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Looking for Life Amidst the Dead Internet – The Philosophy of vaporwave

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Abstract: This paper explores vaporwave not merely as a musical or visual aesthetic, but as a school of thought that reflects on late-stage capitalism, digital saturation, and the erosion of authentic human experience. Deliberately stylized with a lowercase "v," vaporwave channels collective nostalgia for the once-promised optimism of the 1990s internet era, transforming existential malaise into a form of hopeful critique. Drawing connections between early 2000s post-9/11 New York party culture, nerdcore music, blogging, and archival efforts such as The Internet Archive, this study situates vaporwave as a decentralized school of thought emerging from digital spaces rather than physical salons.

Through analysis of its aesthetics, such as glitch art, corporate iconography, and ambient soundscapes, this essay demonstrates how vaporwave repurposes the artifacts of consumer culture to critique commodification, algorithmic control, and the loss of communal experience. Mainstream media examples, including Lost in Translation (2003), Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), and Mr. Robot (2015–2019), illustrate how its philosophical framework resonates beyond niche online communities.

Ultimately, vaporwave functions as a collective act of memory and resistance, reclaiming the cultural promises of a lost digital utopia while simultaneously resisting commodification and satire. By articulating the movement's philosophical tenets, which include critiques of capitalism, the use of nostalgia to resist algorithmic control, collective longing, and digital engagement, this paper positions vaporwave as a unique, emergent lens for understanding contemporary society's relationship with memory, technology, and culture.

Introduction

Vaporwave is more than just 90s nostalgia and glitchy music. While often described as merely an internet aesthetic (Harper, 2012; Morrissey, 2021), I argue that it is in fact a school of thought that critiques late-stage capitalism and the digital saturation of modern Western society, using nostalgia, digital decay, and repurposed aesthetics to reflect on lost futures and the erosion of authentic human experience. When this paper uses the term "school of thought," it is referring to a coherent set of philosophical principles that shape how vaporwave artists and audiences engage with society by critically examining nostalgia, digital culture, and late-stage capitalism. This essay builds on prior research in nostalgia studies (Boym, 2001; Ballam-Cross, 2021), cultural memory, and digital aesthetics, including glitch and post-digital media (Grau, 2011; Morrissey, 2021).

The philosophy of vaporwave emerged from a subsect of society's collective longing for a future that never arrived – typically Millennials and Gen Xers – embodying the loneliness and disappointment behind our collective "what if." Those of us who grew up before the internet became ubiquitous remember the worldwide connectivity it was supposed to bring (it was, after all, called the "World Wide Web"). Instead of uniting us as a global family and expanding everyone's worldview through unlimited knowledge, we ended up with algorithms that silo us according to our preferred flavor of propaganda. Vaporwave takes that collective malaise and, through music, glitch art, and "vibes," asks us to reconsider memory, desire, and the meaning of culture in an overly curated world.

In a world with amnesia, vaporwave's collective memory and nostalgia is a form of rebellion (Grafton, 2016). Like vapor, the movement itself is subtle; it holds a mirror (rather, a scrying mirror) to society as a way to say "look inside yourselves and remember what you once believed your future was going to hold."

Vaporwave is our way of pushing back against the status quo by reminding everyone of the future we were collectively promised. To clarify, by "our," I refer to the community of vaporwave creators and theorists who consciously explore and repurpose digital and cultural artifacts to critique consumer culture. As this essay is the first to argue that vaporwave is a school of thought, members of this "community" may not yet realise they are a part of it. However, I propose that key figures include musician James Ferraro and digital artist Sarah Zucker, whose work exemplifies both the sonic and visual dimensions of vaporwave, as well as theorists such as Paul Ballam-Cross, who analyses the genre's engagement with nostalgia and collective memory, and Tanner Grafton, whose work discusses vaporwave's relationship with capitalism and the commodification of nostalgia (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Grafton, 2016).

