

# Vaporwave, or music optimised for abandoned malls

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## Abstract

*In this article I focus on the genre of ‘vaporwave’, using the artist 18 Carat Affair as a case study, to explore the way the genre works as a project that produces, and takes pleasure in, a kind of ‘memory play’. As a genre, vaporwave is a style of music collaged together from a wide variety of largely background musics such as muzak<sup>®</sup>, 1980s elevator music and new age ambience. Vaporwave’s ‘memory play’ is a project that takes remembering as its audio-visual aesthetic. The pleasure of vaporwave is therefore understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself. To explore this theme, I examine vaporwave’s memory play using the terms of Chris Healy’s ‘compensatory nostalgia’, as well as the idea of ‘ersatz nostalgia’ as discussed by Arjun Appadurai and Svetlana Boym.*

In this article I focus on the genre of ‘vaporwave’, using the artist 18 Carat Affair as a case study, to explore the way the genre works as a project that produces, and takes pleasure in, a kind of ‘memory play’. As a genre, vaporwave is a style of music collaged together from a wide variety of largely background musics such as muzak<sup>®</sup>, 1980s elevator music and new age ambience. The vaporwave song structure is usually short and repetitive, often slow (sitting around 60–90 bpm) with vocal samples positioned low in the mix saturated with heavy reverb and often slowed down to produce a ‘stretched out’ effect or a ‘melting’ quality. Vaporwave forms part of a style ‘family’, comprising genres such as witchhouse, chillwave and seapunk that are popular in online forums. Vaporwave has been labelled as a kind of ‘hypnagogic pop’, a term coined by David Keenan (2009), as a result of its sedative and surreal quality.

Vaporwave patches together its sonic and visual aspects from generic forms of mass media. As Adam Trainer explains in his chapter ‘From hypnagogia to distroid’, vaporwave and associated genres of music tend to be ‘informed by this new era of cultural and informational oversaturation’ (2016, p. 409). Trainer asserts that these digital creations are the result of a coming together of ‘both collective popular memory and the personal histories of their creators’ (409). He continues:

Driven by technology but steeped in a desire to revisit the past, these styles celebrated personal attachments to past forms while pushing the sources of that nostalgia into less recognizable musical performances.

I extend Trainer’s discussion of memory and nostalgia in this article in order to explore vaporwave’s ‘memory play’ as a project that takes *remembering* as its audio-

visual aesthetic. The pleasure of vaporwave is therefore understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself.

To explore this theme, I examine vaporwave's memory play using the terms of Chris Healy's 'compensatory nostalgia' (2006), as well as the idea of 'ersatz nostalgia' as discussed by Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Svetlana Boym (2007). I then move on to examine the case study in terms of a kind of memory play that is produced through representations of repressed trauma. To do this, I draw from Clara Latham's work which explores the way trauma or loss can be expressed through musical form as a process of catharsis. Finally, I look at memory play in terms of the reassembly of fractured memories by analysing the work of 18 Carat Affair in relation to the art of collage.

In examining 18 Carat Affair as a case study, I synthesise the musical analysis with a language analysis from online discussions that are extrapolated from the Reddit.com community. I have chosen Reddit.com as a resource because it provides a navigable way to analyse how users discuss, exchange and share their sentiments about music listening practices. Reddit.com is an open source, user-driven community in which pseudo-anonymous users, called 'redditors', can create threads or comment on existing threads under a 'handle'.<sup>1</sup> Comments are then voted up or down and appear closer to the top of the thread depending on their popularity. The voting system naturally moderates content but there are also volunteers who moderate content based on etiquette and relevance. Any registered user can also start their own 'subreddit' built around specific themes. Subreddits act as independent communities and have their own 'reddiquette' or community values. According to Reddit, there are more than 9000 active communities built from subreddits and in 2015 there were more than 82 billion pageviews on the Redditsphere ('BlogReddit' 2015).

To perform the language analysis, I systematically collated 13 major subreddits that directly discuss vaporwave (see Appendix A for list). These 13 subreddits are not the total amount of vaporwave-related subreddits but they form the bulk of subscribers who discuss vaporwave directly. I searched through these 13 subreddits in order to pinpoint any discussions which used language that pertained to different 'categories' relating to memory, remembering, nostalgia, childhood trauma, loss or the past. These comments were then input into a spreadsheet based on each of these categories. It must be noted that I do not draw from Reddit.com in a quantitative sense but rather a qualitative sense. That is, the comments I draw from the platform are not deployed in order to illustrate the prevalence or repetition of certain words. Instead, I examine these comments in terms of the *quality* of language that is used to describe the ways in which vaporwave is shared as popular material through digital relations. In terms of gathering the comments, I operated only as an observer.

## What is vaporwave?

I approach vaporwave as a popular music genre in the terms of Theodor Adorno's characterisation of the popular as a model of 'standardisation' (Adorno 2006, p. 73). However, the over-standardisation of popular music is, in a sense, exaggerated in the structures of vaporwave through the use of repetitive sampling. As a

<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive work on Reddit.com to date, see Adrienne Massanari *Participatory Culture, community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (2015).

result, the genre appears self-conscious of its function and role as popular music. In a cross section of 10 vaporwave tracks (Soundstation 2015) all tracks sit between a slow and sluggish 70–90 bpm (beats per minute) and all tracks remain at their introductory speed for the duration of the entire track. Each track in the list of 10 runs for 2–3 minutes and features keyboard synth or representations of synthesised textures.

