Metamodernism and Vaporwave: A Study of Web 2.0 Aesthetic Culture

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Abstract

With the advent of Web 2.0, new forms of cultural and aesthetic texts, including memes and user generated content (UGC), have become increasingly popular worldwide as streaming and social media services have become more ubiquitous. In order to acknowledge the relevance and importance of these texts in academia and art, this paper conducts a three-part analysis of Vaporwave—a unique multimedia style that originated within Web 2.0—through the lens of a new cultural philosophy known as metamodernism. Relying upon a breadth of cultural theory and first-hand observations, this paper questions the extent to which Vaporwave is interested in metamodernist constructs and asks whether or not the genre can be classed as a metamodernist text, noting the dichotomy and extrapolation of nostalgia promoted by the genre and the unique instrumentality it offers to its consumers both visually and sonically. This paper ultimately theorizes that online culture will continue to play an important role in cultural production, aesthetic mediation, and even personal expression as media becomes more integrated into our systems of meaning.

Keywords

Vaporwave, metamodernism, user generated content, aesthetics, internet, web 2.0, multimedia

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In his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram,” author David Foster Wallace posits that television commercials of the nineties took to parodying ads of the past by using the notion of an “in crowd” or a bandwagon as an advertising device.¹ In these advertisements, Joe Briefcase, Wallace’s example of the smart consumer, is validated as a “hip” and aware individual because he is alienated from the “masses” due to his enjoyment of commercials that mock naïve consumerism. However, this position ends up being redundant for Joe because a crowd of outsiders is still a crowd:

To the extent that TV can flatter Joe about ‘seeing through’ the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it’s taught him to crave, and can keep him

¹ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 180.

dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling.²

This dilemma in television underpins a larger cultural shift that occurred near the end of the twentieth century, in which postmodernist expressions, like deconstructive irony, shifted from exposing and evaluating social standards to coldly rehashing the *notion* of criticism. This issue is addressed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their 2010 article “Notes on Metamodernism,” which proposes that contemporary artists are now reacting against the stagnation of such postmodernist devices.³

While Vermeulen and van den Akker have since expanded their analysis to include other forms of culture, one area that they have left largely untouched is the world of user-generated content (UGC) on the Web. This essay will use Vermeulen and van den Akker’s ideas to analyze Vaporwave, a Web-based music genre, meme genre, and visual art style that came to prominence shortly after metamodernism was first introduced. I will explore whether Vaporwave can be explained using metamodernist ideologies, and, if it cannot, whether this would imply that aesthetic cultures on the Web diverge from traditional aesthetic cultures. Since we can think of pieces of UGC as cultural texts,⁴ this analysis looks to develop cultural discourse on UGC and suggest new domains in which to record artistic development.

² Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram,” 180.

³ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010).

⁴ Leonard Orr, “Intertextuality and the Cultural Text in Recent Semiotics,” *College English* 48, no. 8 (1986): 812.

Metamodernism

Metamodernism does not actually mark a departure from postmodernism; as its name suggests, metamodernism encapsulates the idea that cultural producers are returning to a modernist sense of sincerity and enthusiasm while remaining far enough outside of said attitude to be wary of its flaws. Viewing modernist and postmodernist attitudes as two sides of one coin, metamodernism prefers to approach culture with methods that exhibit “metaxis” (between-ness), or “oscillation,” in which a work acts like “a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable [semantic] poles.”⁵ This being said, metamodernist works do not necessarily aim for the exact centre between modernist and postmodernist elements.

An example of this metamodernist approach is displayed in the video “The Man” by Ragnar Kjartansson, which captures blues pianist Pinetop Perkins outside of a farmhouse in a rural field as he improvises a song about his life for an hour. The scene immediately gives a romantic impression with the sweeping countryside and intimate performance, both of which are exemplary of the “neoromanticism” that Vermeulen and van den Akker highlight as a common thread of sincerity between the artists they analyze.⁶ However, the video’s viewers can also clearly see the production’s sound equipment, as well as the semi-trucks passing on the interstate behind the house, suggesting self-awareness in a manner that subverts reflexivity. The microphones are not visible to declare that the viewer is watching a video, but rather to say, “this is real”; thus, the video avoids abstracting

⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Perkins's performance to an exalted romantic moment. It is this style of fusion that is of interest in metamodernism, and sociologist Frederic Jameson asserts that this category of real-ness has been lost in the postmodernist era.

