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Looking Into the Meaning of Vaporwave: The Internet's Favorite Genre of Music

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Looking Into the Meaning of Vaporwave: The Internet's Favorite Genre of Music

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Arts

of Bard College

By

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Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020 as the world began shutting down to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, I found myself lucky enough to be able to continue my academics from the comfort of my parent's home. While I was able to focus more on my work without the distractions of the social life on campus, there was still an overwhelming feeling of isolation that many people around the world were experiencing simultaneously. Throughout this time my main source of comfort, and access to the outside world, was the accessibility of the internet from my bedroom. "Born too late to explore the world, born too early to explore the stars, born just in time to explore the internet." This is a sentiment mainly expressed by memes seeking to make light of the seemingly banal frontier of the internet, compared to the original frontiers of colonialism, and the supposed future "final frontier" of space. However the internet, though it may not be a physically explorable space(for the most part), is still a rich frontier of obscure websites, digital archaeology, and entire art forms that can be lost within Cyberspace. One such art form I've come to appreciate over the years is Vaporwave. The term comes from a combination of the term "vaporware", which refers to products(usually technology) that are developed by a company, but are never released to the

public, and the second part being inspired by a quote from *The Communist Manifesto*, saying; “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”(Marx, 12) I’ll go into these terms more later on in this paper, but for now what’s important is that Vaporwave exists as a movement almost exclusively on the internet. The main features of Vaporwave come from the music, and the visual aesthetics, both of which rely heavily on the digital, but with some interesting forays into the past mixed in. Vaporwave could be described as distilled nostalgia, ready for consumption. I’ve been aware of Vaporwave since I was in middle school, I remember hearing リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー played in some YouTube video lost to time, and while enjoying it, not thinking much of it at the time. But as time moved forward I began to see the aesthetics associated with that song popping up all over the internet, entire albums, subgenres, and art styles emerging from what seemed to be a meme song to me at the time. In some ways, Vaporwave occupies a similar space to the widely popular livestream; “lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to” ran by the YouTube account, “Lofi Girl”. This stream has been a companion to countless students in recent years looking for some sort of background noise to help them focus on their homework, and much of Vaporwave by its nature can offer a similar utility in being background noise. But where Lofi Girl aspires to provide background noise, Vaporwave desires to transform background noise into something new, taking the songs of elevators, and shopping malls, and breathing new life into them as representations of either a bygone era, or universal experiences under late-stage-capitalism and American consumerism. When asked in a class last year what culture I most identify with personally, after a lot of thought I answered with “online culture”, a somewhat nebulous answer, as the internet is home to likely millions of different communities that could be considered to have distinct “cultures” in a sense, but regardless I feel

like I understand existence in the virtual plaza better than existence in some of the towns and cities surrounding me in real life. Vaporwave expresses frustrations with society at large that many people my age(or any age really) have felt bubbling for most of their lives. In pursuit of Vaporwave I was able to talk fairly extensively with a few different musicians, mainly, electronic musician/sound engineer; Aaron Howard who was able to give me incredible insight into the history of electronic music, as well as the possible origins of Vaporwave, another artist I spoke to was a Future Funk(more on that later) and EDM musician named Declan James, who was able to articulate much of the philosophies behind Vaporwave in ways that made me rethink huge parts of my initial thoughts on the subject, and thirdly I talked to an artist known as “Dragon Century ‘99” who offered thoughtful takes on their own relationship with creating Vaporwave music. All of the artists offered very different perspectives of the art form, while exposing me to some incredible moments of music history that lead to the phenomenon known as Vaporwave.

Ethnographic work on Vaporwave is considerably more accessible than many other art forms, as pretty much the entire community exists on the internet, meaning a researcher never has to leave their desk to see extensive parts of the scene, and community surrounding it through forums, YouTube comments, and various other social media spaces. Vaporwave’s time may have passed in the mainstream, but as a movement few other internet art forms have had more influence than Vaporwave. It can be seen in graphics used by massive tv networks, or referenced in mainstream pop music. Vaporwave represents a collective detachment from the present, as a direct response to the stagnation of creativity that is brought about through the inability to separate art and business.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Working on this project I was surprised how much had already been written about Vaporwave, I expected it to be somewhat of an obscure subject, but there is no shortage of articles, books, and even movies about the eclectic art form. Here I'll be going through the literature I'll be engaging in this text. I'll be using Arrieta's essay for the UCSD Guardian "Dear Future Funk" to discuss some of the characteristics of the genre, and Saint Pepsi's interesting attitude towards it. Next I have the Bandcamp sponsored interview, "Vectors of Vektroid and Vaporwave" conducted by Simon Chandler, which offers important insight into the influences, and future plans of arguably Vaporwave's most important figure. I'll also be drawing on the book *Specters of Marx: The State of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International* by Jaques Derrida to present arguments against the article "The 'end of history?'" by Francis Fukuyama, both pieces help to situate Vaporwave in the historical context of the early 2010s. Another work of Fukuyama's I will draw on is his essay, "Transhumanism" simply to provide a somewhat accurate definition of what transhumanism is. I will be drawing on personal interviews and correspondence with three individual musicians, Declan, Aaron, and Dragon Century 99, all of whom offered fantastic insights, and unique perspectives into Vaporwave's past and present. I'll be using René Lysloff's paper, "Musical Community on the internet: An on-line ethnography." as it gives an excellent overview of the mod scene of the 90s which one of my interviewees happened to be involved in as well. I will be citing *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, as half of Vaporwave's name comes directly from a quote within the manifesto. I will use Ryan Nguyen's newspaper article; "The Dark Secret of Fiji Water" in order to discuss the symbolism behind the use of Fiji water bottles in Vaporwave art. I will be pulling from Whelan and Nowak's paper "Vaporwave is (not) a critique of Capitalism" as it contains excellent insight into how genres are defined. I'll be using excerpts from Grafton Tanner's book

Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the commodification of ghosts to discuss Hauntology and its significance when compared to Postmodernism. I've cited *Vaporwave- A Brief History*. An archived YouTube documentary on the history of Vaporwave for being a large part of my initial research into the subject. Second to last I will draw from Kate Wagner's aesthetically, and emotionally passionate paper "404 page not found" to discuss important themes of Vaporwave and how they are articulated through past and future relationships. And finally I will be using the Video Essay by Jacob Geller, *The Best Simpsons Intro Is About Losing Everything You Love* to compare the albums *Floral Shoppe*, and *Floral Shoppe 2* and how they show the effects of eternal stagnation. Enjoy!

1. WHAT IS VAPORWAVE ANYWAY?

To start I'm going to focus on describing the musical characteristics that define a piece of Vaporwave music. Many of the ideas present in Vaporwave have been established through albums such as *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, and *Chuck Person's Echo Jams vol. 1* by Daniel Lapotin, among some others such as 2814, and Saint Pepsi. The best word I can think of to describe Vaporwave music is "nostalgic", Vaporwave isn't the first or only genre of music to extensively put to use the practice of sampling, but sampling is a fundamental ingredient to what makes Vaporwave, Vaporwave. Sampling in music is the practice of extracting pieces of other people's music(or other forms of media) and retooling it to create something else. Vaporwave tracks tend to include samples of music primarily from the 80s and 90s, usually focusing on, as Andrew Whelan describes;"...New Age and smooth jazz, advertising jingles, Muzak, background and menu music in 1980s/1990s instructional videos and DVDs, and power ballad and easy

listening hits(Chris de Burgh, Kenny G, Mr. Mister, Sade, Toto etc.).”(Whelan, Nowak, 452-453)

These samples are usually pitched down significantly and placed in seemingly endless loops, evoking a feeling of infinity to many Vaporwave works. Samples are also usually given a healthy dose of reverb in order to construct Vaporwave’s signature vibe of the abandoned mall, giving the sound a somewhat liminal quality, in between dreams and reality. Outside of sampling, instrumentation within Vaporwave works is usually completely computer generated, utilizing synths, and drum programs to complement the samples with modern digital sounds. Vaporwave first came into prominence as a genre in the early 2010s with the success of *Floral Shoppe* as a genre defining work. Early Vaporwave projects circulated on sites such as Bandcamp and Soundcloud, and would be shared on forums like Reddit and 4Chan. Since then numerous subgenres have emerged from Vaporwave’s initial style, some of these genres include; Future Funk, mallsoft, hardvapour, eccojams, Oceangrunge, and many more with varying degrees of absurd names. Vaporwave’s visual aesthetics are just as, if not more recognizable than their musical counterparts. A typical Vaporwave image will usually combine early 90s computer graphics with busts of Roman Emperors, vintage advertisements, animation from Japan(anime) mainly but also from western cartoons such as *The Simpsons*, and frequently images from dystopian media(ie. Blade Runner, and Cyberpunk works) Old video game cover art/menu screens also frequently make appearances. Pastel colors, usually hues of blue, purple and pink, dominate Vaporwave imagery. Most of these images share a common theme of being from the past save for the imagery from Japan which is often representative of depictions of the future found in Japanese movies, and media. Music videos for Vaporwave follows similar sampling philosophies, often using looped scenes from old commercials or movies, edited to line up with the song being represented such as the video for the song “Enjoy Yourself” by Saint Pepsi

