sought to understand how vaporwave artists' identities are formed offline through the lens of communication theory of identity (CTI) and with the help of algorithms (7). Sharon Schembri and Jac Tichbon, marketing and psychology scholars, respectively, studied vaporwave creators using an ethnoconsumerist approach. Another article, co-authored by Guillaume Loignon and Philippe Messier, singles out vaporwave as a useful blueprint through which new forms of media may be studied. In the same vein, I wish to approach the topic of vaporwave from a broader and hopefully surprising angle. This thesis will focus on a reading of the movement's aesthetic attributes and materiality, leaving aside any theory pertaining strictly to the technical elements of the music. Such an approach has been covered in articles by Josh Ottum, Padraic Killeen and Adam Trainer, and would certainly need more attention from music scholars in the future. However, my interest here lies in identifying the conditions of possibility – as in what

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[1] Result obtained on the 20th of May 2022

made vaporwave's emergence possible – and how these conditions have contributed to its identity. Identifying these conditions, and the direction(s) of influence in which they operate, has the potential to expose how the internet has shaped our understanding of what music and the visual arts can be. Furthermore, observing the ways in which culture and such conditions intersect will contribute to our understanding of new media, effectively helping us create new definitions, and sometimes open up old ones too. Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth recognize this potential in their article "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, And Genre", in which they analyze the role the internet has played in the music industry over the last three decades. In their comparison of various musical genres, they argue that "vaporwave provides evidence of a radical shift in the culture of internet use", whereby "the net itself becomes central to the creative practices defining the genre, acting as shared horizon of meaning, content medium, production studio, and means of distribution" (605). It is also my view that vaporwave is representative of a larger and ongoing shift occurring online that is affecting the way artists, producers and listeners make and consume music, which is why studying it with a broader scope is so essential.

A Global Perspective

Throughout my research, I have found that there can be a lack of understanding from various scholars about why genres like vaporwave exist. It is certainly tempting to try to fit cultural objects into specific labels and categories; but the fact remains that this is increasingly hard to accomplish. Many elements of our planet's cultures and economies have become interconnected thanks to our now globalized systems of communication. It is crucial that such connections be mentioned in this research, as they speak to the broader topic of how capitalism in the West has evolved in an era of unprecedented globalization, particularly since the emergence of the internet. In her book *The Media and Globalization*, Terhi Rantanen navigates

the variety of definitions that have been offered up throughout the years. Her overview is useful in this context as it reveals how globalization has changed the dynamics of media and communication. While there are many ways to define globalization, in this context I am referring to the idea that there is a literal and figurative collapse of distances across the globe, effectively facilitating the flow of people, culture and money. One debate that Rantanen brings up is the timeline during which globalization became so prevalent, explaining that some scholars defend it as a "postmodern project" (23). She cites Malcolm Waters' hypothesis that it emerged in the 1990s in association with other phenomena such as "post-industrialization, post-modernization or the disorganization of capitalism" (23) and Anthony Giddens, who writes that "society has become a 'world society' and the individual is confronted by social institutions that have become global" (24). Both of these experiences involve the aforementioned shrinking of time and space that is so distinctive of globalization, implicating the individual in changes that are affecting culture and economics on every level of society.

Globalization is thus a difficult phenomenon to pin down: it is all-encompassing, its scale is incomprehensible, and most definitions remain rather abstract. One might even ask what globalization looks like? Yet, it is an important concept to grapple with as I begin to discuss the contemporary dilemma of situating oneself in a Western society that is in the later stages of capitalism. This theoretical conundrum has been addressed by scholars of postmodernist theory such as Fredric Jameson. In his book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson offers his contribution to the debates of the time surrounding postmodernist theory. His objective throughout the book is to describe the social processes occurring around him, defining late capitalism as a stage that started in the 1970s and has continued to dominate the West since. He writes extensively about the collapse of culture into economics as one of the hallmarks of late capitalism, explaining that "the interrelationship of culture and the economic here is not a one-way street but a continuous

reciprocal interaction and feedback loop" (xv). Commodity fetishism in particular has come to dominate what is perceived as culture (x). Another element that is central to Jameson's analysis is the concept of 'cognitive mapping', a practice that aims "to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (51). In the book *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*, Christopher Butler frames Jameson's idea in an interesting way: "this 'lost in a big hotel' view of our condition shows postmodernism to be a doctrine for the metropolis, within which a new climate of ideas has arisen and brought with it a new sensibility" (5). It is within this "new climate" that the collapse of distances between economics and culture has begun, and as a result it has provided new prompts to be critically explored in art. As Jameson explains, "what happened to culture may well be one of the more important clues for tracking the postmodern" (x).

Looking Back to Move Forward

Like Jameson, who explores the answers to his question in dedicated chapters throughout his book, I wish to explore vaporwave as a means to gain a better understanding of the world we live in today. Postmodernism is an older theory, and most of academia agrees that the postmodern era ended at the turn of the millennium. Still, researchers such as myself continue to see its relevance today. While there are many authors who have contributed to the topic, I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on Jameson's perspective. Jameson's book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is not only one of the most influential contributions of the time, but it is also an exploration of an era from a Marxist perspective. In his book *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx was able to break down the concept of capitalism in such a way that his words have continued to be pored over for the last 157 years. Not only does Jameson extend Marx's argument, he updates it by identifying a new devolution

of capitalism, which he calls late capitalism. His analysis of the cultural changes occurring in Western society is rooted in the understanding that culture and money flows have become inextricably bound together. Starting with the economic instability caused by the oil shocks in the 1970s, Jameson explores the ways in which Western culture changed, analyzing everything from architecture and advertising to literature and films. In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, millions of people lost their jobs, houses and savings, and those in the US were among the hardest hit. The impact the crisis had was so great that The Economist, in an article published in 2018, labeled it the second most devastating shock of the 21ˢᵗ century after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Jameson teases out the link between the economic instability of the 1980s and 1990s and the art being produced at the time. Obviously, a lot has changed since Jameson wrote and published his book, and yet I believe that the critical look he offers is still relevant today; it provides a useful blueprint that can be adapted to a more current analysis. Indeed, applying postmodernism to a more contemporary context might help us understand why vaporwave is still so relevant. Vaporwave as an important artistic element of 21ˢᵗ century Western culture will mirror many of the changes happening in society both online and off. I am most interested by his discussions on nostalgia, as well as pastiche and simulacrum in art. He devotes an entire chapter to the idea of "nostalgia films", ones that can be seen as an "aesthetic colonization" of past eras (19), that play on "'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect" (20) and that exist "beyond real historical time" (21). Pastiche and simulacrum are at the heart of the nostalgia film: "This approach to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage" (21). Much like with the nostalgia film, vaporwave creators are opening up a window into the past using the same artistic processes. In doing so, they reveal more about the society they live in than the past eras that they are referencing. His conceptualizations of the nostalgia film and the

practice of cognitive mapping are particularly helpful in understanding the conditions of possibility that enabled vaporwave to resonate with so many viewers and listeners.

Only a few scholars have made the connection between the movement and postmodernism. One of them is Nicholas Morrissey, who recognizes that vaporwave "can still be interpreted as rooted in postmodernist philosophy because of its interest in images and reflexive commentary, both of which deeply influence the expression of the genre" (79). However, his article diverges to focus on the concept of metamodernism, which he argues is situated in between modernism and postmodernism (66). He explains that metamodernism is a phenomenon that "encapsulates the idea that cultural producers are returning to a modernist sense of sincerity and enthusiasm while remaining far enough outside of said attitude to be wary of its flaws" (66). He defends his point of view by comparing various vaporwave artifacts such as songs, albums and their covers, in order to prove that the genre can be inconsistent in its source material and end result. Morrissey's case studies are limited to a few examples from each category and are not situated in their respective contexts. Indeed, locating the timing of the vaporwave releases he mentions is an important task precisely because vaporwave has greatly evolved since its emergence over a decade ago, something he recognizes at certain points throughout his article. Though his perspective is interesting, his conclusions lack conviction.

Authors Alican Koc and Grafton Tanner have also grounded their analyses of vaporwave in postmodernism rather successfully. Koc's discussion is effective at revealing vaporwave's critique of late capitalism, describing it as a "lifeworld [that] evokes both the feelings of alienation and emptiness of late capitalism"[2] (71). He briefly mentions the idea of the nostalgia film, although his analysis focuses mostly on still images that he has collected

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[2] Koc uses the term lifeworld to describe "a loose aestheticization of feelings circulating within a particular space and/or time" (64)

throughout his research. On the other hand, Tanner's aim in his book is to discuss vaporwave in relation to hauntology, arguing that it should be considered "as an update to postmodernism's critique of history" (76). While this is an important angle through which to explore vaporwave's entanglements with late capitalism, teasing out the connection between them will not be a main focus in my research. My aim will be to go further than Koc and Tanner in their analysis of postmodernism by digging deeper into Jameson's theoretical concepts. Furthermore, neither one's research is focused on the moving image; there is a wealth of video content available online (and sometimes offline in VHS or cassette format) that has not yet been treated by scholars studying vaporwave. Not only do I believe that this is the most intriguing part of vaporwave, but I would also argue that exploring this line of thought is key to understanding the movement as a whole.

New Media Aesthetics

Vaporwave is full of contradictions and is a difficult phenomenon to pin down. Part of the reason why it is perceived to be such a convoluted medium to study is because of the variety of media that intersect within vaporwave. As Carol Vernallis observes in her book *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*, new media formats tend to be this way. She finds that the boundaries between contemporary video and cinema are collapsing as their respective characteristics and narrative structures bleed into one another. This "media swirl" (3) has contributed to what she calls "intensified audiovisual aesthetics" (4), of which the internet has played a significant part. Indeed, it is essential to consider the ways in which "digital technologies like free-downloadable editing software, 10.1 surround-sound, digital intermediary and computer-generated imagery" have contributed to this new "style" of media (4). Vaporwave is precisely part of this 'media swirl' Vernallis is referencing, as it blends various videos, images and sounds from different eras to create something that unquestionably

belongs to the 21st century. Vaporwave should be categorized as simultaneously musical and visual, whereby the music is seen to enhance the visuals and vice versa. This synesthetic characteristic is by no means unique; indeed, music videos are defined by their capacity to seamlessly blend visuals to a musical track. Vernallis writes that in "music video we're continually taken out of and back into the music, resuturing ourselves to the soundtrack" (36). This speaks to the experience many listeners have when consuming vaporwave via platforms like YouTube, where they often leave comments and engage in collective discussions. However, it brings up questions regarding how valuable and essential the visuals are to vaporwave's identity. Though the music is well known among niche online communities, I argue that the associated visuals are more likely to be recognized and, by default, are more embedded in popular culture. What this statement points to is the way in which the visual symbols of vaporwave have become more iconic than the music itself. Its visual iterations are located in the symbols – or memes – cloned and disseminated through music videos and digital art. Therefore, studying the movement involves acknowledging many aspects of communication, moving image and media theory.

Furthermore, vaporwave should be thought of in contrast to the highly structured and institutionalized music and film industries that wield immense influence on cultural production of all sorts. Vaporwave should be studied as a form of experimental music. While I will expand on this, it is worth noting here the interesting position vaporwave holds in the world of music. It has been described as a "microgenre" (Loignon and Messier 2) as well as "embracing a decidedly 'do-it yourself' (DIY) ethic" (McLeod 123), alluding to its highly specific sounds, small fanbase and accessible technology needed to make it. Vaporwave has certainly benefited from a certain degree of success online, and part of the object of this research is to reveal the influence it has had on other forms of media. Adam Harper is insistent on this fact, writing that the "continual description of vaporwave as a 'microgenre' seems at odds with its vast

representation on Bandcamp and the fact that it has spawned several offshoot styles" (121). Still, it is not embedded in popular culture to the extent that the genres of pop, rap and hip-hop are today. Its contours are not well defined, and after more than ten years of existence the movement is still constantly reinventing itself. As Paulo de Assis writes, "the experimental is open-ended, revisable, and fundamentally incomplete" (10), which is vaporwave's very nature. I am not claiming that vaporwave is completely unique, nor does it fully exist outside of the highly institutionalized structures that currently dominate the music industry, but rather that it reflects some important changes in the way in which contemporary music and video are being created and distributed. Additionally, it offers some insight regarding the trends experimental media have followed in the last decade.