As I note in the introduction, the basis of vaporwave tracks is borrowed samples. The tracks are then ‘chopped in’ and remixed with slowed-down repetitive samples and drowned heavy reverb (Wolfenstein 2015; Galil 2013). As a result, vaporwave has been described as a type of ‘plunderphonics’, a term coined in the mid-1980s at a conference by composer John Oswald to describe music made through sound collage, or ‘plundered’ from other sources (2008). Vaporwave’s plunderphonics is representative of the digital incarnation of the long-standing practice of musical intertextuality that became most distinct after the Baroque period. Robert Hatten points out the intertextual resonances found in works such as Mozart’s ‘Requiem’ and Beethoven’s ‘Missa Solemnis’. In these cases, the practice of intertextuality centred on borrowing styles from the Baroque period from which to construct new pieces (Hatten 1985). However, by the 20th century, intertextuality became inflected with irony, such as in the use of Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du Soldat* (1918) in which an older context is not so much absorbed into the newer context of the piece as illustrating the ‘collision of two contexts, generating a third meaning from the interaction’ (Hatten 1985, n.p.). As Hatten points out, this collision produces irony at this ‘higher-level trope’ (n.p.).

Coming into the postmodern era and the age of sampling techniques, Alan Kirby explains that intertextuality took on new meanings with the expansion of home recording technologies. He writes:

What the sampler permitted, in a shift anticipated by Walter Benjamin, was the cannibalization of *recordings* rather than simply of songs, a process that yielded contemporary pieces from sonic components clearly created at a range of past times. The sense of hearing something utterly ‘now’ formed at many different periods ... was uncanny, dislocating, evocative, and exciting. (Kirby 2009, p. 88; original emphasis)

From the 1980s to the contemporary period, we see another shift in the expression of musical intertextuality, reflected acutely in the style of vaporwave and made possible by MP3 technology, which can be rapidly exchanged and remixed using home computing software. In this sense, vaporwave can be understood in the context of what Aram Sinnreich calls ‘mash-up culture’ (2010), the unadulterated collision of any and all materials into what Ann Kaplan calls the ‘flattening of historical frames into one continuous present’ (1987, p. 144).

With these characteristics in mind, vaporwave can be read as a genre that emerged from a host of heavily intertextual electronic musics available since the turn of the millennium, such as ambient, chopped and screwed, electro, lo-fi, Italo disco, hauntology, synthpop, witchouse, seapunk, ethereal R&B, cloud rap, hypnagogia and distroid (see Trainer 2016). What makes vaporwave most distinctive is perhaps the community of artists and listeners who use the same platforms on which the music is exchanged to discuss the ‘meanings’ of the music itself and the kinds of affective strategies involved in its production and consumption. For example, according to artists involved in the genre, the vaporwave project seeks to produce music that ‘satirises the emptiness of a hyper-capitalist society’ (Ward 2014), through repetitive appropriation of phonic and visual aesthetics of 1980s American ‘mall’ culture.

In a 1989 research paper, George Lewis had remarked that ‘over the past three decades, the shopping mall has evolved into a sort of civic centre for many suburban, middle-class Americans. More than just central locations for shopping, these covered and climate-controlled monoliths have become meeting places’ (p. 881). Vaporwave exploits the lingering representations of this period, challenging contemporary neoliberalism with the resonating cultural cringe of 1980s aesthetic. The satirisation of the emptiness of ‘mall culture’ as a shadow of neoliberalist fantasy connects partly with the notion that vaporwave music is cobbled together through a patchwork of found sounds, not its own thing but echoes of other things, and ultimately, empty. In a sense, vaporwave’s ‘mall aesthetics’ mimic sedative tones of the shopping centre soundtrack that accompanies the consumer in that soundscape (Trainer 2016, p. 421). It is for this reason that vaporwave is described, on its ‘official’ Reddit thread dedicated to the community, as ‘music optimised for abandoned malls’ (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/>), suggesting a kind of ‘consumption lubricant’ that ‘coats’ spaces of consumption.

Vaporwave is often referred to as an ‘Internet genre’ because it emerged solely on and through digital platforms. With the exception of one instance that may or may not come to pass,<sup>2</sup> it continues to be played and shared exclusively through online networks (mainly Reddit, YouTube, Bandcamp, Tumblr, 4Chan and Soundcloud). Vaporwave emerged in the early 2010s through online sharing platforms and it has a special relationship with Tumblr. It has been suggested that vaporwave originated from the Tumblr platform and spread out into other sites from there (Wolfenstein 2015; Lhooq 2013), although most likely, it emerged from several platforms simultaneously because social networking sites are ultimately all connected (Wang *et al.* 2010). The year 2013 is generally considered the ‘popular’ explosion of vaporwave with more material flowing into the song-sharing communities such as Bandcamp and SoundCloud (Harper 2015). The main artists lauded in the genre are Chuck Person, James Ferraro, Skylar Spence and Macintosh Plus,<sup>3</sup> who released a seminal album *Floral Shoppe* (2011) that generally stands as the epitome of the style. For example, countless memes, tributes and homages to the ‘vaporwave aesthetic’ borrow directly from *Floral Shoppe* ‘album cover’ themes: a Roman bust against a neon pink background featuring a city skyline at dusk adorned with Japanese language characters. However, while *Floral Shoppe* is the quintessential vaporwave album, I have selected 18 Carat Affair on which to base a case study because this artist is highly prolific, with 12 albums accessible online, which all, in some way, touch on the specific kinds of memory play I discuss in this article. As per the trend of artist anonymity in the vaporwave community, little is known about the identity of this artist, including age and gender. However, on the artist’s Facebook page, the home town is listed as ‘KCMO’, which is the AM broadcaster for Kansas City, Missouri, and therefore likely to be where the artist is located and suggesting they are a US national too. The band members that are listed are names of production equipment (Juno 60, Tape Loops, etc.), implying that this project consists only of one member.

<sup>2</sup> In early 2015, an event called ‘Boogie at the Hypermall 20XX’ was announced which would be the first live vaporwave event. While there is some support, the event has not yet taken place.

<sup>3</sup> Macintosh Plus also goes by Vektroid, New Dreams Ltd, PrismCorp, Virtual Enterprises, Laserdisc Visions and 情報デスクVIRTUAL.

