Vaporwave a e s t h e t i c s: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse

ROSS COLE

Vapor—by definition, it's something that tends to resist being pinned down. Vapor trails linger as faint hexagrams in the sky, but they soon diffuse, melting into air. They are signs of loss and fading, intangibility and transience (epitomized by the eponymous Ride song, a classic of the shoegaze genre). Similar things could be said about waves—by the time you notice one it's already passing you by. New waves soon become old waves. And yet waves never really move at all: they're just transferring energy from one place to another. Beneath the surface, there's inertia and calm. Put these two words together, and no surprises the result is enigmatic.

It's late July 2009 and you're listlessly trawling YouTube, alone in front of a screen in the early hours of the morning. You catch a glimpse of what looks like a rainbow road disappearing into the distance, pixelated and lurid neon against a digital night sky (Fig. 1).[1] You click. It has been uploaded by a user calling themselves "sunsetcorp," a channel with only a handful of videos all between 1'30" and 2'30" long: this one called "nobody here," another called "angel," one called "computer vision," and one called "demerol." Your video begins. The road begins to move, swaying in slow motion from left to right, then right to left against a computerized metropolis and points of white light overhead. The clip loops several times, and you find yourself in a paradoxical state of stasis-in-motion, Sisyphean yet strangely tranquil. The clip has a soundtrack, eerie but familiar: a sotto-voce Chris de Burgh emerges singing a mellifluous phrase from his 1986 hit "The Lady in Red"—the line "there's nobody here." But the soft seductive song appears to be stuck on infinite repeat, slowed down, stretched out, pitch shifted, and saturated with disorientating echo effects, de Burgh's voice multiplied and shadowing itself on just this one line looped seamlessly over and over. Once a paradigm of intimacy, this sonic fragment quickly becomes uncanny, imbued with the diametrically opposite meaning: it's the sound of a disembodied voice, of hollowness and vacuity. This de Burgh is revealed to be a figment of recording technology, a mere acoustic revenant. But you can't stop listening to it. You repeat the clip over again and wonder at the wizardry that has transformed an amorous adult contemporary pop ballad into something so redolent of cybernetic alienation and the existential melancholia of the Internet age. Somehow this video isn't annoying or trashy—it's oddly sublime, hypnotic, habit-forming.

You might have been inclined to comment on the video, with something in typically Internet parlance at once playfully ironic and acutely earnest, sincere and self-mocking: "the road to salvation," "this is so beautiful," "this is just mesmerizing

<3," "I could watch this forever," "This should never stop," "The sole reason Youtube should exist," "You have no idea how many times I listen to this! Thanks!" "this is the single greatest experience I have ever had," "Am I allowed to be in love with an experience such as this? because I am."[2] Some users asked where the visuals had come from, suggesting they had the feel of *Mario Kart 64*—an early 3D video racing game for the Nintendo 64 console released in Japan in December 1996. The visuals are, in fact, not from Mario Kart but from a now extremely rare laserdisc arcade game by the Japanese Taito Corporation called *Laser Grand Prix*, produced in 1984 and thus of a similar era to "The Lady in Red."[3] The rainbow road appears as part of a short animated sequence at the beginning of the game (which otherwise contains live-action footage of a Grand Prix track) and again as part of a final "fantastic race" featuring surreal and futuristic CGI animation accompanied by archetypal 1980s synthesizer refrains. If you'd returned to scroll through these comments a year later, you might have seen one that was particularly prescient: "Your vids scare me in a way that reminds me of being in an empty mall as a child. Mannequins and all."[4]

Here is vaporwave *avant la lettre* in its earliest incarnation as what this video's creator Daniel Lopatin aka Oneohtrix Point Never called "eccojams." The "nobody here" clip was originally from a limited edition DVD-R project entitled *Memory Vague* that Lopatin had released a month before, in June 2009—itself a remixing of found YouTube clips. Lopatin explains the creative process:

> I was tired of waiting for video artists to make me videos—it takes too long—so I started ripping YouTubes and editing them in Windows Movie Maker. I was primarily interested in Soviet-era TV programming as well as Japanese consumer electronics commercials, and I started organizing the footage by its body language and emotive aspects. Some of the videos on *Memory Vague* are really nice and still hold up, particularly "Computer Vision," "Nobody Here," "Nest 5900," "Radiation," and maybe some others. Some of them were object lessons.[5]

This fascination with sampling, Lopatin admits, was inseparable from childhood memories of synthesizers such as the Roland Juno-60 from the early 1980s—the sound of such machines harbouring the potential "to model topographies, or ideas, or ecologies."[6] One such ecology is the soundscape of consumerism: "I don't want to make ubiquitous music," he explains, "although I'm often inspired by it."[7] His music is neither muzak nor satire, but unexpected and ambiguous reworkings of the mundane. His *Memory Vague* project subsequently developed into the limited edition cassette album *Chuck Person's Eccojams, Vol. 1* released via Curatorial Club in August 2010—a collection of chopped and screwed plunderphonics featuring Toto's 1981 hit "Africa," the 1989 Tears for Fears song "Woman in Chains," and the 1986 Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush duet "Don't Give Up," amongst others.[8]

We can find amid this nexus key ingredients that would come to define vaporwave as it emerged and proliferated on the subcultural Web during the early 2010s: piracy and recirculation of audio-visual fragments from the recent past; the combination of analogue media such as cassette tapes with outmoded high-end consumer technology and home computing software; deliberately crude looping and speed shifting; pseudonyms, aliases, and anonymity with oblique references to