Chapter Outline

Given the fact that OPN's album kickstarted the genre, it is only appropriate to start from there. In the first chapter, I explore the visual aesthetic of vaporwave in relation to its materiality. What are vaporwave tracks made from, and what do its music videos look like? What methodologies and theoretical frameworks lend themselves to the study of new media? Indeed, the striking nature of the title '*Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1*', as well as the song names on the album, are certainly indicative of several of vaporwave's main attributes and have influenced many other artists when creating a narrative, or theme, for their albums. These 'stories' are created thanks to song titles, album artwork, merch and music videos, offering up a perspective of the world that is told throughout the album. What is different with vaporwave compared to other genres of music is its relationship to the internet. Not only is vaporwave a type of internet music, it is a rare example of a style whose identity is explicitly tied to platforms. It is in these spaces that fans and creators can meet and engage with one another, creating what could be described as a scene. The first chapter sets out to examine the significant

role that the internet and platforms have played in the production and consumption of culture through the example of vaporwave. The spaces that host vaporwave art, and the way in which enthusiasts and artists engage, have come to define the movement and therefore offer up part of the answer of where vaporwave came from. Furthermore, the very idea that the internet is an entirely immaterial, decentralized, and democratized worldwide system is questioned through the study of internet platforms, and vaporwave's ties to the physical world. The first chapter explores whether vaporwave can truly be described as a unique phenomenon, or if it exists in a logic of capitalism that is all too familiar.

This sets the stage for my second chapter, in which vaporwave is discussed in a more abstract way. Though Fredric Jameson's conceptualization of postmodernism, I explore vaporwave's position in contemporary culture to answer the questions: why is vaporwave important, and what does it have to say? While the genre is often portrayed as a political movement, there is a lack of consensus on its message. Such confusion is understandable. Consider Andy Warhol's pop art depictions of common items such as a pair of shoes, or a can of soup. Jameson explains how his interpretations remove the context that is necessary for the brain to situate the object or person in any tangible way. I argue that this process, as in the decontextualization of the source material, or referent, is the very same process responsible for vaporwave's aesthetic attributes. This situation has muddled the genre's message, leading scholars to question its sincerity and purpose. Stuart Lindsay claims that vaporwave offers a repackaged and hauntological expression of socio-political trauma (117), Adam Trainer describes *Eccojams* as ironic (412), Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak state that the genre's narrative is "about capitalism and serves as a (means of mobilizing a) critique of capitalism" (460) and Laura Glitsos proposes that vaporwave serves as a "satire of both muzak® and memory" (115). What emerges from these claims is that there is a debate surrounding the nature of the vaporwave artist: are they passively offering a critique of capitalism or is their work a

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striking example of online activism? As Ken McLeod writes, "vaporwave's open and enigmatic ideology is perhaps its biggest weakness. Much like the internet in which it resides, its very openness and ambiguity renders it susceptible to (mis)appropriations on all sides" (139). In order to resolve this dilemma, I explore vaporwave through Jameson's analysis of art in the postmodern era. By reframing the typical depiction of the '*artiste engagé*', Jameson works against certain myths on what political art looks like and more importantly, what it can achieve. Throughout the second chapter, I also consider the influence vaporwave has had on visual media by exploring certain parallels between cultural artifacts and their postmodern aesthetic qualities. The aim of this chapter will be to reveal vaporwave's important role in contemporary society and the influence it was wielded on a variety of cultural elements of the 21st century.

As a whole, this thesis will examine vaporwave as an example of new media, with the hope of adding to the growing corpus of research and inspiring scholars to offer new contributions on the topic. This thesis also makes a case for an interdisciplinary approach towards the study of cultural artifacts like vaporwave. In its most general sense, this research aims to show how vaporwave is symptomatic of the entanglements of culture and economics that we face today. Indeed, if there is any lesson to be learned it is that monolithic analyses are not always helpful in understanding the evolution of cultural productions, especially on the internet. In order to understand what the cultural ramifications of such a movement have and continue to be, my goal is to explore vaporwave in the broader context of its existence. This is possible thanks to my research informed by contemporary and older theoretical frameworks, as well as music, film, media, internet and cultural studies. Through these perspectives, vaporwave emerges as a movement that is representative of an irrepressible desire to express and situate oneself within the framework of capitalism that Western societies are organized around today.

Chapter 1: Music, Transformed

In 2012, the website Tiny Mix Tapes published a review of an album by the artist Prism Projector entitled Datavis + Forgotten Light[3]. The author of this review, James Parker, was one of the website's' top contributors reviewing the emerging vaporwave music genre. What is striking about Parker's piece today is the way in which it unintentionally reveals the surprising yet controversial impact vaporwave was having just two years after *Eccojams*, the album that started the movement, was released. The review reads like a manifesto, insofar as it attempts to map out vaporwave's characteristics, its political ambitions and most importantly its lifespan. Indeed, Parker boldly claimed that "in 10 years' time, virtually no one will still listen to it". He viewed vaporwave as a passing fad that was better described as a concept than a fully articulated genre. Still, he acknowledged its impact: "vaporwave will have been important […] because this sort of story will become ever increasingly familiar in the musical avant-garde as the decade continues". Among the many other reviews and thought pieces of the time, this review struck me for several reasons. Firstly, Parker's strong feelings toward vaporwave reveal several things, namely the importance attributed to vaporwave by critics and fans, the seriousness of its implications and its potential to disrupt the traditional dynamics of the music industry. This is not just evident in Parker's piece; in the same year, popular YouTuber Anthony Fantano published a video review in which he describes vaporwave as a "new genre"[4], while *Dummy* published an article by critic Adam Harper in which he interviews several artists. Both of these reviews solidified vaporwave's presence online by creating a ripple effect among fans, critics and creators. What is clear is that in 2012, there was a feeling that vaporwave was interesting and different enough from what was being produced at the time that it needed to be discussed, dissected and prophesized. Music critics such as those mentioned above, and even

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[3] https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/datavis-forgotten-light-prism-projector
[4] Macintosh Plus - Floral Shoppe ALBUM REVIEW by TheNeedleDrop, published Nov 28th 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0D9IyyeEEU&ab_channel=theneedledrop

some researchers in academia began to ask themselves: How important of a movement is vaporwave? What are its implications on the future of music? Are amateur musicians and producers to be taken seriously? Now that some time has passed, it is possible to tackle these questions with more accuracy. In 2019, Harper reflected on his previous contributions on the topic, writing that discussions of vaporwave often resulted in statements being made about the "benefits or dangers of opening the doors of cultural production to technologically enabled amateurs" (119). In order to unpack this statement, I suggest starting with the inferences made by Parker in his article. While Parker was wrong about the movement's longevity, his review nonetheless points to the direction vaporwave was heading towards. His prediction that vaporwave was going to be representative of a broader narrative unfolding in the music industry in the 2010s is worth addressing. Similarly, by labeling vaporwave as "avant-garde", Parker unwittingly drew attention to an important point about whether vaporwave should be studied as a fringe movement. Before I discuss these in detail, I must first address the article's most controversial implication, which is that internet movements are short-lived precisely because of their lack of materiality. He goes even further, writing that "there will be exceptionally little to show for [vaporwave]" because it "will have yielded hardly any physical releases and will barely ever have been heard "live." While it is true that Prism Projector's work in particular seems to have been lost in the internet's vast sea of data[5], vaporwave remains very much alive, with a strong online fanbase and an ever-increasing virtual catalogue. Considering this, what can we learn about the internet's capacity to enable the production, distribution and storage of music as well as to host the communities that partake in such activities? Can music only be described as 'music' if it is consumed physically?

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[5] I used Hito Steyerl's term here in order to refer to the abundance of data on the internet that she has written about in her research.

Internet Noise

The internet serves many different functions depending on who you are or what you're trying to achieve. What is perhaps one of its most extraordinary and revolutionary abilities is that information can theoretically be stored in perpetuity and without any limit that is tangible to the human brain. Indeed, things infamously never really go away once they're on the internet. It can be extremely efficient at storing and archiving information; for instance, researchers found that the number of social media profiles associated with people that have passed away is on the rise (Greenspan). In other cases however, the opposite effect is at work. Journalists working for *The Atlantic* found that "link rot and content drift are endemic to the web", whereby content on a webpage either gets changed or removed over time, thus rendering a referenced source obsolete (Zittrain). In any case, what is true of the internet is that it is "a library without an index" that "becomes paradoxically less informative as it grows" (Borges qtd. in Zittrain). Hito Steyerl writes about how analysts must now "unscramble, filter, decrypt, refine, and process" in order to obtain information from a "sea of data" coming from all sources, including the internet. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why there is a certain feeling of delight when the internet 'works'. Uplifting stories of families being reunited thanks to the internet provide rich narratives for publications, or even for Hollywood in the case of the film *Lion* (2016)[6]. Thus, raw data gains its utility once it is extracted and made intelligible. To add to this, Will Straw argues in his aptly titled article "Embedded Memories" that "on the Internet, the past is produced as a field of ever greater coherence […] making even the most trivial objects the focus of a popular but highly ordered knowledge" (4). Indeed, the very act of using the internet to unearth information from the past produces even more value. Much like those who use metal detectors to find valuables among the dirt, internet users often scour the

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[6] Based on true events, the plot of the film revolves around a character who, after being separated from his family as a child, uses the internet to find his hometown and reunite with his mother.

web for visual content from the past. Such an act changes the perceived value of such content from obsolete to useful. When something of the past is brought back and recontextualized, what was forgotten or out of fashion is transformed into an object that holds cultural currency today. This behavior is especially prevalent with vaporwave artists, who use samples to construct entirely new tracks. Schembri and Tichbon explain that this practice is often called "'crate digging', which is analogous to the physical activity of digging through crates of long forgotten and discarded vinyl albums" (202). Similarly, Harper writes that vaporwave aims "to turn trash, something shallow and determinedly throwaway, into something sacred or mystical" (2012). These analogies and comparisons help us understand how vaporwave revalorizes things from the past. Indeed, most of vaporwave's audiovisual source material comes from the 1980s and 1990s. Such media are typically found by creators on the internet, or sourced offline via home video or found footage from VHS tapes or CDs. For instance, the artist 猫 シ Corp. typically creates music videos using his own footage shot when on vacation with his family[7]. He also used sounds from a found VHS tape on one of his albums, called *News at 11*[8]. Whether the source material is found on the internet or not, the resulting product is always published online, effectively producing the effect described by Straw. Furthermore, these relatively new forms of cultural creation have generated entirely new concepts. Harper, for instance, has also written about the concept of 'internet music', exploring a variety of genres that could be described as such. His research attempts to legitimize this type of music by considering how it is "shaped by, symptomatic of, or straightforwardly 'about' the perceived effects of the internet" ("How Internet Music is Frying your Brain" 87). As mentioned above, Harper revisited his dissection of vaporwave in 2019, placing it within the context of his research on internet music (93). Interestingly, he writes about the backlash that the rise of internet music has caused among

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[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6mhBi6B3W0&ab_channel=%E7%8C%AB%E3%82%B7Corp.
[8] This information is provided on the artist's Bandcamp page. Accessed at https://news-at-11.bandcamp.com/album/news-at-11

music critics, who urge listeners to return to older technologies such as vinyl to counteract the digitalization of music (89). It could be argued that vaporwave presents an alternative to this sort of debate. Indeed, vaporwave presents an "ambiguous" or "ambivalent" view of music by doing away with the very idea of an authentically and technologically pure recording (Whelan and Nowak 453). Many popular vaporwave albums have been released in vinyl format, despite the fact that they were recorded digitally in an era where vinyl is no longer dominant. Similarly, some creators have produced music videos made entirely with digital media, only to then replicate the formal aesthetic qualities of analogue media using various editing software, effectively complicating the normally straightforward boundaries of what constitutes a format. Examples of this can be seen in videos such as *VHS Head - Gas Human No.1 (MV)*[9] or *C R I S I S*[10], which are edited in such a way that they evoke specific technological flaws, such as heavy grain, flickering or rolling bands, and static (fig. 2). These highly distinctive aesthetic flaws, or glitches, ultimately become symbolic of the technologies associated with them. Most importantly, what is essential to the vaporwave creator is that any artifact should be subjected to significant transformations in order to seamlessly fit into its new digitally modified structure; that it must be turned into a format that is compatible with the internet. It is through these transformations and conversions that the materiality of the internet music genre becomes apparent. Though vaporwave exists primarily in a virtual space, its source material most typically comes from a variety of formats that have been transformed, converted, downloaded, distorted, upgraded, uploaded, and degraded. It would be a time-consuming endeavor to map out the origins of media used in just one vaporwave music video or track. In some cases, we can trace parts of this virtual journey: *Eccojams* was initially released in limited quantities via cassette, as well as by DVD under the aforementioned title *Memory Vague*. Fans who sought

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[9] The video was created by Patryk Ludamage and serves as an unofficial music video for the vaporwave track "Gas Human No.1" by VHS Head.

[10] The *C R I S I S* video is another unofficial interpretation of Home's "Decay", this time created and published by Lucien Hughes.

to share the limited release with others either converted the tapes back into digital format or

pirated the DVD to then release them onto the YouTube platform (Schembri and Tichbon 197).

