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CELEBRATION OF THE HYPERREAL NOSTALGIA: CATEGORIZATION AND ANALYSIS OF VISUAL VAPORWAVE ARTEFACTS

Summary. Vaporwave grabs the attention of internet voyager with harsh collages glued together in a technically primitive manner. It's a cultural phenomenon which both originated and is active solely on the internet. In the context of general internet culture Vaporwave is exclusive in its aesthetics due to the domination of violet and pink colors, technically primitive quality of texts, fetishization of 8th and 9th decade mainstream commodities and acute nostalgic undertones. Vaporwave has been mostly explored as a music genre or sociological phenomenon, while its visual aspect has mostly remained unattended. This article seeks to analyze the conceptual aspects embodied within Vaporwave visuals, to briefly compare them with music, and to unpack the mechanism of nostalgia as an affective entry point to the movement. The interpretation is mainly lead by Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, and interpretational principles of hermeneutics. Five Tumblr blogs were analyzed. Hermeneutic inquiry into the texts yielded seven distinct symbol categories differentiated by the affect they generate: nostalgic commodities, idyllic classics, melancholic landscapes, harsh distortions, gentle geometry, depressive texts, and ecstatic brands. Each of these categories here are elaborated in detail finally summarizing the multilayered symbolism of the movement. It can be described as nostalgically challenging visual conventions through harsh technical quality and opposing codes of behavior through open expressions of depression and melancholy, thus exposing the doubts of individual imprisoned in postmodern society. '80s and '90s here become hyperreal fantasy lands of the past where a nostalgic individual can find refuge. In comparison to music, the visual aspect of Vaporwave highlights the technology as central artefacts of nostalgia, introduces new ways to analyze late capitalist consumer culture, and brings an intimate dialogue with hyperreality to the front. The article suggests that Vaporwave is a post-ironic art movement which both celebrates and criticizes capitalism, finally remaining vague whether there are ways to escape the system, and whether these ways should even be looked for.

Keywords: Vaporwave, internet culture, affect, nostalgia, hyperreality, simulacrum.

INTRODUCTION

Vaporwave is an enigmatic cultural phenomenon that started as a music genre in the early 2010s. It both originated and is active solely on the internet: its point of inception is various Reddit message boards; it is spreading its sonic texts mainly through Bandcamp and YouTube, and its visuals through Tumblr.[1] In the context of general internet culture Vaporwave is exclusive in its aesthetics due to the domination of violet and pink colors, the technically primitive quality of texts, and their complex symbolic content filled with references to late capitalist consumer culture, fetishization of 8th and 9th decade aesthetics and mainstream digital commodities, and acute affective dimension.[2] However, the conceptual undercurrent of Vaporwave is not so clear. While Adam Harper, a journalist responsible for the very first article on Vaporwave on a major music news website argued how this music microgenre conveys a complex anticapitalistic critique,[3] the initial response by one of the most prominent Vaporwave artists – Vectroid – highlighted that such interpretations encourage over-intellectualization of Vaporwave, while artists themselves are *"sample curators at best"*.[4] It's important to understand that Vaporwave is essentially ambiguous and there's no consensus within the community on its stance towards postmodern reality.[5] However, one thing can be said

with confidence – Vaporwave is *about* capitalism, it sonifies and visualizes it.[6]

Another unambiguous conceptual aspect of Vaporwave is that it explores our relationships to our recent past through nostalgia.[7] Various obsolete digital devices, brands, empty capitalist architecture, and most interestingly – past imaginations of future to come – compose the vocabulary of the movement and bring forth a genre which questions the linearity of time, and actuality of places subsided in the past.[8] The Vaporwave collage logic fetishizes and appropriates old media content, hence rendering aspects of time and memory vivid. As Alan Koc noted, such analysis of our relationship with capitalism and its effects corresponds to Frederic Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping".[9] Through the Jamesonian lens, Vaporwave appears to be an aesthetical tool providing its participants with an opportunity to express surrounding totality, both criticizing it, and embedding oneself within a larger sociological context. Vaporwave is an internet user's attempt to find a place within society and express the thoughts one is experiencing.

While Vaporwave has been analyzed as a music genre or sociological phenomenon and aforementioned authors make it clear how capitalism and nostalgia are being explored through Vaporwave music, visual expressions of the movement receive an unproportionally small amount of attention. It's not clear what is the message of Vaporwave's imagery, whether it somehow differs from its music, and what is the main motivation leading its participants to create such nostalgically loaded texts. This article fills that gap by approaching Vaporwave mainly as a visual aesthetic and seeks to see what conceptual aspects can be sieved out from analyzing its chaotic imagery, finally exploring how Vaporwave's nostalgia functions.

A potent point of departure for understanding the visual aspect of Vaporwave is Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. Argument for this starts with the very title of the movement: it appropriates a term from the '80s – "vaporware" – which was used to describe various software and hardware products which were advertised, but never came to the shelves of marketplaces. The title of the movement refers to a rift between real and hyperreal: what has been advertised and became hyperreal within media apparatus, and what actually happened. Jean Baudrillard conceptualized hyperreality as a way to highlight the precession of digitally made simulacra in postmodernity (mainly digital imagery), and resulting distancing from the Real – a modernist notion of scientifically measurable empirical and physical reality where humans are situated outside of the world, in opposition to nature.[10] Hyperreality is not simply not-real, it's more real than real – like blood in an action movie which is vivid, captivating to watch, thrilling, even so that cutting your own hand would leave you disappointed.[11] For Baudrillard, we had entered a stage where real has lost the battle against its copies – simulacra – and now the copy stands for the original. While Baudrillard is pessimistic and sometimes even nihilistic, Vaporwave embraces the hyperreal as we will see later. It not simply depressively states that all we have are mediated representations and digital communication, but takes that as raw material for its production and proliferates hyperreality even further. Vaporwave presents a hyperreal modulation of history – by using objects of a bygone era it manages to create a new fantasy world which is not as related to the '80s at it looks like.[12] The semantic landscape of Vaporwave is a simulacrum – a copy without an original. Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality is a highly potent theoretical lens allowing to approach Vaporwave: it not only shows the deceptive nature of advertisement or the impossibility to go back or forth in time, but also highlights the self-referenciality of Vaporwave texts, namely their innate relationship with their sociocultural surroundings and technological means of proliferation. The interpretation of Vaporwave symbolism in this article will mainly be guided by Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality and his wider analysis of postmodernity. However, as we will see later, nostalgia will surface as the main affective dimension of the movement, thus the final analysis will mainly refer to Stuart Tannock's sociological conception of nostalgia as a possibly positive emotional response to a wide variety of personal needs and political desires.[13]

While the theoretical lens guiding the interpretation comes from postmodernist culture criticism, the interpretation itself is following methodological principles of hermeneutics. To uncover the essence embedded in the semantics of Vaporwave, the researcher embraced a hermeneutical aim to uncover what happens to us in our experience of art[14] which goes along with Spinoza's understanding of affect as a modification of body produced in an interaction with another body.[15] However, the term 'affect' in the context of this research is understood as a separate dimension of the art object independent from its subject, and yet – initiating mutual becomings (affections in traditional Spinozist sense) with the spectator.[16] The artist becomes-other in process of creating art, puts the event into the body, which then in turn affects the world.[17] In this article, the affection is captured through a hermeneutical approach where the researcher had submerged the self into the hermeneutic cycle of reading, reflective writing and interpreting with a theoretical position on hand.[18] This article seeks to categorize and interpret the affective semantics of Vaporwave imagery as a way to uncover conceptual undercurrents embedded in the symbolism of the movement, and possibly bring forth something what was left out unnoticed by analyzing Vaporwave as a music genre or social movement. For that, researcher had read Vaporwave texts with a reflective journal, which later was edited to become this article. Interpretation moved through a hermeneutic circle: first, analyzing the conceptual landscape of Vaporwave as a whole, then moving to particular visual texts, then moving back to the whole again, and so on, until the affective categorization of texts and satisfactory conceptual understanding of them was reached. This methodological approach allowed to bring forth a unique interpretation of Vaporwave, which is based on affects.