Japanese tech corporations; an obsession with the period from roughly 1980 to the mid-1990s, encompassing the childhoods of Generation X and some Millenials; incipient 3D video game graphics and digital synthesizers; TV commercials; playful irony imbricated with sincerity; suburbia and the metropolis; a macabre fascination with hollowness, simulation, and ubiquitous music; and, perhaps most significantly of all, empty shopping malls. Indeed, users of the Reddit r/Vaporwave forum later opted to portray the genre as "music optimized for abandoned malls." Earliest use of the term vaporwave, however, appears to have been by Jakub Adamek in a review of the 2011 cassette release *surfs pure hearts* by GIRLHOOD—an album, Adamek notes, following a trend of "airy, blurry 80's/early 90's nostalgia occupying the territory somewhere between 'psychedelic drone' and chillwave."[9] The word calls to mind the computer industry term "vapourware" used to label a tantalizing product that is, in practice, unavailable or non-existent. Impossible to delimit, vaporwave spills over into, incorporates, or riffs off microgenres including hypnagogic pop, seapunk, synthwave, chiptune, witch house, utopian virtual, hardvapour, mallsoft, vaportrap, VHS pop, and distroid. Since being coined, it has become a major tag on Bandcamp and the basis of several net-based labels—as well as being declared dead.[10]

From its hazy beginnings in Lopatin's eccojams, vaporwave has evolved a distinctive aesthetic—the term "a e s t h e t i c" itself (with this idiosyncratic character spacing) used by insiders to signal membership of what might be described as a "virtual public."[11] Google "vaporwave", and you'll find a constellation of paratext comprising 1980s pastel graphics, digital glitch art, obsolete video game and Microsoft Windows logos, shopping malls, VHS tapes, neon colours that could be refractions from the underside of a CD ROM, old PCs and dialogue boxes, tacky classical busts and columns, purposely opaque Japanese text, grids or chequerboards receding to a vanishing point, evening cityscapes, palm trees, and sunsets. It's a fluid, free-for-all meme culture in which these elements are combined and recirculated to produce something between the iconic neo-noir cyberpunk of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*, the Malibu Club featured in the '80s throwback game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and the bygone feeling of surfing the early Internet. Musically, vaporwave is defined by a haunting, wraithlike soundworld of smooth synth pop, distortion, looping, glitches, ersatz elevator schmaltz, unsettling shifts and repetitions, and melodies warped not quite beyond recognition—sluggish fusions mashing together the detritus of corporate motivational soundtracks with snippets of songs that stir memories of a Golden Age. A formula might involve pairing something like a chopped and screwed version of Carly Simon's "Coming Around Again" with a Betamax copy of a 1982 Phillips VLP-700 laserdisc player advert. The genre's signal quality is the juxtaposition of these visual and sonic modalities to create a multimedia experience simultaneously reassuring and estranging, nostalgic and futuristic at once.[12] The release often credited with crystallizing this aesthetic is the 2011 album *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, aka Vektroid, aka Ramona Andra Xavier.

Vaporwave is a genre that exists only on and because of the Internet, a product of its own peculiar affordances—something made possible by the very era it appears to disavow. Only within the Internet's increasingly chaotic archive could the average

person locate, sample, remix, and recirculate 1980s arcade games, Chris de Burgh singles, and Japanese consumer electronics commercials. On the one hand, we have a nostalgic aversion to the present articulated through a fetishization of old, superseded technology (cassette tapes, 64-bit CPUs, laserdisc players); on the other, remediations facilitated by the Internet (online media hosting, social networking, high-speed data transfer). Rather than attempting to resolve these conflicts, what I want to take seriously here is Adam Harper's idea that "vaporwave is a study in Utopianism."[13] My claim is that vaporwave exemplifies what Svetlana Boym has termed the "off-modern"—a "tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia."[14] Although we tend to think of nostalgia and utopia as opposing counterparts they are both forms of escape and displacement, indexes of absence and longing—rejections of the present either for the safety of recognition or the possibility of change. Nostalgia, as Boym emphasizes, "is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective."[15] Vaporwave articulates *somebody else's utopia*, the alienating nowhere of capitalist technocracy, yet this vision contains within itself an infatuation with the mediascapes of the 1980s.[16] These landscapes are consciously defamiliarized and rehabilitated, providing the basis for a more diffuse utopian impulse guided by a nostalgic imagination. The experience of listening to vaporwave is a bittersweet enjoyment of estrangement from our collective past.

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Vaporwave was quick to garner attention beyond the succinct remarks of spellbound listeners, its affordances directing critics toward a prevailing view of the genre as an embattled critique of neoliberal capitalism.[17] Vaporwave appeared to play into the hands of the intellectual left, where it became a kind of mouthpiece for voicing disaffection with the status quo—a folk music for the 21st century. Symptomatic of this framing is a short book by Grafton Tanner published in 2016 entitled *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*. Tanner unapologetically cites the genre as "the musical product of a culture plagued by trauma and regression in late capitalism."[18] Vaporwave, in this view, is a kind of artistic panacea with the ability to "awaken us to the cultural maladies that stunt political discourse and shun human empathy," enacting heroic resistance to "those monolithic systems that enslave the West."[19] Tanner's book was aiming to be a kind of vaporwave-in-prose—except it isn't quite as enjoyable, lacking the playful ambiguities of vaporwave multimedia and weltering in glum disillusionment. But Tanner succeeded in dragging the genre onto familiar terrain, the realm of canonical critical theory: Freud, Derrida, Adorno, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Birmingham cultural studies. Perhaps most influential in this regard was the late British writer Mark Fisher, aka "k-punk." In his work on hauntology, Fisher had set up a distinctive critical feedback loop amplified through Jameson's *Postmodernism* and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.[20] This led Fisher to the conclusion that society was haunted by successive failures to deliver on past

promises such as those implicit in postwar social democracy: hauntology was a musical call-to-arms, the last frail memory of progressive possibility.