Fig. 2: The highly saturated and distorted images of Patryk Ludamage's *VHS Head - Gas Human No.1 (MV)*

From this example alone, we can see that media can go from total stagnation, when it is

unknown, unfound or discarded, to reaching vast ranges of mobility on the internet. This is

even more relevant for the audio-visual sources that *Eccojams* and *Memory Vague* are made

up of; the project has understandably been described as a "nostalgia wormhole" given that it

features distorted samples from the likes of "Fleetwood Mac and Teddy Pendergrass, to Peter

Gabriel and Heart" (Lin 169).

The Vaporwave Video Store

Returning to Straw's discussion of the internet provides additional insight on the way

vaporwave has contributed to the recontextualization of older media and technologies. He

develops the concept of 'cultural time' by taking a look at the cultural impact of the video store.

Straw's argument is based on the idea that such places played with time due to their curatorial

role presenting films from various decades (5). The effect was that long-forgotten films

returned in the public consciousness. As discussed above, Straw believes that the internet functions in a similar way, as it "provides the terrain on which sentimental attachments, vernacular knowledges, and a multitude of other relationships to the material culture of the past are magnified." (3). This point could be extended to describe certain behaviors on social media platforms such as Letterboxd or video hosting platform Netflix. I believe Straw's discussion of the past influences of the video store is still relevant today, given that curation and taste occupy increasingly important roles in determining what is relevant on the internet. As video stores selling commodities turned into platforms that sell information, the idea of 'taste' has always been an essential part of doing business. There is "a highly fractured, even individualized, geography of movie tastes *and* social values" that can be found in a video rental store's "organization of movie categories, in its very architecture" (Herbert 6). Similarly, video stores promised "an ever-expanding selection of movies" and catered to audiences "by personalizing movies through the video shopping experience" (8). Given this information, it is possible to draw connections between the physical organization of the video store with the interfaces and core functions of platforms such as Letterboxd and Netflix. For instance, both interfaces reveal a list of films that is curated according to criteria ranging from specific themes to ratings and popularity. The two platforms also incorporate the concept of 'taste' in various iterations; the former allows users to leave reviews on individual films and include their favorite films on their profile page, while the latter allows users to 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' films they watch in order to influence future film recommendations. Letterboxd and Netflix can be described as participating in forms of cultural renewal by making older or rarer films visible and accessible to today's technologically inclined via their interfaces and algorithms. On top of this, as films are perpetually returned in the public consciousness, so are their past cultural and contextual subtexts. This makes for a layered viewing experience, whereby many differing realities are simultaneously possible for one person. Platforms further accentuate this

phenomenon, given that their goal is also to alleviate "the burden of choice" for users (Rónai 111). As music journalist András Rónai explains, music streaming platforms have been seen to create a "frictionless" experience by removing as much of its original context (such as genre classifications) and rather "inventing new contexts" (105), such as "moods, activities, the time of the day, and the perceived location of the user" (104). Similarly, finding or viewing older films on today's popular platforms is an experience that is necessarily impacted by contemporary tastes, social values, and classifications. For instance, in the film *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) by Francis Ford Coppola, the main character is transported back to her teenage years during the 1960s. The film's comedic premise relies on the vast differences observed by Peggy Sue between the '60s and the '80s in the United States. A 1986 audience would likely enjoy the subtilities of such a plot given its subject matter, but watching the film in the 2020s is not as straightforward of an experience. Straw also notes this in his analysis of the *Austin Powers* trilogy (1997, 1999, 2002), arguing that "there is an ever-increasing thickness" to the films' depictions of past eras (Embedded Memories 10). The idea of 'thickness' is described as "a sense that the overlaying of films and other texts that cast these periods in particular ways has made it difficult to move around them through alternate routes" (10). Naturally, films such as *Austin Powers* or *Peggy Sue Got Married* are particularly remarkable because of their own mise-en-abyme and self-reflexiveness, but such an aesthetic should be problematized when it is at the service of platforms' own distribution of taste.

Through the lens of vaporwave's creators, the 80s and 90s also appear undeniably 'thick'. The sounds and images attributed to the vaporwave genre can be described as glossy representations of those eras, ones that forgo accuracy and realism in favor of aestheticized memory. These representations exist on a spectrum that is closer to an imagined past than reality, highlighting the very real effects of nostalgia on collective human memory. Lopatin explains that the *Eccojams* album was born out of his "fascination with sampling", which was

completely "inseparable from childhood memories of synthesizers such as the Roland Juno-60 from the early 1980s." Lopatin felt that the sounds created by these synths had "the potential 'to model topographies, or ideas, or ecologies'" (Lopatin qtd. in Cole 300). Thus, what was once a personal memory became the inspiration for *Eccojams*, and through its collective enjoyment, effectively contributed to the sedimentation of a specific vision of the past. This vision is not new in the slightest; it can be found in TV shows such as *Miami Vice*, whose legacy lives on thanks to its highly stylized portrayal of the 1980s. But as Lopatin anticipated, his use of synthesizers, as well as samples from past decades and the "chopped and screwed" technique (Cole 300), had the potential to give shape to a certain view of the world. *Eccojams* struck such a chord among netizens that the genre of vaporwave and its singular aesthetic vision were born. The album is also Lopatin's only vaporwave-labeled album, and yet users were able to construct an entirely self-sustaining ecosystem from it. In his book *Retromania*, author Simon Reynolds studies instances of pop culture that demonstrate an obsession "with the cultural artifacts of its own immediate past" in order to answer the following question: "is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times?" (xiii). In order to answer this, we must return our attention to Straw, who explains that time online is not as linear as it is in our offline lives, hence the concept of 'cultural time'. I'd like to use his term with regard to vaporwave's engagements with the "material culture of the past" enabled by the internet. This includes its use of outdated technologies as discussed above but also its representation of the past through images and video. Indeed, I argue that the genre does so by bringing back old media and making them new again, thus extending their lifespan – or delaying their obsolescence. In his work on vaporwave, Stuart Lindsay contends that the genre's "technological and aural reproduction of an analog world through digital means shows an awareness of how we are tricked by commodified nostalgia

and can access the past only by recycling and reconsuming it" (114). A particularly relevant example of this is the way old commercials are used in vaporwave music videos. One of the most famous videos of this sort is *Enjoy Yourself* by Saint Pepsi[11]. Boasting more than 19 million views[12], the video features clips from McDonald's advertisements from the 1980s that were based around the moon-faced character 'Mac Tonight'. Every time I watch this music video, I struggle with the same strange feeling; one that is simultaneously made up of familiarity and confusion. The clips feel familiar because we see the logos we all know – such as the golden arches that make up the M in McDonald's – yet they also cause confusion due to the presence of a long-forgotten and rather dated-looking mascot (fig. 3). Here, vaporwave is contributing to the extension of this advertisement's lifespan, which otherwise ended in the 1990s after a series of lawsuits[13].

Fig. 3: The McDonald's mascot Mac Tonight singing underneath the golden arches in *Enjoy Yourself* by Saint Pepsi.

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[11] Accessed on YouTube via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hI0qMtdfng&ab_channel=SunLevi
[12] As of 25th of August 2024.
[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mac_Tonight

Similarly, in OPN's *Memory Vague*[14], the distorted voice of Christine McVie from Fleetwood Mac knowingly repeats the lines "Angel, please don't go. I'll miss you when you're gone" over various advertisements for the cassette player. The music videos for *Angel* (titled A2 on *Eccojams*) and *Enjoy Yourself* both make a case for the repurposing of commercials as a form of "reinvigoration of early forms of material culture" (4) (fig.4).

Fig. 4: A hand repeatedly presses down, inserting a VHS into the machine, in *Angel* by Sunsetcorp (also known as Chuck Person and OPN).

Furthermore, considering the way cultural objects could theoretically have endless lifespans and circulate from past to present easily, Straw evokes the ideas of "inertial force" and "acceleration" of cultural time (5). What he means by these is that there is a tension between the refusal to move forward, the desire to look back and the final outcome that ultimately still produces a form of newness or at the very least, a difference. With vaporwave, creators know that their attempts to recreate the past will never produce an exact copy, so instead they opt for a depiction of the present using the past as its main source. In his discussion of *Eccojams*' influence, author Marvin Lin gravitates toward a similar conclusion: "*Eccojams*

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[14] Accessed on YouTube via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1flq8LKkzk&ab_channel=EricLawson

asks us not to imagine new futures by pillaging the past, but to linger in the instantaneity of the exclusive, ecstatic now by reconstituting the past as the present" (171).

The Platformization of Culture

Up until this point, I have attempted to draw connections between the concept of vaporwave as a genre and the broader category of internet music in a purely aesthetic way. However, it is also possible to make the case – as others have done – for vaporwave's more formal connection to the internet. Indeed, in Laura Glitsos' analysis of the genre, she points out that "vaporwave is often referred to as an 'Internet genre' because it emerged solely on and through digital platforms." (103). Similarly, Whelan and Nowak describe vaporwave as an internet genre not only because of its sourcing from "distinct libraries of music (commonly trawled from YouTube)", but also because it "mixes distinct platform-based aesthetics and cultural preoccupations." (452). Given that vaporwave "originated from the Tumblr platform and spread out into other sites from there", it would seem as though the infrastructure of such platforms[15] is conceptually linked to vaporwave's core identity (103).

As I have mentioned above, the YouTube platform has played a key role in the movement's success and has more broadly has been responsible for an entire shift in the way we create and consume audio-visual media. Founded in 2005 and acquired by Google in 2006, it quickly became one of the most visited websites in the world. Platform scholars Burgess and Green describe YouTube as "a platform for, and an aggregator of, content, but it is not a content producer itself." (4). They go on to describe YouTube as a "site of participatory culture" (11), a concept that is best described by the idea of the "'meta businesses' – the 'new category of business that enhances the value of information developed elsewhere and thus benefits the original creators of that information'" (Weinberger qtd. in Burgess and Green 4). The term

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[15] According to Glitsos, these include "Reddit, YouTube, Bandcamp, Tumblr, 4Chan and Soundcloud" (103).

"prosumer" has been used to address the evolving role of internet users on user-generated platforms such as YouTube – and to highlight the invisible labor that is performed on a daily basis. McLeod characterizes a prosumer as an "active consumer, a consumer who is enabled to create based on previous creations" (129), while Vernallis attributes a "do-it-yourself aesthetics" to the average prosumer (2013, 132). The term can most simply be broken down into the idea of a consumer who is simultaneously engaged in the act of producing. For Vernallis, everyone on YouTube is a prosumer; she considers it to be one of YouTube's "production practices" (132). In this way, we can begin to sketch out the ways in which the concept of a prosumer can be problematized. Vaporwave users have been described as prosumers by Ross Cole in his article *Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse* (310) and indirectly as occupying the "roles of consumer, evaluator, and creator" by Loignon and Messier (12). Given their interactive roles, vaporwave participants have typically favored YouTube. The platform hosts many vaporwave music videos, which is why users gather there in the first place. As Vernallis explains in *Unruly Media*, "YouTube's most viewed content is music video, and many clips, though they're not quite music videos, function similarly" (6). Users can post their own music videos or songs, as well as interact and leave comments underneath each video. The reasons for vaporwave's popularity on YouTube can be further explained by the fact that the platform has adopted a notoriously ambivalent approach toward copyright. Indeed, YouTube's interest lies in its ability to generate revenue through advertising. Nieborg, Poell and Duffy point out that the platform is "fully dependent on cultural producers", meaning that it relies on users to post, view, and interact within the platform in any way (11). Unsurprisingly, the data collected on platforms such as YouTube paints a rather alluring portrait of its online engagement, which in turn becomes a main selling point for advertisers. Meanwhile, making sure that copyright law is being enforced correctly takes a backseat: Matthew Sag argues that the way copyright law is applied in the case of

YouTube, which he describes as a "notice and takedown policy" (503), is not particularly efficient and in fact rather incentiveless. Quotes from the *Viacom vs YouTube* court case reveal that YouTube "welcomed […] copyright-infringing material being placed on their website" (515). Indeed, such a policy places the responsibility upon the owner of copyrighted material to file a claim under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act[16]. The positive aspect of this double-edged sword is that such an approach favors creativity. Sag argues that achieving the right balance in copyright law can have far-reaching consequences given that "copyright law recognizes the need to incentivize authors by granting them a significant degree of control over the use of their works" but it also "recognizes that the public must retain some freedom to use existing works and to build upon them as the next generation of authors" (Sag 500). On YouTube, users benefit from this policy by being able to post without the fear of having their work taken down due to copyright infringement[17]. The platform enables and facilitates these interactions because it is more financially beneficial for them; at one point, the platform made a deal with competitor Vevo: while they remained two separate platforms, YouTube would host official music videos via the Vevo channel, effectively creating 'two' different spaces within Google's platform. Before this, the difference between the two platforms was stark: "YouTube often has short, sophomoric clips. Vevo has well-rounded, conservative, corporate-identified music videos." (Vernallis 2013, 4). These attributes continued to be each brand's defining feature after the deal, which eventually led to Vevo's demise. Writing for Forbes in 2018, journalist Bobby Owsinski highlighted the power of YouTube over its competitors, writing that "music fans didn't much care if they were getting the official artist video or a version uploaded by a user on YouTube". What's more, YouTube's lack of copyright