Vaporwave is not inherently critical of capitalism; it is critical of what capitalism has become – late-stage capitalism (Nowak & Whelan, 2018). Just as Dadaism was created as a reaction to the horrors of the First World War and a rebuttal to the Enlightenment movement, I propose that vaporwave is a deliberate retaliation against the sterile banality of late-stage capitalism and algorithmic groupthink. If the Internet is dead, and late-stage capitalism killed it, then vaporwave is its zombified corpse hopelessly wandering around and looking for a cure.

Origin Story – From Post 9/11 Party Kids to Prophetic Archivists

This analysis proposes that the seeds of the vaporwave movement were planted in the post-9/11, early-2000s New York party scene, when young celebrities made partying and rehab visits part of their public personas. While the milieu and aesthetics of that party culture and vaporwave are markedly different, both involve deliberate consumption as a form of ironic rebellion against the status quo. The early 2000s New York party scene was the last large-scale attempt to collectively claw back the sense of fun and optimism from the 90s that society was (rightfully) worried we lost after 9/11. The scene was so heavily publicized that even teenagers growing up in small, backwoods Canadian towns could participate in it by emulating the styles of their favorite celebrities, following along through the mass consumption of fast fashion, gossip blogs, and decorating their Myspace pages accordingly.

The emerging technologies available to these “party kids” were a major reason their scene achieved such popularity and cultural reach. Although much of the documentation of this era came from paparazzi and entertainment media exploiting the antics of young celebrities, certain figures embraced their notoriety and leaned into the rumors surrounding them. Paris Hilton, for instance, was well aware of her reputation as a party girl. She took that reputation and, when the stolen sex tape *1 Night in Paris* was released, distributed by Red Light District Video, she transformed the scandal into an opportunity to amplify her media persona (Salomon & Hilton, 2004). I propose that this commodification of selfhood that defined this scene directly informed vaporwave’s later fascination with consumer imagery and artificiality.

Hilton’s early-2000s rise exemplifies the logic of postmodern celebrity, in which irony, spectacle, and self-commodification merge within an increasingly participatory media environment. Prior to the 2003 leak of *1 Night in Paris* (Salomon & Hilton, 2004), Hilton was viewed as an ephemeral socialite whose notoriety stemmed primarily from her proximity to elite nightlife scenes. The leak, which was disseminated across early file-sharing sites and emerging video platforms, ironically provided the infrastructure for her transformation into a global persona. With the rise of YouTube and the viral spread of easily shareable, pirate-able media, Hilton and other “scene” figures of the mid-2000s could shape their public image by using the networks that once objectified them. Rather than retreating from scandal, Hilton mobilized it, launching *The Simple Life* (Hilton & Richie, 2003–2007) and crafting a self-consciously artificial identity that parodied and perpetuated her tabloid image.

In this way, Hilton embodied the “hyperreal” celebrity that Baudrillard (1994) describes – famous for being famous, a copy without an original. This dynamic parallels the aesthetic logic of vaporwave, which Glitsos (2018) argues repurposes corporate Muzak and nostalgic sonic detritus to expose the empty promises of late-stage capitalist consumerism. Both Hilton’s self-branding and vaporwave’s retro-ironic soundscapes transform shallow commercial artifacts into vehicles of self-aware cultural critique, revealing a media landscape where authenticity and simulation collapse into the same loop of endless reproduction.

Ultimately, however, the party kids grew up, and the scene fizzled during – or perhaps because of – the 2008 economic crash. Global surveillance continued to increase, the war in the Middle East dragged on, and people lost hope. In short, the vibe shifted, and nothing fun emerged to take its place. Cue the subtle rise of vaporwave’s early days, as it began to appear as an aesthetic in online forums and on social media.

Additionally, we should also credit the early days of the nerdcore scene for vaporwave’s embrace of DIY creation and the repurposing of corporate materials. Some background: Nerdcore (sometimes referred to as Chiptune) is a niche genre of hip-hop that focuses on nerdy and internet-centric themes. Some of its most prominent artists include MC Frontalot, mc chris, and MC Lars. Nerdcore was the first genre since punk to take commercial trends and turn them on their head, though it did so with ironic humor and often in celebration of the material it remixed, rather than with the critical stance of vaporwave or punk. Nerdcore was more “we love Disney”-vibes versus vaporwave’s “Disney is a cancer on society”-vibes.