Jameson illustrates this phenomenon by using artwork such as Vincent van Gogh's "A Pair of Shoes" and Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes" to build on Martin Heidegger's "earth and world" theory. Heidegger's "earth and world" theory states that a subject in art is rooted in the "earth" of physical material and perception; though it has no clear meaning in itself, the subject is then interpreted by society in order to bring the art into the "world" context of our projections. In Jameson's example, van Gogh's painting participates in this process because we can understand both the earth context of the shoes (their material and physicality) and the world context (the peasant who wears them and her life).⁷ In contrast, this process is illegible in Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes" because of the intense abstraction present in the work. The wear and detail of van Gogh's shoes is replaced by surreal color and glitter, and thus we cannot decipher who owns the shoes in Warhol's work or from where they have originated. All of these elements render Warhol's painting as a work of *image*, making it depthless in the sense that there is no concrete reality with which it can maintain a dialogue.⁸ Meanwhile, Kjartansson's "The Man" avoids this conundrum to an extent by relating the image of Perkins to a real experience

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 59.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 60.

while also maintaining some level of detachment due to its aforementioned self-awareness.

Vaporwave

As cultural philosophy began to shift in the 2010's, so did the Internet shift into a form referred to as "Web 2.0." This iteration of the Web is marked by its user-friendly design and the prevalence of new platforms including social media, wikis, blogs, and UGC sites such as YouTube.⁹ Pieces of UGC that become popular by spreading to many different platforms are generally known as "memes." Following this method of dissemination, Vaporwave began on the Web around this time¹⁰ and garnered attention in the same manner as memes: Vaporwave was "marked by rigid sonic and visual conventions ... [and] fueled by rapid and contagious imitation and citation."¹¹ The genre has a set of general motifs that constitute its aesthetic, and its artists have ambiguous identities, often remaining completely anonymous or having many aliases.¹² Since it is so finely constructed and easy to catalogue, the style of Vaporwave can be replicated by anyone, which has enabled unparalleled participation and mediation in its creation.

⁹ Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.

¹⁰ Sharon Schembri and Jac Tichbon, "Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators: The Irony of Vaporwave," *Arts and the Market* 7, no. 2 (2017): 196.

¹¹ Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (2017): 634.

¹² Schembri and Tichbon, "Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators," 195.

As for its content, Vaporwave engages with internet historicity “through ironic remediations of sounds, images, and practices characteristic of earlier phases of the internet ...”¹³ This engagement is manifested in references to early internet features such as early computer animation, early OS windows, early web design, outdated terminology (names of old computer models, for instance), and the deliberate use of sounds from the corresponding era, mainly eighties synthesizers and drum machines. By using these sounds along with distorted, chopped samples of corporate Muzak and eighties pop music, the genre also seems to be commenting on late capitalism, also known as global capitalism. This commentary is also accomplished visually by recycling aesthetics of vintage consumer tech, advertisements, and Japanese pop culture.

These visual and referential motifs have been analyzed in various academic articles from a variety of disciplines. Sharon Schembri and Jac Tichbon, for instance, analyze Vaporwave’s unique form of cultural production, which they refer to as “cultural curation,” in their article “Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators: The Irony of Vaporwave.”¹⁴ This concept is centred around the idea of “remixing” sounds and images in order to generate new cultural material—a phenomenon which is undoubtedly bolstered by Web 2.0. Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, on the other hand, in their article “From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre,” examine Vaporwave in relation to other born-digital music movements, and they ultimately theorize that this sort of mediation may warrant a new method of defining

¹³ Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 605.

¹⁴ Schembri and Tichbon, “Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators,” 206.

music genres altogether. Born and Haworth also theorize that the internet may disrupt our larger concepts of cultural historicity, including notions of modernism and postmodernism.

I am aware that “tackling the historical dynamics of recent music genres ... requires that we [society] acknowledge the part played in them by intensely reflexive engagements with concepts of historical time.”¹⁵ I am next looking to begin the process called for by Born and Haworth of analyzing a complex, reflexive digital culture within the most recent, widely accepted cultural paradigm. This article is intended as one among many explorations of such an endeavour and is highly interdisciplinary in order to account for the increasingly intermediary nature of contemporary aesthetics, especially digital work. The analysis here will be conducted across three polarities: Creation vs. Commentary, Subject vs. Image, and Epistemology vs. Ontology. Each term represents either the modernist or postmodernist attitude in the category; if Vaporwave truly is a metamodernist text, it should in each case remain in the middle of, or oscillate between, the poles.