Vaporwave artists rarely emphasise their locality (in contrast to most music groups who maintain an identity of their 'hometown'). This is probably because, geographically speaking, vaporwave has no material origin. As vaporwave commentator 'Wolfenstein' (2015) suggests in his brief documentary, vaporwave 'distinctively has no set location as to where it originated [instead] it started online, making it the first genre of music to be completely globalised'. While Japanese characters and Japanese Internet aesthetics<sup>4</sup> are deployed in vaporwave artwork, this is probably born from a trend to 'kitsch-ify' Internet aesthetic (by 'Japanese Internet aesthetics' I mean the graphics imitating 1990s Japanese websites characterised by bright colours and 'busy' text [Francisco 2012; Kulka 1996, p. 21]). Vaporwave is constructed as a globally ambiguous and an ostensibly 'anonymous' phenomenon in that the artists generally identify themselves using 'handles' rather than real names.

## Memory play through nostalgia

### *Memory play through 'compensatory nostalgia'*

Vaporwave music plays with feelings of nostalgia, or more specifically, it plays with the idea of nostalgia for 'something that never happened'. Being nostalgic for 'something that never happened' can be understood with reference to Chris Healey's concept of compensatory nostalgia. As Chris Healy explains, 'compensatory nostalgia' (2006) stems from the paradox between remembering and forgetting that is ubiquitous in contemporary Western culture, and which occurs as a result of media saturation (p. 222). Healy formulates this position from Andreas Huyssen's work (2000) in which Huyssen suggests that the 'relationship between memory and forgetting is actually being transformed under cultural pressures' (quoted in Healy 2006, p. 222). Huyssen questions whether this occurs as a result of 'new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption' (2000, p. 27). 'After all', he writes, 'many of the mass-marketed memories we consume are "imagined memories" to begin with, and thus more easily forgotten than lived memories' (p. 27). Huyssen's assertion resonates with the comments from redditor 'SockMice' who writes:

Vaporwave to me, is a fuzzy memory. Being born in '98, I don't remember the 90's, and only vaguely remember the early 2000's. Therefore, most of my knowledge of what life was like is based off of assumptions and blurred memories. (Sockmice 2015)

SockMice points to the ways in which memory can be produced by, and through, the media system, particularly in ways that feel personal and individualised but which are in fact amalgamated through collective production and media saturation. In Simon Reynolds' view, this kind of compensatory nostalgia is a process particular to contemporary pop culture. As he says, 'Where pop nostalgia gets interesting is in that peculiar nostalgia you can feel for the glory days of "living in the now"

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article, I will also deploy the term in its most common usage to refer to the sounds and images of vaporwave as *an* aesthetic, in which the term differentiates the genre from other genres. For instance, the 'vaporwave aesthetic' will be described as it relates to the types and timbres of images and sounds used in the mode, as opposed to other forms of artistic expression, which we could describe as 'gaming aesthetic' (Dickey 2005) or 'MTV aesthetic' (Calavita 2007).



that you didn't . . . actually . . . live through' (Reynolds 2011, p. xxix). For example, 18 Carat Affair's track 'Home Box Office' (2011) exemplifies this kind of confused play between personal and collective memory that references nostalgia in an exaggerated gesture. The track begins with a lo-fi sample featured prominently in the mix that recalls the sound of television theme songs from the 1980s that 'digital natives' (those born after 1980; Prensky 2001) might 'remember' only as a result of the airing of re-runs, mostly on daytime television programming schedules – or perhaps experienced indirectly as children while older guardians were watching television in other rooms. This notion fits in with the sound aesthetic of most vaporwave tracks, of which the reverb produces a 'faraway' quality that sounds as if it is floating in from another space, or non-space.

The specific track that is sampled by 18 Carat Affair in 'Home Box Office' is difficult to identify but has similar characteristics to the *Dynasty* theme song, with synth keyboard, low-density spacing, and an exaggerated romantic melody pouring over 99 bpm. According to one redditor, 'arleybob', vaporwave 'brings up a weird old feeling of being nostalgic for something *that never happened*' (arleybob 2015; my emphasis). 'arleybob's' sense of nostalgia for something that never happened exemplifies Healey's notion of 'compensatory nostalgia'. Vaporwave nostalgia is therefore not about processing a personal displacement, in the sense of 'authentic' nostalgia that originated from the medical condition in 17th century Switzerland, in which soldiers fighting abroad would miss their homes (Boym 2007, p. 7). Rather, in vaporwave listening experiences, the listener draws upon their own repository of past experience but only in order to 'plug into' the complex and collective (re)production of memory as a form of play, albeit one that is produced within the margins of liminality.

Memory is 'crowd-sourced' to and from the vaporwave aesthetic to produce this form of compensatory nostalgia. In another track by 18 Carat Affair, entitled 'New Jack City II' (2011), the artist slows down a sample from the soundtrack to a Sega Mega Drive videogame released in 1992, *Streets of Rage II*. Early 1990s video game soundtracks are highly distinctive and yet highly generic, as they were built from what is called 'chiptunes'. As Kevin Driscoll and Joshua Diaz explain:

The term *chiptunes* refers to music composed for the microchip-based audio hardware of early home computers and gaming consoles. . . . Born out of technical limitation, their soaring flutelike melodies, buzzing square wave bass, rapid arpeggios, and noisy gated percussion eventually came to define a style of its own, which is being called forth by today's pop composers as a matter of preference rather than necessity. (Driscoll and Diaz 2009, n.p.; original emphasis)

Chiptunes came to define the video game musical aesthetic of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Vaporwave deploys these generic and broad cultural artefacts to generate the sense of shared memory for times and places that one may recognise but cannot quite place. For redditor SockMice, 'Vaporwave represents a fogged window reflecting snippets of childhood memories [sic] (2015). Redditor joshuatx says vaporwave is able to tap into music he once loved but had 'literally forgotten or discarded in terms of memory' (2015). joshuatx goes on to say that:

it reminds me of living in Okinawa as a kid, a time which I hadn't really fixed with a specific artist or music (like I did as a teenager later) but is instead framed by background music and

the aesthetics of toys and tv [sic] and other commercial media I was surrounded by at the time. (joshuatx 2015)