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[16] The official policies are available at
https://www.youtube.com/intl/ALL_ca/howyoutubeworks/policies/copyright/#overview.
[17] The important caveat being that users who have not cleared samples must forfeit the possibility of making any money via the YouTube platform. If a user wishes to monetize their content, they must be able to clear all copyright protected samples at the risk of their post being taken down, or worse.

enforcement has always favored a sort of 'remix culture', whereby anyone can post their take on a trend, or create a parody of someone else's content. This element is such a core principle of YouTube[18] that Vernallis identifies "parody and the sardonic response" as one of eight of its most distinctive aesthetic features (146). Thus, the platform's infrastructure, its proprietary algorithms, and the rules that govern user access have come to define the user experience in very concrete ways.
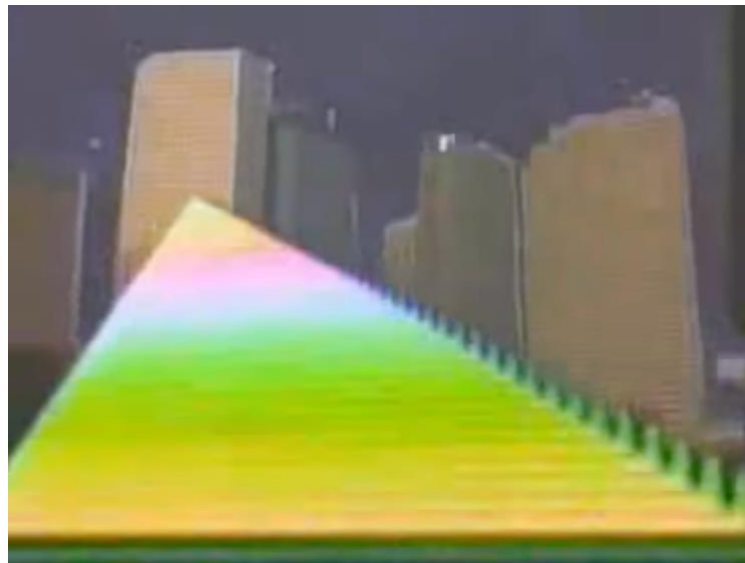

Fig. 5: The video for Sunsetcorp's "nobody here" (titled B4 on *Eccojams*) is two minutes long and has nearly four million views on YouTube.

The impact of YouTube on music, film and everything in between, is also undeniable. Simon Reynolds identifies the platform as the true embodiment of the "chaos of amateur cultural salvage." (56) With this comment, Reynolds implicitly recognizes the idea argued by Straw that value is produced in the 'salvaging' of material, and less so in the material itself. Furthermore, he points out that the dematerialization of "cultural data" is only possible thanks to "advances in user-friendly technology [that] make it irresistibly quick and convenient to

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[18] This is most obviously represented by the 'reaction' video trend that has been displayed on the platform for many years.

share stuff" (56). This reality had a particularly revolutionary impact on the music industry, and more specifically on the production of music videos. Vernallis describes how at a certain point in the platforms' history, "music video became a jewel on the top of YouTube's heap." (14). Scherzinger is more precise in his historical account of this transition:

> Industry commentators increasingly recognized the rising value of gigantic, easily searchable databases for music: 'Eventually, the most successful music companies may not be the ones that create, play, or sell music. Rather, they may be the ones to collect the most music data'". […] By 2008 YouTube had signed licensing deals with many major players in the content industries – including Universal, Sony BMG, EMI, Warner, CBS, NBC and others. (46)

All of this points to an issue problematized by Burgess and Green: if YouTube's infrastructure and business model are designed to function through the creation of information (or data) by its users, then "who gets to speak, and who gets the attention; what compensations or rewards there are for creativity and work; and the uncertainties around various forms of expertise and authority" (11)? Briefly studying platform dynamics and the role of the 'prosumer' will help contextualize the emergence of vaporwave and address Parker's observations on the music scene of the late 2000s and early 2010s. Indeed, it is worthwhile to interrogate the role that platforms play in propelling cultural movements into the spotlight. Whelan and Nowak's description of vaporwave in particular offers a glimpse of what this could entail. While the ideas of "platform-based aesthetics" and "cultural preoccupations" are not initially explored by the authors, they do argue that "vaporwave is an internet genre" given that "a number of platforms and websites were key to the inception and early development of the genre" (452). In order to address the cultural preoccupations and platform-based aesthetics of vaporwave, it

is essential to understand the ways in which platforms have been impacting cultural production for the last 20 years.

Internet music most obviously appears new because it is hosted and supported by a whole ecosystem of online resources. Platforms arguably remain the most important of these resources, as they have come to dominate the internet in many ways. Researchers David Nieborg and Thomas Poell have been studying the expansion of cultural production on digital platforms, what they call the "platformization of culture", as the norm that has defined the last ten years of creative expression online (4276). The term platformization itself describes "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems" (4276), with a platform being defined as a primarily digital interface that hosts a network of actors and end-users (4277). Similarly, Nick Srnicek defines platforms as "digital infrastructures […] that position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects" (43). In light of these conceptualizations, platforms have unsurprisingly become popular among creatives who wish to share and monetize their work online. Platforms can be seen as digital spaces that create opportunities for different actors to connect. To add to this, some platforms "come with a series of tools that enable their users to build their own products, services, and marketplaces", further cementing the central role platforms occupy in cultural production today (43). In their book *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and Brooke Erin Duffy attempt to flesh out the impact platforms have had on cultural producers. Building on Nieborg and Poell's initial research on the platformization of culture, their research seeks to reveal the different ways in which cultural producers can become "platform dependent" (vii). The authors consider the idea of a cultural producer through a bourdieusian perspective, whereby the term refers to "the broad range of actors and organizations engaged in the creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization of symbolic

artefacts" (9). Most importantly however is the distinction they draw between cultural production that is either "industrial" or "vernacular". The first refers to established cultural industries, such as the music industry, while the latter describes everyday forms of creation (9). On platforms, this can look like a lack of visibility on whether a cultural producer is a paid professional. Such boundaries are purposefully blurred on platforms since "all platform-based activity creates value, and all vernacular creativity is commodified by the platform (van Dijck qtd. 12). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for "side switching to occur" as end users who consume content become producers and vice versa (11). Finally, "platforms potentially enable individual producers to figure even more prominently, as the former furnish new markets for cultural goods" (9). Over the last twenty years, cultural producers have been an essential part of the transformations occurring in all fields of cultural production. Such behavior has been observed among what Schembri and Tichbon call vaporwave participants. In their research, the scholars analyze various interviews of these participants – or artists – in order to determine the roles they occupy in the process of cultural creation. They conclude that vaporwave participants should be seen as "cultural curators" given that they act as "cultural producers as well as cultural consumers, but also consuming producers". The idea of a cultural curator entails not only exhibiting multiple roles online but also being "active, reflexive and creative" in these roles, which is why they feel that the term prosumer is too limited. Vaporwave participants are said to act as "multi-role innovative arbiters of meaning" (206). As discussed above, platforms like YouTube have enabled and encouraged users to take on multiple roles by coding it into their digital infrastructure. The term 'curator' is particularly relevant in the case of YouTube thanks to its playlist feature, which allows users to compile videos on the site into theme-based lists. Many vaporwave themed playlists exist on YouTube, reinforcing Schembri and Tichbon's characterization. In such instances, the vaporwave artists and fans explicitly act as

curators: either through the very act of compiling media or by mediating on whether a video is 'authentically' vaporwave in public comments under each listing.

If vaporwave participants are indeed playing out multiple roles online with such fluidity, then the question of who these participants are becomes relevant. The Schembri and Tichbon study reveals that vaporwave is mostly popular in Western countries, particularly in Australia, the U.S. and Canada (196). Interestingly, they use the term "vaporwave audience", but as discussed above, they later advance the argument that users engaging with the genre are consumers as well as producers. Put into plain words, those who create vaporwave media are not only artists, but also fans. We can begin to problematize this reality by discussing the overlap between official and unofficial productions and contexts. More specifically, in what ways are vaporwave participants considered to be "professionals" or "amateurs"? To what extent do these distinctions impact the feeling of belonging to the online vaporwave community? Finally, can vaporwave be considered a scene?

A Nebulous Scene

My aim here is to work through Parker's predictions addressed at the beginning of the chapter by answering these questions. I believe that the vaporwave genre can be described as a music scene given the fact that it possesses several formal characteristics typically attributed to scenes by both older and recent scholarship. This argument is not unheard of in the vaporwave literature; Whelan and Nowak, Harper (2018), Born and Haworth, Tanner, Wilcox and Compton, Loignon and Messier, and Lindsay have all treated vaporwave as a music scene in their research. What is significantly less discussed yet often alluded to throughout vaporwave scholarship is what I believe to be the driving force behind the scene-ness of vaporwave. Indeed, as hinted above, Parker's comments about the evolving nature of the music industry in the 2010s are testament to the influence of the financial downturn of the time on all cultural

industries. It would appear as though the conditions of possibility that gave rise to vaporwave are strongly rooted in the socio-economic conditions of the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as the platformization of culture and the 2008 financial crisis. As I have already discussed, the contexts in which the genre evolved became embedded in its very nature. By pushing this argument to its logical conclusion, it can be argued that vaporwave owes not only its cohesive aesthetic but also its relative longevity to the fact that its identity was centered around participants' lived reality, and that this was the binding force that enabled the genre to become a fully-fledged scene.

The term "scene" is widely used in informal contexts; one might think of the punk music scene in London or the art scene of a particular city. The term is often used interchangeably with the word 'subculture'. In their book *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, Peterson and Bennett provide an in-depth analysis of various music scenes, defining them as "the contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others." (1). Early theorizations of the concept focused on the contexts in which scenes emerged, in the attempt to sketch out its principal characteristics. Context, or location, is so inherent to a scene's identity that, as Peterson and Bennett explain, scholars such as Urry have described phenomena in which people travel to a place in order to "vicariously experience their expectations about a scene" (2). Furthermore, the context of a scene has for the most part been argued to be rooted in physically tangible experiences, with specific locations becoming intrinsically linked to a scene's identity (such as Seattle and the grunge movement). Straw reflects on this in his essay *Some Things A Scene Might Be* by supposing that "the spatiality implicit in the idea of scene has inoculated it from the risk that it simply become one more label (like subculture or fandom)" (476). Thus, the very configuration in time and space of a movement is so essential to its identity that it is the very act of gathering in a space that

transforms and solidifies a movement's status into a scene. There are certain presupposed ideas that come with the concept of a scene, in particular that they are inherently marginal, and that they are exclusively location-based. Does this mean that all scenes are or should be considered avant-garde? For instance, the very term subculture implies a hierarchy of cultures in public perception or popularity. By definition, subcultures are not movements that dominate our cultural spheres. And yet, this term can be problematized given how famous certain subcultures and scenes have become over time. Furthermore, how has the advent of the internet and digitization impacted the definition of what a scene can be? Straw addresses this second issue later on in his essay, writing that scenes can be seen "as collectivities marked by some form of proximity" (477). He elaborates on this by citing examples of scenes that cross-borders (479), ones assigned to specific localities, ones that exist throughout entire countries, and ones that rely on non-physical forms of proximity (478). In the context of the publication, the example given for this last type of scene is about a video game, whereby "collectivities of people distributed in space […] produce spectacles out of intense and focused interaction" in turn "producing new sorts of physical 'proximity'" (478). Straw continues:

As Grimes suggests, the 'scene' of the video game is poised conceptually between two other kinds of spaces: on the one hand, privatized (and thus 'unscenic') spaces, like basement computer rooms, in which individual consumers play; on the other hand, the higher-level, 'highly corporately controlled space[s]' of mediated player networks which transcend the spatiality of any single instance of collective game-playing. The scene of collective game-playing Grimes studies draws creative energies from the privatized space of the player even as it works to pull back (and win territory) from the more abstract ground of corporately constructed brand-space.