SELECTION OF "TUMBLR" BLOGS

Although it's easy to find various Vaporwave manifestations in all major social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Reditt, Twitter or Youtube, Born and Hawroth showed that the center of Vaporwave dwelling is Tumblr,[19] hence this article focuses on the texts found only in this social network. Tumblr users express themselves through microblogging, which entails constructing primitive websites and communicating with short, mostly visual posts. This aspect of Tumblr complements the exclusive ambition of this research, which seeks to experience Vaporwave not as a music genre, but as a visual aesthetic. Furthermore, Tumblr is exceptionally handy for analysis because of its anonymous and content focused nature, thus minimizing the possibility to find unrelated personal content in the blog, while Facebook or Twitter are much more personal – even though their users also share personally appealing content and present their own original creations, but usually it's all mixed with excerpts from personal life.

Finally, Tumblr is a potent field for crystallization of genre identity because it functions mainly as curatorial platform. Its users are curating their own microblogs by sharing content either found in internet or created originally. The essential mechanic of this platform is a "repost" button, which both expresses sympathy towards some content, and at the same time republishes it on the user's blog. Individuals involved in the content production modify aesthetics of the movement every time they apply them for transmitting the message of their own. In this way, Vaporwave participants are working in a decentralized manner, are sharing knowledge within horizontal hierarchies and can best be described as being cultural curators, not simply creators or consumers.[20] Such decentralized production and collective attempts of trying to make sense of what Vaporwave means are elements of genre work – a process where members of a given community "assert, dispute or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence for a musical style".[21] Tumblr blogs are not simply technically convenient for this research because of their focus visual style, but also are places where the identity of Vaporwave is being actively negotiated and molded into a unity.

Selection of blogs was executed using the Tumblr search engine: once keyword "Vaporwave" was entered, 5 first results of the search which had

"Vaporwave" in their domain name were selected. Focus on the domain allowed to find blogs which are consciously articulating Vaporwave identity, thus avoiding possible interpretation mistakes of the Tumblr search engine. Following the aforementioned logic, these blogs were selected (title of the blog is written in parenthesis): vaporwave.tumblr.com („Product Placement"), vaporwave-it.tumblr.com („a e s t h e t i c"), neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com („Aesthetics"), stolenvaporwave.tumblr.com („Stolen Vaporwave"), vaporwave-van-gogh.tumblr.com („🛸🔍✨"). Supply of visual texts archived in these five blogs is numbered in hundreds, what is more than enough to comprehend the totality of Vaporwave.

SYMBOL CATEGORIES

As Deleuze and Guattari noted, affect is one of the two main components of an art piece (along with percepts) – it's a raw material which is being used by the artist and remains preserved in the artwork and in the world, long after the materiality of the artwork had eroded.[22] Affect is both phenomenological and posthuman – it's experienced in the eye of the spectator, but for D&G, it has existence of its own. Affect is like a dimension of an object. While philosophy works with concepts and science works with functives, art works with percepts and affects, and creates monuments which overcome the challenge of time by resonating with the world and thus disseminating their existence.[23] As a consequence of following a Deleuzoguattarian approach to art and implementing a hermeneutical process of reading, Vaporwave texts in this research had been classified into seven categories: "nostalgic commodities", "idyllic classics", "melancholic landscapes", "harsh distortions", "gentle geometry", "depressive texts", and "ecstatic brands". By blanketing the symbols under fewer larger categories distinguished by their affect, it becomes possible to approach the complex semantic nature of Vaporwave visuals by systematically analyzing the main components of its expressions.

It's important to note that some texts of Vaporwave are mixed in their affective landscape in a sense that they depict geometry idyllic, or classics melancholically. However, in most cases symbols are standing stable in their affective tracks. Also, a miniscule portion of blog contents doesn't correspond to any of the categories, but this is a result of horizontal hierarchies which define the sociology of Vaporwave – while imitating the Vaporwave formula, every curator constructs a more or less idiosyncratic narrative.[24] These contents in the context of this study had been considered as noise within general narrative of Vaporwave, and were excluded from analysis.

NOSTALGIC COMMODITIES

This category fits all the commodities which are out of market and/or common usage (Fig. 1–3): outmoded technologies (old game consoles, obsolete information storage devices, kinescope displays, etc.), screenshots from obsolete operating systems



Fig. 1. Serene collage of Gameboy. Author unknown. Found on "a e s t h e t i c" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-it.tumblr.com/post/171269249892/lighbulbs-source .



Fig. 2. An old iMac displaying neoclassical sculpture by stef.brl. Found on "Product Placement" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave.tumblr.com/post/647434978455699456



Fig. 3. Monumental presentation of VHS cassette by Hazelmart. Found on "Product Placement" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave.tumblr.com/post/652493688830869504s

(predominantly "Windows 95"), old versions of various logos ("Pepsi", "Sony", "Sega"), outdated visual styles (mostly vivid '80s aesthetic), old sport cars, episodes from old commercials, etc. Previously revolutionary objects here are being reused in surreal contexts, thus creating a certain satire of neoliberalism which not only necessitates a constant technological progress, but also creates a phenomenon of planned obsolescence, thus transferring commodities from the status of innovation to an antiquity in just a matter of years. Pragmatically irrelevant technology which just recently had symbolized the new digital age here is transformed into a monument for time, consequently generating a strange feeling of nostalgia – an inseparable component of the conception of progress. "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning",[25] and the times of naive trust in capitalism which are drowning in the waters of forgetfulness are now returning to our outlook in digitally spoiled texts of Vaporwave, pushing us to nostalgically recall our former faith in the digital utopia. This brings a unique awareness of past, neoliberal progress and consumer culture, all held together by an affect of nostalgia.

These visual texts bring back memories of the past by creating a hyperreal narrative about somewhat naïve periods where technology appeared to open the gates to a utopian future. Here history is turned into simulacrum, similarly to nostalgia films which instead of being historically accurate representations of the past, create new myths about times passed (Jameson 1991). Young fans of the movement have no physical connection with the antiquities depicted in the texts, although the nostalgia in itself is primarily a melancholic act of remembrance indicating longings for the past. Laura Glitsos explains this paradox as being the result of late-capitalist culture with prevailing imagery consumption where due to all-encompassing advertisement and mass media market the consumer gets his mind implanted with memories which do not belong to him (Glitsos 2017, 104). As Andreas Huyssen writes, "many of the mass-marketed memories we consume are "imagined memories"[26] – memories which come to us as a result of constant media consumption and active involvement into historical narratives. A vast range of various movies, books, physical monuments, told stories or shown photographs construct a hyperreal legend which instigates the spectator to believe that all this spectacle is part of one's life, just slightly foggy in the memories due to time passed. *"For Vaporwave, memory is only another commodifiable object, one that is endlessly generated and reproduced in varying iterations, which produces this sense of nostalgia for something that may or may not 'belong' to any particular past"*,[27] and here the hyperreal memories from the '80s become a substance for the creation of emotionally engaged collages, both visually and audially. Vaporwave creates nostalgia for times which had never happened, and this paradoxical affection proves how hyperreal imagery experienced through media become the basis of our cultural memory. The moment when we sense nostalgia towards the times when we were not yet born should be perceived as a point marking the transformation of memory to a hyperreal version of it.

Furthermore, the texts themselves could be seen as advertisements of the past. It's curious to see that such visual elaboration of obsolete technology appears at the same period when retro technology comes back to the market as something of a desire: when Nokia brings back its 3310, Kickstarter is filled with various Gameboy or Sega Dreamcast revivals, or Nike constantly refashions its old designs. Vaporwave takes dated commodities, stitches them together in a kitschy manner reminiscent of advertisements, and creates a desire to consume retro aesthetics. While nostalgia is a widespread phenomenon within pop culture and Vaporwave is only one part of that,[28] it still contributes to the proliferation and popularization of bygone times.