One of the ironies of this reading, as shown by Ken McLeod, is that vaporwave aesthetics have been effortlessly co-opted by the alt-right in the form of "Fashwave" and "Trumpwave"—disquieting subgenres "with aggressive political track names" often using "loops of radical political soundbites from speeches by Hitler or Donald Trump."[21] What this trend should draw our attention to is that the vaporwave nexus affords a number of conflicting interpretations. The earliest and most influential writer to read the genre from the left—with an analysis revolving around accelerationism and caricature that others later expanded upon—was Harper. It's hard to overstate Harper's influence in the framing of vaporwave after 2012, the opening paragraph of his essay "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza" now reproduced in the "community details" of the r/Vaporwave subreddit:

> Global capitalism is nearly there. At the end of the world there will only be liquid advertisement and gaseous desire. Sublimated from our bodies, our untethered senses will endlessly ride escalators through pristine artificial environments, more and less than human, drugged-up and drugged down, catalysed, consuming and consumed by a relentlessly rich economy of sensory information, valued by the pixel. The Virtual Plaza welcomes you, and you will welcome it too.[22]

With its imagery of a brave new world of cybernetic superficiality, Harper's augury was a shrewd allusion to Jameson's notes on the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. For Jameson, this building is a crucial indicator of the postmodern:

> [Such buildings] no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, but rather they seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax…[T]he escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper.[23]

This hotel takes us to the heart of Jameson's argument: an inability to orient ourselves within, free ourselves from, and make sense of postmodern space is the correlate of an inability to grasp or evade the multinational flows of capital and information in the digital age. In short, alienation in spatial terms = alienation under neoliberalism. Indeed, Jameson's writings anticipate the style of much vaporwave criticism:

> The world in which we were trapped is in fact a shopping mall; the windless closure is the underground network of tunnels hollowed out for the display of images. The virus ascribed to junkspace is in fact the virus of shopping itself; which, like Disneyfication, gradually spreads like a toxic moss across the known universe.[24]

Postmodernism, he suggests, not only builds malls but is "a virtual mall in its own right."[25] It is a view echoed by Marc Augé in his theory of "non-places"—those disorientating sites of transience, control, commerce, anonymity, and surveillance that break down the sociality and temporal depth of legible, "anthropological" place.[26]

These non-places abound in the vaporwave imagination, but rather than being examples of "Marxist plunderphonics" they have a fundamental and defiant ambivalence.[27] On the surface they do indeed appear to speak in the language of late capitalism, employing its lexicon and syntax as a refusal of the very possibility of socialist utopia or even utopian socialism. What kind of political future, for instance, is implied by the track "Clear Skies Through The Mall Skylight" by Eco Virtual? Released in April 2014, this track is available as part of a free album download on Bandcamp and also via YouTube, where an accompanying video (also uploaded by Eco Virtual) has the additional appellation "大気 研究音楽," which translates as "atmospheric research music."[28] It is the kind of thing we've all been forced to hear endlessly repeated while waiting on hold to verify our identity to an automated telephone hotline: mood regulation music with no obvious melody made up of arpeggiated keyboard figures, synthesized saxophone, and compressed percussion—elevator muzak to fill a void where silence would be uncomfortable. It's the soundtrack of corporate mediocrity, the irritatingly serene façade of something altogether inhuman. The video drives this point home to absurdity with a series of CGI graphics of large, intricate skylights repeatedly opening and closing above prototypical malls and office buildings (Fig. 2). There is no human presence, just the two-dimensional silhouettes of an architect's model. It is a nightmarish world emptied of sociality and history rendered as an ideal vision of post-industrial efficiency, a mimesis of polished "placemaking" consultancies and urban planners.

It is the virtual plaza incarnate. If it is utopian, it is the kind of utopian future envisaged not by Morris or Ruskin, but by the US novelist Edward Bellamy—the outcome of scientism, progress, productivity, and discipline. Here is Bellamy's time-travelling protagonist describing his first encounter with a state mall:

> I was in a vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides, but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above. Beneath it, in the centre of the hall, a magnificent fountain played, cooling the atmosphere to a delicious freshness with its spray. The walls and ceiling were frescoed in mellow tints, calculated to soften without absorbing the light which flooded the interior.[29]

This is vaporwave of the 1880s, the urtext of postmodernity and the blueprint for suburban retail of the twentieth century—an expansion of capitalism as the solution to the ills of capitalist society. What we find here are the beginnings of a trope also found in Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which a magisterial department store becomes a figure for the transformation of urban society in the "capital of the nineteenth century."[30] As this shop expands to incorporate an entire block bordering one of Haussmann's new boulevards, the building takes on the archetypal and enduring qualities of an Americanized mall: it is a "cathedral of modern business" with lifts soaring up into an "immense glazed roof" beyond which shoppers "could see nothing but the sky, an expanse of sky which, with its flights of clouds and its delicate azure blue, was mirrored in the still water of the window-panes."[31]