I believe that this framework could be extended to online music scenes, which similarly create new interpretations of what 'proximity' can look like. Research on other specific online music genres has shown that online scenes can exist and sustain themselves. Paula Guerra has written about the internet's impact on fostering youth subcultures in the Portuguese punk scene (2020), while Steve S. Lee and Richard A. Peterson have studied the way fans used listserv technology to create a scene based around alternative country music (2004). What is so fascinating with Grimes and Straw's perspectives is their work identifying the types of proximity afforded by virtual and physical spaces in online scenes. The two types of spaces identified by Grimes in the video game scene certainly hold some relevance with the idea of a community forming around a shared interest in internet music. In fact, a similar duality appears between the private space of the home studio, in which artists create their music, and the public spaces afforded by media-hosting platforms, which are controlled by large technology corporations (themselves engaged in deals with the giants of the music industry). Vaporwave participants can be observed to operate within such spaces; firstly, as the amateur creator and secondly, as the curator, all within the purview of the corporately controlled space of the platform. The rise of the amateur in the 21st century is a phenomenon that has been well documented by many scholars, such as Barna, Prior and Scherzinger, who have all written about its impact on music production. We can recall that the idea of the amateur has already been mentioned in the context of vaporwave, with Harper referring to creators of internet music as "technologically enabled amateurs" (119). In his article *The rise of the new amateurs*, Prior notes the newness of these amateurs compared to older applications of the term. He explains that as the music industry evolved, the idea of recording studios became increasingly obsolete. Such location-based setups were exchanged for makeshift bedroom studios enabled by new technologies, effectively creating the newly "self-sufficient 'amateur' producer" (400). Nonetheless, these private spaces of recording - similar to those described by Grimes - remained connected to "an

infrastructure of bedrooms, clubs, gigs, studios, festivals, rehearsal rooms, and record companies" (400), as well as to "user-organized networks of creation and distribution" such as platforms (399). Prior's conclusion is similar to those scholars who considered the role of platforms in cultural creation, given that

> consumers are increasingly invested in loops of feedback, commentary, and customization in the digital spaces of new music media, from music blogs to cell phone clips. They are making use of digital infrastructures to pool knowledge with other music fans— annotating, filtering, and linking content and creating their own dissemination channels. (400)

Considering that these perspectives are shared by platform and music scholars alike, it is possible to imagine scenes being formed online and in a digital age precisely because of the new roles adopted by internet curators or amateur creators. It is not unrealistic to imagine how networks can be solidified online based on the commonalities between curators' individual experiences; that the individual becomes the collective through the mutuality found and experienced within the very private space of the bedroom. As such, just as Seattle holds importance to the grunge movement, it is possible to imagine the ways in which a specific platform can become the space in which an online scene may form. This is already demonstrated by scholars who have studied the popularity of specific musical genres on the internet. For instance, the subgenre "Soundcloud Rap" became wildly popular in 2017 after amateur rappers posting on Soundcloud generated a record amount of online traffic, effectively saving the platform from filing for bankruptcy (Dunham). In this case, Soundcloud's digital infrastructure was so essential to the rise of the genre that the very name of the company became a part of its identity. Similarly, Emília Barna writes about Lo-Fi music in Budapest,

arguing that the internet was privileged over the city as a space to create music, which led to platforms Bandcamp and Tumblr becoming the "central online social and interactional space[s]" of the genre (48). In another case study based in the United Kingdom, researchers Tilman Schwarze and Lambros Fatsis found that YouTube had become a "major broadcaster" (464) of the Drill genre when users began compiling "music videos to produce playlists" (467). This last example certainly differs from vaporwave due to its mostly 'in person' nature[19]. Nonetheless, these examples are noteworthy because they still highlight the role that platforms can have in shaping music genres and creating spaces of gathering for their audiences. With this in mind, I believe the spatiality that Straw discusses can be extended to the spaces of online gathering found on platforms.

Returning to vaporwave, its creators have often been described as amateurs themselves, or creating music in an amateur way. For instance, Reynolds describes the importance of Lopatin's spatiality while creating his music: "In his cramped Brooklyn bachelor pad, Lopatin's arsenal of vintage synths and rhythm boxes is just an arm's reach away from his giant-screen computer." (79). Trainer discusses vaporwave in connection with two other genres, Chillwave and Hypnagogic Pop, that are connected not only by the way they sound but also due to their similar aesthetic practices. For instance, he analyzes James Ferraro's album *Far Side Virtual* through the lens of the hypnagogic pop style, even though it is often cited as one of "the vaporwave 'big three'" (Whelan and Nowak 459). Trainer explains that Ferraro's album is "composed solely on virtual instruments in Apple's entry-level audio software suite GarageBand" (415). Given that the genres are considered to have much in common, I posit that it is more productive to see what these three genres have in common rather than separate them with labels. Thus, when Trainer explains how Hypnagogic Pop's visuals represent the epitome

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[19] Drill music scenes are typically associated with specific countries, cities, or even neighbourhoods given their link to gang culture and crime.

of "amateur digital image fusion" (415), and how Chillwave's aesthetic "embraced the lo-fi sound that characterizes amateur recording techniques afforded by consumer electronics" (419), it becomes apparent that vaporwave's ambitions may land somewhere in the middle. Lopatin feels similarly about his project *Eccojams*, writing on Reddit that "the entire point of eccojams was that it was a DIY practice that didn't involve any specialized music tech knowledge" (qtd. in Lin 171). In all of these accounts, the status of amateur is attributed to creators who use a bedroom studio setup or easily accessible software, which Prior emphasizes in his own description as part of the new amateur identity. Tanner's point of view on the amateur producer in vaporwave is also important, precisely because it reveals how the very concept of amateur can push a movement into becoming something more, and how feelings of belonging can emerge out of shared perspectives. For him, vaporwave tracks "celebrate remediation and amateur sampling as a way to undermine the smooth, professional-grade production heard in mainstream Western popular music" (33). By rejecting the other side of music, one that is highly institutionalized, vaporwave's DIY approach is not just its aesthetic but rather its motto. As Cole explains, "the term "a e s t h e t i c" itself […] often used by insiders to signal membership of what we might call a "virtual public'" (301). The supposed membership to vaporwave is manifested through its 'insiders' and 'virtual public's' collective understanding of the codes that make up vaporwave, which effectively solidify its scene-ness. The amateur approach to making music as observed by vaporwave curators is one of the genre's binding elements, and one that arguably solidified its status as a scene. Naturally, other movements, subcultures, and scenes have elements of amateur culture in their identity, such as with Chillwave and Hypnagogic Pop, or even older movements such as the Punk scene. In fact, a DIY aesthetic is often attributed to underground movements (Tofalvy; Bennett and Guerra; Barna). Nevertheless, now that vaporwave has been identified as a scene, the question becomes less about how and more about why. Indeed, as Kruse elaborates, "new digital recording and

distribution technologies mean that local musicians are competing with thousands of other DIY local musicians to sell their records online" (635). She likens this to being "lost in a 'sea' of digital noise" (Connell and Gibson qtd. 635). Not all movements turn into scenes, and not all scenes are equally successful. What distinguishes vaporwave from other movements?

Chapter 2: Buying into Vaporwave

On August 31st, 2019, vaporwave label 100% Electronica hosted the first ever vaporwave festival in New York City. George Clanton, label owner and festival organizer, brought together some of the genre's biggest names to perform in front of a sold-out crowd of 1300 people[20]. Clanton also happens to be a rather successful vaporwave artist and is perhaps one of the most active participants of the scene. To date, he has organized three editions of ElectroniCON, two in New York and one in Los Angeles. Vaporwave is still going strong, despite James Parker's gloomy predictions. Still, one can only wonder how a scene that has survived in virtual spaces for so long translates into a real-life experience. A mere decade after its humble beginnings, festival goers did in fact note the strange and surreal experience of listening to vaporwave live. For instance, in the days leading up to ElectroniCON 1, attendees were told about the existence of chat app designed specifically for the event. Promoters described the purpose of the app with the following sentence: "Are you going to be at ElectroniCON but not used to real life?"[21]. The organizers of the festival had a clear sensibility that the transition from online to in-person might need some degree of facilitation. This duality is echoed in a blog post written by a fan, Tori-Lynne Davis, who attended ElectroniCON 3 in 2022. They liken the experience to being in a "foreign territory"; a moment shared as a community but defined by "moments of introversion". They also describe feeling intense sensations during the festival, at times experiencing heightened joy and at other times feeling disconnected from the moment due to its very contradictions. Both accounts point to the tensions underlying the translation of vaporwave's online scene into an in-person group event set in a large urban space. I know that if I became aware of such an event in Montreal, I would

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[20] According to journalist Sarah Gooding, who attended the event.
[21] As detailed in an Instagram post promoting the event: https://www.instagram.com/p/B1uqzkVluHF/.
Accessed 21st June, 2024.

most certainly go, but more so out of curiosity; listening to elevator music live sounds sort of bizarre, almost counter-intuitive. Yet, this seems to be the appeal of vaporwave. Its sound and aesthetic are genuinely captivating because it shouldn't make sense. It would be hard to convince someone who had never heard any vaporwave before to give it a chance based on the following pitch: would you like to listen to some imitation-muzak? Clearly, vaporwave resonates with its audience on a deeper level. For what is perhaps most intriguing about vaporwave is not so much its aesthetics, but rather the significance of its tropes. Surely order can be found within the genre's disorder, and meaning can be extracted from the otherwise superficial-presenting aesthetic it presents? As noted in the introduction, this line of questioning has been expressed from scholars coming from multiple fields who wish to come closer to understanding the movement by approaching it from various angles and viewpoints. The published texts that bear witness to these efforts naturally tend to conclude with an interpretation on what vaporwave means. The issue is, most of these conclusions are at odds with each other. More importantly though is how the vaporwave scene has been known to reject such sweeping statements, especially when coming from a place of intellectual elitism. In 2013, after facing backlash from artists and fans for his 2012 Dummy article, Adam Harper released a follow up apology, writing "in the past year, I've learned – been taught – that vaporwave is more emotional and more sincere than I expected it to be". Taking stock today, vaporwave's recurring symbols and sounds have been thoroughly catalogued throughout its more than ten years of existence on the internet. Interpretations and analyses of the genre feel scattered in comparison, most likely because of its newness and the resistance artists have put up to ward off any efforts of intellectualizing the genre. These elements appear to be the most controversial parts of vaporwave, or at least the most debated online. If vaporwave artists are rejecting what is being said and written about the genre, then this brings into question the very idea of wanting to assign meaning to it. For a movement typically described as criticizing late-capitalism, many

vaporwave artists curiously seem to remain apolitical when the spotlight falls on them. Tellingly, in the blog post about ElectroniCON 3, the author describes a moment where they struck up a conversation with several strangers also attending the event, discussing contemporary political issues. Reflecting on this in their blog, they write: "I wondered if it was a mistake to bring real-world commentary into a space where everyone was looking to escape something." To understand what vaporwave could mean, I believe that looking at it through the lens of the postmodern discourse of the 90s, more specifically Jameson's analysis of society could be useful. In his essay *Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth?*, Alican Koc makes the connection between vaporwave and Jameson's work. Koc's thesis relies on the latter's concept of cognitive mapping, which he argues is essential to understanding the significance of vaporwave. In order to understand what cognitive mapping is, it is necessary to consider postmodernism, not just as a theory, but also as a distinctive period in time. Then, I will return to Koc's essay and explore the potential parallels vaporwave may have with postmodernism. This in turn will open up the possibility for certain conjectures to be made regarding vaporwave's cultural relevancy and significance. There is one final element of Parker's article that I have not addressed yet, and it refers to the movement's belonging to the "musical avant-garde". The idea of the 'avant-garde' is not always clear, but we can take Parker's choice of words to mean that vaporwave was ahead of its time, apart from contemporary music. The implication of the avant-garde is also that such a genre cannot be a part of mainstream culture, given that people will be unable to identify with it. It is only with hindsight, or at least an altered gaze, that we can finally appreciate such "precocious" art. There are many reasons why this wording must be challenged, given that it casts preconceived notions onto its perceived meaning, its contemporary cultural significance, and the scene that has burgeoned from it. Furthermore, labeling the genre as avant-garde risks trivializing any meaning it might have, implying that the gravity of its aesthetic and political significance can

only be understood by future generations. Indeed, what this chapter initially aims to set out are the boundaries of vaporwave's aestheticized signaling, who is participating in the creation of such discourse, and finally the ways in which such signaling is achieved. Identifying these key elements in vaporwave is essential because they will support a comparative analysis between the genre and similar trends observed in contemporary popular culture. In so doing, vaporwave will be reframed as a cultural artifact situated within popular culture rather than as an avant-garde microgenre on the internet, which is what it has been described as in the past. This in turn will have significant implications for any further study of vaporwave, as well as for future trends in aestheticized internet movements. But most importantly, it will recontextualize the movement's aestheticized political symbolism through the lens of critical race theory and techno-orientalism. For if the movement is no longer perceived as fringe, then perhaps we may begin to take it seriously.

How Much is Too Much?