Prominent nostalgia expressed visually extends the main affective undertone of Vaporwave music, but also brings a unique symbolic ingredient – obsolete technology. While audially Vaporwave is mainly referring to '80s and '90s pop music or Muzak – corporate music designed for malls – visually it highlights the sentimental importance of middle-class commodities and features juvenile digital

technology as the main distinctive artefact of the times passed.

It's important to note that nostalgia is able to be observed as an underlying implicit affective ingredient of most of the other symbol categories as well. The contents of the "nostalgic commodities" category are particular here since they expose obsolete objects explicitly. This category received such a name and a special treatment as a special acknowledgment for the intensity of nostalgia it is producing, while the general implicit mechanisms of nostalgia will be dissected further in article.

IDYLLIC CLASSICS

Another predominant set of symbols used in Vaporwave imagery are various classical columns, sculptures of Michelangelo and his contemporaries, elements of renaissance painting, aesthetically similar sculptures of classical antique and neoclassicism (Fig. 4–6). Vaporwave is once again playing with time here both by refusing to stick to any specific historical period from where these sculptures are being appropriated, and by juxtaposing them with elements of contemporary middle-class consumerism: obsolete technology, various soda drinks, popular brand imagery, etc. While aesthetics of classical antiquity transmit some sense of nostalgia by looking back in time to enlightenment and Greek ideals (a certain territory of hyperreal memories where life was proceeding in idyllic manner) they also carry something unique: on the one hand they could be read as a critique targeted towards the postmodern society driven by a metanarrative of performativity,[29] what for example in architecture is dictating laconic aesthetical tendencies (minimalistic shapes and elimination of non-utilitarian decorations); while on the other hand, roughly distorted sculptures juxtaposed with consumerist goods ironically sneer at the very same attention to aesthetics so apparent in classical antique. Here the aspect of post-irony becomes apparent: sculptures act to signify both an honest longing for idyllic times, and critique of the naivety of this past. Post-irony is an equivocal merge of irony and sincerity to the point where they become inexorably linked.[30] This poetic device allows to highlight both the negative and positive aspects of the object at hand, by rejecting it and glorifying it simultaneously. It's "a smarter form of irony, irony used as a scalpel as opposed to a mallet".[31] A sculpture of Helios within the narrative of Vaporwave is simultaneously a symbol communicating sincere need for humanism and aesthetical pleasure, and a way to mock the ethical naivety of the periods when these sculptures were originally produced. It both externalizes the critique targeted towards wealthy upper-class individuals who are seeking for tasteless luxury delights, and glorifies that same extravagance as something desirable. Idyllic affect is essential here since it allows to go a full circle of post-irony: starting with sincerity, continuing with nihilistic critique of it, and ending once

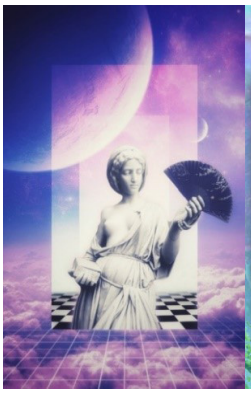


Fig. 4. Ethereal rendition of a neoclassical sculpture made with 3D software by Eric Weidner. Found on "🛸🌕✨" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-van-gogh.tumblr.com/post/173946408753

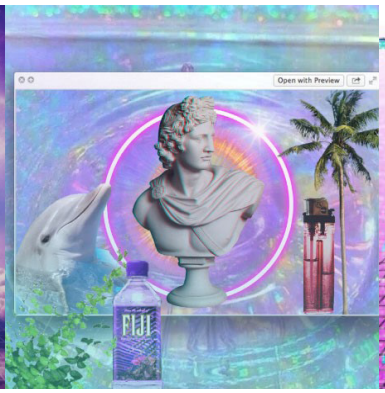


Fig. 5. Apollo is one of the most popular Greek gods to be appropriated by Vaporwave. Author unknown. Found on "Aesthetics" Tumblr blog: https://neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com/post/167876185113



Fig. 6. Another Greek bust of Apollo in a surreal setting. Author unknown. Found on "Stolen Vaporwave" Tumblr blog: https://stolenvaporwave.tumblr.com/post/153141273976

again, in a state of warmth and honesty, creating a hyperreal image of an idyllic state of opulence.

What is more, all these sculptures are easily mass produced thanks to the industrial revolution, and in the case of Vaporwave, they take an even newer form of massively reproduced hyperreal imagery. Classics which signify the Hellenistic appraisal of technē here appear as simulacra created following a simple sequence of digital copying and pasting. Here virtually no human labor is needed, and yet, the imagery still looks as elegant and ornate as it was produced by a professional artisan. This adds another layer of irony to the use of the sculptures, and opens a possibility to approach Vaporwave's analysis of late capitalism not only through its visual and sonic manifestations, but also through technical production of the movement's texts. This is a self-referential act where the mechanisms essential to the existence of Vaporwave become an important conceptual ingredient.

Finally, these sculptures allow to shift our attention to another peculiar idiosyncrasy of Vaporwave – namely, that there are no real people to be found in the imagery of the movement, only simulacra of them. In some rare cases people appear as an excerpt from an advertisement, but mostly as a digital reproduction of a sculpture. Usually, sculptures take a central compositional role, thus creating an impression that Vaporwave creators themselves are identifying with marble heroes and their deadpan facial expressions, who observe the aggressively distorted images of digital reality. The emotionless face of antique sculpture signifies an affective reaction towards late capitalism and the authors' desire to emotionally distance themselves from the twisted reality of Vaporwave imagery. Here an opposition to an emotional saturation of mass media can be grasped: while kilometers of printed advertisements are following the bystander with countless emotionally saturated human eyes, Vaporwave personalities hide in cold bodies of marble. Idyllic classics embody the awareness of troubling late capitalist reality which both brings comfort and alienation.

While affectively Vaporwave music is idyllic at times, it neither brings up the question of identity, nor does it explore the Hellenistic period in any way. It's curious to see how a sense of longing for simplicity and enlightenment ideals gets expressed through classical sculptures in Vaporwave imagery and extends a larger nostalgic narrative expressed in its music. However, visual representations of old marble masterpieces are explicit and bring unique conceptual undertones to the symbolic narrative of Vaporwave.

MELANCHOLIC LANDSCAPES

A significant portion of content exhibited in investigated blogs exposes various empty spaces commonly wreathed in the gloom of night: city streets, cafeterias, rooms of luxurious hotels of private homes, and most frequently – shopping malls (Fig. 7–9).



Fig. 7. Detail from a scan of Horton Plaza Mall in San Diego, USA, by Luigi Donatello. Found on "🐢🍳✨" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-van-gogh.tumblr.com/post/179717048593/80sretroelectro-detail-from-my-scan-of-the



Fig. 8. Nightly skyline of unindentified city by rotomangler. Found on "Product Placement" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave.tumblr.com/post/648951474377850880



Fig. 9. A retrofuturistic city skyline with lonely human protagonist by Beeple. Found on "a e s t h e t i c" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-it.tumblr.com/post/179814036174

Landscapes usually have their color schemes restricted to pale blue with accents of pink and neon colors occasionally appearing on some objects. It doesn't matter what the landscape would be – whether it's a pool or a shopping mall – everything is tied under a strong sense of melancholy communicated through several main elements. First of all, most of the landscapes are void of people: an onlooker is left alone in cavernous spaces usually suited to fit large gatherings. Abandoned shopping malls stand like a desiccated lake, where all the secrets hidden in the lakebed become exposed once the water vaporizes. Just as a lake which without a robe of water denudes its perverted addiction to hunt innocent boats, deserted capitalist spaces also give clues to their pathologies: alienation, consumerism, technocracy, wealth inequality, death of the Real, etc. Shopping malls are exemplary: they are hyperreal cities in a city where an everlasting feast of consumerism is being celebrated daily. Here the showcases of stores are coquetting with the gaze of a bystander by elevating selected commodities on a podium, thus playfully drawing the veil, yet hiding insides aside. It's the erotica of capitalism – the intrigue to consume is kept intact with a suggestion that continuation with your credit card might please you a lot more. The hyperreality of the shopping mall serves its main purpose – consumption, which happens there without any concerns for external conditions of the real world.[32] The shopping mall is a kind of utopian garden of Eden where abundance is all around regardless of surrounding world. However, the imagery of Vaporwave has a surreal twist, since the nightly late capitalist landscapes have their consumption loop stopped and the bystander is invited for unproductive exploration. This peculiar twist illustrates Adorno's critique of mass culture, where he stated that "If mass culture has already become one great exhibition, then everyone who stumbles into it feels as lonely as a stranger on an exhibition site".[33] He emphasizes the information overload and deceptive communal existence of postmodernity where the individual is unable to make sense of his sociocultural landscape. Even though Vaporwave provides a chance to comprehend the late capitalist world by slowly exploring its spaces in darkness, it still remains vague and ambiguous about the meaning of this all, leaving the spectator himself to make conclusions.