While they did not recognize it at the time, the same participatory online culture that fueled nerdcore and scene subcultures also laid the groundwork for vaporwave’s philosophical turn. Angsty bloggers on LiveJournal, Tumblr poets, meme creators, and those that decided to start archiving the internet (i.e., The Internet Archive and Floppy

Totaal) were some of the first people to (unknowingly) start participating in vaporwave as a school of thought. As the optimism of the early internet era began to wane, these communities shifted from playful self-expression to a more introspective tone. Their collective malaise and foreboding sense of something being wrong “let’s save/document this just in case” would be the first hints that our society was/is heading in a dark direction and not towards the bright unified future that was promised to us in the early days of the internet. Despite facing mockery at the time, I would like to argue that some of those “sad emo kids” (now well into adulthood) were vaporwave's first philosophers.

Although vaporwave has existed as an artistic and musical genre since the 2010s, one reason it has not yet been considered a school of thought is likely the lack of physical unification among its followers. Unlike the great philosophical and art movements of the past – such as the Russian Futurists and their salons, or Critical Theory at the University of Frankfurt am Main – vaporwave has no “third place” hangouts. Its participants connect online, lurking in now decaying forums and bot-infested social media platforms, hoping to cross digital paths with another human like themselves, if only to feel less alone. The Dead Internet Theory is very real.

For context, the Dead Internet Theory is that theory that the majority of internet traffic is made of bots and rehashed AI content. While the internet was once a place full of unique and seemingly unlimited websites to discover, the Dead Internet Theory also proposes that users are now cut off and unable to discover the majority of new “content” because of firewalls and algorithmic siloing. As an example, think back to the search results that Google would provide in the 2010s. The results would be in the thousands, if not millions. Now, when you search for something, there will be very few results past the first two or so pages. And what does show up, is often an ad for a product or regurgitated AI content pulled from sites that rely on news aggregators.

Aesthetically, vaporwave often includes low-resolution graphics, pastel color palettes, 3D-rendered corporate logos, Greek and Roman statues, 90s mall imagery, and glitch effects. Its entire visual style is built on a sense of irony, nostalgia, and digital decay. As described by Beauchamp (2016) in *Esquire*:

> Visual jokes, of course—little tiny ghosts of the failed promises of consumerism (were we ever really going to find true happiness in a bottle of iced tea?), its cheapness and vulgarity—that point us towards where the name vaporwave itself comes from. Like the music, the name is a hybrid. It's a combination of the term ‘vaporware,’ a corporate advertising term for products that are advertised for release but are never actually intended to make it to market.

In order to make my point that vaporwave is truly a school of thought hidden amongst a collection of ironic musicians, internet-based artists and philosophical bloggers, let's compare two glitch artists, Kurtis Peskleway (@ethereal_zephyr) and Sarah Zucker (@thesarahshow). Kurtis and Sarah both use different mediums to create their art, yet both explore themes which are essential to vaporwave such as nostalgia and digital decay. Kurtis leans into fractal-esque graphics created by using a series of editing programs to continually modify a previously created picture until it glitches into something new and unrecognizable from its original form. On the other hand, Sarah uses both analog and digital techniques to create GIFs, video installations, and augmented reality filters. Her work often features distorted faces, VHS effects, and classical references, but with a more personal and interactive edge. To compare the two, Kurtis’ art is meant to be enjoyed at an individual level, as compared to

Sarah Zucker's art, which is more audience dependent. To put it more simply, one style is like a Netflix show you watch intensely with headphones on, while the other is like a comforting sitcom that you watch with loved ones to laugh at together.