utilizing an old commercial for McDonalds in which a man wearing a moon with sunglasses on his head sings, and plays piano along with the track. The overall design philosophy when it comes to both the imagery and sound of Vaporwave artwork is to take a piece of media that would be considered “ugly” or meaningless in the past, and transform that media into something new that emphasizes the unique qualities of the work, be it a fast food ad, or a song meant to be played while someone is on hold to talk to some corporation’s customer support department. In Laura Glistos’ article, “Vaporwave, or music optimized for abandoned malls”, she succinctly describes what I believe is the essence of Vaporwave, “The pleasure of vaporwave is therefore understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself.”(101) Vaporwave revels in the ironic, the memetic, and meta commentary inherent to it, reflecting the online culture that birthed it. Memes as an idea have existed for longer than the internet, but there’s no question that the online world has by and large introduced the average person to the concept of a “meme”. The Oxford dictionary definition of a meme is “An idea passed from one member of society to another, not in the genes but often by people copying it.”(Oxford) This definition is accompanied by a secondary definition referring specifically to an internet meme, the distinction being that the new kind of meme is often humorous, and spreads quickly specifically over the internet.(Oxford) Both these definitions can fit what Vaporwave is, as it clearly adopts elements of meme culture, while also existing as a more complex art form that is desired to be taken seriously. In my interview with Declan, when asked about the irony inherent in Vaporwave, he responded with;

I don't think it's possible to defend the idea that it's not a meme, it's obviously a meme, but, I think almost everything is memetic at this point for us... Basically anytime anything becomes part of the cultural lexicon online, it turns into a meme in the sense

that it passes through this cycle of being understood genuinely than ironically then as both. The sort of meta ironic thing where it's genuine and ironic at the same time. And I think Vaporwave definitely followed that cycle, but so many things follow that cycle where they go through this thing and then we're left at a point where it's both ironic and it's not.(Personal Communication, November 30, 2022)

Declan's attitude toward the memetic nature of Vaporwave seems to be a common one amongst the community, though not necessarily reflected by some of the larger names within the genre who seem to have largely moved away from Vaporwave as a direct result as it's status as a meme. When talking to Aaron about why an artist like Vektroid might divorce themselves from a work as foundational as *Floral Shoppe*, he responded;

As for VW and its founders, I think what disgusts them is that they worked so hard to make what they did, only to get turned on them, and then into a meme and played ironically. I think every musician wants to be respected, feeling like you're the joke would make anyone want to distance themselves.(Personal Communication, December 1st, 2022)

As I'll go into more later, there seems to be something of a trend amongst Vaporwave's progenitors, who seem to actively resent how Vaporwave has come to be from their music, and will even deny the existence of the genre, citing earlier examples of similar music. While I find Vaporwave to be a fascinating art form, it also is something of a cage. Something so self-referential, like a piece of paper, can only fold in on itself so many times before it reaches its limit, works like *Floral Shoppe 2* seek to explore this limit, but even then, the creator of the experimental record states that it's intention was to be something of a joke at the expense of Vaporwave. Ironically enough, the absolute refusal of the Vaporwave community to *not* treat

these pieces as jokes, and instead as profound pieces of art reflects the same themes that Vaporwave often explores, as fans seek out meaning in pieces of art that sought out meaning from art designated as music's lowest form of expression. The line between meme and art is completely lost within Vaporwave, everything is both ironic and not at the same time, and what's more Vaporwave than that?

2. VAPORWARE, AARON, AND VAPORWAVE BEFORE VAPORWAVE

While searching for musicians to speak with for this project, I was lucky enough to be put into contact with Aaron Howard, a long-time electronic musician and sound engineer, who was able to give me incredible insights into the music industry he grew up in, as well as Vaporwave from the perspective of someone who actually experienced the times being remembered through the music. Surprisingly, his response to the very first question I asked provided some unexpected insight into the origin of the word Vaporwave itself. As mentioned before, Vaporwave is a play on the term "vaporware", which describes products developed, but never released to the public. When I asked Aaron about his relationship with Vaporwave he told me;

When we started out, it was drum machines, tape decks and a real lofi sound. Looping tracks and making mellow vibe/elevator music was cool but there really wasn't anyone looking for that vibe pre 2000/ hell til 2010. We'd been using the term Vaporware for ever, for stuff that we never thought was going to go anywhere/come out. I thought I was going crazy when I heard people terming it "wave", but with all the subgenres going on, it really didn't surprise me at all.(Personal Communication, Dec 1, 2022)

I was somewhat shocked to hear the term vaporware to describe music being made well before Vaporwave existed as an acknowledged genre of music. Aaron, I would come to learn, at just 12

years old was involved with the early Mod music scene, in which artists would share “Digital music models”, or mods for short, which were tracks consisting entirely of code being ran on hacked video game consoles using synth chips and early personal computers. As a kid Aaron would be somewhat of a pioneer of this scene, as he explained to me;

The wow factor for these demo’s was that it would load and eject the 3.5 floppy and start the demo. So it was all preloaded and would run off memory alone, which honestly, at the time was un-fucking-heard of. People would drop their jaws. Esp over that Xmas Demo. It was one of the first times someone coded a way to use the (black) borders of the apple][gs to display colors.(Personal Communication, December 2022)

The first tape Aaron would share with the people around him was called “Vaporware” and consisted of these tracks created entirely through code being run on a computer. Immediately, I see a litany of similarities between this music scene of the mid 80s and the Vaporwave scene of the 2010s. After looking into the Mod scene of the early internet, it became clear that Vaporwave was something of a spiritual successor to this practice. In the paper by René T. A. Lysloff, “Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography, Lysloff goes into detail on the way the mod music scene had developed differently from other genres of music at the time through its use of the internet, and the collaborative nature of the format itself. A couple key features of the mod scene according to Lysloff are the lack of any financial incentive motivating mod musicians, as the majority of mods were distributed for free online(or at in-person “computer meetings” as Aaron described his experience), instead of status within the community being based on financial success, “social status is directly linked to social action.”(239) He explains that the way to gain standing within the mod community was simply to participate in it in some capacity, either as a producer, a software developer, or even just maintaining a website

that could host the files being shared. Vaporwave followed a similar path of development, emerging predominantly on free music sharing sites like Soundcloud, YouTube or Bandcamp (Bandcamp allows artists to price their music, but at least from my observations these prices rarely exceed a dollar). Comparatively it seems like there was more emphasis on collaboration within the mod scene, based solely on the technology of the genre allowing for direct edits to be made to a tracks file, however Vaporwave still has this collaboration focus, just presented in a slightly different way. Nowadays music creation is more accessible than ever before with the popularity of software like Ableton, Fruity Loops, and GarageBand (among others) allowing anyone with access to a computer the ability to compose, produce, and record an entire orchestra's worth of instrumentation without ever picking up a physical instrument outside of the computer. A complete replication of the mod formula would probably see Vaporwave artists sharing the project files of their respective software, ready to be loaded up and edited, but most artists prefer to release exported mp3 files, that while not impossible to edit, don't offer quite the same amount of access that digital music models offered. To make up for this the community engages in collaboration through other forms of media, such as creating music videos, or remixes to tracks and posting them for free on the same file sharing sites. In a sense, both music scenes experimented in collectivization of music, both existing in times of intense consumerism in the music industry, and offering a strange alternative that seems to try its hardest to not fit in with the mainstream sound. Where Vaporwave samples music from Nintendo 64 games, mod musicians would rework games made on some of the first ever video game consoles like the Atari, or the Commodore 64 into elaborate digital performances. Lysloff in his paper points out an interesting phenomenon of online communities wherein typical assumptions of people's identities are inverted due to the anonymity of the internet, stating;

In most cases, offline interactions depend first and foremost on visual codes inscribed on the body to establish the identity of others. For better or worse, we routinely stereotype others: beliefs, experiences, and perspectives are assumed on the basis of the physical characteristics we see in them. However, on-line interactions, as Burkhalter points out, often follow a reverse pattern. Once the other's perspectives and values are established, we tend to make assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality.(240)

The degree of anonymity available to people through the internet has of course been lessened since the early days of cyberspace, now through either Facebook or Google it's likely that your real name, and face are attached to your online identity, albeit a version of yourself that doesn't necessarily reflect reality, but Vaporwave's initial rejection of music industry, and internet conventions allowed a certain degree of anonymity to remain, as well as the transnational identity Lysloff spoke of. If I hadn't been able to talk directly to Dragon Century 99(or D R A G O N C E N T U R Y 9 9 as Vaporwave art tends to capitalize and add spaces between titles, and names as part of the *aesthetic*) I'd have little idea of what they actually look or sound like, much less anything about their identity. Speaking on the comforts of anonymity, DC99 told me;

I think the internet is pretty crucial to the Vaporwave community in a way because Vaporwave, at least in the early days, relied on anonymity. So you have this anonymous aspect to it where people on the internet can kind of hide behind their identity. I can just say my name is, you know, liquid toast or something and everyone will call me liquid toast or Dragon Century or whatever it is, and that becomes a new person. I don't have to show my face. I don't have to leave a fingerprint or show my height or whatever. So, I think the internet is really important in that way. It also helps people distribute Vaporwave music. It also helps you reach a wider audience and we've had famous

Vaporwave artists from Germany, from Brazil, from the U.S., from the U. K., from, I don't know, Korea, and Japan. So I think it makes it a global movement.(Personal Communication, November 2022)

There is freedom to experiment more boldly under the protection of anonymity, unless your work reaches the levels of popularity of something like *Floral Shoppe*, if you grow to dislike a piece of music you put out, you can simply change your online name and start over with a clean slate, no reputation to damage in the first place.

