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Vaporwave's Appropriation and Appreciation of Japanese Culture

Vaporwave is a microgenre of art where aesthetics of different eras - typically the 80s and early 90s - are arranged in a surrealist, dreamlike hodge-podge to evoke strong emotions such as nostalgia. In music, companies such as Isotope have constructed software options to adapt vinyl crackles and cassette tape hissing that were - at a time - compulsory to consuming music for modern music producers. Trademarked 80s synths such as the Arturia Juno-6 have been issued in digital plugins. In visual media, video in the 2010s reprioritized the graininess and fuzziness of VHS television over full definition clarity. Sourced from "The Appropriating Subject", Jana Cattien and Richard John Stopford define cultural appropriation as "if one uses or takes 'other' cultural material," (Cattien and Stopford, 2018). Yet, they also describe cultural appreciation as one that "merely acts as an audience" of another's culture instead (Cattien and Stopford, 2018). Though blatantly appropriative, I argue that Japan's inspirations of vaporwave are more appreciative to the nation's culture than exploitative of it as they are initially based in Western ideals to begin with.

A strong cultural reference point of vaporwave is Japan. Furthermore, Ken Macleod's "Vaporwave: Politics, Protest, and Identity" argues that Japan itself can be "viewed as the national equivalent of vaporwave" (Macleod, 2018). What validates the dual appropriation and appreciation of vaporwave is that the genre reflects the post-Cold War techno-economic expansion in 1980s Japan. In fact, Japan's economic boom bled into their consumerist culture shock of the 1990s. They became recognized as the country that developed upon technologies first birthed in the Western world in a way that made them uniquely Japanese; these

technologies including cars, computers, television, video games, and - most pertinently to vaporwave's sound - musical instruments.

Sampling as a musical technique is innately appropriative, as one is literally recontextualizing slices of music from another's culture. Musically, vaporwave elements can retrospectively be seen in plunderphonics artists like The Avalanches and The Books; who would similarly combine music and television samples in a garish, yet evocative manner distinct from the groove orientation of hip-hop. They are also observed in Devon Hendryx (later-JPEGMAFIA)'s work from 2007-2009, with the pitch manipulation of 80s pop hits from Angela Bofill among other artists.

According to Andrew Wheelan and Raphael Nowak's "'Vaporwave Is (Not) A Critique Of Capitalism'" essay, the genre was officially recognized titularly with several albums between 2010 and 2011 released by Daniel Lopatin (under his alias Chuck Person), James Ferraro, and Vektroid (under her alias Macintosh Plus). Most vaporwave artists elect to work under pseudonyms. The chosen anonymity allows for exploration - and thus appreciation - of the cold, dystopic, corporate themes critiqued in the genre with chosen names such as Saint Pepsi and Sweetheart's Paradise Ltd. While vaporwave artists initially operated from a pure appreciation of the sounds they tampered with, the oversaturation of the online community allows for trendy appropriation of the genre, much in the consumerist manner primordial creators critiqued.

Macintosh Plus' 2011 album *Floral Shoppe* has become historically iconic for its cover debuting vaporwave's visual aesthetics. The cover features a Roman head atop a checkered board and a pixelated photo of a city skyline on a bright pink background. The design mimicks "1990s Japanese websites characterized by bright colours and 'busy' text" (Glitsos, 2015), but the Roman head remains anachronistic to the composition as is the style of vaporwave. The ubiquitous traces of Japanese characters and words in vaporwave

iconography have also stemmed from Floral Shoppe's bright blue title being typed in Japanese on its cover.

Further, much of the vaporwave visuals - as seen in various YouTube compilations of the music - are owed to Japanese influence. In one video, a song can be soundtracking footage of 1980s video games made by Japanese company Sega. Alternatively, videos occasionally adapt the contemporary anime art style. Montages of Japanese commercials from the period will also run alongside the music, and stills of female Japanese models from period commercials of the period will grace album covers and video thumbnails. As seen in 1990s advertising, the Japanese based their then-futurist perspective on North American consumer ideals, until their economic recession in the 2000s. In essence, vaporwave is the West's nostalgic view of Japan's idealistic view of the West's future.

Finley Michaels (who works under her aforementioned alias Sweetheart's Paradise Ltd.) describes the modern oversaturation of vaporwave as "a result of hauntology;" a concept proposed by Jacques Derrida in 1933 (Cattien and Stopford, 2018). The etymology of the word breaks down as a "haunting of the past", and as such, vaporwave works through defining nostalgic reverberations within the present. These euphoric cadences and pillowy instrument loops aren't without appropriative creation, but through global circulation online, they also contain space for appreciative consumption too.

Works Cited

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