Together, Kurtis Peskleway and Sarah Zucker reveal the multifaceted nature of vaporwave. Kurtis channels a quiet, dreamlike reflection on digital obsolescence and the ephemeral nature of memory, while Sarah emphasises interactive, identity-driven experiences that engage audiences directly. Their work highlights the introspective and participatory dimensions of the vaporwave movement, capturing vaporwave's critique of consumerism, its fascination with digital nostalgia, and its capacity to explore the emotional and philosophical currents of our increasingly mediated lives.

Mainstream culture occasionally tries to adopt vaporwave vibes, but it never quite sticks. Vaporwave isn't inherently anti-capitalist; in fact, it often evokes nostalgia for the communal consumerism of malls and food courts. Yet, in an almost perfectly ironic twist, it may be the only movement that has resisted full commercialization, simply because it's built from stolen corporate sounds and repurposed commercial aesthetics. As the aesthetic trends of vaporwave have begun to fade from the mainstream, its philosophical dimension has started to crystallize. What remains is a deliberate reflection on the emptiness of consumer culture, the erosion of authentic experience, and the alienation embedded in a digitized world. It's as if vaporwave practitioners are thinking: "Capitalism isn't looking! Quick! Let's create a philosophy before they steal this from us too!" The music, visuals, and glitches that on the surface feel like playful nostalgia actually serve as vehicles for a critique of algorithmic control, digital saturation, and the loss of futures we were promised but never received. In this way, vaporwave has evolved from a fleeting aesthetic into a cohesive, if loosely organized, school of thought.

Case Study: Philosophical Defiance in Practice

While vaporwave's philosophical stance emerges from broad cultural dynamics (as outlined above) its principles take material shape in the work of individual artists who, although using different mediums, have experienced similar societal frustrations and nostalgic longing that vaporwave as a school of thought unites into a shared cultural sentiment.

Let's once again look at the work of the aforementioned vaporwave artists, Kurtis Peskleway and Sarah Zucker, and how their work illustrates vaporwave's philosophical resistance in practice. Peskleway's work often begins with preexisting images that are repeatedly run through layers of digital modification until their original form is entirely unrecognizable. When viewed through the lens of vaporwave, degradation in glitch art seemingly asks the question of "what is left, when the original has been replaced?" In contrast, Zucker's work, while aesthetically similar, involves using digital and analog technology to create new pieces that never had an original; her work uses analog video distortion, looping GIFs, interactive filters, and gallery-scale projection to create art that is new but still culturally familiar. While late-stage capitalism encourages the consumption of pristine unrealistically-perfect media, Zucker embraces imperfection.

In order to expand on this idea of new art versus remixed art, we need to quickly explain the definition of simulacra. *Simulacra* is a word which was popularized by philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard in his 1981 publication, *Simulacra and Simulation*. As simulation refers to something fake, simulacra refers to something whose original no longer exists.

This essay argues that both Peskleway and Zucker's art – and vaporwave art in general – is the opposite of simulacra. While simulacra refers to images or representations that replace real things, vaporwave embraces and exposes decay in both cultural and commercial settings. Simulacra aims to erase and replace the imperfect with false versions, while vaporwave rejects the fakeness and holds a mirror to our ever-increasingly commercial society.

Ironically, while some could consider Paris Hilton to be an example of simulacra due to her deliberately crafted public persona, I argue that in the early days of her public life, Paris Hilton was a proto-vaporwave figure and that her career decisions in the early 2000s were inline with vaporwave's defiant philosophy. I believe this because of Hilton's master-level ability to manipulate and control the public's perception through her use of social media and technology. She was the embodiment of the cultural shift that vaporwave later archived and critiqued.

Hilton's career in the early 2000s hinged on an exaggerated simulation of identity: an artificial persona constructed from tabloid scandals, viral repetition, and commodified vulnerability. She was the first mainstream celebrity whose notoriety was not because of traditional media but due to the same kinds of digital reproduction that vaporwave later embraces. By leaning into the artificial, Hilton was the first to treat identity as a commodity; she didn't market herself as Paris Hilton the reality star or Paris Hilton the artist, she marketed herself as simply Paris Hilton. While that in itself isn't "vaporwave" – in fact, one could argue that commodification of the self is actually incredibly reflective of late-stage capitalism – this essay's argument is that Hilton's tongue-in-cheek nature of turning her public persona into an affable and likable character, is in fact incredibly vaporwave. She not only satirized herself before anyone else could, she made it so that no one could replace her *but her.*

All of that being said, due to her shift in the 2020's to embrace AI and digital performances, as well as her increasingly vast array of corporate "Paris Hilton" branded products, I do not consider her to be a part of the modern vaporwave scene.

