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Recoup/Repeat/Resist:

Vaporwave as Strategy

From its beginnings in 2011, vaporwave developed into an internet-meme subculture that includes a subgenre of electronic music and a digital art movement. Inspired by mainstream cultural aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s, vaporwave explores representations of consumerism and pastiche in parallel to feelings of isolation and alienation in a post-9/11, global-capitalist America. Significantly marked by a nostalgic longing for a time that is fleeing further into a forgotten history, vaporwave aesthetics creates a cognitive map of the bleak affective space of late capitalism.

Vaporwave aims to critique the capitalist model of consumption and the current digital era experience by appropriating obsolescent technologies and visual design — sampling retro-futuristic sights and sounds of shopping malls, video games, anime cartoons, and television commercials, vaporwave artists are attempting to understand the phenomenon of their dependence upon technologies and biologies of present day while simultaneously expressing misconceptions and mystifications surrounding their use. The small internet community of vaporwave artists is entirely comprised of young Millennials who have utilized the Internet to construct their own social and cultural capital, thus making entirely new spaces of representation. Visual analysis of vaporwave music video for Saint Pepsi's "Enjoy Yourself," filtered through the theories of Slavoj Žižek, I argue that vaporwave is not to be dismissed as a naive fashion trend or Internet meme, but rather like a Lacanian-inspired genre in the realm of internet meme culture: one that characterizes a chasm between the future and the past, and operates in reference

to discourses imposed on reality by popular media and consumer culture, otherwise systems of communication of the Symbolic Order. Further, I seek to analyze how this subculture communicates the workings of ideology and the Symbolic by employing ‘tactics of explicit consent’: a hyper-literal memesis of consumer ritual and the capitalist market.

... to confront the disaster: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities upon which we then act today. We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, that it is our destiny — and then, against the background of this acceptance, mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past. Paradoxically, the only way to prevent the disaster is to accept it as inevitable.¹

At first glance, vaporwave’s own a title is steeped in meaning: riffing the term, ‘vaporware,’ a practice of promoting nonexistent products adopted by computer companies in order to intimidate its competition, and Marx’s quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, “all that is solid melts into air,” a reference to relentless societal changes under the influence of capitalism, overall suggests vaporwave’s aim towards a critical ideology. Its appropriation of nostalgic imagery and pastiche of commodity culture of the 1980s and 1990s incorporates capitalist kitsch into “surreal, frequently discomfoting musical sequences, created out of recycled tunes of yore and accompanied by dreamlike hues, have the effect of both re-appropriating and re-enchanting.”² It is a deliberate repackaging of the vapidty of late capitalism into a work of art, further “revealing the lies and slippages of modern techno-culture and its representations, or as its willing facilitators.”³ Most vaporwave music and visuals boast a complete lack of original material, instead choosing to cite obsolescent technologies such as VHS cassette tapes, discontinued video games and consoles, and more notably, the Windows 95 operating system. Generic corporate soundscapes, such as retro lobby muzak, and the disappearing vessels from which it once thrived, American shopping malls, are popular items for détournement in

vaporwave aesthetics. Grafton Tanner in the book *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* describes vaporwave aesthetics as a language that “seeks to rearrange our relationship with electronic media by forcing us to recognize the unfamiliarity of ubiquitous technology...It is the music of ‘non-times’ and ‘non-places’ because it is skeptical of what consumer culture has done to time and space.”⁴ To the millennial creators of vaporwave art, these systems and landscapes are distant memories of a time before the present day hyperreality of late capitalism — a time before those promises of late capitalist utopia turned out to be empty.