In these comments we see the relationship between media and the production of nostalgia without 'real' memory, or what Arjun Appadurai describes as 'ersatz nostalgia' – a kind of 'nostalgia without memory' (1996, p. 82). Svetlana Boym also refers to pop culture's preoccupation with nostalgic sentiment as a kind of 'ersatz nostalgia' (2007, p. 10). She writes that 'technology and nostalgia have become co-dependent' and that this spurious form of nostalgia is a product of the promises made by technology which were never fully realised – a sentiment echoed in the name *vaporwave*, drawn from the term *vaporware* which refers to products, usually technologies, that were advertised to the public but were never manufactured or released (Trainer 2016, p. 420). As Boym writes,

The ambivalent sentiment permeates popular culture where technological advances and special effects are frequently used to recreate visions of the past, from the sinking *Titanic* to dying gladiators and extinct dinosaurs. While many nineteenth-century thinkers believed progress and enlightenment would cure nostalgia, they have exacerbated it instead. Technology that once promised to bridge modern displacement and distance and provide the miracle prosthesis for nostalgic aches has itself become much faster than nostalgic longing. (Boym 2007, p. 10)

This is evident in the vaporwave aesthetic, which borrows from a range of disparate times and places that become conflated by contemporary media mechanisms. In doing so, vaporwave is undoing and deforming memory in order to construct a phantasmal and liminal *remembering experience* in which memory both happens and does not happen.

Time and temporality are used as tools with which to play with the constructs of memory. In this sense, the construct of time becomes absorbed into the mediatic system. In Appadurai's approach, time itself is commodified and becomes 'the daily practice through which nostalgia and fantasy are drawn together in a world of commodified objects' (Appadurai 1996, p. 82). For vaporwave, memory is only another commodifiable object, one that is endlessly generated and reproduced in varying iterations, which produces this sense of nostalgia for something that may or may not 'belong' to any particular past.

There is also a paradox at play in vaporwave because the style recalls material from the past – outdated VHS tapes, old pop songs – yet so much of vaporwave production relies on extant sounds as well as cutting-edge means of production, such as crowd-sourced software (padurdur 2015) and the adoption of digital platforms for circulation. In doing so, the vaporwave genre both constructs and represents the anxieties in digital communities that emerge from tensions between memory and amnesia. As Huyssen explains:

contemporary culture is relentlessly cast as forgetful, its historical consciousness lost or anaesthetised. Yet on the other hand there is a seemingly endless proliferation of discourses of the historic, of commemorations, of memorialising, of genealogical and local historical enthusiasm, and an unceasing escalation in the desire to preserve, record and document 'the past'. It seems that Western society's memory culture suffers from a hypertrophy of both remembering and forgetting. (Quoted in Healy 2006, p. 221)

Vaporwave ultimately plays upon and expands liminal space in which the past, the present and the future coexist. It performs a kind of 'retro aesthetic', but one that is produced through contemporary data systems. This ultimately pulls together the contradictory powers between old and new and between remembering and forgetting, creating tension in the listening experience. For Simon Reynolds, 'On the Internet, the past and the present commingle in a way that makes time itself mushy and spongiform' (2011, p. 63). Vaporwave, as an exclusively online genre, plays with this 'mushy' time in a way that confuses and confabulates the past, and in many ways exposes the slipperiness of time itself and the subjective experience of the past as memory, which become a creative resource for so many collective stories. For Reynolds, the processes of contradiction played out in contemporary music enact a kind of 'retro-futurism by imagining that this music still is the future, somehow: a bridge to tomorrow that was never finished but just hangs there in space, poised, pointing to something out-of-reach and unattainable' (p. 394). Reynolds' assertion is a fitting tribute to the tropes of vaporwave that exaggerate these anxieties through the power of contradiction.

Rather than being opposites, remembering and forgetting are inextricably relational, as Huyssen writes: 'memory is but another form of forgetting, and forgetting a form of hidden memory' (Huyssen 2000, p. 27). In line with this paradox, vaporwave's memory play is both a form of remembering and forgetting, in that the material that vaporwave deploys is 'archived' but does not make any coherent sense of the past. Nothing is remembered 'properly' so to speak, but is layered in obscurity and drenched in processes that make the original barely recognisable. Huyssen suggests that 'psychic processes of remembering, repression, and forgetting in an individual are writ large in contemporary consumer societies' (p. 27), an assertion with which I would agree. I add to this that vaporwave is an exemplary manifestation of contemporary music consumption in which these psychic processes produce paradoxical results. This leaves the listener, like the contemporary subject, with feelings of 'nostalgia' to compensate for the fracturing of traditional modes of memory.

## Memory play through the representation of repressed trauma

### *Trauma, cultural memory and catharsis*

Vaporwave also enables memory play through the processing, or reprocessing, of mediatic artefacts which represent moments of cultural trauma. Jeffrey Alexander *et al.* (2004, p. 1) describe cultural trauma as a kind of residue that remains in the social psyche 'when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever'. I suggest that, as a popular form, vaporwave recycles and repurposes this traumatic residue. For example, the song 'Jon Benet' by vaporwave artist 18 Carat Affair (2012) features the generic characteristics of vaporwave audio-visual aesthetic. The YouTube clip features outdated spa imagery in which a woman gently bathes in flower water while hollow beats are overlayed by the bright tones of keyboard synth. However, in stark juxtaposition, the title 'Jon Benet' inescapably draws reference to the 1996 assault and murder of JonBenét Ramsay, a six-year-old girl found dead in her parents' basement. The murder of JonBenét Ramsay, in Colorado, became a well-known tragedy throughout the USA