Polarity Analysis

The first polarity, Creation vs. Commentary, originates from the contrast between modernism’s thirst for inventive forms of expression (as exemplified by Cubism) and postmodernism’s fixation on socially aware expressions (such as in Roy Lichtenstein’s elevation of comic book art). Again, metamodernism generally seeks to obtain a middle ground in these situations, a position aptly described by metamodernist

¹⁵ Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 647.

artist Luke Turner as an attempt to avoid “the inertia resulting from a century of modernist ideological naivety and the cynical insincerity of its antonymous bastard child.”¹⁶ Vaporwave appears at first to be mostly interested in commentary; however, it is not clear what the artists are trying to reveal about their subjects of late capitalism and internet historicity.

For example, the cover art for Macintosh Plus’s *Floral Shoppe* album is marked by a 3D generated skyline, which references dated computer technology, but the central image is a Greco-Roman bust, which seems to have nothing to do with Vaporwave’s interests. Even though the bust is a central trope of Vaporwave art, its inclusion may seem bizarre or a non sequitur to a layperson. On the other hand, the cover of Saint Pepsi’s album *Hit Vibes* only displays an abstract printing style popular in nineties fashion and graphic design, and no concrete objects are otherwise present. Though these album covers showcase various products of late capitalism, they do not appear to make statements about them. The actual music of these records is even less helpful in unpacking Vaporwave’s brand of commentary: *Floral Shoppe*’s pitched down, disorienting dreaminess, which might have a critical tone, is sharply contrasted by the energetic, tight grooves of *Hit Vibes*, which appear celebratory. Yet, these albums are of the same genre, which is supposedly universal in presentation. What is Vaporwave trying to comment on in these examples, and how can it retain its universal style with this vagueness?

¹⁶ Luke Turner, “Metamodernist Manifesto,” *Metamodernist Manifesto*, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://www.metamodernism.org/>.

To explain, let us consider another 2010's internet genre: Lo-Fi Hip Hop. Lo-Fi incorporates loops of vintage jazz, loops of orchestra music, and music from popular media to construct short instrumental hip hop beats. These beats are often digitally produced with the intention to recreate analog defects such as record scratches and tape hisses.¹⁷ This genre is known to incite feelings of nostalgia, even in those who have no personal connection to the samples within each beat. These emotions are derived partly from the faux patina of the production style, but also from the manner in which the music is consumed. Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood use "I wonder if we're dead" by Eevee to expound this concept. This song samples music from the animated TV series *The Legend of Korra*. Various participants in a YouTube livestream of Eevee's song within a larger mix wrote in the comment section small and original narratives that the song evoked for them, including images of someone frantically journaling in the rain or experiencing an existential crisis. Others talked about actual memories of the show.¹⁸ In this example, Winston and Saywood claim that "mentions of the sample's source and emotional microfiction are consumed adjacent to one another" in order to affect a combination of personal nostalgia and "a past which the listener *already knows* never to have existed."¹⁹ It does not matter whether or not the listener has seen *The Legend of Korra*; the listener feels an imagined nostalgia for it

¹⁷ Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood, "Beats to Relax/Study to: Contradiction and Paradox in Lofi Hip Hop," *LASPM Journal* 9, no. 2 (2019): 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

simply because of the sound and observance of nostalgia in others.

Vaporwave incites the same phenomenon. Many of its listeners are of a similar age—one which is not old enough to remember the advent of the Web or the augmentation of capitalism at the end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these listeners still find Vaporwave meaningful and personal because this dichotomy of genuine versus imagined nostalgia enables them to partake in a simulated remembrance of the past. Vaporwave is not trying to offer a detailed deconstruction of late capitalism or consumer identity by the same method as a postmodernist work; it is instead engaging in some kind of creation. So, by using motifs of a bygone era, the genre has managed to foster a new fantasy world, or a world of simulacra, a term developed by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to describe “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”²⁰ In other words, Vaporwave presents a recreation of an object that never existed.

However, the genre of Vaporwave has evolved to create this reproduction differently from those postmodernist artists who have worked with the notion of simulacra (such as the postmodernist Peter Halley). Vaporwave stopped using the replacement of objective reality with subjective signs as purely a means to deconstruct societal phenomena (as in postmodernism), instead beginning to use it as a means to reverse the simulation into something tangible and personal, such as an experience of nostalgia. *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1*, often credited as the

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

album that started the Vaporwave genre, employs the incessant repetition of slowed eighties pop grooves as an ironic comment on nostalgia and its commodification, which pairs nicely with the title's reference to collectable music volumes that are marketed towards those who long for past times. Conversely, the album *Hit Vibes*, which was released only three years after *Eccojams*, displays a genuine celebration of nostalgia in its repurposing of vintage funk and fusion music. Using this approach, *Hit Vibes* would go on to spark an entire subgenre—known as Future Funk and marked by its fun, energetic sound—within Vaporwave. In short, it is now standard procedure for Vaporwave songs to evoke a mood rather than cultural scrutiny, even though these moods are still based on simulated connections to the cultural past. This trend demonstrates metaxis within Vaporwave's approach to expression.