Melancholy is reinforced by two main atmospheric elements of these landscapes: darkness and water. This can be read with the help of Jung's analytic psychology. Concerning the darkness, "day and light are synonyms for consciousness, night and dark for the unconscious",[34] thus shopping mall corridors soothed in moonlight are inviting the onlooker to a dreamlike wander through the depths of the collective unconscious manifesting as hyperreal Vaporwave imagery. Landscapes from this category are suited to be inhibited by masses of people and bright light, while the spectator of Vaporwave enters a forbidden zone where the transparency of daytime is replaced by the mystery of the night. And secondly, concerning the water, it is "the commonest symbol for the unconscious".[35] Sometimes water takes the shape of fountains or pools, sometimes – of the sea, falls or oases. These two symbols make evident the fact that dreamlike nature of Vaporwave has significant symbolic origins and exposes a complex becoming into which both creators and spectators are brought to through Vaporwave artefacts. Empty landscapes become a psychic underworld where both the spectator, and the creator are able to contemplate not only the relationship with consumerist culture, but also their own psychologic imperfections. Postmodern society has abandoned the individual to a state of paradoxical loneliness: the consumer is left gobbling up the media content where one is able to have an intimate bodily contact only with a flat screen, hence letting the reality melt away in order to replace it with gripping amusement of hyperreal mass entertainment. City renders deserted and consciousness plunges deep into the water to give place for a media-generated dream.

Finally, the melancholy of the landscapes receives a final treatment by the labor of time. In most cases, Vaporwave features architecture from the '80s and '90s or retrofuturistic imaginations. Here a contemporary spectator is being reached by places (both real and imaginary) from the past which are inviting him to a sightseeing trip through hyperreal

memories of times when everything used to be more naïve, where consumption used to still produce a lasting pleasure, and where the future was still imagined as something having utopian potentialities, not a prospect of inevitable disaster. Such longing for past times is extremely nostalgic, but interestingly enough, nostalgia and melancholy share their affective territory.[36] However, there are differences: melancholy is experienced more individually, while for nostalgia the relationship between individual and collective biographies is essential.[37] Deserted late capitalist landscapes are primarily experienced in solitude and are inviting the individual to explore his personal experiences within late capitalist society. The solitude is both symbolic, as explored previously, and technical, since the spectator is most likely alone with his screen. Continuing to collective memory, the recent western history emerges later as an intersubjective cultural relationship. All the aspects discussed here finalize their melancholic narrative with a nostalgic undertone, and signify an invitation to a symbolic self-reflection therapy where the spectator is nudged to contemplate his relationship with consumerist culture, both for better and for worse. Denuded urban and consumption spaces turn into monuments of percepts and affects, which provide a body for the event of capitalism. While this is similar to Vaporwave music which allows to listen to elevator music put on loops, imagery of empty consumption spaces brings unique reflective potentials allowing to contemplate capitalism from an architectural angle.

HARSH DISTORTIONS

Generally, the aesthetics of tend to Vaporwave replicate visual idiosyncrasies of old TVs or VCRs, which are commonly embroidered with glitches and other rendering errors (Fig. 10–12). Although a tiny portion of images are sterile, the majority of them present no visual scrupulousness: they are packed with vividly shining neon colors, various digital distortions and recklessly stitched together objects, thus infusing the scenes with a sense of confusion. Apparently, one of the central nodes in network of Vaporwave within Tumblr is "glitchgifs.tumblr.com" microblog[38] which deliberates all of its attention to digital distortions, hence highlighting the importance of spoiled imagery in Vaporwave. Such aesthetical tendency can first of all be interpreted as being an oppositional move: while Apple is creating perfectly sterile devices or Hollywood each year presents new movies embellished with more and more believable special effects, Vaporwave tears apart the hyperreal imagery and recklessly glues it into collages. Communication through harshness is an allusion to a desire to deconstruct and resist rules and modes of behavior imposed by society.

Furthermore, such fetish of error renders Vaporwave as an ally of reality, symbolically signifying



Fig. 10. Distorted bust of Hercules by Felipe Cañón. Found on "🐟🔍✨" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-van-gogh.tumblr.com/post/172654409248s

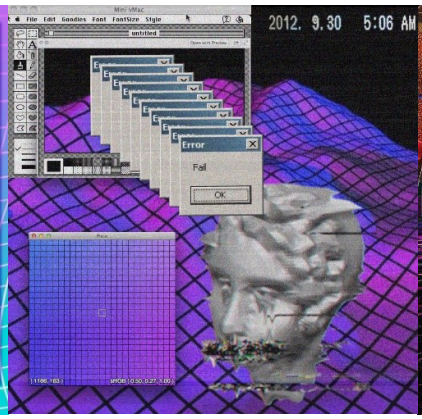


Fig. 11. Screen filled with error prompts. Author unknown. Found on "Aesthetics" Tumblr blog: https://neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com/post/166642508203



Fig. 12. Apollo is one of the most popular Greek gods to be appropriated by Vaporwave. Author unknown. Found on "Aesthetics" Tumblr blog: https://neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com/post/167876185113

a chaotic and unstable postmodern condition. It's not Vaporwave but Apple that is in odds with reality as it is constructing hyperreal commodities and etching an illusionary impression of sterile and consistent world. Shapeless Vaporwave bodies submerged in distorted imagery are hallucinations of consciousness intoxicated by digital communication, consumerism and fake promises of capitalism. Here visual distortions deconstruct the hyperreality of late capitalism, puts it on the foreground, and greets the spectator with Baudrillardian desert of the real.[39] Baudrillard here expressed his attitude towards hypermediated society where nothing else but simulacra are left, where "all events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information".[40] Contemporary network society renders these insights truer than ever, where everything is a matter of communication taking shapes of Instagram stories, Tik Tok videos, Facebook posts, news media articles, etc. Here events get mediated into series of pictures and short statements, spaces turn into Google Maps and Google Streetview, and memories become Facebook timeline with its feature to remind you what you were doing X years ago on this day. It's the "absolute unreality is offered as real presence"[41] – a constant stream of simulacra which becomes Castells' "real virtuality".[42] This term is formulated as a reaction to the fact that networked media became the primary mode of information retrieval in the digital age. Vaporwave is tearing its imagery apart, thus creating a glitch – means by which the technical workings of a medium come to forth.[43] Here the relentless treatment of late capitalist, technological and classical imagery becomes a way to render Vaporwave's mediums – digital imagery and online communication – vividly apparent, thus dropping the robes of hyperreality and highlighting its disorienting and often deceptive nature. This eerie disclosure comes with a harsh affective nature, both creating a sense of confusion, and certain alienation by rendering known objects nearly unrecognizable, or stitching together seemingly unrelated symbols without any technical precision.

