

The Influence of Internet Culture on the Shifts in Aesthetics. A Practice-based Approach to *Vaporwave*

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The roots of the cultural object called *vaporwave* are often traced to the year 2009, however, the qualities that define it are still being discussed in both the discourse of popular culture as well as in an academic context. Ranging from being defined as a microgenre of electronic music, a *meme*, an art movement, a critique of capitalism to a being defined as a form of pure *aesthetics* it remains a multifaceted object for research. In this paper, I explore examples of *vaporwave* in order to distinguish the methods and strategies used for creating something that is called *vaporwave*, rather than in an attempt to label it as some particular thing. As a further step in this inquiry to *vaporwave*, I document an attempt to apply these methods and strategies that resulted in a published music album. A *practice-based* approach to analyzing *vaporwave* by creating and publishing it does help to understand some core qualities of it.

Keywords: vaporwave, aesthetics, plunderphonics, internet culture, practice-based research.

Introduction: Definitions and roots

Metaphorically speaking *vaporwave* can be described as „the muzak that plays in an elevator in a mall in a futuristic Japanese cyberpunk dystopia“¹ and an „internet-based subculture whose members consider themselves the digital-age version of punk rockers“², however if we were to try de-

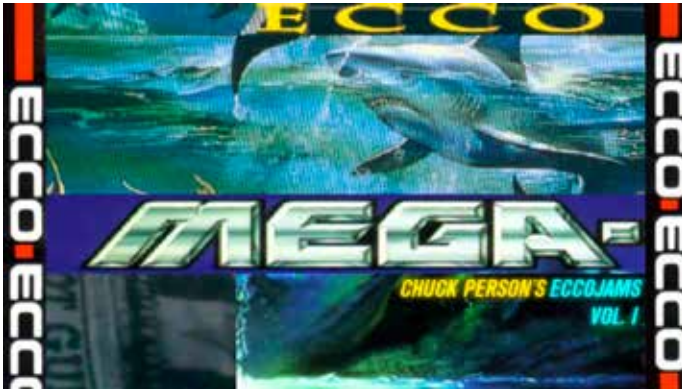
scribing it through precise definitions and distinct qualities what would they be? Often it is described as a microgenre of electronic music, a *meme*, an art movement, a critique of capitalism or as a form of *aesthetics*.

Given its scale and the fact that *vaporwave* is still relevant in 2019, while it crystallized in 2011 and there already some examples of it from as early as 2009 it is easy to say that it is not a homogeneous cultural object. Even though it did branch out to become *future funk*, *eccojams*, *mallsoft*, *vaportrap*, *vapornoise*, *hardvapour*³ some

1 Jordan Minor, *Drown yourself beneath the vaporwave*, in: geek.com, 2016.
<https://www.geek.com/tech/drown-yourself-beneath-the-vaporwave-1657121/>

2 David Jimison, *The Dilution of Avant-Garde Sub-cultural Boundaries in Network Society*, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2015, p. 13.

3 Simon Chandler, *Genre As Method: The Vaporwave Family Tree, From EccoJams to Hardvapour*, in:



Picture 1. Chuck Person – *EccoJams vol. 1* (2010) cover

qualities still make all these sub-definitions part of *vaporwave* thus they should have something in common.

Perhaps analyzing an early example could help to define some qualities that turn something into *vaporwave*.

Chronologically a great starting point in this inquiry could be the album that is often titled as one of the first examples of *vaporwave* – *EccoJams vol. 1* by Chuck Person (2010). This album was created by applying audio editing techniques such as resampling, stretching, cutting, looping, adding sound effects to songs released in the 80s and 90s. The 15 compositions that make up the album are transformed songs made by other artists, but the transformations are so intense that the source material becomes hard to recognize and the result turns into a new *aesthetic* experience.

For example, the 1987 hit song *Lady in Red* by Chris de Burgh becomes a seemingly endless loop repeating the phrase „There’s nobody here“ in an atmospheric way with lots of extra reverb and delay and is simply

left untitled and known as the 4th song on side B⁴. In a similar fashion, the song *Lonely* by Janet Jackson (1989) becomes A6. An important quality comes into light here as the authors of the source material are not mentioned anywhere on the album – the listeners are left with a choice to either try solving it as a puzzle or to simply listen without any preconceptions. We can already see some possible legal issues regarding copyrights here, but we can also see the emphasis on the idea that the album is not a *remix* compilation, but rather a new piece of music, which is simply based on the work of other artists.