Vaporwave's political aspects are pretty widely accepted amongst people who write about it, fans, and artists alike. When I asked Aaron about his thoughts on the politics of Vaporwave he told me;

I think you have to look at the 80's/90's as the buildup of all this excess and of course the music really reflects that whole optimistic view... The censors were still heavy in the industry, so of course nothing is really out in left field. So looking back on the music, especially the pop/top40 of the time, you can just hear how different that time was. I love how it's taken as a critique now and not just some plunder music pirating. I don't really think it's music's job to judge, but a way to put a spotlight on things we either enjoy or hate. I wish electronic music was more political, but I feel that if you want to be popular, you don't want to alienate your clientele. (Personal Communication, December 1, 2022)

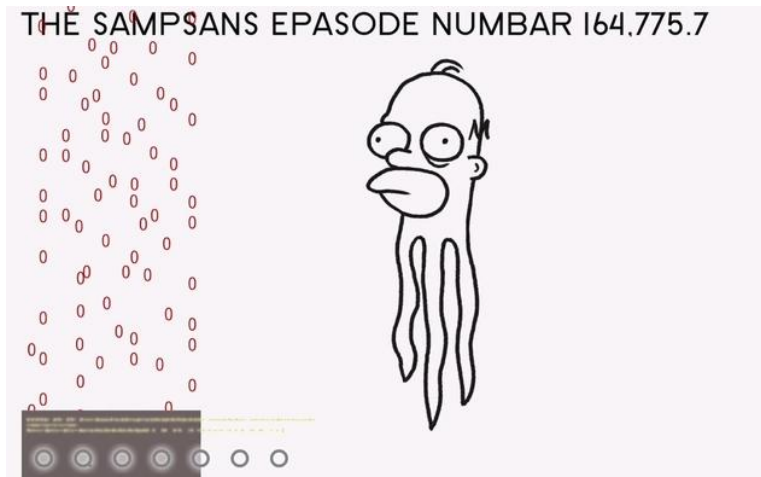
I was surprised that Aaron felt that the electronic music of his time felt lacking in politics. He had told me in a different email that at the "computer meetings" where these proto-file swaps took place, he had received his first copy of the infamous *Anarchist Cookbook*, a book by William Powell that includes instructions on how to build bombs, make LSD at home, and various other revolutionary aids(Powell wrote the book as a protest against the United State's

war in Vietnam, but would later himself push to have the book removed from circulation). This struck me as a bit political to put it lightly, however from what he's shown me I can see why it would be hard to ascribe a political message to the music he was surrounded with, especially compared to Vaporwave which can be as subtle as a bomb going off at times with its political commentary. Many of the digital music models seemed to be more for the sake of experimentation, and creating new methods of composing with the technology that was rapidly evolving at the time. At the time though, I can't help but see some elements of the Anarchist ideology that was clearly present within these circles when Aaron was a kid, the overall rejection of conventions, in the service of creating something new, while not a clear cut critique, it certainly shows a willingness to affect change, and subvert dominant ideas through art, which is to me at least a political statement on its own.

In an interview with the creator of *Floral Shoppe*, Vektroid, by Simon Chandler, the Macintosh Plus artist pushes back against the idea that she is the creator of Vaporwave, instead stating that the artist Ryuichi Sakamoto had already invented it 30 years prior to her. Sakamoto is a Japanese artist, with an impressive list of projects to his name. These days his work consists mostly of piano compositions, and scoring movies, but he was also known as a pioneer of electronic music along with his band, "Yellow Magic Orchestra". Even a brief look at some of his earlier work, and you can see what Vektroid is talking about in her interview. Sakamoto's 1978 EP, 千のナイフ ("A Thousand Knives") is dripping with aesthetics that would be reappropriated by Vaporwave artists over three decades later. The instrumentation is largely synth based, though not exclusively, really there's room for any sound in his music, from electric guitar solos, to what sounds like air bubbles popping at the surface of a body of water. The cover art for 千のナイフ shows Sakamoto wearing a casual suit, and holding a lit up lamp, while

standing in a bathtub full of soapy bubbles. It's a picture that Vaporwave artists would likely salivate over, the image is decisively lo-fi, clearly taken with whatever objects were handy at the moment in someone's bathroom, but the muted colors of the tiles, and the warm orange glow of the lamp reflecting off the bubbles give the photo a striking glow about it, put simply, it's pleasant to look at. There's a bit of the absurdity we see on full display in 2010s Vaporwave in this picture, as Sakamoto is standing fully clothed in a full bubble bath. Sakamoto's work however doesn't seem to focus on sampling techniques nearly as often as Vaporwave would go on to, endless looping melodies are there, but they're balanced with an ever evolving soundscape of different instruments building on top of each other. Vektroid may not particularly like the title given to her as the representative of Vaporwave as a genre, but listening to 千のナイフ, and then *Floral Shoppe*, and comparing both to other Vaporwave out in the last ten years, it's clear that *Floral Shoppe* has directly influenced so much of this work. That's not to say that Sakamoto's influence isn't present in modern Vaporwave, there's definitely some shared humor between the two, Sakamoto's work in a way makes me think of a version of Vaporwave's design philosophy applied to classical music. Tracks like "Grasshoppers", and "Island of Woods" use piano, and noises taken from nature to construct a sonic narrative, reflecting the subjects of the two songs. The mixing of classical piano playing, and the digital sounds of synthesizers come together to make something in a similar liminal state between past and future to Vaporwave. Though at the end of the day, if Ryuichi Sakamoto was the biggest musical influence on the creation of *Floral Shoppe*, then even if we don't accept his early work as the first form of Vaporwave, he still was instrumental in the creation of the genre, though indirectly.

3. THE FLORAL SHOPPES AND THE SAMPSANS



(Hertzfeldt et al., 2014)



(Xavier, 2011)



(*Floral Shoppe 2* Cover Art 2014)

The title for most recognizable piece of Vaporwave art ever created would, in most people's minds inside and outside the scene, go to Ramona Xavier's (aka Vektroid) album *Floral Shoppe* released under the name "Macintosh Plus". Specifically the 2nd song appearing on the album titled; リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー (Lisa Frank 420/ Modern Computing). This song's opening synth has been used in thousands of memes, edits, and other media all over the internet, and has been credited with establishing Vaporwave as a genre in the first place. While speaking with Declan on the significance of *Floral Shoppe* he stated without much hesitation that;

...say the United States government comes and they're like, we need one like a piece of Vaporwave to put in the archives... Like what is the one thing that the best captures exactly what this is about? It would probably be *Floral Shoppe*. (D. James, Personal Communication, November 30, 2022)

Floral Shoppe's cover art depicts a bust of the Roman god Helios crudely edited onto a pink and black checkerboard floor, and sitting next to a still of Manhattan Island taken from a Japanese ad for Fuji cassettes. The text for the title is mostly in Japanese save for the word “Mac”. The album's tracks make use of samples from a variety of artists mainly from the 1980s and 90s, including Sade, Pages, Anita Baker, Diana Ross, Jamie Foxx and a video game from 1997 called “Turok” among others. Much like other Vaporwave works that would follow Xavier's blueprint, *Floral Shoppe* distorts and loops its samples to the point of making them nearly unrecognizable. The first track uses Sade's 1985 song, *Tar Baby*, by rearranging the intro and chorus to interchangeably loop throughout the song, while Sade sings a couple octaves lower than her original recording, and at about half the speed. Frequently the record seems to “catch” repeating a beat over and over before proceeding with the song. All of these features are hallmarks of Vaporwave work in general, but stand out here as the defining moment of the genre. There is a lot of significance in the choice of era for sampling. Most if not all of the samples (barring the Jamie Foxx sample on the track “海底/Seabed” which is from 2010) originate from pre 9/11 American art. In Grafton Tanner's book; *Babbling Corpse Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* he speaks on Vaporwave, and specifically *Floral Shoppe's* connection to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center saying;

Several vaporwave releases, and Xavier's projects specifically, confront this youthful period during the immediate years after 9/11 with both a slight yearning and an incredulous eye. FLORAL SHOPPE, for example is composed of songs and sounds from the 80s and 90s, both times before 9/11 and the rise of the Internet, but by drastically tampering with the samples of these older tunes, Xavier throws the nostalgia 'in a centrifuge' and gives us 'the colder, more stark side of it.'"(53)