Vaporwave's defiance is subtle and open-ended, and often beautiful, but it is defiance nonetheless. Together, Kurtis Peskleway, Sarah Zucker, and Paris Hilton articulate vaporwave's philosophical defiance by showing technological decay instead of hiding it and embracing imperfection, and in Hilton's case, by acknowledging the artificial instead of faking authenticity.

Why it Resists Commodification

The strength of vaporwave's aesthetics is that it can never be fully commodified, because most of it uses stolen or remixed corporate content. Remixing corporate content constitutes a form of resistance insofar as it challenges conventional authorship, ownership, and commercial absorption. Because parody, irony, and critique are already embedded in the genre, vaporwave may also resist straightforward satire; attempts to mock it often

reproduce the very processes it already employs. Like U.S. Justice Potter Stewart once said of pornography, vaporwave is hard to define, but you know it when you see it. Resistant to simple categorization, vaporwave functions almost entirely as a mirror – its reflection calling out, “Look at yourself. Look at how you used to be. How did you get here? Don’t you wish you could go back?”

This quality makes vaporwave strange to write about. Beauchamp (2016) observes:

> How do you write about music that most people have never heard of and that fans claim doesn’t exist any more? Or just as important: why? I think the continued relevance of the genre is explained in the history of vaporwave itself. Vaporwave arose in reaction to huge economic and social forces that are still very much a part of our lives: globalization, runaway consumerism, and manufactured nostalgia chief among them. There is no other kind of music that explicitly concerns itself with these aspects of our zeitgeist. And if vaporwave still matters, it’s because those things do also.

Another reason vaporwave is difficult to commodify is the anonymity of many of its artists. Tanner (2016) argues that “vaporwave's ultimate defacement of the culture industry is the lack of transparency between artist moniker and producer.” Coleman (2025) similarly notes that:

> This lack of information is rather telling, as it explains a lot about the movement’s core aesthetic values. It is precisely because of vaporwave’s exclusively virtual emergence and existence that researchers simultaneously face an abundance and a drought of information. Indeed, the excess of data provided by the internet can easily drown out important details: a quick Google search of the term ‘vaporwave’ yields around 28,400,000 results.

In fact, it is common for vaporwave musicians to share their work under multiple names. Tanner (2016) continues:

> This sort of prolific anonymity allows a burgeoning community to appear much more expansive than it is and to also cement the specific traits of a genre early in its development ... What makes vaporwave unique as a new method of Internet-produced punk is its relationship to the sights and sounds of unrestrained capitalism. Vaporwave spits in the face of late-stage capitalism and mocks the very methods used to sell us the things we don't need, all while problematizing our understanding of history.

Vaporwave persists not because of its sound and aesthetics, but because of our complicated relationship with consumer culture. Comprised of imagery of shopping malls, think pieces about the ironic collective emptiness of modern society, and songs composed of stolen commercial jingles and the ghostly ambience of 90s food courts and department store noises, vaporwave is both a critique of capitalism and a longing for the communal spaces it created. That is why it is so much more than a disposable aesthetic fad; vaporwave won't sell out, because it cannot be fully commodified. It will continue to linger in the ether of our slowly decaying Dead Internet until the next global calamity happens and we end up in caves.

What is the Philosophy of vaporwave?