As with vaporwave aesthetics, it's hard to distinguish in such cases between critique and a kind of Miltonian fascination with the devil's party—an ambiguity

most clearly demonstrated by the strange similarity between Bellamy's ostensibly socialist utopia and Zola's socialist burlesque of capitalist expansionism: both end up with passages that suggest the experience of such commercial spaces is not simply alienating, but transfixing. Vaporwave is neither utopian nor dystopian in any true sense: it abandons us in a hall of mirrors where visions of utopia and dystopia are thrown out of shape and dissolve into one another and back out again. As Harper puts it, the genre "twist[s] dystopia into utopia and vice versa."[32] But for Jameson and Augé, postmodernism and utopia are anathema. "The non-place," Augé writes, "is the opposite of Utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."[33] Only high modernism, in Jameson's Adornian framework, can oppose the tainted populism of consumer culture, imbued as it is with a "Utopian sense of the transfiguration of the self and the world."[34] Although it appears to be the perfect example of postmodern bricolage and reshuffling, vaporwave is something more like a *commentary* on postmodernism, an ironic remediation of the postmodern era—for want of a better term, a sort of meta-postmodernism.[35] In the discourse on utopia, we sometimes forget that Thomas More's original term means "no-place": although utopianism belongs to the left, it would seem naïve to assume there is no capitalist equivalent—a futuristic and technocratic "no-place" that might look a lot like a virtual equivalent of Augé's "non-place," a dehumanizing void. This is the utopia that vaporwave enjoys toying with: a slick corporate utopia in which utopianism is dead.

Transgressions and Topophilia

Caught up in what David Morley and Kevin Robins term "techno-orientalism," vaporwave immures itself in a world of pre-Internet high-tech optimism—an era epitomized by Japanese innovation and the spread of free market ideology around the globe. Japan of the 1980s and early '90s, as Morley and Robins point out, became "synonymous with the technologies of the future—with screens, networks, cybernetics, robotics, artificial intelligence, simulation."[36] But this ascendant vision brought with it a darker undercurrent: "the figure of empty and dehumanized technological power…the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress."[37] Vaporwave's deep ambivalence is grounded in this polarity, torn between nostalgic endorsement of technological innovation (defined by those things carelessly discarded in its wake) and an awareness that technology has not altogether improved our lives—the Internet in the early days of the dial-up modem, for instance, once a borderless frontier with the potential to enhance knowledge, communication, and freedom across the globe now lost to Dark Net obscurantism and the clandestine power of Google and Facebook. Given events of the recent past, it has become progressively more difficult to imagine a time when, to borrow Tim Berners-Lee's words from the early 2000s, the web was seen as "a collaborative space where you can communicate through sharing information," and that by working together people "could iron out

misunderstanding."[38] It has since become a source of relentless disinformation and targeted harassment—another hidden persuader in the attention economy.[39]

Vaporwave's nostalgia for the early Internet thus follows the definition put forward by the sociologist Fred Davis: an ability to feel nostalgic about something, he argues, has less to do with temporal distance from events than "with the way they contrast—or, more accurately, the way we *make* them contrast—with the events, moods and dispositions of our present circumstances."[40] Nostalgia is thus "*a certain kind* of subjective contrast" that implicates the present, juxtaposing and reconstructing phenomena "to arrive at the foregone conclusion of the superiority of times and things past."[41] Vaporwave is a sign of the 1980s and '90s *becoming* past—being made into something nostalgic that functions as a bulwark against rapid change and current crisis. As Lopatin indicates, this era of early digital technology was the childhood of those reaching adulthood in the new century, just as the Internet arose and began weaving itself irrevocably into our lives. Vaporwave's aesthetic seems to revolve around this moment prior to the social media revolution, before pervasive online advertising, before mobile Internet and smartphones, before the monopoly state of the present. In vaporwave, the Internet is still tied to objects such as the PC; music is still tied to physical media such as magnetic tape or vinyl; films are tied to laserdiscs or VHS; video games are associated with consoles; digital art is linked to Microsoft Paint; and so on. This is what Davis would call vaporwave's "nostalgia signature"—its imaginative and implicit juxtaposition of obsolete technology, elapsed software, or "residual media" with the present world of limitless global connectivity, clouds, AI, abundance, access over ownership, and the "Internet of things."[42] When writing about vaporwave it's hard not to succumb to elucidations that, as Davis notes, "extend and intellectually elaborate the substance of the nostalgic expression itself."[43] Vaporwave criticism and commentary typically resound vaporwave's own nostalgia.

The genre, therefore, gives voice to a certain identity, exhibiting a special kind of nostalgia—an ironizing nostalgia that refuses to be outwardly sentimental or self-deluding. Indeed, vaporwave is a prime illustration of what Phil Ford dubs "hip consciousness."[44] Hipness is oppositional not on the expected terrain of political dissent but on the ground of culture and consumption, using materials it sees as the junk vestiges of consumerism.[45] Take, for instance, the vaporwave community's delight in bringing defunct logos back from the dead, from Microsoft Windows '95, Sony's PlayStation, Nintendo's N64, and the Sega Saturn, to MTV and AOL. This fascination goes hand-in-hand with what Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth portray as the genre's ludic immersion in "the historicity and evolving materiality of the internet itself as a medium."[46] In vaporwave, these once common insignia, smooth MOR pop hits, and snippets of corporate muzak have a quantum power to exist as post-ironic elation and anti-capitalist defiance, nostalgia and ironic mischief, simultaneously. Vaporwave prosumers are thus archetypal taste-makers: in Bourdieu's words, they are figures "whose transgressions are not mistakes but the annunciation of a new fashion, a new mode of expression or action" who are "capable of rehabilitating the most discredited object."[47] The genre has this hip sensibility at its heart: a desire to play games with names and personae, to recycle the detritus and

found objects of the past, to separate listeners into those who dig its strange assemblages and those who are left bemused—a bifurcation drawn between savants and squares. Like all hip culture, it's always already one step ahead of anyone wishing to grasp it, smirking from a smoke-filled corner at the blundering Mr. Jones with his sharpened pencil and list of laughably unenlightened questions.