The second polarity, Subject vs. Image, is present in the dichotomous nostalgia that Vaporwave evokes, which raises questions concerning what the genre aspires to capture: a real subject, or an image of something real or unreal. In general, Vaporwave appears to be using the past as “referent,” which is consistent with Jameson's observations on postmodernist “nostalgia films”—films that are not interested in perfectly recreating the past, but instead strive to condense bygone eras by displaying “the pastiche of the stereotypical past,” or the essence of the time period as we now understand it.²¹ However, these nostalgia films all have a specific time period that they are stylizing, while Vaporwave's referent era is multifaceted. As per a previous example, *Floral Shoppe* samples eighties music, but the

²¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 68.

3D-modeled skyline on the cover could have come from the eighties or nineties, the classical bust did not come from either, and the Japanese text is only a nebulous reference to the associations of Japan and consumer technology within this timeframe.

Vaporwave's references are also not bound to the past; "hyperreal" or digitally augmented aesthetics, common aspects of "glitch art" which are only possible to create with current software, are also frequently present. This combination of referents makes it difficult to label the era that Vaporwave is interested in stylizing, especially if it is indeed following the postmodernist approach to nostalgia that Jameson describes. Additionally, unlike the forgotten epochs of nostalgia films, the early internet was not a universal period of time experienced by all. Furthermore, the internet catalogues and preserves decades themselves, giving global, near-instant access to any era of time recorded by a camera, further enabling nostalgia based on aesthetic content. Just as listeners in Winston and Saywood's study felt a familiarity with *The Legend of Korra* from the production style and sample, someone can also watch a VHS home video on Archive.org and experience the same nostalgic feeling simply from its appearance, audio, and atmosphere.

Vaporwave recognizes this interplay of internet aesthetics and personal events, displaying an awareness that the nostalgia offered by the web is often simulated and that the experiences it affords are limited and fragmented. Yet, these experiences are nonetheless powerful. *Tell Me Your Secret*, a song by Death's Dynamic Shroud, exemplifies this power as it combines digitally stuttered and at times unintelligible vocals with a melodic, bittersweet song structure, all placed on top of a typical

Vaporwave rhythm section (eighties synth bass and slow, low-pitched synthetic drums). The listener is presented with deep emotion filtered through hyperreality, which is what the genre as a whole seems most interested in exploring.

Although Vaporwave subverts postmodernist interactions with nostalgia and uses images to evoke real feelings, it still does not return to real subjects, as it is mostly concerned with virtual material; this contrast creates the opposition of Subject vs. Image. Almost no works of Vaporwave contain personal narratives or details. This latter criterion is essential to the concept of a real subject according to the description provided by Jameson and Heidegger.²² The earth to world process is prevented within the genre, which makes it difficult to label Vaporwave's approach to this polarity as truly metamodernist.

Regarding the third polarity of Epistemology vs. Ontology, literary theorist Brian McHale proposed in 1986 that epistemology (what we know and how we know it), the dominant concern of modernist literature, gave way to ontology (what things are or what it means to "be") in the era of postmodernism.²³ This dynamic is applicable to most modernist and postmodernist texts; by using heavy stylization to prioritize perspective, artists like van Gogh sought to explore the boundaries of epistemology in art. In contrast, postmodernist artists like Warhol wanted to challenge the very definition of art

²² See footnote 8.

²³ Brian McHale, "Change of dominant from modernist to postmodernist writing," in *Approaching Postmodernism: Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University of Utrecht*, vol. 21, eds. Douwe Wessel Fokkema and Johannes Willem Bertens (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1986), 60.

by elevating commodities and otherwise “lower” aesthetics into galleries and museums. Vaporwave has shown interest in both domains within its dichotomous approach to nostalgia. By asking what it means to be nostalgic (ontology), the genre also questions our perspectives and knowledge (epistemology), asking how the authenticity of our nostalgia impacts the nostalgic experience itself. However, as previously mentioned, Vaporwave often puts aside these questions in favour of experience itself.