The choice of image on the cover reflects this connection with the image showing a depiction of Manhattan with the Twin Towers still standing and the focal point of the picture. Macintosh Plus(the artist) was born in 1992 making them only 9 years old when 9/11 happened. I myself was born in 1999 so I don't even remember the event, but we, and many Vaporwave musicians and fans who tend to fall into the Gen Z and Millennial generations, both have largely spent our lives in a post-9/11 world, with many's only memories of the time before the changes the attacks brought to America fleeting moments of childhood. *Floral Shoppe* and many other Vaporwave projects(such as the explicitly 9/11 themed *News at 11* by 猫 シ Corp) seem to directly react to a sense of lost potential in our immediate past, that we haven't actually been able to experience. The prevalence of 80s music in the sampling shows a nostalgia for a time that Macintosh Plus wasn't alive for, but can you blame them when so much of media is saturated with 80s nostalgia and just nostalgia in general being one of the most effective tools of marketing these days. The constant regurgitation of commodities being repurposed to be sold again(think of disney remakes of their own movies) can be seen in the way *Floral Shoppe* doesn't just repurpose it's samples, but actively decays them. A smooth song about wanting someone to prove their love to you, like Diana Ross' *It's Your Move* sampled in リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー, becomes a dissociated

mess with the lyrics “it’s all in your hands” sounding much more ominous as they repeat themselves and seem to say “it’s all in your head”. In my interview with Aaron, a sound engineer and musician who’s worked with the likes of Pink Floyd to Willie Nelson he described Vaporwave and specifically *Floral Shoppe* thusly;

In the VW scene, My first real experience was either Floral Shoppe or Macintosh Plus. I dug it, and it reminded me of the malls in the 80’s.. at the time though, I didn’t think there would be much impact, since the nostalgia wasn’t there yet. I noticed a few more artists moving in that direction, wanting something more old fashioned, yet new and refined.(Aaron, Personal Communication, November 30, 2022)

Aaron’s association with “malls in the 80’s” is incredibly similar to the general associations people seem to attach to Vaporwave, frequently compilations of footage of abandoned malls with Vaporwave music edited over it in a way to make it seem as though the music is playing from the mall’s intercom system. These kinds of images exemplify Vaporwave’s attachment to consumerist nostalgia, and the overarching theme of a world that was promised, and then lost to us. The mall is a one of the strongest symbols of consumer culture in the United States, as well as the appearance of complete economic prosperity being pushed during the Cold War, that wouldn’t really be challenged in the mainstream arguably until the second term of George W. Bush’s presidency, where the public seemed to start peering under the veil of propaganda, and begin questioning whether or not this time period really was the “End of History.”

Floral Shoppe’s creator has gone on record in recent years signaling a desire to move on from Vaporwave and even music in general in favor of other mediums such as video game design

which she has stated was a major influence on her style of music and her childhood in general. In an interview with Bandcamp she describes her recent influences as:

...mostly non-musical at this point,” including “Marble Hornets [another ARG], Satoshi Kon, Namco games, deep web and conspiracy theorist culture, [and] transhumanist fiction.” All of these revolve around alternative ways of perceiving the world, so much so that it’s tempting to think Xavier appreciates “consumerist culture” less as something to analyze from a distance and more as something to enjoy in its own right—something that opens up new ways of living. (Chandler, 2016)

Given Vaporwave’s constant grappling with nostalgia and the promises of 80’s Capitalism, it makes sense that artists like Xavier would find inspiration in transhumanist storytelling.

Transhumanism describes the belief that, much like the machines we build, humans can be modified and “enhanced” in order to push our species into a higher state of being beyond what it means to be human. It’s a topic explored often in science fiction and especially stories within the Cyberpunk genre (ie. *Ghost in the Shell*, *Blade Runner*, *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*) that examines what makes someone “human” in the face of sometimes complete bodily replacement with technology. Vaporwave music draws on ideas and imagery from across the world, time, and even reality, incorporating symbols of the Roman Empire alongside ideas of becoming immortal through technology. Francis Fukuyama, the same man behind the infamous declaration of “The End of History” wrote about his personal fears of transhumanism as an idea, declaring it the “world’s most dangerous idea”, and describing it as

...a strange liberation movement [that] has grown within the developed world. Its crusaders aim much higher than civil rights campaigners, feminists, or gay- rights advocates. They want nothing less than to liberate the human race from its biological

constraints. As "transhumanists" see it, humans must wrest their biological destiny from evolution's blind process of random variation and adaptation and move to the next stage as a species. (Fukuyama, 1)

It's natural for artists to move on from their early work in favor of exploring new ideas, though I can't help but see these visions of the future and humanity's curated evolution reflected in Xavier's desire to evolve her own art beyond the ironically commodified image garnered through *Floral Shoppe* into new mediums, ideas and themes.

If *Floral Shoppe* is something of a love letter to a time that never came to be, then it's unofficial sequel; *Floral Shoppe 2*, by Pyramid under the alias, The Darkest Future, is a pessimistic prediction for what's to come. *Floral Shoppe 2* is described in a single line on its Bandcamp page, "From the year 4014", this being 2002 years after the release of the original record(though of course *Floral Shoppe 2* was released August 16, 2022). Pyramid described their motivation for the creation of the sequel as an exercise in aesthetic presentation being valued over the actual sound of the record. The record is divisive within the scene, with it being equally hailed as genius, and purposeful garbage. Where *Floral Shoppe* may be strange to someone who has never heard Vaporwave before, there are at least discernible time signatures and melodies. *Floral Shoppe 2* doesn't care if you get it, it probably wasn't meant to be "got". Every track on the 18 minute project is called "Untitled" and consists of nonsensical sounds playing over(though a more accurate word would be "against") samples that are so completely distorted that it would be nearly impossible to figure out where they came from. Some tracks have a moment of a coherent rhythm only for that to be interrupted with what sounds like someone blowing air directly into a cheap microphone for 20 seconds. It's not an enjoyable listen by any means, but many still find it to be an important piece of Vaporwave art nonetheless.

Floral Shoppe 2 simultaneously critiques Vaporwave as a genre, and pushes it to its limits. Throughout the entire record a man's voice can be heard saying nothing that resembles words but just loosely familiar noises, arranged in confusing ways. Every once in a while the opening melody from that incredibly famous 2nd track of the original *Floral Shoppe* will play. It plays covered in layers of reverb, as if from a different room from the one you're in, and is always promptly thrown out of the track by whatever cacophony of nonsense *Floral Shoppe 2* decides to throw at you next. The cover art is a pretty much identical recreation of the original with the saturation turned up all the way, and the image of Manhattan island replaced with flames and digital geometric structures that seem to leak out of their frame. Everything about the album from the cover, to the sound of the music feels like a corrupted twin of the original. Even if this was meant as a joke, *Floral Shoppe 2* still brings forth the main themes of Vaporwave front and center, except replacing the nostalgia present in the original for 80s disco music with a much more meta nostalgia for Vaporwave and *Floral Shoppe* itself, nostalgia of nostalgia, the current stagnation of consumerism taken to the extreme. The Darkest Future is looking back with longing at a work of art completely centered around the same idea, but in doing so, even as a joke/critique, it creates a very nice vision of past and future within Vaporwave, the start and the logical conclusion.

This disintegration of meaning is showcased very nicely in episode 553 of *The Simpsons*, specifically in this episode's couch gag (the plot of the episode is irrelevant). Outside of news, sports and talk shows, *The Simpsons* is the longest running television show of all time (and sits at number 1 if you exclude those other categories) with the animated sitcom consisting of 737 episodes across 34 seasons and counting. Many fans, and oftentimes the show itself will question the advisability of the decision to keep the show alive this long, leading to fans of the show

collectively referring to the later seasons as “zombie simpsons” alluding to the perceived lifelessness the show has taken on in its stagnation. The “couch gag” is a staple of the show wherein at the end of each episode’s intro, as the family rushes to their couch to watch tv, a variety of various wacky scenarios ranging from pretty tame jokes(one member of the family trips on the way) to completely absurd short stories(characters from a different tv show arrive and are given their own mini story all within the episodes intro). Episode 553’s couch gag stands out as it is a particularly longer gag than normal, and is animated by a guest, award winning animator/filmmaker, Don Hertzfeldt. Much of Hertzfeldt’s work deals with themes of infinite life, and the existential quandaries that come with the concept, and this couch gag is no exception. I’m going to summarize the whole scene, as without context it’s a bit hard to wrap one’s head around. The sequence begins with just the patriarch of the family, Homer Simpson, watching tv on the iconic couch. He picks up an over-designed remote and clicks it at the tv, on which we see the current date of that episode’s release in 2014. When Homer clicks the remote time begins to rewind, reflected by the date on the tv, during which Homer’s body morphs into the various different designs and art styles he’s been presented in over the years, then Homer clicks the fast forward button and we begin to travel forward in time. The rapid progression of time knocks homer to the floor as he flashes in between forms and animation styles, before finally time pauses again, and the tv reveals the words, “Today’s Sun-date be of: Septembar 36.4, 10,535”. We then get a glimpse of “The Sampsans Epasode Numbar 164,775.7” which consists of Homer’s head attached to three tentacles floating in a white void repeating his catchphrase; “doh”, over and over while red text communicates to the viewer phrases such as, “Amusement is control” and “hail hail moon god”. The Homer squid then requests that his family members meet him in the “kitchen cube”, each family member is revealed to be in a similar state. The siblings,