We can nevertheless begin to understand vaporwave's nostalgia along three intersecting planes: visual, acoustic, and imaginative. We have already encountered vaporwave's visual plane, defined by a flux of anonymous online memes and remediated video clips. A classic example is *Floral Shoppe* (or, to give it its proper title, *フローラルの専門店*) by Macintosh Plus (styled MAC プラス), which overlays a checkerboard floor on a pastel pink background with a classical bust of the sun(set) god Helios and a small, nightfall photograph of New York City with the towers of the World Trade Center still intact—that poignant existential marker of the twentieth century's devastating end (Fig. 3). Nostalgia is encoded into this collage on multiple levels, piling a warped aesthetic longing for Hellenistic beauty and Renaissance perspectivism with an image of Western hubris and innocence. Other imagery is less overtly political: *NEW DREAMS LTD.* by LASERDISC VISIONS (actually, the same artist behind *Floral Shoppe*) gives us the original "Compact Disc Digital Audio" logo, the Sega Saturn trade mark, a pixelated CD, a bulky laserdisc player, early 3D computer modelling, and several retro catalogue models—one drinking Pocari Sweat, a Japanese sports drink introduced in 1980 (Fig. 4). Sift through other vaporwave album covers and you'll find confusing layered collages featuring PCs with floppy disc drives and cumbersome monitors, dated urban nightscapes and cars, anime figures, what look like fragments of TV advertisements, Windows '95-era software, the VHS "PLAY" button as it would have appeared on an old TV set, VHS-like tracking glitches and distortions, and grids that recall the 1982 science fiction film *Tron*. The overall impression, from colour choice to fashion style brings you squarely back to the 1980s and '90s, albeit with peculiar moments of surrealism and oddity. This collection of imagery is futuristic yet compromised: it is a vision of the future as it was once imagined, the requiem for a lost era in which the future, driven by high-tech innovation, would be better than the past.

To appreciate the acoustic plane of vaporwave's nostalgia, we have to look back to the quintessential "sonic markers" of the 1980s—a decade defined by a global revolution in music technology propelled by Japanese innovation that produced MIDI analog synthesizers such as the Roland Jupiter-6 and the Roland Juno-106 as well as drum machines such as the Roland TR-909.[48] These synthesizers ushered in a new sonic landscape untethered from acoustic instruments and sounds—a virtual, ultramodern panorama of square and sawtooth waveforms. Bands such as Kraftwerk and Yellow Magic Orchestra had trailblazed this aesthetic during the 1970s, as had Vangelis, whose compositions haunt *Blade Runner*. Vaporwave's sound is defined by a confluence of dark, *Blade-Runner*-esque ambience and silkily chorus-soaked pads that evoke foggy customer service muzak and home shopping channel infomercials—examples being *New Nostalgia* by Golden Living Room and *Midnight Television* by

Midnight Television. Perhaps the most iconic sound of the 1980s, however, was the gated drum reverb—a true simulacrum produced through recording technology. First used by Peter Gabriel in 1980 on the track "Intruder," it was made famous by his Genesis bandmate Phil Collins on "In the Air Tonight" from *Face Value* released the following year. This sonic marker pops up across the vaporwave soundscape, particularly noticeable, for instance, on *Euphoria* by Infinity Frequencies. The genre assembles its distinctive soundworld by remixing '80s tracks permeated by gated reverb with arcade game music and smooth or synthesized sax-driven lounge jazz. These samples are then elongated, slowed down, and filtered through additional reverb and compression such that human voices emerge as if from within what the roboticist Masahiro Mori called an "uncanny valley."[49] Vaporwave producers revive this sonic ecology of the 1980s, but only as the ghostly re-emergence of a temporal space no longer felt as present. Vaporwave's uncanny aural spaces are distortions of a once ubiquitous soundscape: technologies that were once new, hi-fi, and cutting edge reappears as outmoded objects stained with time; what once seemed futuristic and utopian reappears as something resolutely hallmarked by its own era.

These sonic and visual nostalgias converge on the plane of imagination. As Gaston Bachelard reminds us, "all memory has to be imagined" because "we have in our memories micro-films that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of the imagination."[50] Bachelard is suggesting that nostalgia and imagination are entwined as a redemptive escape from the present that is never forced "to confront an image with an objective reality."[51] The imagination is thus a haven in which we're shown that "memories are dreams."[52] Vaporwave is a paradigm of this memory-daydreaming-nostalgia meeting point—a "topophilia" of the early or pre-Internet cultural landscape imagined as an unknowing paradise, an irretrievable space of privacy, sincerity, seclusion, quaintness, and comfort.[53] The genre situates itself at a generational watershed, conjuring up the elation of advertisements promising a future filled with shiny consumer electronics—an optimism that now seems impossible to ever recapture. At its most distilled, the vaporwave imagination concerns an inability to recall fugitive time, a time inscribed in imaginary space. Consider, for instance, the following much-liked comment from a YouTube upload of *Floral Shoppe*:

> *Dark nights, and the flicker of a weak analog signal on a cathode television. Home shopping channels selling pink quartz and shoebox-sized computers. Bags of lard-laden junk food and violently potent soft drinks. A cigarette, black pines, the lights of a dashboard, and the view of a comet in the sky.*[54]

Similarly, here's Harper once again, on *Computer Death* by Infinity Frequencies:

> The 3:00am mediascape is that of the information screen in the hotel single, the TV perched in the far corner of the Chinese takeaway, and the digitally overmodulated airline sound-branding heard through cheap earphones on that pitch-black night-flight, surrounded by sleeping strangers.[55]

Vaporwave, in this light, offers up an uncanny replication of postmodern experience, solitary and yet strangely reassuring in its faint hollowness. This very late night lo-fi

alienation and quiet stasis becomes both a symptom of and a quasi-homeopathic antidote to the omnipresent intrusions of enforced global connectivity—a way of remapping the disorientating non-places of postmodernity by escaping into virtual, imaginary space afforded, paradoxically, by the 21st-century Internet.