For Jameson, the postmodern era is one that came after modernism, particularly because of its failings. As Jameson explains through an analogy of various paintings (or even the style artists have become famous for), the psychological state of those living in the era of high modernism is best characterized by Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, or even a "Van Gogh-type madness" (14). There was a certain feeling of alienation caused by the realities of post-war capitalism, a rising social phenomenon of "anomie" as coined by Durkheim. However, by the end of the 1970s postmodernism had emerged and even taken modernism's place. Jameson refers to Andy Warhol's works, in particular the piece *Diamond Dust Shoes*, as illustrative of the change in atmosphere brought about in this new era. He describes the painting as contextless, its aesthetic attributes "debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images" (9). To view the painting that Jameson is referring to is to

experience "a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration", and just as it shines due to the literal diamond dust and crushed crystals incorporated into the piece, so does "the spangling of gilt sand that seals the surface of the painting […] continue to glint at us" (10). By most accounts, the painting series of the same name was in fact commissioned as an advertisement for the fashion brand Halston[22], and as Jameson points out, Warhol started off his career in advertising, specifically working with shoes. Thus, there is a level of superficialness inherent to the painting given its advertisement-like quality. Like most of Warhol's oeuvre, the line between commodity and art is practically non-existent. But perhaps this distinction is not as important as it was in past eras? Is the artwork considered superficial because it is an advertisement, or because of something else? What does *Diamond Dust Shoes* say about life in the postmodern era, or even the purpose of postmodern art? For Jameson, it is precisely the depthlessness of *Diamond Dust Shoes* that characterizes the postmodern era. Such flatness can be found in more than just the art of the time; society at large was experiencing "a waning of affect", whereby people felt disconnected from the very idea of selfhood, referred to as "the death of the subject" (15). The strong feelings of anxiety and alienation of the past are gone, given that "the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (14). If the subject is fragmented and affectless, what happens to emotions? Jameson argues that these feelings are better described as "intensities", given that they "are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (16). Indeed, in the postmodern era, the myth of capitalism and its promises have not only dissipated but have been met with a certain acceptance and even celebration. Thus, feelings of great intensity emerge as a necessary reaction to everyday life in a rather mundane world. But where the word 'mundane' would typically conjure up an image of excessive flatness or grayness, the mundane in postmodernism is best described as the state in which chaos is no longer considered unnatural

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[22] https://www.phillips.com/article/29694970/warhol-diamond-dust

or out of the norm. This last reality is what, drawing from Edmund Burke and Emmanuel Kant, Jameson describes as a "camp or 'hysterical' sublime" (34). In other words, as the scale of everything has reached increasingly abstracted levels of grandeur, the shininess of newness becomes dulled. Consumerism and consumer society come to mind, even today, as a relevant illustration of this idea. What's more, the scale of 'things' in late-stage capitalism becomes increasingly abstracted and intelligible to the average person. Thinking back to Hito Steyerl's concept of a "sea of data" is helpful here, because it aptly describes this conundrum in both a metaphorical and very literal sense – something that is very much needed if we are to believe Jameson! When so much is available to us, information becomes a precious commodity. Steyerl's article was published in 2016; making the link between her words and Jameson's may seem anachronistic. Yet, Jameson's book was published just as the World Wide Web was infiltrating people's homes across the globe. In his discussion of the sublime, he captures a glimpse of what Steyerl would write about years later:

> The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. […] It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized. (38)

Though Jameson's reality at the time of his writing *Postmodernism* would seem a long way away from us on many levels, I still find his conceptualization of a dematerialized, serviced-based worldwide economy incredibly relevant today. Thinking back to the previous chapter,

the issues raised by scholars regarding the roles platforms play in society and the impact the internet has had on cultural production are in fact not all that removed from Jameson's musings. As we have also seen, it is on the internet that things have reached a truly incomprehensible scale. Through vast networks of infrastructure and power, the internet has come to represent the "enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions" that has ultimately conferred upon it the status of late capitalism's most defining innovation. As new technologies have shaped, fed and supported the internet, which we can refer to more broadly as all of media, spaces have opened up in which it becomes possible to understand what exactly Jameson meant in his reformulation of the term 'sublime'. For if Burke's sublime is based on the experience of encountering something "so enormous as to crush human life altogether" or Kant's sublime is located in the representation of such forces, both dominated by simultaneous fear and awe, the postmodern sublime notes a shift past a dialectical opposition between nature and man. Instead, it demonstrates the experience of acceptance, albeit a reluctant one, marred with incomprehension and confusion. The plot of the film *Melancholia* (2011) comes to mind: as the end of the world approaches, the main character Justine seems to accept her fate without question. Other characters cannot understand her façade of indifference. Yet, the structure of the film suggests that Justine is not entirely sure of what is real or what is true about her life. Stuck in a state of permanent confusion, she is unable to ground herself, to grasp onto anything tangible or even to see the 'bigger picture'. For Justine, the past and the future hold little value. The film thus poses the question: how did we get here, and does it even matter? In a lot of ways, *Melancholia* illustrates Jameson's description of the postmodern era: a marked indifference towards the vaguely threatening new world order. For Justine, this indifference is caused by her inability to situate herself within the broader context of her life. Jameson argues that something similar has happened in the postmodern era, but on a much larger scale. If "depth is replaced by surface" (12), emotions

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have become intensities, and the subject is no longer dominant as it was before (thinking back to the uniquely personalized and distinguishable styles of Munch and Van Gogh), then cultural production necessarily reflects a shift away from historically informed perspectives. Indeed, Jameson also finds that the sublime resides in the way postmodern art, literature and most importantly architecture are able to create "a postmodern space in emergence around us" precisely by "distorting and fragmenting reflections of one enormous glass surface to the other" (38). If we are to consider this interpretation of the world during the postmodern era, and extend it onto our own, then we must accept that increased connectedness has come at the cost of originality, uniqueness and historicity. This dynamic is not necessarily the result of society's willful ignorance but rather due to an overabundance of information that is available to consume, making it very difficult for the past to resurface unaltered.

Sublime Memes

Naturally, the internet has only accelerated and amplified this phenomenon. Memes, as we know them today, could easily be described as postmodern, for they operate in curiously depthless ways on the internet. Imagine a person standing in between two mirrors facing one another. The person's reflection is reproduced seemingly to infinity, with each version getting increasingly distant and blurry. These faraway reflections are hardly an accurate reflection of the person standing in front of the mirrors; in fact, these copies of copies are so distant that they are only connected to this person through the chain of previous reflections. Memes will follow this sort of trajectory on the internet, with an initial idea causing a chain reaction of imitations, each with their own nuance or twist. A few leaps down the chain and the result may have little to do with the original source material. What's more, the copies may themselves be transplanted into entirely new chains of 'reflections'. This increased fragmentation could be imagined as those same two mirrors, now cracked, with each shard reflecting its own angle of

the person in a scattered network-like fashion. Describing memes this way points to their shallow, surface-like qualities. But memes possess other qualities that make them appear inherently postmodern. The concept of meme was originally developed in the 70s by Richard Dawkins, an ethnologist studying genetic evolution. Publishing his findings in *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins describes memes as "a unit of cultural transmission" that are capable of "achieving evolutionary change" (192). These "replicators" could be "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (192). What determines which memes catch on and which ones die out? Likening cultural transmission to the process of natural selection in nature, Dawkins writes that "imitation, in the broad sense, is how memes can replicate. […] Some memes are more successful in the meme-pool than others" (194). The three factors that determine this in natural selection are "longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity" (194). For memes, Dawkins focuses on the last two factors. "Fecundity" can be likened to how plausible, interesting, or relevant the meme is or becomes. As for "copying-fidelity", Dawkins explains that "meme transmission is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending", which is not unlike the way one person's genetic makeup represents a blend of both parents' genes. Dawkins' model has been hotly contested over the last five decades[23]. Nonetheless, I believe that his theory is relevant given that it provides an informal blueprint through which we might begin to understand how memes operate. A meme's "fecundity" might be specified as less dependent on factors such as authenticity, as Eliot Borenstein observes in his study of memes in post-perestroika Russia: "a meme does not have to be 'true' or 'right' or 'virtuous' to thrive; it only has to be attractive and catchy" (467). Indeed, it becomes possible to visualize how memes can function like a bad game of telephone. As information is passed along, only the bits that are "attractive" or "catchy" will stick. This is particularly true for memes on the internet. There are many examples of innocuous memes that have been coopted

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[23] Dan Bristow's Introduction to the book Post Memes provides an effective overview of these debates.

by various interest groups, or 'fake news' being conveyed in meme format because it is more likely to capture people's attention (Bristow; Zolides; Way). What's more, algorithms are able to measure an internet meme's success by aggregating data on how long it stays popular and how far across the net it has spread[24]. Thus, a meme may travel 'far' if it is highly adaptable; in fact, as the editor of the book *Post Memes* summarizes, memes are not only "adaptable to new conditions, but adaptable by them" (17). Memes have become an important form of cultural currency on the internet; so much so that their potential has been instrumentalized by corporate interests, or even to express political views. As Andrew Zolides observes in his study of memes that aimed to discredit the COVID pandemic, "online communities have succeeded in using memes for specifically anti-intellectual, populist rhetoric due to memes' ease of transmission [and] mutability" (110). In all of these cases, internet memes appear to embody many of postmodernism's aesthetic attributes. Not only are they depthless and fragmented in the way they spread, memes are also fueled by the collapse of culture into economics. They proliferate in the designated spaces of Jameson's sublime – the internet and its platforms – and often articulate intensities rather than emotions. Aesthetically speaking, internet memes are "deliberately clunky images, with accompanying text, designed to make us laugh, feel, and/or think" (Pettman, 28). In a similar vein, Bristow writes

> Images are excerpted, recycled, copy-and-pasted; memes often utilize stock photography, or 'poor images,' fuzzier and less sharpened, unairbrushed, not photoshopped; paused frames, often of accidental facial expressions overflowing with a particular emotion. (19)

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[24] Trending topics and virality on the internet are usually quantified by platforms.

The idea of copy-and-paste, which recalls the common act of repurposing in vaporwave, is so essential to meme culture that certain variants are referred to as 'deep-fried' given their extremely degraded quality, both in terms of pixels but also in terms of message. Some vaporwave artifacts recall these same qualities, such as the unintelligible cover art for the album DERELICTメガタワー 2014 by death's dynamic shroud.wmv.

Fig. 6: The cover for death's dynamic shroud.wmv's album *DERELICTメガタワー*.

It might initially seem counter-intuitive to label internet memes as pastiche, or "blank parody" as Jameson calls it (17). In many ways, memes can hardly be described as blank parody for all of their irony-rich subtext derived from extreme intertextuality. However, if we are to consider memes as essential components of today's visual culture, then perhaps a more formal analysis of what memes are – images, that is – is necessary. Citing philosopher Guy Debord, Jameson argues that the image has become the ultimate commodity by means of "addiction", whereby consumers have developed an "appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'" (18). Are memes not the very same addictive, self-referencing visual spectacles that many seek out daily? Furthermore, blank parody is symbolic

of the stripping-away of individual style that is instead replaced with historicism, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (18). The parody is thus 'blank' because there is no intent to make a satirical comment from the very act of copying. As we have seen, imitation is one of the meme's innate qualities. More importantly, blank parody occurs because there is no clear "referent" as Jameson calls it, which recalls the distancing of a source from its infinite fragmentated reflections in the mirror (18). Memes are consumed as fleeting moments in which the past, present and future can be experienced simultaneously. This brings me to one of Jameson's most important concepts in postmodern theory. Jameson suggests that the postmodern subject is faced with the following dilemma, which is "the incapacity of our minds […] to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44). This idea echoes his description of the sublime as the feeling of helplessness when faced with the incomprehensible power structures that have emerged in late capitalism, which can only cause further disorientation and distress. Jameson thus describes "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping" as the response to this dilemma, in which politico-spatial articulations are made as attempts to situate the subject within the totality (51). Cognitive mapping therefore implies that subjects attempting this spatialization are inherently political, and the same goes for any sort of postmodern art. For if "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally", we must accept that it is still possible to offer critique from within (4). Furthermore, Jameson writes

> the new political art […] will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say,
> to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital— at the same time
> at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of
> representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as

individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at

present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (54)