Bart and Lisa, resemble their characters somewhat, and like Homer repeat their catchphrases over and over again (it seems like Bart is in pain from doing so), a ball sucking a pacifier floats down from the top of the shot representing Maggie, the youngest Simpson, who proceeds to grow a mouth out of her head that yells "Make purchase of the merchandise!". Marge, the blue haired mother of Bart and Lisa, appears as just her iconic hairstyle with arms, legs, and a face shouting "All hail the dark lord of the twin moons!". While all the chaotic catchphrases overlap, the Homer creature states "I have memories" as he gazes toward a non animated window showing a sunset behind some trees. With this we flash to a few other "Simpsons" episodes over the millennia (though all are from the future) in which we see a robotic Homer and Marge express their love for each other, then a collection of yellow shapes that resemble amoebas swimming toward each other exclaiming, "We are happy family!", and finally a shot so distorted that you can't even hear what's being said, as two shapes that vaguely resemble Homer and Marge face each other, the subtitles read "I will never forget you." The scene cuts back to "Episode 164,775.7" where a clearly uncomfortable Homer squid creature takes another look at his catchphrase spewing family before letting out a very defeated final "doh", then the episode starts proper. Don Hertzfeldt expertly plays with the same ideas and themes present in *Floral Shoppe* 2. Squid Homer exists in a product that has been around so long, that any original meaning has been completely scrubbed from it aside from catchphrases, and the promotion of whatever the future equivalent of the network is trying to sell people. When he states that he has memories we look back on episodes that still exist so far into the future of the show's run that they hardly resemble what we know as *The Simpsons*, this is the logical conclusion of letting a show like this run forever, inevitably it will run out of things to say and be reduced down to only its most recognizable components in order to sell something. The characters may look like something we

are familiar with, much like moments of *Floral Shoppe 2* allow us to catch glimpses of the original *Floral Shoppe* peaking through the madness throughout the rest of the record, but the original intention is gone, the characters themselves are shells, and in Marge's case just a vehicle for some sort of future cult. Homer's defeated look at the end shows that even he, by all means the representation of the show itself, has realized the disappointment in what has been allowed to happen to his family and his world. In Jacob Geller's excellent video essay on Don Hertzfeldt he says this in regard to the surreal couch gag;

In The Sampsons Epasode 164,775.7, the most agency Homer can exercise is the simple fact that he has memories. Fragments of time, seconds of tenderness amidst a near-infinite stream of daily trivialities and petty details. Lost in memory because the present moment, a crushing of him and his loved ones into grotesque caricatures, is too hard to take. This couch gag argues that this fate isn't a possibility, it's a virtual guarantee.(Jacob Geller, 2021)

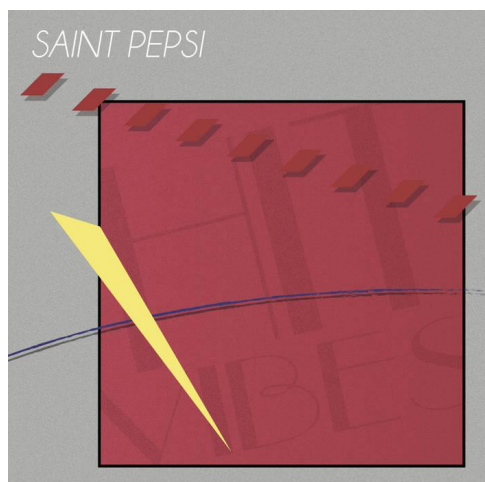
Sitcoms by their nature rarely change(especially animated ones), instead each episode ends with a reset, and the next episode more often than not ignores the events of the previous one in favor of a new story. This cycle of repetition leads to strange paradoxes where characters that were made in the 90s can be shown, due to how long the shows been on the air, as both middle aged and children in the same time period, as that time period goes from the Modern, into the past, but the characters stay the exact same age over all 34 seasons(with some exceptions such as characters getting killed off, or new characters being introduced that stick around). The sitcom effect I just described shares much in common with the functions of *Floral Shoppe*, and *Floral Shoppe 2*, Squid Homer escapes to his memories so he needn't deal with how horrifying his present is, similarly, Macintosh Plus uses sampling to transport herself and the listener to the

80s (again a time she was not alive for), and of course *The Darkest Future* uses the chaos of their album to return us periodically to the memory of *Floral Shoppe* itself, already a memory of a different time. All three works degrade their “memories” in similar ways, Squid Homer’s memories are fuzzy, and confusing it’s hard to know what you’re looking at especially in the last memory where the only identifying characteristics of the shapes representing Homer and Marge, are their iconic yellow skin tone. Macintosh Plus has the songs she sampled slow down, skip, and repeat over and over, as though it only shows the fragments of these songs that have been committed to memory, and similar to the final Homer memory, *Floral Shoppe 2* distorts everything to the point of it being completely unrecognizable, save for the very purposeful peaks at the work it’s based on. Don Hertzfeldt’s gag represents the darkest future of *The Simpsons* in the same way that *Floral Shoppe 2* represents the darkest future of Vaporwave (hence the name).

During my conversation with Declan, I asked him what statement, or question would annoy someone who makes Vaporwave art the most, and after some thinking, he responded with; “Probably like asking them if they’re into Simpsonswave or some like meme thing ...” (Personal Communication, November 30, 2022) Simpsonswave is a trend, mainly found on YouTube, where Vaporwave-esque songs are placed over edited clips from *The Simpsons* usually focusing on sequences where characters are visibly sad, or depressed. One example of this trend, the video; “SUNDAYSCHOOL” currently has 17 million views on youtube, which is over 10 million more views than the most famous song from *Floral Shoppe* (though that particular song is playing in a character’s headphones during the video’s introduction showing clearly the creator’s influences. Though artists within the scene may find Simpsonswave work to be a bit too “memy” for lack of a better word, commenters on the video find SUNDAYSCHOOL to be just as, if not more meaningful than any other Vaporwave staple. A surprising amount of the

comments come from people revisiting the video, years after originally finding it, to share where they were in life at the time of its release, and often expressing a longing for the sense of comfort the video brought them (even when some commenters acknowledge the time they're talking about may have been the point of their life where they were at their lowest). Animation in general seems to be important to Vaporwave, I believe due to its ability to largely bypass the aging process. While old films can act as time capsules, there's still usually a clear mark of the times in the quality of the picture due to less sophisticated cameras, or the knowledge that the people you're seeing on the screen likely look completely different now, that is if they're even still alive. Animated characters on the other hand can only age or die if they are explicitly made to by a writer for the show, Homer Simpson of 2022 is nearly identical to the Homer Simpson of 1990, and no matter what happens to the people who provide The Simpsons with their voices, the characters themselves are all functionally immortal. *The Simpsons* represents Nostalgia for people who grew up any time during the last 34 years. Lack of change can and often is incredibly comfortable, however it also can lead to stagnation, and decay over time, leaving us questioning whether or not it's cruel to let this animated family go on in stasis for as long as humanly possible (as Don Hertzfeldt portrays) or if we should let them come to an end, knowing that they will be looked back on as a source of comfort, while everyone else is allowed to move forward without them.

4. WHERE THE INTERNET FALLS SHORT: FUTURE FUNK



(Derobertis, 2013)



(Nabil, 2013)

While Vaporwave as its own genre has slowed down in recent years, one particular offshoot genre has experienced something of a resurgence; Future Funk. Where Vaporwave might take a song you can dance to and turn it into something strange and alien, Future Funk approaches sampling with an eye on finding the “butter notes” of a song. Butter notes refer to the section of a sampled song that the Future Funk artist decides is the “best” part. It could be the catchiest part of the chorus, or a section of a solo that sounds particularly good, but whatever it is, the rest of the song will be removed in favor of concentrating on the butter notes by looping them, and then adding drum and bass patterns over the loop. The first thing I noticed about Future Funk tracks is that, compared to the classic Vaporwave style, you could actually dance to these songs, you might even not get weird looks if you put it on at a party. Many of the samples used in Future Funk come from the same genres and time periods as Vaporwave, but with a seeming desire to “perfect” the song as a dance record. Samples are sped up instead of slowed down, and the looping effect gives less a feeling of eternity, and more of the feeling of speeding down the road with the windows down on a warm day. As the name would imply, Future Funk’s imagery focuses much more on visions of the future, rather than musings on a lost past, though

these depictions of the future frequently come from the 80s and 90s themselves. Future Funk uses anime imagery to an even greater extent than most Vaporwave albums, and interestingly seems to forgo the 90s computer graphics in favor of movies and tv from the 80s and 90s. Many Future Funk music videos use footage from aerobics videos, with people wearing all the colorful leg warmers, and headbands the 80s had to offer. One of the earliest and most famous examples of Future Funk music is the album *Hit Vibes* by Saint Pepsi. Releasing May, 2013, the album is considered almost as foundational to Vaporwave as a whole as *Floral Shoppe*, often being mentioned alongside Macintosh Plus' defining work. The album consists of 13 songs sampling artists such as Phil Fearon & Galaxy, Sister Sledge, Rockie Robbins, and The Whispers among others. Personally I find this album to be incredibly easy listening, it doesn't assault your senses the way *Floral Shoppe 2* does, but it also isn't afraid to be bouncy, and fun. Declan James is a Future Funk artist himself, who was introduced to the genre through Saint Pepsi's album. I asked him what got him into this kind of music in the first place;