Confronting the Impossible

Nostalgia's gaze, as Davis notes, is most commonly seen to look "backwards rather than forwards, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery."[56] And yet vaporwave does something entirely different. It is a genre at once nostalgic and utopian, familiar and novel, experimental and conservative, digging up new discoveries while offering past certainties, looking both backwards and forwards: its gaze is janiform, always facing in two opposing directions, its expressions always double voiced. This is precisely why it's so difficult to pin down, so illusory and ambivalent. Vaporwave sounds like the Internet yet it sounds like the 1980s; its satirizes artificiality yet delights in the realm of simulation; it sells snippets of corporate muzak and commercial power pop, but we get it all virtually for free; its products are near-anonymous and yet distinct artists have emerged; it's hyperreal and yet sincere. What it says, at some deep level, is that we actually enjoy the things that capitalism brings, however woke we are: blockbuster films, malls, pop music, home computing, video games, theme parks, TV adverts, Japanese synthesizers.

But vaporwave is never simply a celebration of kitsch—it's an odd kind of hip avant garde imbued with an ironic and cutting self-awareness. As Boym suggests, nostalgia "has a utopian dimension" directed not at the past "but rather sideways," stifled as it is by "the conventional confines of time and space."[57] It is less like a refusal to face the future than a "rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress."[58] It is concerned with lived, fluid time (what Bergson calls "*durée*") rather than clock or scientific time.[59] According to Lopatin, the emergence of nostalgic synth music early in the new century is a sign that "people are tired of linear time" and using such music or psychedelic experience as strategies "for living in sacred time."[60] There is something ritualistic about vaporwave. But rather than auratic ceremonies in sacred spaces, its rituals involve the screen, the isolated user, and the World Wide Web. As Boym might put it, vaporwave's nostalgia is a "historical emotion"—a symptom of the age in which we are living.[61] It is surely no coincidence that vaporwave along with its sub and sister genres arose directly in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, just as the social media colossus Facebook was expanding beyond its initial campus purview, just as the Apple iPhone was rising to prominence along with personal GPS and new mobile gaming apps, just as Twitter, Instagram, Uber, WhatsApp, and Spotify were exploding in popularity. "Outbreaks of nostalgia," Boym points out, "often follow revolutions."[62] This kind of nostalgia is not simply solipsistic, then, but social and collective, aligning individual experience and cultural memory with wider shifts in the population at large. Such nostalgia is less

for the past *per se* than "the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete"—a critical, utopian nostalgia that searches history with its telephoto lens in order to visualize alternatives to the present.[63]

Nostalgia, as Boym argues, "speaks in riddles and puzzles," confusing our sense of direction through attempted "repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial."[64] Vaporwave is a classic instance of this off-modern nostalgia, refusing time's arrow and the eviscerated highways of progress to dwell instead in "sideshadows and back alleys"—in the "time-out-of-time of daydreaming and longing" that allows for new, heightened perspectives on the spaces, products, and sensations of the cybernetic world.[65] It brings together affection, satire, and alienation as one, employing the technique that Viktor Shklovsky referred to as *ostranenie* or "enstrangement."[66] Vaporwave is a hazy, pop cultural echo of this modernist device—taking the ubiquitous soundscapes of postmodernity and making them strange, dissonant, and unfamiliar.[67] In so doing, as Shklovsky would claim, vaporwave holds the capacity to reverse automatized habits of perception, permitting us to hear shopworn pop and irksome muzak in entirely new ways—returning to us the childlike capacity not merely to recognize things but to see and hear again. As he puts it:

> The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space, but we see only its surface. Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away. This is as true of our perception of the object in action as of mere perception itself…And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art…By "enstranging" objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and "laborious."[68]

Vaporwave functions precisely in this way as a form of distorted, poetic meditation on prosaic experience. Two of the most prominent vaporwave producers have indicated their commitment to this very tactic—Robin Burnett of INTERNET CLUB aiming for what he describes as "the defamiliarization of things we've become so used to that we don't notice them anymore", and Ramona Andra Xavier aka Vektroid wanting "to take that familiarity and re-contextualize it so it was just slightly out of place," making a familiar thing "sound alienated and otherworldly."[69]

Herein lies vaporwave's critical, utopian potential. This attitude is particularly clear in the genre's sardonic deployment of corporate newspeak (the kind that's beginning to infiltrate the academy). A 2012 INTERNET CLUB album entitled *REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE*, for instance, has track titles such as "UTILIZE YOUR IMPACT," "SYNERGIZE," and "THE NEW DIGITAL FRONTIER." Enstrangement occurs as listeners begin to appreciate the ways in which these ostensibly tedious motivational tracks have been chopped and screwed to produce something new, restoring the habitualized activity of listening. Among the most liked comments on an upload of the 2012 album *REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE* by INTERNET CLUB is one that reads, with tongue firmly in digital cheek, "I almost had a heart attack through disorientation when the panning went nuts; I almost had to turn it off, but then I recognised it as a necessary cleansing process after a lifetime of

neoliberal conditioning and lies."[70] Albums such as this flourish on YouTube, trespassing over the very terrain they criticize and smuggling a call to self-awareness into the proliferating commercial non-places of the Web. As such, vaporwave establishes what Jameson has since come to describe as a utopian "enclave" or tribal fantasy space within the maelstroms of postmodern culture, an aberrant "pocket of stasis within the ferment and rushing forces of social change."[71] Utopianism, Jameson argues in a revision of his earlier work, has begun to "seep into what used to be dystopian figures" such as cyberpunk or revolve around a gratification "inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible."[72] As a "rattling of the bars," this utopian impulse forces us "to think the break itself" by concentrating on fears surrounding a crisis of historicity and a loss of the future as such.[73]