As I have teased throughout this thesis, there are many comparisons to be made between vaporwave and Jameson's postmodernism. However, the most striking and emblematic connection seems to be that vaporwave could be the response to Jameson's invitation some twenty years later. This is not a new theory; as mentioned above, Koc's article focuses on the idea of cognitive mapping in vaporwave. He argues that "vaporwave aesthetics can thus be understood as creating a cognitive map of the bleak affective space of late capitalism, inviting viewers or listeners to step inside and critique it from within" (60). Most importantly, he refers to the aesthetic of cognitive mapping in vaporwave as a "virtual lifeworld" (66). This notion refers to a loose aestheticization of feelings circulating within a particular space and time, mapped across a diverse array of expressions. Using Koc's terminology, I wish to characterize vaporwave's virtual lifeworld as I see it: a fractured, self-reflecting mirror. As we have seen, vaporwave can be described as profoundly entangled with capitalism, from its relationship to platforms and the music industry, as well as its relentless pillaging of popular and consumer culture. What's more, vaporwave has been commonly referred to as a meme (Killeen; Wheland and Nowak), as the inspiration behind a type of meme (Schembri and Tichbon; Killeen; Cole; Glitsos), or even described as memetic due to its virality (Killeen; Wheland and Nowak; Lin). I see vaporwave memes - in the way Dawkins originally conceptualized but also as internet memes – as an essential part of this lifeworld. Indeed, memes operate in vast networks, feeding off of elements of popular culture in such a way that they provide a fluid and evolving meta-commentary on what it means to be alive in this day and age. Memes are defined by their relationship with contemporary popular culture precisely because of the way in which they engage with or even rely on it. Through a mutually reinforcing relationship, popular memes

will come to symbolize specific moments in popular culture, while the latter will also inform the themes that dominate the former. Today, memes are an essential part of internet and audio-visual culture, so much so that they have become convenient vehicles for political expression. In his study of the "OK boomer" trend, Jason C. Mueller paints a convincing picture of how one sentence came to represent a wave of politically disillusioned youths. The meme was based on the experience of younger generations who felt that they were increasingly misunderstood by baby boomers. Boomers were often depicted as a generation that was unable to sympathize with the hardships experienced by the youth due to their life experiences[25]. The initially humorous sentence became a signifier online, inferring a sort of casual membership to a category of people that could not relate to the 'boomer experience'; namely becoming a homeowner, having life savings, and being unaffected by identity politics among other things. Mueller found that "the substitution of political strategizing and action for Boomer memes and discourse" became incredibly popular, reaching its peak during the COVID pandemic. Using the OK boomer study as an example, it is interesting to notice how memes are not only used for identity signaling, but also for political commentary. While Mueller describes the behavior in this scenario as excluding political action, I would argue differently. The COVID pandemic caused a breakdown of spatial and temporal networks on a global level. Confined to smaller than ever spaces, with economic and mental hardships multiplying, the seams of the global world order appeared to become undone. Is it not possible to see how an event of such catastrophic, doomsday-esque proportions can accentuate the breakdown of subjects' relationships to their communities, countries, continents and the world? Perhaps then the OK boomer trend could be conceptualized as one group's attempt at cognitive mapping? For their efforts aim to make sense of their situation through an aesthetic (the internet meme) in a

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[25] Baby boomers, or just 'boomers', represent the generation born after the end of the world war in the West that typically experienced relative prosperity and wealth in their lifetime.

moment of crisis. Such moments of crises, such as "the great shock of the crises of 1973" described by Jameson (xx) and the COVID pandemic, have had significant impacts on the world, but more importantly on people and their communities. Vaporwave emerged in the context of a devastating financial crisis. Looking back, it is clear that the two cannot be divorced from one another.

Otherworldly Desires

In the influential essay "The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded", author Christian Thorne problematizes the idea of utopia by looking at three dystopian films from the 90s (101). In these films, the characters dream of tropical islands and outer space as desirable alternatives to their oppressive lives. Thorne notes the bizarre and dated nature of these fantasies, reflecting on how effective Hollywood has been at transforming the desires of past generations into fictional disaster scenarios. Why is it that these films, released at the end of the 20th century, still reflect Cold War anxieties? Thorne argues that "the old-fashioned quality of these utopias […] is most instructive; it is precisely their retrograde quality that demands an explanation" (101). Thorne's analysis of the concept of utopia in film opens up a new line of questioning regarding vaporwave's own portrayals of alternative worlds. It seems easy to get bogged down in debates about whether vaporwave's lifeworld is utopian or dystopian. Vaporwave certainly alternates between these aesthetics depending on the subgenre and the artist. For instance, it could be argued that Utopian Virtual depicts a dystopian world in which life has been completely digitized and corporatized. James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual* (2011) features the songs "Global Lunch" and "Palm trees, Wi-Fi and Dream Sushi". Similarly, Vektroid's album *ClearSkies™* (2013), released under the alias PrismCorp Virtual Enterprises, has a track called "Welcome To ClearSkies™" and another entitled "eCooking". There is an element of

Jameson's sublime in the images these names conjure up: corporate interests have taken over just about every aspect of society, and decidedly also made life just a bit easier.

Fig. 7: The cover art for *ClearSkies™* by Vektroid.

The artworks of both albums reveal a digital landscape, one of a tropical travel destination and the other of a blue sky dotted with clouds, captured through the screen of a tablet. The background in Vektroid's remains an image of a similar sort of tropical paradise, while Ferraro's seems to place the subject right in the middle of New York City traffic. The main idea that comes across in these albums is that technology has superseded all: our lives have been digitized and displayed online, locations and distances have collapsed, and work and leisure are but two peas in a pod. However, it could be argued that this sort of total collapse is a positive outcome if one adopts an "ignorance is bliss" mindset. Upon careful consideration, I would argue that neither of these albums is explicitly trying to abide by a utopian or dystopian aesthetic; rather, the mise-en-abyme achieved in both of these artworks embodies the same sort of characteristics displayed by memes. The 3D rendered video-game aesthetic appears flat, stereotypical, and unplaceable, yet is entirely recognizable. Through the juxtaposition of the foreground and background images, *Far Side Virtual* and *ClearSkies™* envision vaporwave's lifeworld as something superficial and depthless: the spatio-temporal qualities of New York or Thailand for instance are collapsed into something that resembles the virtual space of Second

Life more than our own reality. Ferraro himself describes *Far Side Virtual* as an "aestheticization of capitalism", while also saying "that he is obsessed with capturing what he calls a 'pan global generic sound' or 'global ambiguity'" (Horta). This is what explains the oddly familiar look of these images despite them also being too uncanny and too false to be real. In essence, they should be seen to represent an attempt by vaporwave curators to understand the totality of our world as one dominated by capitalism.

Fig 8: James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual*.

The subgenre Signalwave is also worth mentioning, as it displays similar aesthetics to Utopian Virtual. Typically constructed out of random soundbites from American and Japanese commercials, it paints a picture of consumerist excess that could easily be described as dystopian. Nmesh's *Dream Sequins®* (2014) features the nightmarish song "λvθn™ Nitemare Liquid Mascara" that is made up of samples from various advertisements for the make-up brand Avon. Another song on the album, entitled "Climbing the Corporate Ladder", presents an even stranger world as the lyrics go "what kind of hippie am I? /Man, I'm a business hippie/ I understand the concept of supply and demand". In the music video for the song, office workers begin to dance, jump on tables and throw away documents as they are freed from their strict working conditions thanks to a new computer program. The video ironically portrays the breaking down of the conventional separation between work and personal life as a positive

outcome for the workers. Nmesh goes even further by embedding a link in the YouTube description of the music video that leads to an article entitled "How to Fast-Track Your Way Up the Corporate Ladder" published by *Forbes*. As with Utopian Virtual, I would argue that Signalwave is not necessarily dystopian; in fact, the embedded link to a real article suggests that we have already arrived at this feared future. Instead, the music video embraces its source material, effectively blending art and advertisement into something in the middle. Once again, I see this projection as a mirror to reality, a metaphorical depiction of something that is based on real and relatable experiences.

Future Funk, another vaporwave subgenre, opts for a different tone. One could argue that it displays a more favorable perspective on capitalism's excesses. Future Funk notably projects a rather human-centered image compared to the previous genres discussed; the fear of computers and corporations taking over is replaced with people engaging in the "hedonism and excess" of consumer capitalism (Chandler). Such optimism can also be heard in the music itself, as the tempo is typically more upbeat than in other types of vaporwave. Yung Bae's album *Bae* (2014) is one of the most famous albums of the subgenre due to the fact that, apart from its chopped and screwed qualities, it is practically indistinguishable from 80s pop. One song on the album, "Bae City Rollaz", reaches 126bpm, a rate justified by Future Funk's desire to sound like "modern house and lounge music" (Sommet 17). Most importantly, however, is the subgenre's "extensive use of City Pop samples" (17). City Pop is a music genre that emerged at the end of the 1970s in Japan, typically featuring a "set of visual and textual motifs that reflects the rise of a transnational, urban consumer and leisure culture in 1980s Japan" (Sommet and Katō 2). By sampling City Pop, Future Funk emulates the same sort of optimism for the future that is typically found in representations of Japan during its four decades of prosperity post-World War II, dubbed the Japanese economic miracle. Representations of a hedonistic consumer culture in Japan have dominated in the Western imaginary: one has only

to think of Osaka's Dontonburi area[26] and its depictions in popular culture, including in Ridley Scott's Black Rain (1989). Future Funk participates in this discourse by oversimplifying an entire era into conveniently utopian aesthetics. This part of vaporwave has been criticized for its techno-orientalist tendencies by journalists and scholars alike (McLeod; March; Kim; Zhang). Considering this and the persistent economic stagnation that Japan has experienced since the 1990s - aptly called the Lost Decades for the huge toll it has taken on society - utopian depictions of the Japanese economic miracle tend to lose their flair when studied up close.

The End of the World is Happening… in Suburbia

In all of these cases, it could be argued that the worlds they depict are utopian or dystopian. What would otherwise seem clear regarding the balance between what is desirable and undesirable for the future is completely muddled in vaporwave. Thorne's argument can help clarify why this is the case. For vaporwave's confusing aesthetic can be explained by the fact that, as the genre plays with temporality, the desires and fears being represented in such utopias and dystopias mostly belong to previous generations. Thus, what might seem like a nightmare today might have paradoxically been idealized in the past, and vice versa. If all of our desires and possibilities for a better world have been washed away, then perhaps the terms 'utopia' and 'dystopia' have lost some of their importance in late capitalism? This reasoning is what led Mark Fisher to proclaim in 2009 that "for most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue" and alternative modes of cultural expression are preemptively incorporated into a capitalist aesthetic (12). It seems as though a strong sense of hopelessness dominated the atmosphere of the late 2000s, impacting the youth that grew up during these times and the hyper-educated millennial generation entering the workforce. Indeed, the initial waves of vaporwave participants were

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[26] Osaka's equivalent to New York's Times Square and London's Piccadilly Circus.

mostly made up of individuals who identified as Caucasian, middle class, North American millennials (Koc; Whelan; Wilcox and Compton; Schembri and Tichbon; Whyman). Recalling the OK boomer trend, the emphasis on this core identity is important to vaporwave culture, for it seems to have defined its aesthetic. Yet, 'middle-class' has become an increasingly contested term. As the researcher Anat Shenker-Osorio explains, Americans are likely to consider themselves middle-class even if they are not fully clear on what being middle-class is or looks like. Her linguistic study of the term revealed that the term is not typically associated with concrete ideas of wealth or status compared to the terms 'upper-class' or 'lower-class', while statistics showed that the middle-class shrank from 2008 to 2012. What's more, typical markers of wealth such as purchasing power are no longer as class coded as they used to be. The result is rather significant, given that without "popular depictions of wealth and poverty similar to our own lived experiences, we determine we must be whatever's left over". On the other hand, being middle-class in the past was much more defined:

> Peering behind the once iconic picket fence surrounding a house, we see what "middle class" used to mean. The mortgage was close to paid off; the car loan settled. This feat was accomplished on a single income that came with health care plus pension and enough for domestic vacations and college.

Shenker-Osorio's image of what middle-class used to mean conjures up very concrete image that have persisted in the public imaginary. Films like *The Truman Show* (1998) or *Pleasantville* (1998) heavily lean into this trope of middle-class suburbia frozen in a veneer of immovable perfection. Is it possible that the aesthetic of vaporwave's 'middle class' identity is rooted in the imaginary of older depictions of the middle class? The uncertainty that dominated in the years after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, as well as the subsequent precarity that affected

many households across the world, make this a plausible scenario. The white picket fence is no more; in fact, the very nature of the crisis completely redefined who could become a homeowner in North America[27]. If depictions of middle-class suburbia are seeming increasingly outdated, the city has remained a space onto which projections of the future can easily be made. Referencing Jameson's interest in postmodern architecture, Giuliana Bruno analyzes the transformed city of Los Angeles in the film *Blade Runner* (1982), which she describes as not only postmodern but also postindustrial. This type of city is "a polyvalent, interchangeable structure, the product of geographical displacements and condensations", one that looks "very much like New York, Hong Kong, or Tokyo" (66). The "condensations" occurring in the city are ones that are determined by class issues: "while immigrants crowd the city, the indigenous petite bourgeoisie moves to the suburbs or to the 'off-world'" (66). Interestingly, this 'futuristic'[28] configuration of the city bears some similarities to our own reality. As Ridley Scott was projecting forwards, the Safdie brothers were formulating their own version of a postmodern city by looking back in the film *Uncut Gems* (2019). Set in 2012, the film transports us back to the city of New York in the years following the financial crisis. Their version of New York operates in similar ways to Scott's future configuration of Los Angeles. The city finds itself organized on the same sort of spatial logistics, with a stark contrast operating between the grimy, overcrowded, always busy city center and the far removed, alternate universe of the suburbs. This dynamic contributes to the overall impression that *Uncut Gems* is a type of disaster film, albeit not in the traditional sense. The main character's questionable actions, the strategic staging of New York in 2012, and the unrelenting pace of the film result in a nightmarish cinematic experience. The storyline teeters between utopian and dystopian elements of capitalism: Howard Ratner, the main character, suddenly

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[27] The financial crisis of 2007-2008 is commonly referred to as the subprime mortgage crisis due to the inappropriate financial behavior linked to high-risk mortgages that contributed to an economic collapse in North America.