Fragments of the album appeared on the video sharing platform Youtube as early as 2009 and in 2010 the album was released as a cassette and in a digital format through the label *The Curatorial Club*. The graphic design of the album, as well as the previously released videos, include images that are appropriated much like the sounds. The images create a link to a similar period of time as the source of sound samples.

daily.bandcamp.com, 2016. <https://daily.bandcamp.com/2016/11/21/vaporwave-genres-list/>

4 Chuck Person, *EccoJams Vol. 1*, The Curatorial Club, 2010, B4.

A shark on the cover of the cassette is displayed alongside the words *Ecco* and *Mega* (Picture 1 Chuck Person – *Eccojams vol. 1* (2010) cover). The fonts used on the cover indicate that they were transferred from the packaging of a video game *Ecco the dolphin* and the gaming computer *Sega mega CD*. Thus, the entire content of the album (both the audio and the visuals) is created only by rearranging previously existing material created by other authors.

We can notice the exact same strategy applied in the song that became the *meme* mostly associated with *vaporwave* – リ サ フ ラ ン ク 420 / 現代のコンピュー (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing) by *Macintosh Plus* released in 2011. This song, as well as the whole album *Floral Shoppe* (2011), is made by sonically editing songs by other artists⁵. For example, リ サ フ ラ ン ク 420 / 現代のコンピュー (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing) in particular being a slowed down and chopped up version of *It's Your Move* by *Diana Ross* (1984), which in turn is a cover a version of the song recorded by *Doug Parkinson* released in 1983.

Both of these iconic *vaporwave* albums reveal a strategy of recycling sounds and imagery. At first glance it might resemble sustainable design, however, in the case of actual sustainable design, the need for new raw materials is reduced, whereas in the case of digital recycling both the source material and the results remain present and thus the number of products is increased.

As we have established the idea that *vaporwave* is not a *remix*, but rather a new

phenomenological experience created from previously existing material we see a clear connection with the ideas of the Canadian composer John Oswald. In his essay *Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative* (1985) Oswald already discussed the question of piracy and creativity⁶, furthermore, he did apply the method of reusing sounds created by other artists in order to create something new through the album *Plunderphonics 69/96* (1969–1996). Regardless, while being ahead of his time Oswald did get involved in a legal dispute with a major label due to copyright issues⁷ and his work did not become known or quoted as much as works of *vaporwave* creators such as *Macintosh Plus* or *Chuck Person*.

Vaporwave as a reflection of the digital medium

Whereas plundering sounds to make new compositions created legal issues for Oswald back in 1989⁸, representatives of *vaporwave* do manage to avoid them and one of the main reasons might be the fact that *vaporwave* is directly rooted in the digital medium and the internet rather than a physical space or geographic location. Just as the early examples uploaded to Youtube by Chuck Person in 2009, much of the later

6 John Oswald, *Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative*, Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference, Toronto, 1985. <http://www.plunderphonics.com>

7 Michael Rancic, *Why a Canadian Composer's Controversial 80s Work is Still Ahead of Today's Copyright Laws*, in: *vice.com*, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gvnwyw/john-oswald-copyright-interview

8 *ibid.*

5 *Macintosh Plus, Floral Shoppe, Beer On The Rug*, 2011.

works and even collaborations took place online. David Jimison notes this in his doctoral thesis while discussing the begging of *vaporwave* – it „was an exclusively online subculture, with its members meeting and hanging out together in chat windows, sharing music through streaming sites such as Turntable.FM and growing a community of friendships and shared values online“⁹. Furthermore, „Vaporwave oscillates between critiquing the capitalist digital realm that it inhabits, and merely replicating it in a straightforward pastiche“¹⁰, which binds it even more deeply with the digital medium. This feature of *vaporwave* not only suggested a framework for creativity but also parts of what became the *aesthetics* associated with it.

One of the key features that arise due to *vaporwave* being an online phenomenon is the possibility for the creators to remain anonymous due to the structure of digital media and digital music distribution. This anonymity that arises through sounds and images being uploaded and then downloaded by other people just to upload them again creates not only a rapid pace, but also blurs out the creator and lays the pathway for anonymous collaboration.