Vaporwave asks the fundamental question: what happened to the future we were promised, and where did things go awry? Scholars and cultural critics have suggested that Western society experienced a decline in optimism in the early 2000s, shaped by social, technological, and economic forces (Coleman, 2025; Beauchamp, 2016). I would suggest, more pointedly though, that the decline in optimism was not caused by *general* economic issues but the stifling and pervasive surveillance which began to appear following the 9/11 attacks and the US’s introduction of the Patriot Act, which sent authoritarian ripples throughout the rest of the Western world. While the

difference in the pre- and post-9/11 world is difficult to describe to someone who has grown up in a world where constant surveillance is normal, vaporwave music can capture that collective longing that elder Millennials and Gen Xers feel.

While it is nearly impossible to describe in words how the world felt prior to the post-9/11 surveillance world we now live in, vaporwave music somehow manages to capture that through its haunting use of ambient noises and echoes. As musician and vaporwave pioneer James Ferraro explained about his album's use of ringtones (Ferraro, 2011):

> One person might consider it more artful and someone [else] is just going to be into the music aspect of it. ... I think the comforting sound comes from the fact that there is this sort of comfort or hope or something embedded in all these ring tones. It's total sonic psychological behavior control. You get a text and the tone is very happy and optimistic. The infrastructure of that stuff is promoting this utopia—promising this world of hope.

In earlier reflections on consumer culture, I argued that shopping malls functioned not merely as sites of commerce but as social and cultural spaces in which middle-class North Americans could participate actively in capitalism rather than being passive consumers (Good, 2025). Vaporwave extends this critique by repurposing the sounds and imagery of malls, department stores, and corporate environments, transforming them into artifacts of cultural reflection.

The philosophical dimensions of vaporwave are interwoven yet distinct. At its core, the movement *critiques late-stage capitalism*, reflecting on the emptiness, commodification, and hollow promises of consumer culture – ambient sounds and repurposed corporate imagery underscore these contradictions. *Nostalgia functions as a lens to challenge algorithmic control*, revealing how digital technologies silo, manipulate, and mediate human experience rather than foster meaningful connections. The philosophy of vaporwave embodies *collective longing and generational ennui*, particularly among Millennials and Gen Xers whose imagined or promised futures never materialized, externalizing a shared "what if" that interrogates unrealised societal trajectories. And despite the absence of formal physical spaces**,** *participants engage in philosophical critique via digital environments*, forming a decentralized, emergent "school of thought" rather than a conventional movement.

If one looks for mainstream media that may not be explicitly labeled as vaporwave but align with the philosophical framework outlined here, the films *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004), as well as the television series *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015–2019), exemplify the vaporwave ethos. Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) conveys existential loneliness and urban alienation while subtly critiquing capitalism through the experiences of Bill Murray's character, an American actor hired to appear in a Japanese whiskey commercial. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) explores memory erasure as a metaphor for the ways technology shapes human experience and incorporates themes of nostalgia and fleeting hope during moments of melancholy. Similarly, Esmail's *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019) presents a direct critique of capitalism and corporate overreach across its narrative arc, following a hacker group's attempt to subvert a monolithic corporation known as "E Corp," perceived by the protagonist Elliot as "Evil Corp." The series' perspective told primarily through Elliot – who experiences dissociative identity disorder – frequently blurs the

boundaries between digital and physical realities as well as between actual memories and the lingering influence of the past. While these texts have not been widely categorized as vaporwave, their thematic and aesthetic qualities resonate with the movement's ethos, representing my interpretive contribution.

To boil it down, vaporwave's ethos is… *We have been lied to, and we're sad as hell.* Even as many of the artifacts of our pre-9/11 society were corporate creations, vaporwave has repurposed them to reflect on societal loss, unfulfilled promises, and the continuing negotiation between humans and the technological, algorithmically mediated world. By appropriating and reconfiguring these corporate iconographies (even if it involves breaking copyright laws), vaporwave practitioners articulate a philosophical stance: despite the failures of late capitalism, the futures we were promised are not entirely beyond reach.