(and which resonated throughout international media systems, particularly in Australia where, in 2016, *World News Australia* SBS featured a segment on the 20 year mark of Ramsay's murder). The case was sensationalised by media speculation and the fact of JonBenét's participation in child beauty pageants, which many believe constituted abuse in itself (Pannell 2007). The crime was never solved and so her killer was never brought to justice. There continue to be specialised television presentations on the murder and revived discussions of the crime. For nearly two decades it has haunted the Western psyche. I read the track 'Jon Benet' in a similar way to Clara Latham's analysis of the vocal performance of Albertine Zehme in Alfred Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme*, that is as a technique that expresses a range of affects, particularly those produced by repressed trauma. In Latham's examination of affect in Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme*, she writes:

When the subject does not release the trauma by purging the affect through the acts of mourning or revenge, the affect remains attached to the memory of trauma. By speaking of the trauma, the subject recreates the affects that were originally associated with the trauma. This gives the subject the chance to adequately release the affects: to abreact them. (Latham 2013, p. 107)

In a similar reading, I suggest that vaporwave calls forth collective trauma through the empty sound of tinny beats and hollowed out drum tracks, to express forms of anguish that alienate and isolate the individual. It is an empty soundtrack for the emptiness of an innocence destroyed, one that cannot be 'made sense of' by the media or by the community. 18 Carat Affair also juxtaposes the track against outdated video of random spa imagery. The track and video synthesis highlights the absurdity of the criminal justice system as it played out in the case of JonBenét Ramsay, as well as the *lost-ness* of an event that the culture cannot put to rest. As redditor RightError put it, vaporwave represents and constructs 'lost worlds' (2015). 18 Carat Affair's track can therefore be read as a moment in the articulation of repression and the trauma associated with loss.

Vaporwave digs up those waste products of consumer culture, that which capitalism discards, and brings them to the fore: old VHS tapes, technologies that never reached the market, the grating tones of corporate instructional videos, advertisements from the 1980s. In doing so, vaporwave serves as a type of cultural purge of old material. Vaporwave seeks out that which is stripped away in order to recapitulate the chronic obsolescence permeating contemporary consumer culture. Vaporwave's 'pure creepiness' and 'hollow white nothingness' (Abridge27 2015) reference this sense of loss. One redditor describes listening to vaporwave as a sense of 'fleeting melancholy' (DoFDcostheta 2015). In fact, the 'hollow' and 'generic' sound aesthetic is achieved in many vaporwave tracks by stripping the mid-section of the tones. The term 'mid-section' is a cognitive metaphor used in sound mixing that represents the middle range of frequencies that can be manipulated in the mix. In the language of sound engineering, mid-section tones are often anthropomorphised as a 'body' ('Secrets of mixing: Resolving midrange conflicts' 2013). For instance, if the mid-section frequencies are full and privileged in the mix, the sound will be referred to as having 'good body'. Conversely, vaporwave strips these frequencies out and, as a result, vaporwave mixes generally have no mid-section – no *body*, provoking a sense of hollowness or melancholy that connects readily with loss in trauma.

However, is it the remixing and repurposing of muzak<sup>®</sup> that undergirds the vaporwave project (see Trainer 2016), and this ties in with the repurposing of discarded material as a form of purge or catharsis.<sup>5</sup> For one redditor, vaporwave is 'the most cathartic' music s/he has ever heard (joshuatx 2015). However, as a genre, muzak<sup>®</sup> has 'long been considered the scourge of 'good music' because it has been stripped of any musical identity for the purpose of manipulating individuals into buying products' (Jones and Schumacher 1992, 156). For these reasons, Simon Jones and Thomas Schumacher call muzak<sup>®</sup> 'an instance of cultural totalitarianism, reproducing an ideology of bureaucratic rationalism and perpetuating alienation and false consciousness' (Jones and Schumacher 1992, 156). Muzak<sup>®</sup> points to the obfuscation of horrors by capitalism's insistence on superficial pursuits. Muzak<sup>®</sup>, from the outset, has been an imposter in the musical and artistic field. It has always been alienating and alienated. Vaporwave artists essentially work with and base their art upon a genre that nobody ever liked in the first place. This is because vaporwave artists choose to focus on those parts of our culture that are uncomfortable or that have been buried in order to excavate the dregs of cultural production and the uneasiness that those aspects produce.

Applying Eldritch Priest's work on experimental music is pertinent here. Priest notes that muzak is 'the public shame of good taste' (2013, n.p.). As Julia Kristeva notably put forth in *Powers of Horror* (1982), shame is representative of that which is abject, those materials that a body (or a cultural body) seeks to rid (p. 8). Yet vaporwave takes this 'shame' as its launching point. As Priest explains, recent experimental compositions have repurposed many of those sounds which have been thrown away, made disposable, or discarded as waste material (or as he calls it, that which has been made into 'shit'). Experimental music calls forth these obsolete sounds in order to 'fertilise the wide field of listening with a farrago of attentional spores that sprout gnarled shoots of interest to see new aesthetic sensibilities' (Priest 2013, n.p.). Following along these lines, I suggest that vaporwave, as an experimental form of music, repurposes those long 'dead' artefacts that our culture has sought to forget through their disposal. The nature of repression, however, is not an eradication of material. The material lingers, biding its time to re-emerge. Vaporwave seeks out that which has been lost and that which, in itself, has been alienated, in order to charter those lost affects. This process enables listeners to articulate ways of feeling which are otherwise difficult to express because they are the very moments that culture tries to erase – from 1980s haircuts to more sinister phenomena such as the AIDS epidemic. Priest explains that those 'habits of inattention developed around the use of ubiquitous audio media forms' have helped to create music that 'replicates and warps the drifts and digressions that constitute those habits' (2013, n.p.). In a broader sense, Amit Pinchevski discusses in his work on archive and trauma the 'persistent preoccupation with traumatic memory, that is, with the ways past episodes, which have been blocked out of private or public consciousness, return to haunt the present in various displaced manifestations' (2011, p. 253). In relation to vaporwave's blending of past and present artefacts of archive, I suggest that the genre satirises the aesthetic of muzak in order to excavate the uneasy feelings that commercial culture seeks to repress and silence. Memory, in this sense, is entirely audio-visual, or as

<sup>5</sup> The word muzak is often used to refer to a 'genre' of music, but the term muzak<sup>®</sup> denotes a registered trademark belonging to the company Muzak Holdings.