One example of this type of collaboration is the works of Youtube creator that goes under the alias *Sun Levi*. *Sun Levi* has been creating (or perhaps just distributing)

and uploading videos for *vaporwave* music since 2013. The videos are made by using the same method of altering material that already exists, but it is taken a step further as the sounds are simply taken from other anonymous creators of *vaporwave*. As Laura Glitsos elaborates on this topic

„[...] *vaporwave* is produced through digital media but is reworked in order to mimic the video tape and VHS aesthetic, often directly using cuts from VHS tapes with the flaws and imperfections particular to tape. In doing so, *vaporwave* recalls not only the memories and floating signifiers of late-20th century consumerism, but also the history and trajectory of video as it has been reimagined through artistic sites“¹¹.

And as we can see in the case of the work of *Sun Levi* the act of creating videos for the sounds of other *vaporwave* creators adds another layer of context and creates a new experience by recycling once more.

Another case of anonymous collaboration is *vaporwave* labels that function as hubs for distributing the works of various creators. Great examples of labels distributing *vaporwave* are *Dream Catalogue* (established in 2014) and *Sunset Grid* (established in 2016), which are constantly releasing *vaporwave* albums on the music distributing platform Bandcamp. Due to the sheer amount of new *vaporwave* releases and various websites and internet forums used for distributing it is often rather hard for a listener to find what interests them, but

9 David Jimison, *The Dilution of Avant-Garde Subcultural Boundaries in Network Society*, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2015, p. 13.

10 Michael Waugh, „*Music that actually matters?* Post-internet musicians, retromania and authenticity in online popular musical milieux, Anglia Ruskin University, 2015, p. 114.

11 Laura Glitsos, *Vaporwave, or music optimised for abandoned malls*, in: *Popular Music* (2018) Volume 37/1, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 100–118.

having a label that release selected quality albums makes the process of searching for music a lot easier. Nevertheless, most of the distributed albums are created within a similar framework of plundering sounds and images, so how do the creators stay under the radar of copyright protection enforcement?

Thanks to online communication I did manage to get in touch with one of the creators of vaporwave 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~ via email and thus I was able to get to know a bit more about the methods for avoiding copyright issues from an insider. The album *flavorWave TURBO* „is most definitely a classic-style vaporwave album in the fullest form“¹² and it does indeed exhibit the same method of recycling music created by other artists¹³, however, the music recognition application Shazam does recognize it as authentic music and this does raise the question how does it work?

According to 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~ „the loophole for stealing sounds was created when the music industry grew so large that it became nearly impossible to filter out releases without the use of automation through algorithms. The algorithms that are currently in use do detect rhythmic and timbral patterns based on a database of copyrighted material, however, once you stretch a sound both its pitch and tempo changes and luckily enough the algorithms

are not sophisticated enough to detect every possible transformation just yet“¹⁴.

Furthermore, a similar loophole for image recognition is currently as large as well as „images that are flipped, cropped, stretched or edited in ways are not recognized by algorithms“¹⁵ either. And lastly due to „profit being made through ad revenue“¹⁶ the creators of *vaporwave* can still gain some profit through streams and views online even without direct sales. These replies can help us better understand the methods applied by *vaporwave* artists and, furthermore, we can see how these methods of stretching are directly related to the slowed down and ephemeral *aesthetics* associated with *vaporwave*.

Testing the methods of *vaporwave*

After getting to know some of the methods and strategies used by *vaporwave* creators I did develop a curiosity to test them through a *practice-based* approach. This curiosity has successfully become an international group project *One Person And*, whose album *Flash Future 1997* was distributed via online music platforms and online music stores in 2018. May 22. The progress of this project has revealed some additional insights, which are relevant in the context of this paper.

Several questions became essential as a starting point. First of all, what exact

12 Dylan Kilby, *Sunset Grid releases "flavorWave TURBO" by 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~*, in: sunbleach.net, 2018. <https://sunbleach.net/2018/07/02/sunset-grid-releases-flavorwave-turbo-by-bigaku/>

13 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~, *flavorWave TURBO*, Sunset Grid, 2018.

14 Personal interview with 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~ via email, 2018.

15 Personal interview with 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~ via email, 2018.

16 Personal interview with 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~ via email, 2018.



Picture 2. The Anatomy of Vaporwave, 2018

methods should be used for anonymous *vaporwave* distribution? Secondly, as I am interested in an anonymous collaboration, how should I gather a group of people for it? Lastly, what will the result be if only the framework for creative methods is decided upon in advance, but not the result that is being aimed?