The timeline of vaporwave’s creation and development from the late 2000’s era parallels the time when music production and consumption experienced a systemic overhaul due to cloud-based music services becoming available. As a result, the music industry at large and its definition of success became radically redefined. In 1999, total revenue from music sales and licensing in the U.S. topped \$14.6 billion, and by 2009, revenue totaled nearly half, coming in at roughly \$6.3 billion, and continued to decline.⁵ The internet and its increase in file sharing techniques, quickly led to an expansion of access to new music, especially niche genres that defied traditional models of popular music. Early niche and micro genres such as chillwave, seapunk, trap, and witchhouse forged a path for vaporwave to develop, which in turn was able to take advantage of the music industry’s forceful upheaval and subsequent move to internet spaces. Vaporwave is considered to be one of the first art movement or subculture that has no geographic origin, existing purely in the virtual realm on social media sites such as Tumblr, Reddit, and 4chan. Even today, the vaporwave community continues to prefer the online space; “its founding members are self-professed introverts, and its members claim an anti-IRL stance.”⁶ By allowing instant access to unlimited sources of music, software, and visual media, the internet has enabled vaporware artists to discover each other, develop a community, and host music festivals while

physically being located around the world. The majority of the millennial generation — as opposed to the earlier pre-internet generation — “is not excited or overawed by the changing technology that surrounds them, as they have no experience of existence prior to the ubiquity of instantaneous pan-global communication and portable digital devices associated with the current era. For the post-internet generation, mash-ups, emojis, smartphones, file-sharing, streaming, YouTube, social media, and memes are a part of everyday life, and the music that they engage with is wholly integrated with these surrounding cultural and technological elements.”⁷ How products and capital occupy a considerable amount of time and space within this generation, it would seem as if they begin to transcend the traditional structure of consumption, absorbing “all of the worker’s time, as well as his or her existence, thoughts, and creative desires. Products or goods are produced not to be consumed, to be swallowed directly, but as a set of new modes of communication knowledge, language, or even worlds.”⁸ The nature of cybernetic patterns imbedded into youth lifestyles of today is just as banal as the hyper-futuristic internet experience it threatened to be when they were born — “a projection of a ‘new’ hybrid of individual and social in a space and mode of existence neither has inhabited before, and yet reproduces all the old relations of dominance and subordination in the very act of superseding them, and yet disrupts them in the very act of preserving them in a disguised form”⁹ — the technology and its boundaries have already been appropriated by structures of control, trapping a demographic in its own idea of progress. The emergence of vaporwave is indicative of a larger shift of awareness in internet culture, not only representing a maturation of artistic creation, but regarding as such within a changing relationship to consumption.

While it would be easy to dismiss this curious subculture community as the product of a bored class of millennials glued to computer screens — the aesthetic properties and musical qualities of vaporwave can be difficult to summarize to outsiders — however, its aesthetic

uncovers a much more reflexive movement that seeks to constantly analyze and redefine itself. This sort of contemporary subculture is what theorist Paul Mann describes as a “stupid underground,” whose members are hyper-aware of the complicity and veiled deceit that is endemic to modern society’s structures of power and resistance. This subculture is willfully aware of their participation in the power structures in which they direct their criticism, and their indifference is revealed by either their boredom or fascination that does not pretend to be anything else other than an obsession over the symptoms of difference left behind by a reflexive culture’s compulsive need to organize and capitalize on experience. Mann writes:

The energy released by the stupid underground is never anything more than an effect of its very morbidity. It is marketed as novelty, but that is not its truth. Nor will it ever constitute a base for opposition: it cannot be yoked to any program of reform, nor serve any longer the heroic myth of transgression. It is merely a symptom of order itself.¹⁰

For Mann, the stupid underground reflects a trend in contemporary culture to actualize its need for difference by exaggerating the expression of that difference. The purpose of these subcultures, the stupid undergrounds, is to provide criticism regardless of the paradox in which allows them to exist and collapse into the very form of what it seeks to distance itself from. Vaporwave as a subculture presents itself as both “a symptom of the disease of capital and an indication of the direction of its cure the direction of the cure often leads back to the disease; or the cure itself turns out to be nothing more than a symptom.”¹¹ Thus, in what seems to be the very attempt to avoid it, vaporwave subculture reproduces the pathology of the Other, of the Symbolic order. Mann describes this further by an example of an alcoholic’s prodigal son who becomes an alcoholic in order to end his own repulsion towards his father; “at the same time, it is a kind of paranoid rechanneling of obsessions and defenses, a way to reconceive the social worlds by means of, indeed as a psychosis.”¹² Similarly, vaporwave seeks to reclaim the byproducts of global capitalism and pop culture, further embracing the soulless societal detritus