[28] The film is set in the year 2019, which would have been several decades in the future from 1982.

seems to make it big, only for his monetary success to be stripped away moments later. These fluctuations have a certain urgency to them and are governed by feelings of elation or doom experienced by Howard – and the viewer – that are fleeting just as much as they are intense.

Fig. 9: A version of a widely shared meme that reframes the economic peril Howard is facing in *Uncut Gems* as a humorous and relatable moment. [29]

Much like the Cold War anxieties of Thorne's doomsday, *Uncut Gems* is a film that is marked by a character's obsession with an expired vision of the American dream. In order to achieve this improbable goal, Howard is willing to go to extreme lengths: he puts his life on the line, endangers his family, takes out bad loans, leverages assets that aren't his, makes high risk bets, and more. The aesthetic of the film is deeply rooted in the unsettling nature of the plot and hinges on the anxiety of financial insecurity. The disaster of his dealings in the city is so imminent that it begins to bleed into his life in suburbia. The spatial logic of the postmodern city is not the only thing perturbed in the film; in the opening sequence, we are transported from an Ethiopian mine, through an opal, to a medical examination room in New York. The film can be seen as an anesthetization of capitalism that once again reflects the desire to situate

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[29] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-how-i-win

oneself among increasingly illegible power dynamics that dominate the world. *Uncut Gems* and vaporwave have much in common, from the fact that OPN produced the films score to the themes explored above. However, what interests me the most is the parallel of the perspectives of capitalism coming from a certain period of time, namely 2012. Like with *Uncut Gems*, vaporwave is playing with the audio-visual tropes of utopia (or dystopia) rather than actually attempting to represent this simplified past as desirable or undesirable to our current generation. Images of a bygone time of stability have become images that can be plundered, recycled and repurposed as a means to emulate an aesthetic. The suburbia of *Uncut Gems* is a projection of a 'safe haven' that doesn't really exist anymore as Howard's wife threatens him with imminent divorce. In the city, things aren't much better, representing a total breakdown of traditional socio-cultural but also spatial-temporal boundaries. Vaporwave memes, music videos, song names and artwork tend to feature objects of consumer culture that Shenker-Osorio would argue used to be considered status symbols, but now hold little class-relevance. These are the objects that were "once deemed luxuries, like cellular telephones and televisions" but "are now common possessions". In his book *Retromania*, Simon Reyolds speaks to Daniel Lopatin about his relationship with objects:

'I'm super into formats, into junk, into outmoded technology,' says Lopatin. 'I'm super into the idea that the rapid-fire pace of capitalism is destroying our relationships to objects. All this drives me back, but what drives me is a desire to connect, not to relive things. It's not nostalgia.' He argues that the idea of 'progress' itself is driven by the economic requirements of capitalism as much as by science or human creativity. In a 2009 manifesto like article, he decried the fixation on linear progress, proposing instead the opening up of 'spaces for ecstatic regression [so] we homage the past to mourn, to celebrate, and to time travel.' (83)

For Lopatin, his art was never nostalgic in the traditional sense of the word. To use Jameson's expression, vaporwave often finds itself in "nostalgia mode" instead, cannibalizing different imaginary worlds from different times and eras through "stylistic connotation" and stereotypes (19-20). In his book *Ghosts of my life*, Fisher describes encountering music that belongs neither "to the present nor to the past but to some implied 'timeless' era" (32). To understand this better, I would like to consider Fisher's discussion of late capitalism and its effects on culture. Inspired by Jameson, Fisher famously said that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (8). This striking sentence was written in the context of his analysis of the dystopian film Children of Men (2006), in which the dystopia is about the effects of late capitalism on society. His words resonate with what I have established so far and provide a possible explanation as to why vaporwave exists, and why its lifeworld looks the way it does. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, future vaporwave participants found themselves in a situation of crisis. In an interview conducted in 2013 for Stereogum, James Ferraro articulates his state of mind while producing the follow up to *Far Side Virtual*, called *NYC, Hell 3:00AM*:

> For me, the world is kind of in a giant traffic jam. […] It's more of a mental stuck […] Everything's congested — the economy, everything is oversaturated and there's no mobility. That's the mental space of thinking of something as global as New York or as global as the economy — sometimes it's a weird checkmate logic. For sometime[30] who is not an economist and trying to think about it, you get into this sort of congested rationality. […] Just seeing the world as a completely fixed thing…there's no way of

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[30] I believe that the intention of the speaker was to say 'someone' and not 'sometime'.

really breaking it. Even with the threat of global warming, you just can't really break the system. It's bigger than us. This being an eternal condition. [31]

While *NYC, Hell 3:00AM* isn't strictly a vaporwave album, its release came only 2 years after *Far Side Virtual*, revealing Ferraro's continued interest in capturing life in post-crisis New York City through his music. His train of thought perfectly captures his feelings of unease and helplessness as he attempts to understand the larger structures of powers that seem to be directing his life. Fisher was already transcribing these affective experiences into academic discourse in his book *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?* back in 2009. Fisher coined the term 'capitalist realism' as a means to describe "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (8). Fisher's comments help frame Lopatin and Ferraro's perceptions of the socio-cultural climate of the time within a larger perspective of economic doom and resignation. In *Ghosts of my life*, Fisher goes on to discuss the idea of hauntology, a concept that expands on Derrida's own version of the word. While I do not wish to linger on this concept's relation to vaporwave[32], a small note can be made given that Derrida and Fisher felt it "was endemic in the time of 'techno-telediscursivity, techno-tele-iconicity' 'simulacra' and 'synthetic images'" (38). For Fisher, hauntology represents a ghost, one that "will not allow us to settle into/for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism" (42). In the context of the platformization of culture (discussed in the first chapter), we can see how the endless repetition of images facilitated by new technologically enabled forms of media has created a popular culture that is often 'hauntological'. Recalling Jameson's sublime, movements like vaporwave operate in this small

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[31] https://www.stereogum.com/1504091/qa-james-ferraro-on-nycs-hidden-darkness-musical-sincerity-and-being-called-the-god-of-vaporwave/interviews/

[32] The topic has been thoroughly discussed in the context of vaporwave in Grafton Tanner's book *Babbling Corpse* and Stuart Lindsay's article "Disaster Theory".

space that exists right on some invisible borderline of authenticity. Vaporwave participants are earnest in their desire to make art, but their art is also entirely commodified and commodifiable; they are people to whom many can relate to as 'victims of late capitalism' but also entirely invested in and dependent on its systems and infrastructures. I think that this is why vaporwave is easily mistaken as inherently political. Knowing that vaporwave is a movement that operates within "the world space of multinational capital" as Jameson puts it (54), it becomes increasingly hard to defend the argument that vaporwave was or is 'avant-garde' in any way. Furthermore, vaporwave embodies the paradoxical position of the subject in late capitalism, whereby it is impossible to offer any sort of truly alternate perspective given that there is no 'outside'. As has been made repeatedly clear over the last decade, vaporwave participants do not feel as though they are making a political statement through their art. As such, one cannot in earnest claim that vaporwave is a politically engaged movement that is taking a stance on late capitalism. Rather, I believe that the genre is political insofar as it is a manifestation of the perceived reality of the point of view of a specific group of people at a specific point in time. The vaporwave lifeworld is more of a reflection than a dream or a nightmare, it is not a far-removed nostalgia-drenched delusion. Thinking back to Jameson's claim on political art, we can see that in postmodernism, and by extension Fisher's more contemporary capitalist realism, political art cannot be political through subversiveness. Given that subversiveness is now mostly a set of codes that have been appropriated into marketable aesthetics, art can only be political in the way in which it propels viewers to situate themselves in relation to the broader structures of power surrounding them. Lopatin's manifesto is a testament to that, and it certainly infused vaporwave, or at least its spirit, with an enduring legacy that continues to show us that we are better off with it than without it.

Conclusion

When I first came across vaporwave in 2018, I was immediately drawn to it. Its airs reminded me of empty malls I had never been to, its echoes enchanted me. I immediately began to incorporate it in both academic and personal works. I felt it had the potential to work with, even enhance, my artistic projects. I wanted to know more. As I began my research for this thesis in 2020, I was quickly stumped. Despite my perceived firm grasp of what vaporwave was, I realized that I was at a loss when it came to putting pen to paper. It seemed to me as though it would be impossible to describe it in one sentence, or as one idea. This difficulty felt justified, given the spotty nature of the genre. My efforts to understand vaporwave eventually led me to search for clues elsewhere, which brought nuance to my interpretations and pushed my research in directions that I had not anticipated.

In Chapter One, I explore vaporwave's relationship with material culture. Citing examples from different artists, songs and music videos, I attempt to portray vaporwave as a genre full of paradoxes and anachronisms. Will Straw's theories on culture further explain how vaporwave plays with time and memory by bringing analogue cultural relics into the digital world through manipulation and destruction. I continue to explore the genre's materiality by considering its existence on the internet as largely defined by platforms. These platforms operate as a repackaged version of the traditional record company system. As such, they have completely changed the way in which culture is produced and consumed on the internet. This in turn has shaped vaporwave in many ways, most notably giving it a DIY, sample-based aesthetic. This also explains how vaporwave has developed into a self-sufficient virtual scene. Throughout the first chapter, vaporwave is presented as a type of internet music, and this defining characteristic helps trace back the conditions of possibility that enabled vaporwave's existence as such.

In Chapter Two, I build off of my cultural studies centered approach from the previous chapter to explore more abstract and theoretical understandings of vaporwave as a part of 21ˢᵗ century culture. In so doing, I look back to postmodernism as a source of inspiration and a framework through which vaporwave might better be understood. Jameson's concept of 'cognitive mapping' is particularly helpful in understanding how vaporwave can be conceived of as a form of artistic expression. By situating the genre in the time in which it emerged, I argue that vaporwave creators were faced with new realities that could be theorized as Kant and Jameson's 'sublime'. This position opens up a new interpretation of the ongoing debate occurring online and among vaporwave scholars about its political nature. While the focus seems to be on vaporwave's meaning, I believe that my thesis points to a different perspective. I argue that the lack of unified message is less important than the idea that vaporwave curators are creating and communicating in innovative ways. As such, I interpret vaporwave memes as one example of an attempt to project oneself into a mental map, one that offers insight into who we are in relation to the all-encompassing intuitions of capitalism that structure our world.

With this in mind, I believe that this research brings to light several valid ethical questions that I hope continue to be addressed in the future as the genre evolves. For if I believe that vaporwave's origins and aesthetic have more to offer than its 'political message' in the context of my research, this does not mean that criticism leveled against some of its discourse is unwarranted. For instance, when considering the meme format, much of its appeal comes from the fact that it presents itself as an alternative form of communication. Indeed, Zolides writes that "as seemingly grassroots creations (even when they are not), memes contain an inherent populist, anti-establishment quality that makes them ideal for disseminating contemporary populist messages to the masses." (Zolides, 110). This line of thought is important when considering some of the techno-orientalist discourse found in the subgenre

Future Funk, or the uncovering of the vaporwave-inspired micro-genres 'Fashwave' and 'Trumpwave' (Macnair; Lemmens; Bullock and Kerry).

The aim of this research was to uncover vaporwave's relation to contemporary culture. What can we learn from a small, relatively unknown, genre bending audio-visual movement? As it turns out, I argue that studying vaporwave has been useful in tracing back important events and shifts in the world for the last few decades. Furthermore, it is an interesting case study of internet culture, given its links to the internet meme, a form of communication that has defined youth culture on the internet. More importantly however is the idea that a moment, such as the financial crisis of 2008, may be misleading by its name, for its ramifications were not only financial. As Jameson makes clear throughout his book *Postmodernism*, *or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, culture and economics are no longer separate domains. This remains true and has been forever complicated by the rise of the internet. This is why I believe this thesis offers valuable and relevant insights that should inform future discussions of the genre, but also research in cultural studies, as well as in media studies. In such a politically fraught environment as our own, we must do our best to understand why movements such as vaporwave come into existence, what its spheres of influence are, and how these movements can influence our society in the most unpredictable ways.

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