Another visually harsh aesthetical move observed in some of the investigated content is a compositional utilization of screenshots from various software windows. These collages expose a secret side of a manufactured life and measures up to an unedited movie with artificial lighting, make-up artists and stage workers changing cardboard decorations remaining in the frame. Mass media is always keeping the unseen side of its creations in secret, because "it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them".[44] By showing the technical equipment it becomes evident that everything is simulated and staged. Windows of Paint software uncovers the secret and exposes the transformation of the Real into a digitally manipulated version of it. Furthermore, these windows serve two additional compositional functions: sometimes they are constructing visual composition, and sometimes are inviting a spectator for a dialogue by presenting textual information. Use of software windows is a self-referential act exposing a level of self-awareness, and the attempts at establishing a certain sincere transparency with the spectator.

Fetishized error is continuing a dreamlike and nostalgic narrative of Vaporwave, encouraging the spectator to give a thought on what is the meaning of sterility and pursuit of utopia, and what makes technology useful. This is unique to the visual side of Vaporwave, since although sound distortions (a prominent element of Vaporwave music) might correspond to visual glitches seen in Vaporwave imagery, here we see something unique anyway – namely the intimate conversation with the hyperreal. It attempts to establish a contact with reality by constructing harsh collages which exhort a confrontation with the plethora of systemic late capitalist pathologies. Vaporwave accelerates the hyperreal, rendering it visible and dissimulating it with the help of glitches and software windows.

GENTLE GEOMETRY

Vaporwave blogs occasionally exhibit minimalistic geometric shapes which usually are illuminated with a palette of gentle shades of pink and violet (Fig. 13–15). This category is closely connected to others because

geometry is rarely the only ingredient in texts, usually it is paralleled with other elements and is instituting a structure into visual compositions. Even though sometimes pictures have architectural shapes in them, but minimalistic design and specific camera framing of photos renders architecture more comparable to abstract geometric shapes than to shopping malls or city fragments. All the texts exposing gentleness through geometry are ascribed to this category. This element of Vaporwave aesthetics is one of the aspects signifying the multifaceted nature of movement's affective spectrum: gentleness is an antithesis to harshness expressed in other Vaporwave texts and appears on similar frequency.

While western patriarchal culture fetishizes bitter affections like interpersonal aggression, conflicts, lack of empathy in romance, when postmodern media machinery emphasizes bitter and abusive emotions,[45] Vaporwave is inviting to a romantic visual contact with gentle geometrical shapes and is advocating ceasure of pointless usage of energy for unrefined emotions. A Vaporwave participant is opposing aggression by openly actualizing a full spectrum of emotions, and is suggesting that both being neurotic and gentle are completely normal. This goes along with sociological insight into aesthetically expressive youth subcultures, which highlights that in the context of global networked capitalism they are more concerned with existence, not resistance as in post-war period (like punks), and seek to create new ways of living by remoralizing everyday life.[46] Such sympathies for tenderness could be seen as a political act of widening the range of accepted emotional states within Vaporwave community. This way the movement has a potential to become an emotional retreat where a suppressed teenager is able to explore his affective states without being judged.

The geometrical shapes themselves, despite their emotional capital, are concurrently signifying a nostalgic opposition to semantic chaos of postmodernity, where for Baudrillard, "Nothing moves any longer from cause to effect".[47] In other words – the all-encompassing electronic linkage and its companion – the information overload – eliminates the modernist continuity hence giving ground for a situation where everything is happening at the same time. Meanwhile, primitive geometrical shapes are communicating with lines and planes – in a stable and an easily readable way – thus indicating a nostalgic longing for clarity and a struggle against schizophrenic digital communication.



Fig. 13. Heavenly collage of neoclassical bust. Author unknown. Found on "✨" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-van-gogh.tumblr.com/post/169885498988



Fig. 14. Photograph of a skyscraper lost in haze. Author unknown. Found on "a e s t h e t i c" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-it.tumblr.com/post/179750578033/mvbxr-hazy

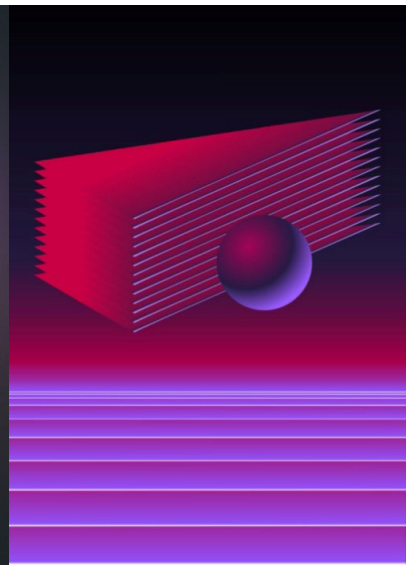


Fig. 15. PAbstract collage of geometric shapes by Pary Darian. Found on "a e s t h e t i c" Tumblr blog: https://vaporwave-it.tumblr.com/post/174009768201/parydarian-f-0-0-6-9-i-n-s-t-a

Finally, it's important to highlight that gentle aesthetics correspond to capitalistic corporate imagery where sensual pleasure is praised. While sometimes Vaporwave is harsh and nihilistic, here it shows its other face: the admiration of visual consumption practices. Pleasant and somewhat mainstream aesthetics presented here are embodying both a nostalgic longing for clarity, and a hedonistic desire to continue consumption. Interestingly enough, similar affect is reached audially as well, where slow sounds of '80s smooth jazz or elevator music are accompanied with reverb and various atmospheric sounds to bring a sense of hypnotic amusement. By being gentle both visually and audially, Vaporwave embodies both the nostalgic longing for modernist linearity, and the honest pleasure experienced by consuming products of the hyperreal.

DEPRESSIVE TEXTS

A minor portion of Vaporwave creations are directly inviting the spectator for a dialogue through explicit linguistic communication which is exceptional in its communicational forms and general affective atmosphere. Words are rarely just written on collages, usually they are being organically incorporated into them: for example, Windows error screen with a question "Are you sure you want to delete all feelings?", a window imitating video game with a text "Game over. You and all your friends are dead", or a VHS cassette with the title "Me crying 3 hours straight". A perfect example of this is a collage seen in Fig. 16 which is ingeniously utilizing various software windows to type in the text.

On one part, this semantic move acts as another dissimulation strategy, partially continuing what we saw with harsh distortions. In this case the attention is turned to the very phenomenology of using a computer: a member of computerized society is spending countless hours every day near the computer screen, thus usually words are reaching him as text framed in software windows. That is how our external brain – a computer – is communicating with us, and Vaporwave narratives put it into an explicitly cold position where it is laconically reporting the decay of reality. Depressive computer error screens are signifying a suffering of individual, social segregation, inability to fit in society, and attempts to apathetically distance oneself from surrounding problems. The individual is seeking empathy, he wants to institute an interpersonal contact, but all that speaks to him is a computer. These linguistically communicated conceptual aspects neither can or are presented in Vaporwave's music, which most