of hyper-commercialized consumer capitalism — Mann’s example of pathological reproduction applies (perhaps as a more radical form of psychoanalytical subversive action) as well as Žižek’s sentiments found in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, which proposes an alternative to resisting capitalism is to submerge yourself in the system — mimic the law and logic and deconstruct it from within. “The greatest threat to bureaucracy, the most daring conspiracy against its order,” Žižek theorizes, “comes from those who actually try to solve the problems the bureaucracy is supposed to deal with. But does not the same hold for capitalism as such? Its ultimate impetus is likewise not to satisfy existing demands, but to create ever new demands so as to facilitate its continuous expanded production.”¹³

The most quintessential music track and video of vaporwave belongs to an artist by the name of Saint Pepsi. The music video for his single “Enjoy Yourself” is a repetitious, cut-and-paste video loop of segments from McDonald’s “Mac Tonight” commercial campaigns from the late 1980’s, featuring a Max-Headroom-esque type of hipster crooner character, sporting a black leather jacket and dark shades with a giant, crescent-shaped moon for a head. In the original commercial, “Mac” soars through a bizarre dreamscape while playing a piano on top of a giant hamburger — this method of *détournement* at work, repetition included, seems to exemplify a curious reflection of the frivolous behavioral patterns that occur under the spell of capitalism. The original “Mac Tonight” campaign was as huge of a success for McDonald’s as it was short-lived; its death was cited as a result of pending lawsuits from Bobby Darin’s estate, who claimed they had appropriated Darin’s “Mack the Knife” without their permission.¹⁴ The video by Saint Pepsi is very much akin to the music track, which is a repetitious pattern of the phrases “do what you want to do” and “enjoy yourself.” The constant looping of music and drone in “Enjoy Yourself” creates a sense of semantic satiation, otherwise known as the sensation of words losing meaning under rigorous repetition.¹⁵ The sound of drone either embodies an ethereal vastness or

indicates an empty void, depending on how its duration nags at the consciousness. This relationship to the void was already flexed by George Bataille nearly a century ago, who had spoke of the universe as “formless”, further reducing the cosmos to nothing more than “a spider or a gob of spit.”¹⁶ Drone lacks the definitive qualities that give music a form, communicating on a more visceral level. The slowed tempos, glitchy loops, and low frequencies used by vaporwave artists like Saint Pepsi seem to nod to the power of the drone by either referencing the subliminal overcoding of Muzak systems or lifting the open source musical samples entirely.

It is no secret the culture industry continues to co-opt and appropriate even the most critical viewpoints, stripping away its charge and irony, thus rendering them ineffective. Today, critical distance proves to be an inadequate position. Subversive affirmation is an “artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them.”¹⁷ This tactic is used to overemphasize ideological elements by use of mimicry, simulation, and repetition in order to expose and alienate these ideological practices in our discourse: subversive affirmation does not function as an answer, but instead poses a question about our place in the Symbolic Order. For Žižek, the purpose of subversive affirmation is that “it ‘frustrates’ the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but represents an over-identification with it — by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.”¹⁸ In vaporwave, specifically Saint Pepsi’s video for “Enjoy Yourself,” over-identification can be understood by its clever transference — what was once a commercial for McDonald’s (*objet a*, the objective cause of desire) is a reversed question of desire (*Che vuoi?*, what do you want?) directed at the ‘desire of the Other’. Recognizing and deciding upon the sense of duty in enjoyment and enjoyment as an instrument of the Other’s will (the law, universal mission, etc.) of which the

essence of the matter is not so much the banality, but rather the excessive/*jouissance* contained and nurtured within the banality itself. Like most vaporwave, “Enjoy Yourself” is droning, repetitious glitch music — it can be irritating and troublesome for the listener and the visuals are confusing, unsettling, if not simply producing an uneasy feeling within. These visceral responses to vaporwave aesthetics, whether it be unease, estrangement, nostalgia, alienation, etc, reveals how the ideology and its collective discourse functions without distancing itself from it.