I've always been into dance music and I was always into french house, so like Daft Punk, especially the two dudes from daft punk before they joined up, they were running Roule and Crydamoure which were French labels that were focused on French Disco House stuff, which is basically what Future Funk is, It's like an updated, more compressed and more polished sounding version of the French House stuff, so...it's all loop based, it's basically the same idea as Future Funk, but it was happening in the nineties. I was very familiar with that kind of music and I always liked it.(Personal Communication, November 30, 2022)

No song better shows the connection between French House music and Future Funk to me than the only song by the French EDM trio, Stardust, called "Music Sounds Better With You".

Stardust consists of DJ Alan Braxe, Benjamin Diamond on vocals, and Thomas Bangalter of Daft Punk fame producing. The trio would promptly disband Stardust after the initial massive success of their first single, not releasing any other music until 2021. The song itself loops a guitar sample from the song “Fate” by Chaka Khan in the exact same way a Future Funk song of today would, with that single loop repeating for the entire 6:48 runtime. *Hit Vibes' sound* is so similar to “Music Sounds Better With You” that it’s hard to tell that the projects are from different artists, much less that they came out almost 20 years apart from each other in different countries. So what actually distinguishes Future Funk from French House music? Saint Pepsi himself would argue that there is no difference, in fact, Saint Pepsi (who now goes by the stage name Skylar Spence due to legal threats from PepsiCo), the most recognizable figure of Future Funk would argue that Future Funk is not a real genre. In Hector Arrieta’s essay; “Dear Future Funk” published in April 2022, Arrieta quotes a message sent by Saint Pepsi in the artists Discord server addressed to his fans saying; “Please stop using the term ‘future funk’ that’s not a real thing & your embarrassing yourself when you say that. Do a small amount of research and learn the history of disco house and funk music.” (Saint Pepsi, as cited in Arrieta) Again we find ourselves with an artist who essentially represents a (supposed) genre not just distancing themselves from it like Vektroid with *Floral Shoppe*, but going even farther and openly expressing disgust at the idea of something called “future funk”. So why do fans insist on calling music like *Hit Vibes* Future Funk, if it’s already called French House/Disco? I believe it’s here where we can see where the internet fails in its vastness. Many artists associated with the Vaporwave genre may not have careers today if not for Vaporwave, and the internet communities that adopted it, but for the most part, these artists didn’t set out to define new genres, they simply wanted to make something in the vein of music they already knew and loved, in Saint Pepsi’s

case(and Declan's) that love was French House, Disco and Funk music. It's possible that early fans of Saint Pepsi labeling what they were hearing as "Future Funk" simply didn't know what French house music even is. On the internet you can find pretty much every piece of information available to humans if you look for it, but if you don't know to look for something, the chances of stumbling upon it in a space as digitally vast as the internet drops quite a bit. At this point something like a death of the author occurs, where we see again, despite the intentions of Saint Pepsi, and his push back against defining what he does as a separate genre, fans ascribe their own parameters to his work resulting in the genre springing forth anyway, whether Saint Pepsi likes it or not. Unfortunately for Saint Pepsi, Future Funk has slowly become the most popular of the subgenres surrounding Vaporwave, as Arrietta writes later on in his essay describing the recent work of popular Future Funk artist "Yung Bae",

...the entire album features original lyrics and vocals. It's the selection of features on the album that compel me to feel like Yung Bae has taken future funk in a more pop, mainstream direction. The album boasts the presence of artists like Sam Fischer, Pink Sweat\$, Jon Batiste, AWOLNATION, and Marc E. Bassy, all amassing millions of monthly listeners on Spotify. This is the crossroad I believe future funk finds itself at, the same crossroad that many niche genres have gone through.(Arrieta)

This "crossroad" Arrieta mentions is the choice presented to any genre of music once it hits a certain level of mainstream recognition, do you seize the opportunity and move towards a more mainstream sound in order to amass a larger audience, or do you stay somewhat obscure, but push the boundaries of the genre in exciting ways, it's not an easy choice, especially when many artists are making little to no money from their work. Representing the choice to stick within the genre's parameters, next Arrieta talks about Macross 82-99, saying;

Macross 82-99 also remains loyal to the sound and feeling of future funk: a joy ride that loops the “butter notes” for the entirety of the song and features vocals, typically just repeating a chorus. Macross 82-99 represents the mindset of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” and proves that the tried-and-true formula can produce an album that is sonically different. (Arrieta)

I don’t think either of these choices are the clearly right one, though there is a certain irony to using Vaporwave as a launchpad into mainstream, consumer music, since presumably up until that point you’ve been participating in a art form that exists to critique that very thing, but art that’s popular to a lot of people isn’t worse because it’s popular, and there have been plenty of artists that have been able to have the best of both worlds, pushing the boundaries of genre, as well as enjoying massive mainstream success.

As Future Funk continues to grow and likely outpace Vaporwave in terms of new ideas being made, I come back to the question, what makes Future Funk part of Vaporwave? Declan provided me with an excellent answer to this question;

It’s interesting because they are all loosely put together when you examine what they actually are but somehow they’re part of this family, you know? And I think part of that is just the underlying mentality about the music that allows these things to be related to each other. I think there’s a lackadaisical attitude towards sampling. So all of these genres, it’s like I’m just gonna rip stuff from all over the place and and piece it together. I think also they’re similar in that they’re all very postmodern in their approach to assembling things where it’s like ‘I’m gonna take a french song, or I’m gonna take a seventies Brazilian disco song, loop it, put 909 drums under it and then I’m gonna compress it and then I’m gonna make the title in Japanese. I’m just combining all of these

random influences and I think all of these genres are like that where future funk is very similar to Vaporwave. Sonically I don't know how I would compare them because I think they're very different actually. I think Future Funk is much more dancy. I think Vaporwave, especially early Vaporwave like *Echo Jams* and then Macintosh Plus is all focused on this dissociative atmosphere that I think future funk isn't. I think the common sort of unifying element there is that postmodern, "I'm just taking whatever I want and assembling it into something new."(Personal Communication, November 30th 2022)

Declan is arguing that the primary unifying principle in Future Funk and Vapor Wave is actually completely separate from the sonic elements of both art forms, and instead based on their embrace of postmodernist ideology. Postmodernism when talking about art forms rejects the notion that there are universal truths, or objectivity, preferring to focus on meta analysis of itself, while seeped in the ironic. Dragon Century 99 provided some thoughts that problematize the apparent lack of care for the sources of Vaporwave's retooling, point out that;

Often the music being utilized was created by people of color. Sometimes, this creates deliberate actions such as the white supremacist Moon Man or Ecco "n-word" (the original title is spelled out, but that's a Telepath[a Vaporwave artist who was criticized for his use of the n-word in the title of an album, as well as voting for Donald Trump, which many fans found unacceptable] project). Sometimes it just seems less-than-ideal-but-maybe-not-the-worst like the Qingdao Market label which parodies bad Chinese bootlegs. One could argue that the utilization of Japanese characters constitutes cultural appropriation.(Personal Communication, December 2022)

DC99 brings forward a good point that often gets ignored in discussion of Vaporwave as a genre, there seems to be a feeling of apathetic superiority present in a lot of the community, where if the

music is being considered through a postmodern lens it can be ignorant to what Vaporwave doesn't say. There's little talk of race and gender within Vaporwave's supposed criticisms of Capitalism, instead Vaporwave takes on a sort of colorblind/"there's only one race, the human race" view of these issues, which only serves to elevate the perspective of White people who see themselves as the "default" race. There's also the somewhat troubling orientalist obsession with Japanese language, and imagery. As far as I know Vektroid doesn't speak Japanese, so why are all the song titles in Japanese? It feels like it's because someone thought, "Japanese looks cool and mysterious, we should translate every song title into Japanese!" By no means is Vaporwave an exclusively white art form, anonymity and the vast interconnection of the internet makes sure that people within the scene can remain anonymous if they so choose, but it's telling that these issues go largely unaddressed when it comes to Vaporwave, aside from the general criticism of capitalism that applies to pretty much everyone. All while building the entire movement off of POC artists such as Sade and Diana Ross just to name two.

5. THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND ANIME: VAPORWAVE IMAGERY



The above image is a “Starter pack” meme I found on reddit’s “vaporwave aesthetics” subreddit, unfortunately whoever uploaded the image deleted their account in the years since, so I’m unable to say who made it, but I found that this meme, though mistaking the Roman bust for a Greek one, nails down the visual components of the average Vaporwave digital image, or video very well. Fiji water as a symbol in Vaporwave is an interesting one. Water being a prime example of the detrimental aspects of commodification. Something as universally necessary for life as water, not only is bottled in plastic and sold, but comes in 100s of different “types” of water, Fiji water is usually seen as a “luxury” water alongside brands like Voss, and Evian. Fiji water is owned by The Wonderful Company, ran by the Resnick family, and is infamous for it’s highly unethical and destructive business practices, as the same suggests, Fiji water is extracted from Fiji and then sold all over the world, all while at least 12% of the people who actually live

in Fiji don't have access to clean drinking water.(Nguyen , 2021) It's a situation where the reality is illogical to anyone but the company profiting off of the water bottles. Vaporwave's use of Fiji water bottles as a symbol calls to mind the absurdity of both Vaporwave, and bottled water as a concept. In Kate Wagner's heavily Vaporwave inspired article, "404 Page Not Found" Wagner makes the argument that Vaporwave is transgressive in it's position as a utopian ideology in a sea of obsession with dystopias, even though that utopian vision is of a past that never came to be,

It's an ironic, embittered genre that asks: What if the utopian innocence of those early Geocities websites had survived, and what if we all lived in chill, pastel, communal harmony? What makes vaporwave so distinct, other than its dubiously Marxist undertones, is that it is utopian and therefore against the grain of the modern mania for dystopian thought. Vaporwave was a new version of a recent past, a simulacrum; it was like a hitting "Save" instead of "Save As . . ." version of the 1990s—an overwritten file, a copy, but one for which no original exists.(130)

I come back to the idea of Vaporwave being nostalgic for times that never really existed, the imagery of Vaporwave is almost completely centered around the past, especially the 1980s, but not the past as it happened, the past as it was meant to be. Cyberpunk is a genre of science-fiction centered around a near future where corporations have somehow taken even more control over society to the point where they are indistinguishable from a government, the genre as it exists today is heavily influenced by the work of game designer, Mike Pondsmith, who, in 1988 created the tabletop role playing game *Cyberpunk The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future*, or as it's commonly referred to as now due to the year the story takes place in, *Cyberpunk 2013*. We are 9 years past the future that was depicted in 1988, and Cyberpunk media has adjusted accordingly(the newest entry in the universe is set in 2077), a big part of *Cyberpunk*

aesthetic is the introduction of Japanese culture, architecture, and media to the rest of the world. With this in mind I see a connection between Vaporwave's obsession with the past, except when it comes to Japan, where it always seems to depict the future, albeit rarely a pleasant one. Any depiction of the future however is still of the past in a more real sense, as while *Cyberpunk 2013* portrayed the future, it also did so in 1988, and in the case of *2013* specifically, we've passed the future it depicted by without being able to replace our bodies with mechanical ones quite yet. In a way it feels like Vaporwave is almost hopeful for the Dystopia shown in *Cyberpunk* and adjacent works, but that's only in some cases. The Roman bust of Helios has become somewhat of a universal symbol for Vaporwave in general at this point. When I first encountered Vaporwave, the Roman statue motifs struck me as some of the more unexplainable, seemingly random elements of the aesthetic, however I see now that Ancient Rome to the West is in a lot of ways the ultimate vision of a lost past and future. The Roman Empire was absolutely massive, powerful, rich, brutal and influential during its existence, and though it's been done to death, there are no shortages of comparisons between the Roman Empire, and the modern United States. Both states were hegemonic superpowers during their times, both were known for their well funded, and seemingly all powerful military forces, and technology, both even seem to have similar obsessions with the importance of highways. America sees itself in Rome, and therefore idolizes it as a time and place of "civilization" and "sophistication" while the true Roman Empire spent it's lifespan mostly brutally conquering all of their neighbors, until eventually expanding to the point a collapse of the entire Empire was triggered. The Roman statues in Vaporwave represent to me the admiration the West, and specifically the US sees in Ancient Rome, and it's domineering ways, Mark Zuckerberg, by all means one of the most powerful people on earth due to his ownership of some of the largest social media sites, regularly gets his haircut in the style of

Augustus Caesar who he, according to Business Insider, has idolized for years. The presence of these Roman symbols of power in virtual landscapes offer a visually interesting contrast between the ancient world and the modern, perhaps it represents in some way the ideals of both Rome and the Internet, representing a synthesis of past and present that may improve on what came before. But on the other hand, knowing how Zuckerberg, and many other powerful people like him idolize the Roman Emperors, and dictators gives the imagery a much more sinister tone, in which, Rome, the conquering Empire, not the ideal, has shown up to make a claim on the internet. Social media has been instrumental in the spread of Vaporwave art, but it's also been a heavy blow for it at the same time. Wagner shows us how later on in her paper, where she laments what social media, and corporations in general have done to Vaporwave,

The critique offered by vaporwave—its defiant sense of utopia—was immediately and effectively erased, leaving only a commodified, nostalgic aesthetic. And this aesthetic detritus, its millennial pink, Memphisque shapes and squiggles made entirely for Instagram, became cold, devoid of joy and playfulness, something the Consumer Aesthetic Research Institute, an ad hoc, Discord-based volunteer group which runs a popular series of blogs and Facebook pages cataloging various aesthetic tendencies across the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, simply calls the “bougie design aesthetic.”(131)

How cruel, that an art form that seems to pride itself in its status as a critique of Capitalism would be designated by corporations as a bourgeois aesthetic. MTV uses Vaporwave inspired graphics in its programming frequently. Likely thousands of different retailers make and sell clothes with the bust of Helios surrounded by 90s computer imagery, it's at this point that in my view, the irony of Vaporwave can't keep up with the speed in which Capital will gobble it up and make the genre it's own toy to profit off of until it gets bored and moves on. The 2019 video

game by Estonian writer Robert Kurvitz; *Disco Elysium*, has you play as a detective, who after going on a legendary bender, wakes up in a destroyed hotel room with complete and total amnesia, not even to remember his own name. As you explore the world of Elysium you uncover the bloody history of the fictional city of Martinaise, which had been the site of a battle in which a communist revolution had been suddenly and violently crushed by the world government of the game's world known as the "Moralintern". At one point in the game you get to speak with a representative of this government, who self identifies as a "ultraliberal", this world's exaggerated take on Neoliberalism. This character, Joyce Messier is her name, explains to your character in a conversation that; "Capital has the ability to subsume all critiques into itself. Even those who would *critique* capital end up *reinforcing* it instead..."(Kurvitz & Rostov, 2019) An ironic line considering recently that ZA/UM fired both creators of the game and seemingly committed fraud in the process of pushing them out. But I digress, this line shows exactly what has happened to Vaporwave, what started as a critique has been thoroughly subsumed into the mainstream, and all that's left is the aesthetic devoid of meaning, trying its hardest to say something it can no longer articulate.

6. ENDS OF HISTORY, LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES, MARXISM, AND 9/11



(Hagrsan, 2018)

The end of history is a term coined by Francis Fukuyama in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1999. Fukuyama write's in the now famous paper; "The End of History" what he means by this;

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This is not to say that there will no longer be events to fill the pages of Foreign Affairs's yearly summaries of international relations, for the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in. the real or material world. But there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material world in the long run.(Fukuyama, 1)

Many of the people I know who can remember this period of time in America recall a time of political apathy, Fukuyama's theory was thought to be fact, nothing would ever be more ideal than the Liberal Democracy, especially since any serious ideological challenger at the time save for the PRC had been basically wiped out by the mid 90s. Of course, history did not end in the 90s, even in the way Fukuyama clarifies it, but rather the US had become the hegemonic force in the world, allowing the country to enjoy essentially unbridled power with no one to challenge them. This didn't mean all was peaceful in the world either,

Has the collapse of communism also spelled the death of Marxism, and of Marx as an important philosopher and political thinker? Have we indeed reached "the end of history" as Fukuyama has argued, where pluralistic democracies and capitalist economies reign supreme? Is the future now to be simply a choice between Scandinavianstyle social democracy on the one hand, and unrestrained free market capitalism on the other? Given the difficulties some democratic, free market economies are experiencing-including the plight of the homeless, the lack of adequate health care, environmental degradation, and enormous national debt burdens-what sort of model for the future do we have? And what is one to make of the destructive, even violent "nationalisms" which have followed in the wake of the collapse of communism, not to mention virulent forms of ethnocentrism and xenophobia perhaps not seen since Hitler's Germany?(Derrida & Kamuf, 2011)