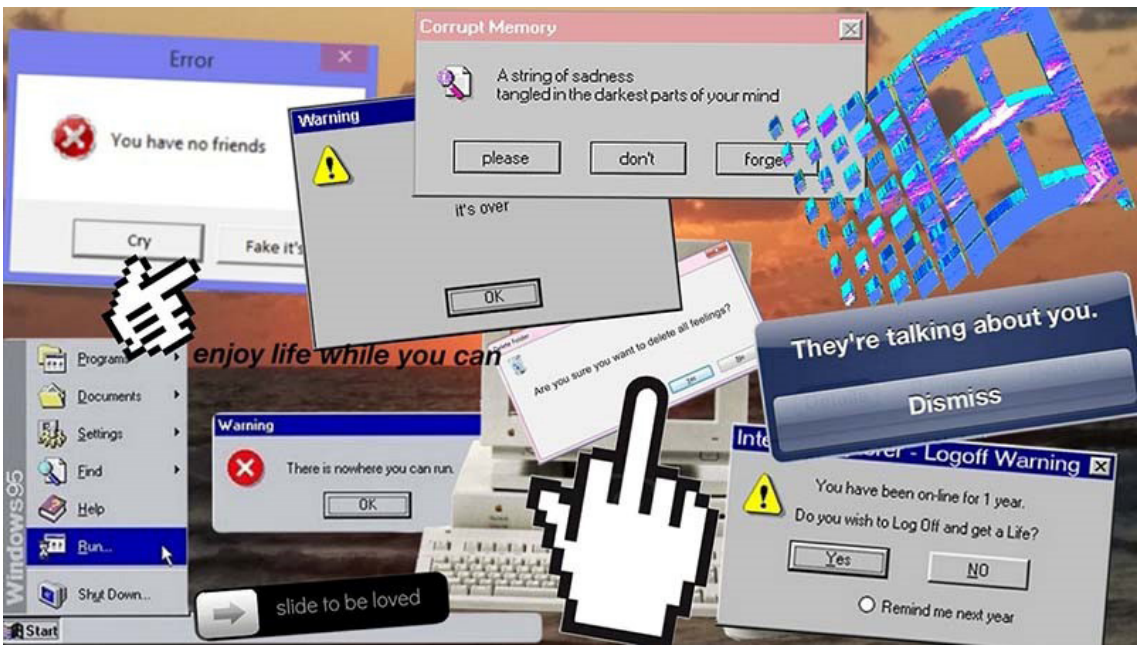


Fig. 16. Overwhelming flood of software dialogue windows. Author unknown. Found on "Stolen Vaporwave" Tumblr blog: https://stolenvaporwave.tumblr.com/post/165536582302/enjoy-life-while-you-can

of time doesn't even have lyrics, or if it does – uses samples from upbeat '80s pop music.

It's important to pay attention to the fact that these depressive texts are so to say, coming from the outside – from the software windows. The spectator is discouraged by the technology, not by people. Here paranoid and depressive statements and questions are coming from the computer screen, and most importantly – interaction possibilities with them are very limited – the spectator is symbolically allowed to click only on few predetermined buttons. More often than not, these buttons are greyed out, leaving only a single option possible. As Deleuze and Guattari had noted, the abstract machine of late capitalism captures desires, segments becomings, and organizes bodies by proliferating itself through the State, society and mass media.[48] Abstract machine in Deleuzoguattarian ontology is an overarching systematic body which can be grasped only through its effects, and yet, is always present, influencing everything from corporate business deals to everyday water-cooler talks. In the case of capitalism, few of these effects could be specified – proliferation of production regardless of environment, hierarchical capital flows and resulting wealth inequality, organization of identities, the rise of advertisement as a great form of art, proliferation of hyperreality, etc. Although Vaporwave software windows rarely expose certain consumption related messages and more speak about the psychological distress of loneliness or social rejection, they still are constructing a segmentationarist narrative: the individual has his reality verbally narrated to him by computer and gets very limited options for interaction. Here the situation is distilled into a hyperreal image where the melancholy is amplified by crystallizing it into short lines of text. And seemingly, it's the technology (or software in this case) – the condition of capitalist apparatus – which creates the emotional distress. The alienating nature of technology and resulting loneliness takes the body of Vaporwave software dialogues, which despotically impose their messages thus exposing a strict organization of individual lives in late capitalism.

ECSTATIC BRANDS

It's certain that Vaporwave is very much concerned with capitalism where brands play an integral part, thus it's natural to see various corporate logos and contemporary consumer goods occasionally taking part in collages (Fig. 17–19). They are important as means of crystalizing identity of the movement, despite their relative rarity in comparison with other categories. It's important to note that brands concerned here are contemporary, thus conveying different connotations and affective textures than old Playstation or Sega logos which are part of "nostalgic commodities" category.

Brand logos are being appropriated and recontextualized by distorting them with various digital artifacts, filling their silhouettes with colors or



Fig. 17. Michelangelo meets Versace. Author unknown. Found on "Aesthetics" Tumblr blog: https://neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com/post/168614482073



Fig. 18. Greco-Roman bust stitched together with Nike logo by aphrodite98wave. Found on "Stolen Vaporwave" Tumblr blog: https://stolenvaporwave.tumblr.com/post/157101072586/aphrodite98wave-n-i-k

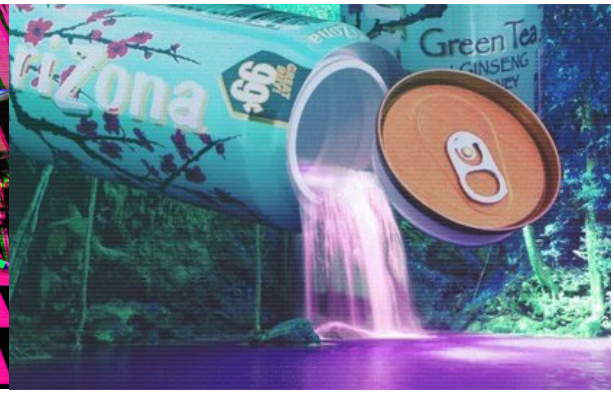


Fig. 19. 99 ct. Arizona tea presented as a glorious spring water. Author unknown. Found on "Aesthetics" Tumblr blog: https://neon-vaporwave-shit.tumblr.com/post/163089844148/vxp0rwxve-arizona

textures uncommon to them, adhering the logos to completely misbecome objects (like Nike on soda cans), and combining them with Japanese hieroglyphs. Here a graphic image protected by intellectual rights and certain respect within mass media is being laconically used just as another ingredient for collages, making it speak of all-encompassing brand fetish and ever so continuous chain of consumption within late capitalism. The Nike logo placed on a soda can is ready to become part of a consumer body, alluding to a postmodern identity constructed out of commodities and questioning the relationship between use, exchange and symbolic values as explored in Baudrillard.[49] For example, Arizona cold tea – a common guest in collages – is one of the cheapest drinks in USA, but both its packaging and its advertisements communicate an idyllic fantasy that it's something much more than a 99-cent drink. Here the use value is just of a cold drink, exchange value is minimal, yet symbolic value is baffled with hedonism and apparent quality of the drink. Vaporwave highlights the hyperreal nature of mainstream consumer goods by accelerating the hyperreality even further through its collage techniques. It's not that Arizona cold tea would be presented as a boring, mundane object, creating a certain antithesis to its advertisements, but on the contrary – Vaporwave creates an over-the-top visual narrative, an advertisement of an advertisement so to say – an ecstatic advertisement which is more advertising than advertisement and is way too kitsch even for mass media. While conventional ads seek to capture desires and increase consumption, they can't be too open about their plots and remain on the edge of ecstasy since contemporary consumers are more or less conscious about the conspiracy which is turned against them. However, this doesn't apply to Vaporwave, which by being conscious of problematic relationship between advertisements and the commodity, baffles the brand logos with extasy.

These conceptual aspects are once again unique to visual aesthetic of Vaporwave. Although extensive use of corporate Muzak music played in retail stores is a common ingredient of sonic Vaporwave expressions and has an apparent corporate connotation, it doesn't bring the same level of awareness with hyperreality of advertisement. The waterfall of Arizona tea is explicitly mocking consumer culture, which can't be sensed so vividly in music.

Such exaggeration of hyperreality opens a way to fixate the interpretation of Vaporwave as an essentially post-ironic movement, which both critiques and celebrates capitalism. Brands in Vaporwave are taking central positions of the collages, which turns this aggressive reappropriation into a visual ode to them. Moreover, ecstatic aestheticization of their logos in amateur Photoshop collages personalizes these brands and creates an even more intimate relationship between the consumer and a corporate body by reterritorializing it on the creator of the collage. Fetish of Arizona tea is another post-ironic gesture which on the one hand is signifying hollowness of consumerist culture and alienation from physical substance of a commodity, while on the other hand is connoting a pleasurable act of consumption and honest indulgence of symbolic values inherent to everyday life of capitalistic society. Ecstatic imagery of consumer goods in Vaporwave embodies the inescapability of consumer culture and the authentic bliss of consumption.