Responding to vaporwave with “what does this mean?” is the psychoanalytical acknowledgement of the symptom for the analysand, who in return “forced to acknowledge that the analyst himself is nothing but a big question mark addressed to the analysand,” and “an analysand becomes analyst upon assuming that his desire has no support in the Other, that the authorization of his desire can come only from himself.”¹⁹ In other words, vaporwave cannot provide a definitive answer to cause of desire because it is already posing the question, or providing the means for the symptom to surface. Thus, in response to subversive affirmation, it is not dealing with critical distance but is instead rather “confronted with a critique of aesthetic experience that — via identification — is about creating a physical/psychic experience of what is being criticized.”²⁰

What are we do to in such depressive times when dreams seem to fade away? Is the only choice we have between the nostalgic-narcissistic remembrance of sublime moments of enthusiasm and the cynical-realist explanation of why these attempts to change the situation inevitably had to fail?²¹

The capitalist system of today has adapted to earlier concepts of critical distance. What used to be acts of subversion and rebellion are now simply commodity driven trends constituted within the frame of the dominant ideology. Without any possibility of maintaining distance in the face of a new totality (totality of the capitalist market) our options as members (consumers) “are either condemned to remain passive (i.e., to actively fulfill the consumer’s role assigned to them

by the totality of the market) or to develop practices that consist in creatively handling the products pre-given by the ruling order.”²² Like the Anti-Art ready-mades, the Situationists, the Yes Men, and the culture jammers, vaporwave aesthetics mimics product, but its treatment of a product’s past history — how an object gained agency and made it last — separates vaporwave from early forms of subversive affirmation. Vaporwave is the product and the participant in the capitalist market, it *over-identifies* with it, prompting the visceral response the viewer requires in order to seek out the symptom and recognize a repressed collective desire.²³ Criticism here is not simply offered or stated clearly, in fact, “it is the recipient to whom full responsibility is being transferred.”²⁴ Using this strategy, Saint Pepsi’s “Enjoy Yourself” might be presenting the question of what enjoyment actually means.

Endnotes

- ¹ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. (London; New York: Verso, 2008): 460
- ² Ishan Raval, “On Harambe: Simian, Cyborg, Meme.” *Hipstersublation*. (October, 2016).
- ³ Adam Harper, “Comment: Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza.” *Dummy Magazine*. (2014).
- ⁴ Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*. (Alresford, Hants, UK: zero books, 2016): 10
- ⁵ David Goldman, “Music’s Lost Decade: Sales Cut in Half.” *money.Cnn* . (2010).
- ⁶ David Jimison, *The Dilution of Avant-Garde Subcultural Boundaries in Network Society*. (Diss. Georgia Institute of Technology, 2015): 13
- ⁷ Michael Waugh, *Music That Actually Matters? Post Internet Musicians, Retromania and Authenticity in Online Popular Musical Milieux*. (Diss. Anglia Ruskin University, 2015).
- ⁸ Keti Chukhrov, “The Space of the General: On Labor Beyond Materiality and Immateriality.” *e-flux Journal* #20. (2010).
- ⁹ Paul Mann, “Stupid Undergrounds.” *Postmodern Culture*. vol. 5, no. 3. (1995): n.p.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., n.p.
- ¹¹ Ibid., n.p.
- ¹² Ibid., n.p.
- ¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. (New York: Verso, 2012): 95
- ¹⁴ Jake Rossen, “Man in the Moon: How Mac Tonight Became the Burger King.” *Mental Floss*. (2015).
- ¹⁵ Zachary Petit, “Why Does a Word Sometimes Lose All Meaning?” *Mental Floss*. (2015).
- ¹⁶ Marcus Boon, “The Eternal Drone.” *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*. Ed. Rob Young (London, New York: Continuum Books, 2002): 67
- ¹⁷ Inke Arns & Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance.” *Maska*, Vol. XIX, 3/4 (2006): 445
- ¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “Why are Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst not Fascists?” *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume Two* (London: Continuum Books, [1993] 2006): 63
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 66

- ²⁰ Inke Arns & Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation”: 446
- ²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. (New York: Verso, 2012): 127
- ²² Inke Arns & Sylvia Sasse. “Subversive Affirmation”: 455
- ²³ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. (London; New York: Verso, 1992).
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 455

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