Pinchevski describes it, 'the digital medium serves as the 'technological unconsciousness' (2011, p. 258).

### *Loss and the impossibility of memory in postmodernity*

Vaporwave also capitulates to the impossibility of memory in postmodernity, and thus attempts to redefine the very essence of memorialisation in order to destabilise what has come to be concretised as The Past. In 'Memory as forgetting' (2003), Eric Berlatsky draws on a Lyotardian framework to posit that postmodernism 'takes place in the realization that Enlightenment rationalism and scientific positivism are not tied to objective truth and reality' (2003, p. 101). Instead, the contemporary context is defined merely by "'language games", like narrative itself, creating "the effects of reality", that, in a postmodern age, become "the fantasies of realism"' (Lyotard 1984, p. 74 quoted in Berlatsky 2003, pp. 101–2). Here I apply Berlatsky's reading to vaporwave because, in a similar sense, vaporwave undermines traditional narrative structures that give rise to any sense of a coherent past. Symbols and sounds from a wide variety of artistic and commercial forms come together in often nonsensical ways that serve to undermine holistic accounts of historical record and to satirise formal narrative structures. In doing so, vaporwave exemplifies ways of feeling in the digital listening context as a complex phenomenon that imbricates both intimate and social affective dimensions of memory as a fractured picture trapped in lost or liminal space.

### **Memory play through reassembly of fractured memory**

I suggest that vaporwave is a project that plays with the idea of postmodern fractured memory, the 'schizophrenic' mode of remembering in contemporary schemas which results in the search for totality in a world of chaos. The tensions apparent in vaporwave lend themselves to a preoccupation with the desire for totality and coherence born out of a discontinuity with the past and the anxieties of fractured memory.

Vaporwave, in effect, comprises sound and image collage: sounds collaged together; images collaged together; sound and images collaged together. Therefore, to read vaporwave as a case study in contemporary listening practices, we must trace what role 'collage' plays in wider implications of aesthetic experience. The word 'collage' is the French noun that is drawn from the verb *coller*, literally 'to glue' or 'to stick' (Taylor 2004, p. 8). The verb *coller* is used in French in a variety of idioms: eyes 'glued' to women, backsides 'glued' to seats, and later, as Taylor explains, 'To be *collé* to a woman was to be married to her ... or, from the early twentieth century, to be living with her "in sin"' (p. 8). Collage connotes a type of confusion of boundaries through 'stickiness'. For Brandon Taylor, collage is associated with 'indecent, paradox and perplexity – as impurity by any other name' (p. 8). In aesthetic terms, when an 'imported object' imposes itself on another surface on which 'it does not belong', the new relationship brings forth a type of inappropriateness that is, in Taylor's words, 'jarring or wrong' but at the same time cultivates a 'frisson of excitement at the sight of a coupling which is illicit, discontinuous, at the very limits of aesthetic decency' (p. 8). Collage has always been about pushing uncomfortably against that which contains it. By doing so it often blurs the very rigidly held boundaries between low and high art, further exacerbating its

experimental and marginal status (p. 9), 'as Marcel Duchamp did in his readymade L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) by adding a delicately drawn moustache and a goatee to a commercial reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa' (Judovitz and Duchamp 2010, p. xv). Vaporwave's collage aesthetic therefore follows on from a historical trajectory of the 'ready-made' conceived by the Dadaists and Surrealists launched in the early 20th century (Judovitz and Duchamp 2010, p. xv) and later expanded upon through Pop Art (p. 220). There are deep resonances between vaporwave's artistic irreverence and the Dada movement, for example, Hannah Höch's later work foreshadows vaporwave's 'garishness' (Taylor 2004, p. 196). There are distinct similarities between 18 Carat Affair's visual tropes and Höch's hallmark practice of drenching collages of women's bodies, from various contexts, with 'faded cheap printing colours' (p. 196). For example, the video art for 18 Carat Affairs track 'ΔΔΔ (MV)' (2014) features women dressed in gaudy, typical 1980s fashion and floating inside sharp cut-and-paste triangular shapes. The 39-second track is short but discomforting, and draws reference to Höch's use of sharp cut-and-paste corners, her use of women's bodies, and a similar use of colours in the form of mustard-yellow gradients. Vaporwave's aesthetic can be read as a culmination of a variety of contemporary forms that have come together in the digital medium, collapsing together tropes evident in early 20th century avant-garde with later movements in collage art, and combining this with a layering of plundered and pirated sounds. The resulting effect produces a flattening and conflation of memory, which exaggerates remembering as an imperfect and confabulated process.

Vaporwave also references aspects of Surrealist collage which gained attention in the mid-20th century, and in particular, that of Czech poet and artist Jiří Kolář (1914–2002) who led the Czech Surrealist movement 'Gruppe42' during the 1940s ('Jiri Kolar, 88, Czech Collage' 2002; see also [jiri-kolar.com](http://jiri-kolar.com)). For example, 18 Carat Affair's track 'Promethazine' demonstrates similarities to Kolář's style of collage: a woman in a neon pink tank top dances slowly and seductively; overlaid on this moving image are contoured lines of burnt orange and deep purple which fall into transparency as they shift. This clip can be read as an audio-visual remediation of what Jiří Kolář described as a *prollage* (Taylor 2004, p. 181). *Prollage*, a form of collage, is a method that involves two or more images cut into strips and then reassembled in a staggered sequence (p. 181). Taylor explains that '*prollage* stretches images lengthways, giving a behind-bars appearance that is also a simultaneity-effect whose purpose is to tease the mind and the eye' (p. 181). In this instance, the whole is suggested as a *Gestalt* that is just out of reach. The mind and the eye are teased, seduced towards the desire for the wholeness of the image that is never realised. However, it is not only the visual aspects of the clip that form its totality, our perception enfolds that which we hear and read. 'Promethazine', the title of the track, refers to an anti-histamine drug used to treat allergies and motion sickness and because it has a sedative effect it is often used to induce a light sleep ('Promethazine HCl', n.d.). The beat pushes along at a sluggish 65 bpm while a synthesised saxophone-style keyboard produces a hypnagogic effect. The track mimics the sensation of non-presence, of somehow being 'out of one's body' or under a thick drug-induced stupor that creates a confusion. The self is in negation. Thusly, the track implies a wholeness, a coherence, that is always just out of reach.

