Vaporwave, or the Novelty of Nostalgia

"Going faster does not necessarily make culture move forward. We could be just spinning our wheels." - Simon Reynolds, Retromania

Nostalgia is a state of mind deeply rooted in the collective psyche of Western culture. Despite technological and cultural advances beyond our ancestors' wildest imaginations, the yearning to go back has not waned; far from it, nostalgia, in an era of ever-changing, Internet-centric media, continues to be channeled in unprecedented ways.

The affordances and sheer expanse of the Internet gives all of us an open canvas with which to exploit elements from our past and make a mark on culture. It's function can be seen as that of a museum exhibition, with us as it's curators, capturing and presenting our own mementos. Perhaps the most ideologically-weighted movement to come out of the internet's rise to omnipresence, and a clear indication of it's novel ability to harness cultural callbacks is vaporwave.

Vaporwave's existence is inextricably linked to a complicated view of the past: equal parts profoundly sincere yet purposely distorted. The name is a play on the term vaporware, terminology prominent during the revered era of the 80's and 90's. They were products companies had advertised, but ultimately never released. It manifests itself both as a visual style and a genre of electronic music. In terms of visual hallmarks, Greco-Roman busts, Japanese type, and early computer graphics are co-opted to create a distinctive aesthetic.

The use of pastiche extends beyond the visuals. For vaporwave musicians, this typically meant pilfering and manipulating the sounds of their youth: 80's and 90's pop, smooth jazz, new age, advertisements and found sounds.

A defining musical trait of vaporwave, sampling, has a long history in more recognized styles like hip-hop and house music. However, vaporwave takes this a step further by utilizing an approach called plunderphonics, a term conceived by composer John Oswald, whose most notable works consisted almost entirely of repurposing pre-existing songs. In his essay *Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative*, he argues,

> "All popular music…, exists in a public domain. Listening to pop music isn't a matter of choice... we're bombarded by it. In its most insidious state, filtered to an incessant bass-line, it seeps through apartment walls and out of the heads of regular people."

This same ethos has been employed by landmark figures not only of the vaporwave movement, but the music world by-and-large. Experimental electronic artist Daniel Lopatin has worked as a producer and collaborator for pop stars like the Weeknd, as well as scoring films like 2019's *Uncut Gems*. All this, and not to be outdone, his 2009 album *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* ultimately birthed the vaporwave genre. Underpinning his artistic philosophy is a grasp for the anachronistic, and an ardent belief in the utility of repurposing:

> "Embedded in collective memory are unique instances of the personal. No commercial work is outside of the reach of artistic reclamation. Likewise no artistic project is outside the reach of commercial implications."

Continuing to submerge the music in the temporal, compositional techniques also include shrouding the sound in cascades of reverb and echo. This gives the music an almost dream-like quality. As new notes are being played, the listener can still grasp the notes previous as they ring out and bleed into one another, thus complicating what is understood as the present. This ethereal atmosphere is enhanced by the slowing and pitch-shifting of the musical samples. In the case of vocal snippets, employing this technique gives them a ghostly timbre.

Vaporwave itself is easily dismissed, sometimes for compositional reasons, but more often cited as nothing more than an internet meme. Make no mistake: this isn't unfounded. Much of the style's creative output is steeped in irony and irreverence.

The vernacular of many Internet circles, gifs and memes featuring popular entertainment icons, follow this sort of rebellion against ownership, unconsciously or otherwise. If the advent of the internet indicates anything, it's that traditional notions of copyright no longer hold up under scrutiny. The content that we enjoy becomes part of our identity, and if one is to properly transmit an account of their past, they shouldn't have to censor the sights and sounds that make up those moments. Given how dependent vaporwave is on other works, how easy it is to imitate, and the lack of any barrier for entry into the larger canon means the sheer nature of vaporwave makes it subject to criticism and ridicule. But in turn, just like memes, by creating a level playing field and allowing anyone into the fold, the genre has amassed a large audience and wildly expanded its musical scope. Perhaps what listeners latch onto is the ideological baggage vaporwave carries with it that demands examination.

In his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, philosopher Jacques Derrida coined the term "hauntology", referring to a complication in time where something from the past returns to the present, but in a sort of specter-like way. He argues that our experience can never be understood as solely one temporal location, past, present, or future, but a combination of all the above. Advancements in recording technology only exacerbate this paradox, by giving us an opportunity to vividly archive that which has already taken place.

All of the aforementioned artistic qualities of vaporwave situate it in this "haunted" sphere, where elements of the past play on an endless loop. However, vaporwave isn't alone in this regard. The late cultural theorist Mark Fisher was a staunch proponent of a collective reverberation in contemporary Western art and pop culture, applying Derrida's idea of hauntology to the incessant repetition of pre-existing themes and techniques in music, as well as visual arts. We are doomed to repeat ourselves in this condition, missing out on the future we imagined.

> "The reliance of current artists on styles that were established long ago suggests that the current moment is in the grip of a formal nostalgia...music is locked into pastiche and repetition...Not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible."

Beyond a deep adoration for the past, this movement operates as a collective lament over how reality had transpired. The concept of a lost future resonates by tapping into a collective nerve, regret, a deep sadness concerning our fleeting time.

Those who grew up in the period vaporwave fawns over are now grown adults, participants in a grueling, unforgiving slog with no foreseeable oasis on the horizon.

The conventional wisdom of the American Dream, that a rewarding life in the suburbs would be granted so long as you had a degree in hand, had evaporated before their very eyes. With impending economic hardship and a forecast of environmental catastrophe, who could blame them for wanting to retreat into the past?

Culturally-speaking, nostalgia is a double-edged sword: capable of instilling an appreciation for the transient, reminding us of our own mortality. It provides a sense of comfort and allows us to identify with our roots. On the other hand, it can have disastrous consequences: being used ideologically to instill a fear of progress, a sense of complacency that represents either a lack of awareness or even worse, complete acceptance in the face of impending consequences. "In the end", Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia* writes, "the only antidote for the dictatorship of nostalgia might be nostalgic dissidence", one that operates on "the border zone between longing and reflection".

Nostalgia's novelty in the present day comes down to the fact that thanks to the subordination of new technologies, we can now achieve a perfect recreation of the past, as well as a deteriorated view of the present. We can continually archive the present, all while it transitions into the past. Like sifting through old belongings in the attic, the question becomes do we want all of this? is it still possible to have something new?

Or rather, as Fisher poses, is it still possible to forget?

Link to video: https://youtu.be/C-uyP_dykK0

Commented [14]: (Imagery of climate change, housing crisis, everyday commute, repeated ad nauseum) (Towers 1 by towers)

Commented [15]: (Show imagery of people connecting with old technology, the analog)

Commented [16]: (MAGA visuals, rise of fascism)

Commented [17]: (Use imagery of photography, images taken digitally being filtered to look older) (George clanton plays)

Commented [18]: (Fade to Black)

Commented [19]: (George Clanton on full blast, outro graphics)