This comes from Jacques Derrida's book written largely in response to Fukuyama's "end of history" theory, titled; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*. The book argues that Fukuyama in a rush to present his theory, largely ignored all signs pointing toward a world on thin ice in terms of extremist movements developing around the world, climate change's effects becoming increasingly noticeable, and the

ongoing systemic violence in the US toward any one not “hard working enough” to avoid being poor or born the wrong race or sex. The moment that likely killed any notion of Fukuyama’s theory, at least in America, was the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in Manhattan. I was born 2 years before 9/11, and have no memories of the day, but I’ve grown up in a world full of people who saw this happen live. I hear talk of how much easier it was to get on a plane before 9/11, or about how the reason the government has been able to legally spy on pretty much anyone my entire life was because of this seemingly earth shattering event that happened just outside of my memory. Vaporwave artists tend toward the younger side, mostly consisting of Millennials and Gen Z who, if they remember 9/11 at all, were likely too young to fully understand all the changes that were happening. Of course as I talked about earlier, *Floral Shoppe*, and by extension the entire genre of Vaporwave emerged from Macintosh Plus’ experience of growing up post 9/11. The end of history is an enticing phrase, it brings to mind ideas of perpetual peace, and a comfortable lull of daily life, of course the 90s weren’t like that, the AIDS epidemic was still going on, police brutality was becoming more publicized following the filming of LAPD ruthlessly beating Rodney King in the street, sparking the LA riots, columbine happened at the end of decade, setting off the 2000s proper with an introduction to the horrors of mass shootings that have become all too common place now. It’s no wonder 80s nostalgia is such a huge marketing boon, it may not have been good in the 80s, but to those of us who weren’t there at least we can pretend based on these hyper idealized depictions of that time shown in media like *Stranger Things*. Vaporwave acknowledges the absurdity of looking back at a past that was never ours to begin with, but it’s not about what it idealizes, it’s simply about the escape from the current world which has had to reap the consequences building up over centuries

of industrialization, and greed motivated imperialism. Derridas puts his anger at Fukuyama into words passionately, saying;

...never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the "end of ideologies" and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth.(Derrida, 106)

People did think the world might end in the year 2000 due to y2k, but then a year later, the world as many Americans knew it did end, and we entered the new era of stagnation, and war, and poverty, which never left, but as social media gained traction we were able to also come face to face with just how bad it can be, anyone with an internet connection can put their voice out there now, of course that also means that it's a lot harder to be heard in the sea of voices. Vaporwave came in at a transitional time in America, and succinctly expressed the unreal feeling of that time with it's pensive gaze set on the past we never had.

There was however, another end of history on the other end of the political spectrum. That being Communism. According to Marx's theories of societal evolution, society was destined to evolve through economic systems that would improve on the last iteration until the current system's contradictions became too much for the system to bear, at which point the next revolution would take hold, advancing us to the next stage of society, until finally we arrive at a true, stateless, moneyless, classless society called Communism. Fukuyama's conception of the

end of history wasn't too different in its framework to Marx's, he just chose an end that would halt any progress toward Socialism. From a Marxist perspective, the end of history was stolen by Capital, which decided to dig in its heels and overstay its welcome until the bitter end. Again, Vaporwave as a term comes from the combination of "Vaporware" meaning a product lost in development, and a quote from *The Communist Manifesto* stating "Everything solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned, and man is at last compelled with sober sense his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."(Marx, 12) In my interview with Declan I asked him what he made of these two elements; and he expressed his idea perfectly;

We're like, what you're saying about vaporware, like lost in development, it almost seems like things took this weird turn and it's like we were lost in, I don't know, in this momentum when 9/11 happened. And now we're like in this sort of post apocalyptic or dystopian future where we're just kind of left with nothing. (Personal Communication, November 30, 2022)

Vaporwave emerges because progress had been forcibly crushed, and illusions of a peaceful world had been shattered in the West and all that was left to do was look back with longing at a time where this still could've been avoided. Grafton Tanner in his book, *Babbling Corpse Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* states that Vaporwave doesn't operate on postmodernism, but instead on "Hauntology", where a ghost of the past's conception of the future shrouds the present with what could have been. He puts it this way;

Whereas postmodernism toys with history via an increased skepticism in truly "knowing" the past, hauntology posits that the past notions of the future have in some way failed, causing a disruption of time as an orderly sequence of past, present, and future.(41)

When I read this quote I think about struggling with grasping Vaporwave's simultaneous grasp of past and future, as a reflection of postmodernism, but as a reflection of hauntology I see a much more concrete version of what Vaporwave seeks to evoke, the visions of Utopia may be optimistic musings, but they also are the promises that were not kept, that hang over our society ever present, but just out of reach.

7. CONCLUSION

Vaporwave seems to have ran its course, it's existence now just another specter of what once was. But a common saying in the community has been for some time "Music is dead, Vaporwave lives on". It's a bit presumptuous to declare Vaporwave to be a replacement for music as a concept, but when I look at the multitude of genres both born from, and greatly influenced by Vaporwave's time in the spotlight, I see what they're talking about. Declan and Dragon Century 99 are still making music that is inspired by Vaporwave, Aaron is seeing the legacy of the music he found "disgusting" when he first made it become something new and exciting, who's to say that won't keep happening? By leaving behind the constraints of Vaporwave, it leaves room to reflect on what it was to people, and how something so self-referential and meta could receive a proper send off, new sounds will come, new forms of art will affect people in new ways until the end of humanity.

The purpose of this discussion of genre is to emphasize, firstly, that genres are not macro, top-down, or rigid classificatory systems, and secondly, that genre is a social process not only in its negotiation, but also in that it brings groups into being, most notably, the "genre community." The members of this community are active parties to how the genre acquires meaning and achieves wider recognition. (Whelan, Nowak, 454)

This quote comes from Andrew Whelan's article titled, "Vaporwave is (not) a Critique of Capitalism: Genre Work in an Online Music". I gave Vektroid and Saint Pepsi some crap for the stances they take on the genres they defined, but they both have been around these from the beginning, and it was never really them who made the genre in the first place, yes they made *Hit Vibes* and *Floral Shoppe* without both of which Vaporwave might not exist at all, and definitely not in the exact form it is now. But it's communities around the world, gathering through computer monitors, and signals bouncing off of satellites circling the earth, that truly define the genre, that's the conclusion Whelan reaches in this quote, and I can't agree more. The Vaporwave community ascribed many of the critiques of capitalism I wrote about to the music on their own, I'm sure plenty of artists did feel motivated to try and make critiques through their music, but just as many may have just been messing around with a sample they liked. Art is what we make of it, and I've always believed in the death of the author. Vaporwave can be whatever we want it to be really, and I think I'm okay with that.

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Monday, November 28, 2022

Informed Consent Form for Participation In Ethnographic Research at Bard College

An Ethnographic Study of Vaporwave Music and the Online Culture Around it: Investigator: Spike Kelly-
Rossini Department: Music

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

You are invited to take part in a research study. But before you accept, we would like to help you understand the research and what participation you will be involved in. In doing this study we hope to shed light on the movements and settings that helped to create the genre known as Vaporwave, as well as make connections between societal forces and the genre. Please read through this informed consent and feel free to let us know if you need some clarifications.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Should you wish to participate, you will be asked to meet over a video or text method of communication for interviews regarding your music-making process, some basic background information if you are comfortable sharing, and your relationship with the Vaporwave scene. You will not be required to use your real name, or your artist name/username if you do not desire to. These interviews will be recorded, and stored for the duration of the project. All recordings will be stored on a password protected computer locally(not uploaded to any cloud) and then will be deleted upon completion of the semester.(January 2023)

DURATION

Interviews will be flexibly scheduled based off of convenience to the participant and should last about 1 hour each. Every participant will be asked to meet at most 3 times, but most likely twice before the submission of the project.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Please understand that your participation here is purely voluntary. You will decide whether you will participate or not. In case you decide to participate, you will be required to fill out the fields below for your consent as an affirmation of your participation. Should you decide to withdraw during the study, please do inform us. Your withdrawal will not affect your relationship with us. In case you withdraw from this study before completion of the data collection, all information, including the consent will be deleted.

Opting Out

If you no longer wish to participate in the study at any point after signing this form, contact anyone listed below and let it be known, and all interview content, and any other information linked to you will be removed from the project.

Risks

As we will be holding recordings containing information that you may not want revealed publicly, there is a risk of the loss of this data through some sort of theft, or other circumstance that results in the information becoming public. These recordings will be deleted upon completion of the project in January 2023.

CONTACT INFORMATION

This study was approved by the Bard College Music Department, if you have any questions feel free to email Sk3301@bard.edu, Laki@bard.edu, or irb@bard.edu

CONSENT

I voluntarily give my consent to participate in this study. I have read the information above or the said information was read to me. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these were answered satisfactorily and to my contentment. Please keep a copy of this form for yourself after you have signed.


Name of Participant

Declan Williamson

Date

Wednesday, August 4, 1999

Signature of Participant

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Declan', is written over a horizontal line.



Wednesday, November 30, 2022

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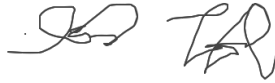
Name of Participant

Aaron Howard

Date

Wednesday, November 30, 2022

Signature of Participant

Handwritten signature of Aaron Howard, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by 'H' and 'O'.



Sunday, December 4, 2022

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Department: Music

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Name of Participant

Richard Magnelli

Date

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Signature of Participant