Another variation on collage that is credited to Kolář is the practice of *rollage* (Taylor 2004, p. 181). In this method, several copies of the same image are cut into strips and mounted in a staggered sequence (p. 181). This specific effect is deployed

in another video, also by artist 18 Carat Affair, entitled 'Mirror Mirror' (2011). A woman with startling red lips and a matching red top is dancing against a grey background. The moving image is cut into vertical strips that are staggered against each other, producing a *rollage* effect in motion. These scenes are then cut between other types of effects, such as a kaleidoscope, and edited with another video of a well-dressed woman smoking a cigarette in a mirror. This *rollage* presents to us one of the major themes of Gestalt particularly in a psychoanalytic sense (see Woldt and Toman 2005), which is the confrontation of the shadow self; the merging with the self in the mirror – hence the title of the track 'Mirror Mirror', the word mirror repeated. The self is cut into strips which exist against each other but never meet. It is for these provocations that vaporwave is often referred to as 'eery' or 'unfamiliar'. In a Freudian sense, feelings of eeriness are related to a meeting of the unfamiliar and the familiar, or what Freud described as 'the uncanny' (1919). In his essay, Freud writes that 'those properties of persons, things, sensations, experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness, ... lead to the same result: the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar' (1919, p. 1). Through the *rollage* in 'Mirror Mirror', a resolution is suggested but never achieved through the suggestion of the double in the mirror. The uncanniness lingers and is not resolved but in constant play until the end of the track. The image in the mirror longs to be resolved into the self; longs to be authenticated (intensified by the fact that the mirror image performs slightly different gestures from those of the woman looking into the mirror). However, resolution never occurs. The strips never meet and the double continues its irreconcilable shadow play.

In his essay, Freud points to the work of Otto Rank, who also connected 'the double' with a desire to be reflected, i.e. seeing the reflection of the self in mirrors and shadows. This is because 'the double' provides the individual with an immortality through preservation of the self: 'doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of the genital symbol' (Freud 1919, p. 9). Although the 'twin' emerges from the stage of infantile narcissism, once 'left behind the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death' (p. 9). (Interestingly, in the very end of the track 'Promethazine', childhood toys are featured through a blurred lens, but disappear within three to four seconds of their appearance.) As the self emerges into adulthood, into the social structures that require the condition of phallic rule, the double becomes that which threatens the total destruction of the ego. It must be repressed, pushed away. Of course, the 'double' never truly leaves, which is why the effect of 'doubling' in media images harks back 'to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons ... these factors are partly responsible for the impression of the uncanny' (p. 10). The doubling 'effect' is a preoccupation in vaporwave aesthetic<sup>6</sup> and I suggest that this preoccupation both reflects and constructs an emotional architecture of the digital listening experience in which layers upon layers are available for production and

<sup>6</sup> See the vaporwave mix 'Subconscious Browsing' and 'Satisfaction Guaranteed' for more examples of the use in the double effect overlayed on vaporwave playlists.



consumption. Kolar once wrote that *rollage* enabled him to ‘see the world in at least two dimensions’ and that the ‘the stratifications made [him] realise just how many unknown layers make up life and just how many unknown deposits exist within each of us’ (quoted in Taylor 2004, p. 181). Vaporwave uses the effect to a similar end, whereby the *rollage* (of images, but also of sound and image together) enables vaporwave consumers to explore the multiplicity of these ‘musical dimensions’ and experience an effect in which different time periods and contexts appear to coexist in chaotic amalgam.

Vaporwave can also be examined in relation to the genre of Video Art, in its use of audio-visual collage technique. Video Art has its roots in the 1950s–1970s Fluxus movement established by a loosely connected group of artists, such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell (Meigh-Andrews 2006, pp. 10–11). According to Chris Meigh-Andrews, the group was interested in undermining the art establishment, and drew inspiration from preceding subversive art movements such as Dadaism and the Ready-Made (pp. 10–11). Most importantly, the Video Art movement developed a special relationship with minimal and experimental music. For instance, its video artists were influenced by the American composer John Cage and drew heavily from his work, which was used to texture video installations (pp. 10–11). In addition, Meigh-Andrews explains that Fluxus artists adopted collage techniques by ‘overlapping media technologies and strategies [and] engaging in a blurring of categories that established a dialogue between artists’ (p. 11).