The Internet, as we now know it, has entered what Francis Fukuyama might call an "end of history" state—the counterpart of globalization, the "universalization of Western liberal democracy," and the "ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture."[74] Vaporwave obliquely calls out and gives form to the correlation Fukuyama draws between liberal economics and the path to liberation, a highway paved with "easy access to VCRs and stereos" that even Fukuyama admits has an "emptiness" at its heart.[75] Quietly prophetic in its ingenuity, the genre offers momentary respite along this turbulent freeway as society hurtles headstrong into a perilous future. Its off-modern aesthetic, as one Reddit user points out, is something like a "cyber-analog of normcore"—a contemporaneous sartorial trend associated with ironically normal, unassuming clothing in response to the rapid shifts of the fashion industry.[76] Vaporwave rehabilitates and makes strange the discredited objects of postmodernity so that we can hear them anew, remodelling the topographies of the past through the technologies of the present. Does it, in the end, have a clear political message or agenda? "STOP HOPING, START DREAMING" ULTRA ウルトラ tells us as we listen to their 2013 album *CYBERNET UTOPIA*.[77] Vaporwave's utopianism inheres in this dream state. Yet dreams, as Benjamin would surely remind us, are never purely escapist but contain the germ of possibility: "every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening."[78]

Notes

[1] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFunvF0mDw [accessed 08.08.19].
[2] These are all comments from 2009–10 on Ibid.
[3] See https://www.arcade-museum.com/game_detail.php?game_id=8383 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIDGIFFAZpQ [accessed 08.08.19].
[4] Comment by user Colunga210 (2010), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFunvF0mDw [accessed 08.08.19].
[5] Kiran Sande, "Oneohtrix Point Never: Computer Vision," *Fact*, 22 June 2010, https://www.factmag.com/2010/06/22/oneohtrix-point-never-computer-vision; see also http://rootstrata.com/release/RS43 [accessed 09.08.19].
[6] Sande, "Oneohtrix Point Never."
[7] Ibid.
[8] "Chopped and screwed" is 1990s hip-hop terminology used to describe non-commercial remix: see Ryan Alexander Diduck, "Time Stand Still: Sampling Scenes and Slowing Media," in *Sampling Media*, ed. David Laderman and Laurel Westrup (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 102–13. On "plunderphonics" see John Oswald, "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative," paper presented at the Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference in Toronto, 1985, https://econtact.ca/16_4/oswald_plunderphonics.html [accessed 01.11.18]. See also *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital Music and Culture*, ed. Paul D. Miller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
[9] Jakub Adamek, "Review: Girlhood—Surfs Pure Hearts (Holy Page, 2011)," 13 October 2011, http://weedtemple.blogspot.com/2011/10/review-girlhood-surfs-pure-hearts-holy.html [accessed 07.03.19].
[10] See https://bandcamp.com/tag/vaporwave; https://old.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/360cj9/the_rvaporwave_record_label_list; https://old.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2uotgu/vaporwave_is_dead; and Leor Galil, "Vaporwave and the Observer Effect," *Chicago Reader*, 19 February 2013, https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/vaporwave-spf420-chaz-allen-metallic-ghosts-prismcorp-veracom/Content?oid=8831558 [accessed 16.08.19].
[11] See Laudan Nooshin, "'Our Angel of Salvation': Toward an Understanding of Iranian Cyberspace as an Alternative Sphere of Musical Sociality," *Ethnomusicology* 62/3 (2018): 341–74, 368. On Internet music more broadly, see William Duckworth, "Making Music on the Web," *Leonardo Music Journal* 9 (1999): 13–17; Steve Jones, "Music and the Internet," *Popular Music* 19/2 (2000): 217–30; Kembrew McLeod, "MP3s Are Killing Home Taping: The Rise of Internet Distribution and Its Challenge to the Major Label Music Monopoly," *Popular Music & Society* 28/4 (2005): 521–31; William Cheng, "Role-Playing toward a Virtual Musical Democracy in *The Lord of the Rings Online*," *Ethnomusicology* 56/1 (2012): 31–62; and *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[12] I'm drawing here on theories explored more fully in Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
[13] Adam Harper, "Invest in Vaporwave Futures!" *Dummy*, 29 July 2013, https://www.dummymag.com/features/essay-invest-in-vaporwave-futures [accessed 05.11.18].
[14] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.
[15] Ibid.
[16] On "mediascapes," see Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2/2 (1990): 1–24.
[17] Vaporwave has already received a striking degree of attention: see Adam Harper, "How Internet Music is Frying Your Brain," *Popular Music* 36/1 (2017): 86–97; Sharon Schembri and Jac Tichbon, "Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators: The Irony of Vaporwave," *Arts and the Market* 7/2 (2017): 191–212; Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music & Letters* 98/4 (2018): 601–47; Laura Glitsos, "Vaporwave, or Music Optimised for Abandoned Malls," *Popular Music* 37/1 (2018): 100–18; Padraic Killeen, "Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave's Affective Potentials," *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (2018): 626–38; and Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak, "'Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in An Online Music Scene," *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (2018): 451–62.
[18] Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016), xi.
[19] Ibid., xii.