MECHANISM OF VAPORWAVE NOSTALGIA

The hyperreal narrative of Vaporwave is exceptional in its relationship to historicity. Although some visual texts of the movement use solely contemporary objects (as in "ecstatic brands" category), most of the time we see something nostalgic in them: from obsolete technologies to retro visual trends, from Greco-Roman sculptures to '80s architecture and interior design trends. It's fair to say that Vaporwave is utilizing "burned out" obsolete symbols from the past and poetic indications of dystopian futures to produce an affective attachment in the present. This is being done through a practice of a media archeology where old symbols are being retrieved in order to foster a critical reflection on both past and present. However, this archeological procedure is operating exclusively through feelings, not a rational thought[50] – symbolic narrative of Vaporwave is transporting the viewer to a hyperreal realm of the '80s by releasing and revoking the affective potentials inherent

in the appropriated texts. "Vaporwave – in its harvesting of the 1980s imaginary – can be understood as channeling the background hum of that era: the sounds and images through which a generation's affective capacities inevitably developed and meandered".[51] Gazing at the collages where old gaming consoles are juxtaposed with neon imagery, retro fonts, elements from the Windows 95 interface and analog-like visual glitches engulfs the viewer in familiar, yet distant; sentimental, yet melancholic; celebratory, yet dystopian affective atmosphere of hyperreal past, highlighting how much affective content these symbols still do have. It's largely a nostalgic move. Most of the observed symbol categories have nostalgic undertones: they are obvious in the "nostalgic commodities" category, but nostalgia could also be identified in "idyllic classics" as a longing for the sterile and utopian mythological existence of classical antiquity, in "melancholic landscapes" as a wistful gaze into the cityscapes or malls which are coming from the '80s or '90s, in "harsh distortions" as sentimentality for glitches and errors, and in "gentle geometry" as episodic remembrance and reinterpretation of '80s graphic design. It's obvious that nostalgia is dominating the affective territory of Vaporwave and is the main point of entry fostering a productive and passionate attachment to the movement. We explored some of the affective mechanisms of nostalgia within the "nostalgic commodities" category, highlighting how hyperreal imagery is implanting fabricated memories into the consumer's mind, hence causing one to remember times which had never existed. However, there's much more to be uncovered. Such affective attachment can be explained by unpacking the mechanism of nostalgia in a general sense.

To begin with, nostalgia is always experienced as a bittersweet emotion where a positive affect is felt simultaneously with a negative one, which always has a social dimension by grounding the self within a context of close others.[52] It is a "periodizing emotion"[53] which "approaches the past as a stable source of value and meaning"[54] and can be understood as a response "to the experience of discontinuity – to the sense that agency or identity are somehow blocked or threatened".[55] However, although nostalgia is romantic about the past, it does not necessarily oppose modernity, but rather comes together with it.[56] Modernity changed our experience of time in various substantial ways by both breaking down the signifying chains where "the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time",[57] and by producing "an impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references".[58] Contemporary nostalgia (and especially the one observed in Vaporwave) is a symptom of such transformations, where history is both presenting itself to the spectator in a collage-like fashion with the entire human past sits within the distance of a single Google search, and is exhausted the meanings of its symbols thus rendering itself vapid.

The experiential canvas of nostalgia always involves a "sense of historical decline and loss, involving a departure from some golden age".[59] It presents a narrative of idyllic prelapsarian world which was destabilized by a lapse event and transformed into a postlapsarian world – a version of existence missing essential features of "the good old days". Furthermore, nostalgia brings "a sense of the absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty"[60] and "sense of the loss of individual freedom and autonomy with the disappearance of genuine social relationships".[61] These aspects consolidate nostalgia as a highly personal emotional state where the self almost invariably figures as the protagonist in the narratives.[62] Finally, nostalgia brings a sense "of a loss of simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity".[63]

All of these facets are thoroughly prevalent in Vaporwave which is highly sentimental about the prelapsarian world – the seemingly straightforward and naïve '80s and '90s when capitalism was still observed as a system engulfing each individual in a consumerist euphoria without any regrets; where digital technology was a lot more primitive and tactile, a lot less invasive and deceptive, a lot more friendly and willing to obey the user's orders; where people were free to live in physical reality and to autonomously construct their own fates. This is most

obvious within "nostalgic commodities", "idyllic classics" and "gentle geometry" symbol categories, each of which display naivety. The nostalgic narrative of Vaporwave is continued by a mysterious lapse event: it seems that something happened around the 2000s, a time which is absent from Vaporwave texts. As Baudrillard famously said, "the year 2000 will not perhaps take place",[64] this way prosaically polemicizing about historical blockage in postmodern society where all future imaginations had been exhausted and where all progress had already been calculated, thus effacing the unexpectable and possibly liberating sociocultural evolution. In this case Vaporwave illustrates the pathological reappropriation of previous decades and a suspension of time. The possible precipitators of such situation are disclosed within "melancholic landscapes" and "ecstatic brands" symbol categories which imply that the catastrophe was caused by the rise of late capitalism where shopping malls became a monumental part of people's lives, and brands departed from the commodity state to become quasi-religious means of constructing the postmodern identity. Obviously, these trends were also present in earlier years, but the difference is in the consumer's mind which lost its naivety and became highly critical about the prevalence of capitalism because, with the advent of the new millennium, 9/11 attacks and the 2008 financial crisis, the promised land of blissful consumption appeared to be a huge lie. Now the COVID-19 pandemic turns into a cynical icing on the cake of pessimism, which highlights the inevitability of catastrophes despite the advertised utopian visions of capitalism. Vaporwave finalizes its nostalgic scenery with a sense of nihilism targeted on the postlapsarian world, what is exposed mainly through "harsh distortions", "depressive texts" and "ecstatic brands" symbol categories. That also implies that another lapse event was a rise of digital technology to ubiquity. Here reality is presented as a cage full of alienation, control and loss of personal authority. Everything is distorted and hyperreal, the computer screen becomes the only window into reality and the user is left to roam within deserted virtual plazas looking for one more dopamine hit released with opening another soda can, or a digital equivalent of it – refreshing the Facebook page in order to see whether your posts had accumulated more "likes".

Such narrative becomes affectively relevant mainly because of a strong sense of change, loneliness and loss of meaning in life within postmodern society. Nostalgia is induced the most often as a result of negative affect, loneliness and lack of social support being the most potent triggers.[65] Furthermore, nostalgia "facilitates coping with existential threat",[66] thus it can be understood as a symptom of loss of meaning in people's lives, and a means of establishing the meaning. Nostalgia situates the person in a historical narrative, facilitates continuity between past and present selves, enforces the rise of positive memories, motivates, boosts optimism and sparks inspiration, which enables one to establish a sense of stable identity – a one which always has similar attributes and was positively embraced in the past, implying that current state of internal/external struggle is temporary.[67] "Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals",[68] thus it's not a big surprise that it becomes prominent as an artistic strategy and political rhetoric during various revolutions or revolution attempts: from the 18th-century French revolution to the industrial revolution, from rapid modernization of western world at the beginning of the 20th century. to the rise of consumer society in the '70s. Even such works as "The Dialectics of Enlightenment" by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorono or "Simulacra and Simulation" by J. Baudrillard, both of which are cited in this essay, could be interpreted as nostalgic longings for authentic pre-modern existence or pre-photographic media conditions respectively. Finally, the current dominant situation within humanities (including this essay) could be seen as conveying a nostalgic narrative, since the top three most cited authors of books in humanities are M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu and J. Derrida,[69] all of which are coming from the same postmodern French tradition which displays a heavy critique on postmodern societies. These authors are reacting to the rise of capitalism, the spread of neoliberalism and the pervasiveness of newly conceived electronic and

digital media technologies with underlying sentimentality towards a pre-modern existence.