Why vaporwave Matters - Reclaiming Our Collective Memory

The fact that vaporwave matters becomes painfully evident when we consider contemporary cultural conditions: loneliness has become widespread, the Internet is increasingly algorithmically mediated, censorship is pervasive, copyright laws tend to favor corporations over creators, and a general sense of hopelessness affects large segments of the population. Vaporwave's collective nostalgia offers a way to remember a time that felt better – not perfect, but imbued with hope. At minimum, many would agree that the 1990s carried a sense of optimism, even if partially rooted in naivety.

I would like to argue that there are two primary forms of nostalgia: the first is the "comforting" corporate kind, which sells us back our cultural artifacts in a manner designed to keep the general population happily distracted consumers; the second is a form of nostalgia that acts as an angry reminder of what we had and ignites a sense of urgency to right our collective course and reclaim the future we were promised – the kind embodied in vaporwave. While Boym (2001) does not directly discuss vaporwave, she extensively explores the appeals and dangers of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia*. According to Boym, "Nostalgia operated by an 'associationist magic,' by means of which all aspects of everyday life related to one single obsession. In this respect nostalgia was akin to paranoia, only instead of a persecution mania, the nostalgic was possessed by a mania of longing" (p. 12).

While nostalgia in music and art is not a novel concept, the manner in which it functions in vaporwave differs from most other revivals. Vaporwave (and its sub-genres) employ imagery and themes that evoke comforting nostalgic feelings or memories, serving as a form of collective imaginative self-soothing. This approach generates a nostalgia for times and places that may have only existed in the listener's imagination. As Ballam-Cross (2021) articulates, "the re-interpretation of cultural memory is an important structural feature" in vaporwave, highlighting its role in reshaping collective memory through aesthetic means.

Harper (2012) observed that capitalism's pervasive nature has made defending authenticity challenging, noting, "Perhaps since capitalism is so omnivorous with its co-optings and appropriations that defending the authentic no longer feels possible (Facebook bought Instagram, after all), accelerationist pop is lo-fi and avant-garde going on the offensive." This insight underscores the tension between genuine cultural expression and its commodification within capitalist structures.

While corporations have largely succeeded in capitalizing on our collective nostalgia in order to sell us back repackaged versions of our childhoods, and tech giants know that they can mine loneliness for social media engagement, vaporwave reminds us that the nostalgia we are being sold is in fact fake. The "danger" of simulacra (the replacement of reality with representations) is central to vaporwave's critique; by repurposing these same cultural artifacts in a self-aware, ironic, and often haunting way, vaporwave reveals the artificiality of the nostalgia being sold to us. It points out: "This isn't your childhood. It's a commodified copy of your memory." In this sense, vaporwave's nostalgia becomes a form of resistance, allowing us to collectively grieve and accept our current reality as the only path forward. Through vaporwave, we can acknowledge that our shared memories aren't merely illusions but are reinterpreted through cultural memory, as emphasized by Ballam-Cross (2021).

Reflecting on the evolution of cultural spaces, I noted in my 2025 article, *What We Lost When We Left the Mall*, that shopping malls and main streets now primarily exist as aesthetic backdrops in people's lives instead of sites of cultural significance, and social interaction increasingly occurs online (Good, 2025). Vaporwave reminds us that even as our cultural spaces and memories are repurposed, we can reclaim meaning and maintain a critical awareness of what is real, what is commodified, and what belongs to us collectively. By engaging with vaporwave, we participate in a dialogue about authenticity, memory, and the impact of commercialization on our cultural experiences.

What vaporwave is Not

I have read an extensive number of papers on vaporwave; two of these pieces, however, have struck me as particularly sensationalist. The first such example, by March (2022) argued that vaporwave is inherently racist because it embraces "techno-orientalism," citing its frequent use of Japanese graphics popularized in the 1990s. However, I would propose that the use of Japanese aesthetics prominent in vaporwave is done in loving tribute, rather than any form of cultural appropriation or fetishization. As Ballam-Cross (2021) notes, Chicago-based DJ Van Paugam argues that the primary appeal of 1990s Japanese aesthetics for Western listeners lies in nostalgia:

> We've saturated and commercialized our 70s and 80s so much that younger generations can't even form a cohesive impression of what those times were actually like…'city pop' (a Japanese musical genre) has just enough Western influence to sound like untouched, untainted versions of what we once had, but without being hyper-commercialized (p. 75).