[20] See Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66/1 (2012): 16–24. See also Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings* (London: Repeater, 2018): Fisher was not a fan of vaporwave as he felt it signaled "a kind of diminished expectations" (Ibid., 685). He did, however, praise Daniel Lopatin's "Nobody Here" assemblage as a form of "salvagepunk" opposed to the postmodern: see Mark Fisher, "Desecration Row," *The Wire* 319, September 2010, 46.
[21] Ken McLeod, "Vaporwave: Politics, Protest, and Identity," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30/4 (2018): 123–42, 135.
[22] Https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave [accessed 08.11.18]. This quotation is the opening paragraph of Adam Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza," *Dummy*, 12 July 2012, https://www.dummymag.com/features/adam-harper-vaporwave [accessed 05.11.18].
[23] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 39, 42. Jameson is alluding here to the influential legacy of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's book *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
[24] Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May–June 2003): 65–79, 77. See also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[25] Jameson, "Future City," 70.
[26] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2nd edn., trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2009), 35.
[27] "Marxist plunderphonics" was a phrase used by Robin Burnett of INTERNET CLUB to caricature the anti-capitalist reading suggested by Harper in 2012: see Harper, "Invest in Vaporwave Futures!"
[28] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J16x9HW6rEc [accessed 19.10.18].
[29] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 60.
[30] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
[31] Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise [Au Bonheur des Dames]*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 234, 344.
[32] Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza."
[33] Augé, *Non-Places*, 90.
[34] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 312–3.
[35] Similar terms have been circulating around the academic sphere over the last decade: see, for instance, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2/1, 5677 (2010) and Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
[36] David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), 168. See also Ken McLeod, "Vaporwave" and Kenneth B. Pyle, *Japan in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
[37] Morley and Robins, *Spaces of Identity*, 170.
[38] "Web's Inventor Gets a Knighthood," *BBC News*, 31 December 2003 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/3357073.stm [accessed 12.11.18]. See also Tim Berners-Lee with Mark Fischetti, *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by its Inventor* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
[39] I'm alluding to Vance Packard's book *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay, 1957). Packard's argument seems more relevant than ever today. See, for instance, Matthew Hindman, *The Internet Trap: How the Digital Economy Builds Monopolies and Undermines Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) and Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[40] Fred Davis, "Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11/2 (1977): 414–24, 417. See also Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979).
[41] Davis, "Nostalgia," 417, 419.
[42] Ibid., 418. See *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Mercedes Bunz and Graham Meikle, *The Internet of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); and Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
[43] Davis, "Nostalgia," 416.
[44] Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5. See also Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994)

and, on the deeper history of hipness, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[45] See, for instance, Emily I. Dolan, "'...This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth': Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity," *Popular Music* 29/3 (2010): 457–69.
[46] Born and Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave," 640.
[47] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010), 253, 327.
[48] See Eirik Askerøi, "Who is Beck? Sonic Markers as a Compositional Tool in Pop Production," *Popular Music* 35/3 (2016): 380–95.
[49] The "uncanny valley" was a concept introduced in 1970 to describe humanoid robots: see Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki. *IEEE Spectrum* 12 June 2012, https://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley [accessed 13.11.18]. Vektroid makes this connection in Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza."
[50] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 192.
[51] Ibid., 171.
[52] Ibid., 120.
[53] "Topophilia" is Bachelard's term: see Ibid., 19.
[54] Comment by user shockraid1 (2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCq0P509UL4 [accessed 15.11.18]. Italics in original.
[55] Adam Harper, "Pattern Recognition Vol. 8.5: The Year in Vaporwave," *Telekom Electronic Beats*, 5 December 2013, https://www.electronicbeats.net/vol-8-5-the-year-in-vaporwave [accessed 14.08.19].
[56] Davis, "Nostalgia," 422.
[57] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.
[58] Ibid., xv. This distrust of metanarratives, of course, is a hallmark of the postmodern: see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[59] See Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[60] Sande, "Oneohtrix Point Never."
[61] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., xvii, xix.
[66] Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 6.
[67] On the neglected interactions between these two spheres, see Juan A. Suarez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
[68] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 5–6.
[69] Quoted in Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza."
[70] Comment by user Ross Cunliffe (2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAs6Y5jjXrA [accessed 13.11.18].
[71] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 15.
[72] Ibid., 161, 84.
[73] Ibid., 232–3. See also Jameson, "Future City."
[74] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18, 3–4.
[75] Ibid., 8, 14.
[76] Comment by user mrtransisteur (2015), https://old.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2py8ir/vaporwave_artifacts [accessed 06.03.19].
[77] See https://fortune500.bandcamp.com/album/cybernet-utopia [accessed 15.08.19].
[78] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 13.

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Abstract

Vaporwave is a term that emerged during the early 2010s to describe a hip, wraithlike nexus of videos, memes, and experimental music on the Internet. This article traces vaporwave’s aesthetic back to the work of Daniel Lopatin and on through its deeply ambivalent relationship with consumer electronics and the mediascape of the 1980s. Vaporwave enjoys toying with a virtual, dehumanized utopia in which utopianism is dead, even as it defamiliarizes and rehabilitates the objects and disorientating non-places of postmodernity. The genre ultimately exemplifies what Svetlana Boym calls the “off-modern”—a form of critical reflection predicated on nostalgia.