Vaporwave, while not necessarily a proponent of Video Art in a strict sense, does borrow from the Video Art paradigm in several distinct ways that provide insight into the vaporwave project as an exercise in memory play using audio-visual collage. Take Woody Vasulka’s piece ‘Art of Memory’ (1987), which Meigh-Andrews describes as ‘flowing and scrolling documentary images of the historical past . . . the images becoming “time-energy” objects removed from their conventional chronological, historical and conceptual framing’ (Meigh-Andrews 2006, chapter 10). As Meigh-Andrews continues, the video becomes a space in which sequences emerge ‘before being re-submerged into the undercurrent of history and memory’ (citation). In an echo of the spirit of this work, vaporwave video sequences closely resemble this metaphor of tide and time. For example, 18 Carat Affair’s track ‘Pretty Girls I Don’t Know Anymore’ (2011) features floating images of women drenched in purple gradients, who move in and out of frame only to vanish and melt into the next image, a sequence which references the title, suggesting that these are memories not fixed in time nor space. In a similar sense, in an analysis of Woody Vasulka’s piece ‘Art of memory’, Raymond Bellour proffers the notion that the work functions as:

decoupage and memory device, for the contemporary spectator as well as for the spectator whose mind scans the history of wars captured by cinema in this century, which has become a history of cinema itself. (Bellour 1996, p. 57)

Bellour’s description of Vasulka’s video resonates with the thrust of the vaporwave project, in the folding together of spectacle, history and memory as both personal and public practice. In a fitting description, Bellour describes Vasulka’s video as enduring while also ‘split, fractured, and, as it were, vaporised’ (p. 157). The work of more traditional forms of Video Art has clearly been translated into a new practice of popular music consumption in a way that appears to completely collapse the

distinctions between the two, and in doing so, also appears to transform understandings of how memory can be used through both production of art and in consumption of popular music. In a sense, memory as a site of knowledge is recapitulated as a site of borrowed and reconstituted stories and sequences.

Perhaps the most pressing link between vaporwave and Video Art is the preoccupation with video itself. Video Art was most predicated on, and produced through, video tape technology which developed through a wide variety of formats including the most widely accessible VHS format in the 1970s. In a paradoxical twist, vaporwave is produced through digital media but is reworked in order to mimic the video tape and VHS aesthetic, often directly using cuts from VHS tapes with the flaws and imperfections particular to tape. In doing so, vaporwave recalls not only the memories and floating signifiers of late-20th century consumerism, but also the history and trajectory of video as it has been reimagined through artistic sites. Of course, Video Art itself has developed and changed since its initial emergence on video tape and VHS formats and, as a result, the distinctions between Video Art and other genres such as vaporwave are perhaps redundant. For example, the distribution company Video Out has recently put forth a call for submissions for 'experimental or feature-length video work that relates to the aesthetic theme "Vaporwave" – an internet art aesthetic phenomenon that invokes a pastiche of imagery' ([vivomediaarts.com](http://vivomediaarts.com)). According to Meigh-Andrews, who approaches Video Art as both an academic and as an artist, the current array of presentation formats provides the viewer

with challenging spatio-temporal experiences that require constant re-negotiation from work to work. ... The digital convergence of audio-visual technologies and the interrelationship of physical, acoustic and digital space have created new aesthetic challenges for contemporary artists, curators, critics and audiences alike. (Meigh-Andrews 2006, 335)

The lines between vaporwave and more formal Video Art projects have become less rigid. This movement suggests that vaporwave, as a popular music genre, is expanding its role in popular culture, which also demonstrates the variety of expressions of memory play available to contemporary artists. Vaporwave transgresses boundaries between the past, the present and the future, as well as boundaries between audio and visual expression. In doing so, the genre proposes a particular kind of Internet Art that mocks popular music as well as conforms to it.

## Conclusion

This article presents the genre of vaporwave as a process of audio-visual collage that deploys the act of remembering as a central feature and concern. This reveals a playful but, at times, sinister and self-conscious aesthetic, which is tied to the recycling of the past through both artistic and musical forms. The vaporwave project is therefore about slippages between spaces – spaces of form, of consciousness and of memory.

Through a language analysis, I have presented some experiences of listening to vaporwave as simultaneously alienating and endearing. In particular, redditors have characterised the vaporwave listening experience as the longing for 'something that never took place', which I have tied to Healey's 'compensatory nostalgia' and the 'ersatz' and 'spurious' forms of nostalgia described by Appadurai, Boym and Reynolds. However, this language analysis works in conjunction with the case

study I have presented above, which features tracks from the vaporwave artist 18 Carat Affair. I refer to this case study to describe vaporwave as an artistic project characterised by contemporary forms of media that draw from a legacy of 20th century movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Video Art. Most importantly however, I propose vaporwave as a process of remembering for the sake of remembering itself, but one that is deformed and confused by the postmodern disassembly of memory and the evaporation of history into the chronic amnesia of post-capitalist structures. In the vaporwave aesthetic, boundaries appear to collapse on themselves in the half-remembered moments of popular culture and the collective traumas which become subsumed back into the mediatic system of corporate capitalism, in a satire of both muzak® and memory.

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## Appendix A



Album cover of Macintosh Plus album, Floral Shoppe (Strawberry Illuminati 2015).

### List of vaporwave subreddits examined for the language analysis:

Vaporwave inspired art, etc.: /r/VaporwaveArt 7,202 subscribers, a community for 1 year  
 Music optimized for abandoned malls: /r/Vaporwave 37,169 subscribers, a community for 4 years  
 vaporwave\_irl: /r/vaporwave\_irl 156 subscribers, a community for 8 months  
 Where Vaporwave artists discuss production: /r/makingvaporwave 917 subscribers, a community for 8 months  
 proto-Vaporwave: /r/protovaporwave 102 subscribers, a community for 11 months



Aesthetics 美学: /r/VaporwaveAesthetics 12,982 subscribers, a community for 1 year  
Vaporwave: /r/VaporwaveCSS 176 subscribers, a community for 2 years  
Vaporwave Cassettes – post about upcoming Vaporcassettes or Post your collection: /r/  
VaporwaveCassettes 239 subscribers, a community for 6 months  
A Vaporwave Contest: /r/Hyperbattle 153 subscribers, a community for 6 months  
Nujabes and Vaporwave: /r/nujavape 25 subscribers, a community for 1 year  
vaporwave 2.0: /r/vprwv 16 subscribers, a community for 1 year  
Vaporwave History: /r/vaporwavehistory 12 subscribers, a community for 6 months  
Vaporwave for Sleep: /r/SleepVaporwave 13 subscribers, a community for 10 months  
Add your Vaporwave music that would make me fall asleep (in a good way).