In an interview with Japan Fans – a website for fans of Japanese arts and culture – Van Paugam further explains that his love of city pop is connected to his longing for childhood and his love of anime (Paugam, 2022).

The second article suggested that the genre has been, or is in the process of being, co-opted by the alt-right, pointing to a Trump-themed subgenre called "Trumpwave" or "Fashwave" (Bullock & Kerry, 2017). My argument is that a genre is not responsible for who uses it. For example, punk music has been embraced by both anti-establishment anarchists and far-right extremists, yet the genre itself does not inherently advocate either ideology. Having immersed myself deeply in vaporwave, these are the only instances I have encountered that claim the genre is racist or embraces fascism.

The previously discussed anonymous nature of most vaporwave musicians makes it impossible to gauge how widely any niche subgenre is actually listened to. The entirety of that so-called “Trumpwave” genre could very well be the work of a single individual. This sort of “controversy for the sake of it” proto-rage-bait is all too common. For instance, the viral trend from Japan about a decade ago, where people supposedly created donuts on their foreheads with silicone injections, was almost certainly the act of one or two individuals, amplified by clickbait journalism. Similarly, the infamous story of college women getting drunk by soaking tampons in vodka likely involved only a few participants, yet was portrayed as a larger movement. In both cases, what appeared to be a trend was probably an anomaly magnified by media hunger for shock value, similar to the two critiques of vaporwave discussed above.

Morrissey (2021), in his study *Metamodernism and Vaporwave: A Study of Web 2.0 Aesthetic Culture*, argues that vaporwave aesthetics contribute to the new cultural philosophy known as metamodernism – a term coined in 1975 referring to cultural discourse emerging after postmodernism. To his credit, nerdcore rapper MC Lars also touched on this idea in his 2006 song *Space Game*: “I’ve been post-post modern since junior high!” As Morrissey explains:

> 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 (p. 14).

I do not disagree with the idea that vaporwave contributes to metamodernism, but as outlined in this essay, there is sufficient evidence to assert that vaporwave constitutes its own philosophical framework, distinct from postmodernism, metamodernism, or any other modernist paradigm.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that vaporwave is no longer merely an internet aesthetic, as some scholars and cultural commentators have suggested (e.g., Harper, 2012; Morrissey, 2021), but constitutes a school of thought centered around collective anxieties about late-stage capitalism, algorithmic control, and the erosion of authentic experience. By examining its origins in the post-9/11 party-kid scene, its reliance on repurposing corporate materials, and its unique resistance to commodification, I have demonstrated that vaporwave represents more than a passing fad. It critiques the simulacra of consumer culture while using nostalgia to reclaim and recreate the optimism for the future that many grew up with, which was curtailed before it could fully materialize. In defining vaporwave as a “school of thought,” I refer to its function as a set of shared philosophical concerns and aesthetic practices, engaged in and reinforced through digital communities, rather than a formalized academic or institutional movement (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Morrissey, 2021).

Several questions arise from this analysis: Will the vaporwave movement endure? Can something fundamentally rooted in decay be preserved and should it be? I suggest that vaporwave’s “success” will be realised when it is no longer necessary, because we have collectively found happiness.

Vaporwave emerged, seemingly by accident, as a rebuttal to the economic and social forces that continue to shape our world. As long as our lives are being dictated by rampant consumerism and corporations continue to sell our collective nostalgia back to the masses, there will be a place for vaporwave as both an aesthetic and a school of thought. In the meantime, archiving "outdated" media and continuing to create remain important; you never know if you or your work will become a part of something much larger, like a new philosophical movement.

In closing, I want to give a shout out to all the now-grown-up party kids, emo poets, and nerdcore rappers. You were just having fun and expressing yourselves, yet by living the vaporwave ethos – reclaiming meaning from our commodified culture – you shaped the cultural zeitgeist far more than any manufactured performer ever could.

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