This favouring of experience can be seen in Vaporwave’s distribution methods of mixes and streams; individual expressions and innovations are far less relevant than the feeling or “vibe” that the music supplies to its listeners, who generally turn on a mix or stream as background music as they accomplish other tasks. The livestream YouTube mix “lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to” from ChilledCow is primarily viewed by college students, and the stream seems to also function as a sharing space where the students talk about their daily stresses and interpretations of the music in the comment section as it plays.²⁴ Even the name of the stream suggests that Lo-Fi can be used as a tool for productivity or relaxation, and this association has become common to the point that it is now a meme in and of itself within online music communities.

Indeed, both Vaporwave and Lo-Fi have been criticized for their ease of production; Vaporwave has been equated to slowed eighties pop songs, and Lo-Fi has been mocked for its simple construction. However, these criticisms miss the main point of both genres: Vaporwave and Lo-Fi are supposed to manifest their meaning within their listeners, not the works

²⁴ Winston and Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study to,” 45.

themselves. Artists of each style continuously follow rules and tropes because they and their audiences admire the ideas and feelings that come with these tropes over any sort of existential or philosophical discoveries they might make. This value is evident in the oscillation between sincere and ironic works within the community, and the lack of a central “manifesto.” While the genre does have many conventions, there is no central authority that dictates them. Such an approach would be detrimental to Vaporwave and its internet motifs, including anonymity and meme culture.

This prevalence of tropes is not to say that new ideas have not surfaced in the genre: there are many Vaporwave subgenres, like Future Funk, Hard Vapor, Vaportrap, and even Simpsponwave, which is entirely themed around *The Simpsons*. In addition, all of these subgenres are a far cry from the works of James Ferraro and Daniel Lopatin that are cited as the origin of the genre.²⁵ This disparity is demonstrated by the transition from conceptual musical works such as Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual* and Lopatin’s *Eccojams* to the “background music” format that the genre is known for today. However, the common thread of these works lies in their unique interests: commentary on consumerism is evident both in the work of Future Funk artists such as Saint Pepsi and more vanilla artists such as Luxury Elite; internet motifs are present in the work of Vaportrap artists like Blank Banshee and Hardvapor artists like Wolfenstein OS X. The ultimate concern of Vaporwave and its subsidiaries is to express to its listeners how deeply personal the faceless world of the Web can be, and to provide the knowledge that, no matter how “real”

²⁵ Schembri and Tichbon, “Digital Consumers as Cultural Curators,” 197.

this internet world is or is not, it has and will continue to shape our lives to an unprecedented degree. Such an approach to this third polarity is exemplary of metaxis, specifically the priority of phenomenism that results from reaching beyond what is known or what is “real” in a Baudrillardian sense.

Conclusions and Further Inquiry

Although Vaporwave appears to be pushing past typical postmodernist constructs, it can still be interpreted as rooted in postmodernist philosophy because of its interest in images and reflexive commentary, both of which deeply influence the expression of the genre. Even if it is not “exposing precisely what it signifies,”²⁶ the genre is still deconstructing the assimilation of simulacra into our daily lives. However, this deconstruction is unique from previous examinations by postmodernist artists in that Vaporwave frequently asserts that simulated experience can still be personally meaningful and positive. This observation does not quite match the “neoromanticism” that Vermeulen and van den Akker describe in “Notes on Metamodernism,” but it is still unique from the postmodernist perspective. It is probable that Lo-Fi Hip Hop may hold more promise as a truly metamodernist text, as the intention and messaging of the genre is in accordance with its consumption in that the genre does not question nostalgia, but instead promotes it.

Looking beyond the scope of the preceding discussion, the very recent genre of Hyper Pop may also fall more neatly into metamodernism because it combines a reflexive examination of

²⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 10.

pop culture with personal narratives in a method that neither Vaporwave nor Lo-Fi uses. From the motifs of Hyper Pop, we can assume that Vaporwave has set a standard cultural precedent, as both genres use the Web and its instruments as aesthetic material—an approach that was much more difficult and obscure before Web 2.0. In general, these genres (as well as Lo-Fi Hip Hop) use simulacra from the past in order to construct novel pathos in a style that seems to be in opposition to sociologist Manuel Castells’s observation of “the increasing distance between globalization and identity, between the Net and the Self.”²⁷ On the contrary to Castells’s statement, it may be possible that the Net and the Self are coming to exhibit metaxis as corporate media becomes increasingly engrained in our culture, which then informs our experiences and expressions. This process is something that Vermeulen and van den Akker did not predict in their work, and it may suggest that Web culture is already developing its own interests and interpretations as separate from other facets of culture.

²⁷ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 22.

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