The fact that nostalgia is a symptom of a society which is faced with loneliness, lack of social support, existential crises, historical decline, sense of loss of personal wholeness and individual freedom, explains why Vaporwave has such a big and lasting support. The aesthetical narrative of the movement provides a chance to mentally travel to hyperreal "good old days" when physical tactility was part of everyday existence, when the internet was still just a utopian dream and all the pathologies associated with it were unimaginable, when digital media and consumerism were still seen as the peak level success of western civilization. The mentally lost individual who feels how the control of one's life is falling out of one's hands finds refuge within the affective territory of Vaporwave which creates an imaginary retreat within hyperreal times when everything used to be slow and simple.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of symbols found in Vaporwave texts brought to the surface a number of interesting elements welding this movement together: Vaporwave participants sense how reality is mutating into hyperreality, are suspicious about surrounding information and articulate a nostalgic longing for simpler, pre-digital modes of existence. They expressively oppose general conventions by disclosing their emotions and insights without hesitation in texts deliberately filled with digital errors, thus generating an extremely dreamlike affective atmosphere dominated by nostalgia. Multilayered symbolism of the movement can be summarized as 1) nostalgically challenging visual conventions through 2) harsh technical quality, 3) opposing codes of behavior, 4) open depression and 5) melancholy, thus 6) exposing the doubts and alienation of the individual imprisoned in postmodern society. The '80s and '90s here become an imaginary land of simplicity which provides an asylum for a nostalgic individual who has his identity, sense of community and control over his life threatened by ubiquitous digital technologies and increased proliferation of capitalist mode of production. Nostalgia consolidates a dominating affective texture and the main entry point of affective attachment of Vaporwave.

However, Vaporwave's relationship with capitalism remains vague. On the one hand, Vaporwave seems to criticize capitalism by radically distorting its imagery as in "harsh distortions" or by displaying unsettling messages in software dialogues as in "depressive texts", while on the other, the movement celebrates consumption in "ecstatic brands" or "nostalgic commodities". It's fair to say that Vaporwave is about capitalism, but never precisely pessimistic or elated. The visual narrative of the movement raises more questions than answers by symbolically polemicizing the hyperreal nature of contemporary society and inducing a nostalgic longing for a past which had never existed. Vaporwave is a post-ironic art movement which embodies the inescapability of consumer culture, sincere pleasure of consumption and blockage in history.

In comparison with musical expressions, Vaporwave's imagery largely corresponds to it affectively: just as music, it is both melancholic, harsh or gentle at times, presents a post-ironic mocking of capitalism, and most importantly – is extremely nostalgic. However, visual aspect of the movement embodies unique conceptual aspects: 1) it highlights obsolete technological goods as central artefacts carrying the nostalgic sentimentalities for times passed; 2) it reflects on premodern values, questions identity and extends the nostalgic narrative through the use of classical sculpture; 3) it opens a possibility to explore late capitalism through its architecture; 4) it shows the backstage of digital production through glitches and software windows hence establishing an intimate dialogue with hyperreal; 5) it linguistically explores the oppressive nature of capitalism and technology it produces, which draws the individual to a social withdrawal and depression; 6) it vividly mocks the advertisement culture of late capitalism both criticizing and appreciating middle-class consumerism. The visual face of Vaporwave extends the complex analysis of late capitalist culture conducted in its music, and allows to explore various conceptual aspects which are difficult to embody audially.

Although more than 10 years had passed since the inception of Vaporwave in early 2010s, it is still relevant since similar nostalgic and post-ironic narratives are extremely prevalent in sociocultural landscape of the 2nd decade of new millennium. Nostalgically aestheticized TV series or movies such as "Stranger Things", Marvel movie series or Start Wars revivals gather huge fanbases; retrofuturistic video games such as "Cyberpunk" or "No Man's Sky" are selling tens of millions of copies; visual and sonic replicas of '70s and '80s psychedelic rock in "Tame Impala", "Temples" or "Flash Voyage" have a huge listener scene; finally, NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) – the latest trend in online art – are a nostalgic attempt to restore the pre-digital materiality through the use of blockchain technology. Also, there are a lot of examples where Vaporwave aesthetics clearly influenced pop culture (as in Rihanna,[70] Lil Nas X,[71] Tommy Cash[72] or MTV.OS[73]). The complex semantics of Vaporwave explore the condition of postmodernity and present a unique self-awareness with situation we are in. It's a tool to situate ourselves in a wider sociocultural landscape, which speaks of inescapability of capitalism and the collapse of history. It's an accelerated and exaggerated form of hyperreal art which instead of looking for escape routes, celebrates hyperreality and treats our disappearance as an art form. Only future will tell whether the analysis conducted by Vaporwave is correct and we really have no chance to escape capitalism. But even if it is true, Vaporwave suggests that we at least will be able to comfort ourselves with an ever-increasing plethora of consumer goods and mass media production, which will reach us through digital media in our everlasting solitude.

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HIPERTIKROS NOSTALGIJOS ŠLOVINIMAS: VIZUALINIŲ *VAPORWAVE* ARTEFAKTŲ KATEGORIZACIJA IR ANALIZĖ

Santrauka

Vaporwave interneto klajoklio dėmesį patraukia grubiais, techniškai primityvia maniera suklijuotais koliažais. Tai kultūrinis fenomenas, kuris ir atsirado, ir yra aktyvus išskirtinai tik internete. Bendrame interneto kultūros kontekste *Vaporwave* išsiskiria estetika dėl dominuojančių violetinės ir rožinės spalvų, techniškai primityvios kokybės tekstų, fetišo 8-ojo ir 9-ojo dešimtmečių prekėms ir ryškios nostalgijos. Daugiausia *Vaporwave* buvo tyrinėtas kaip muzikos žanras ar sociologinis fenomenas, vizualinį judėjimo aspektą paliekant nuošalėje. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti koncepcinius *Vaporwave* vizualikoje įkūnytus aspektus, trumpai palyginti juos su *Vaporwave* muzika ir atskleisti nostalgijos mechanizmą kaip pirminį judėjimo traukos tašką. Interpretacija daugiausia remiasi Jean Baudrillard hipertikrovės teorija bei hermeneutiniais interpretavimo principais. Analizei buvo pasirinkti penki Tumblr tinklaraščiai. Hermeneutinės tekstų analizės eigoje išryškėjo septynios skirtingos simbolių kategorijos, kurios vienos nuo kitų skiriasi generuojamu afektu: nostalgiškos prekės, idiliška klasika, melancholiški peizažai, grubūs iškraipymai, švelni geometrija, depresyvūs tekstai ir ekstatiški prekių ženklai. Kiekviena iš kategorijų šiame straipsnyje yra detaliai išnagrinėta, galiausiai apibendrinant daugiasluoksnę judėjimo simboliką. Ji gali būti apibūdinta kaip metanti iššūkį vizualinėms konvencijoms per afektinį nostalgijos aparatą, grubią techninę kokybę ir opozicinius elgesio kodus, pasireiškiančius atvirai demonstruojama depresija ir melancholija, taip galiausiai eksponuojant postmodernioje visuomenėje įkalinto individo dvejones. 8-asis ir 9-asis dešimtmečiai čia tampa hipertikrais fantazijų pasauliais, kuriuose prieglobstį rasti gali nostalgiją jaučiantis individas. Lyginant su muzika, *Vaporwave* vizualika išryškina technologijas kaip centrinius su nostalgija susijusius artefaktus, įveda naujus būdus analizuoti vėlyvojo kapitalizmo vartotojų kultūrą, išryškina intymų dialogą su hipertikrove. Straipsnyje teigiama, jog *Vaporwave* yra postironiškas meno judėjimas, kuris tuo pačiu metu ir šlovina, ir kritikuoja kapitalizmą, galiausiai aiškiai nepasakydamas, ar yra būdų pabėgti nuo sistemos ir apskritai ar tų būdų reikėtų ieškoti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Vaporwave*, interneto kultūra, afektas, nostalgija, hipertikrovė, simuliakras.

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