The first question was easy to answer once more thanks to 美学 (bigaku) AESTHETICS~. To solve the second question, I have decided to use the opportunities provided by the fact that Vilnius Academy of Arts is a member of the international networks for art and design schools of northern European countries *Kuno* and *Cirrus*. A part of the activities conducted within the framework of these networks is international workshops, therefore I have decided to turn the attempt to apply the strategies of *vaporwave* into a workshop, which I have called „The

Anatomy of Vaporwave“ and invite teachers and students from other institutions for higher education in art and design to join in and test them out.

On April 5–29 of 2018 at the Vilnius Academy of Arts during the doctoral student exhibition *Science and Life*, I presented an installation of the same name (Picture 2 The Anatomy of Vaporwave, 2018). A part of the work was a rather dated desktop computer with a specially designed website open through which it was possible to sign up for a newsletter to get free access to the results of the workshop once they are released (which might not have been produced at all and remained a *vaporware* campaign in case the strategies would not have worked out).

Artists from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom responded to the open call through the networks

Kuno and *Cirrus* and took part in the workshop and the production of the album, however, I will not mention their names in this paper. The workshop went as follows: as a moderator on the first day of the workshop, I started it with a brief presentation of an attempt to map vaporwave the source material use and by presenting the strategies. The morning of the second day was dedicated to learning to use the tools for editing audio, images and video (this is another point making vaporwave accessible thanks to the digital, as there are numerous free options available for editing software). During the second and third days of the workshop, all participants worked together on finding audio and visual sources to work with, converting them and processing them to create something that feels like a different aesthetic experience compared to the course material. The sharing of work was easily accomplished by using cloud sharing for storing all the works in progress. This way all of the participants could continue working with the materials that others have started, easily change functions, extend the work to the audio or visual fragments initiated by other participants and easily connect them. On the fourth day, we dedicated on listening to sounds we have created, selecting an album cover and singles for distributing on Youtube before the official release.

The next step was to contact the music distributors suggested 美学 (*bigaku*) AESTHETICS~ in order for the album to be verified as authentic and to be included in the music recognition and copyright databases, online music listening platforms and online music stores. Therefore, the people

who signed up for the newsletter still had to wait a little until the result was distributed.

There was a problem with the distribution phase. The music distribution platform suggested as a top priority by 美学 (*bigaku*) AESTHETICS~ called RouteNote is perhaps not fully automated, as the album was struck due to the presence of unauthorized content in a number of works. However, when we did try to check if the samples used are recognized by the music recognition app Shazam we had no hits or links to the database of copyrighted material ¹⁷. Afterwards, we did make another distribution attempt on CD Baby, and it was a successfull.

I'm not sure whether it is directly related to the success of the album being distributed through one distributor, but not the other, but these music distributors do apply slightly different profit distribution models. One option of music distribution via RouteNote costs nothing but the distributors receive 15% of the profits made through sales and ad revenue, whereas an option for distributing music through CD Baby applies a model in which the distributors do not receive any share of the profit,

¹⁷ Personal note: While distributing a non-related album *ref/inter – iwbiactnle* (2018) I did encounter similar authentication issues even though the content was fully original. In order to get it published, I had to write an email to prove that the voice used in the music is my own voice. The confusion might have risen due to it being a spoken word piece, which might sound like a sample taken from somewhere. Nevertheless, it was new content and was not included in any database on the internet yet, thus it must have been checked by a human in order to question its authenticity. Or perhaps there are more parameters in the algorithms than just comparing sounds to databases.

however, they do have set cost for the distributing. Therefore, one can either become a partner with one distributor or a client of the other and it does to have worked out better to be a client.

Conclusion

The answer to the question, what will be the result of only deciding upon a creative framework, rather than the content used, was rather unexpected for me. Before starting the workshop I hypothesized that the result would be a very chaotic, crude as the editing of sound was done by visual artists, many of whom had no prior experience in working with sound, furthermore, not all of the participants knew much about *vaporwave*. However, the album, which became the result of the workshop, is, in my opinion, still recognizable as *vaporwave* through its aesthetics that is in part result of the set framework and the methods of stretching, cutting and looping applied.

Therefore, as a result on this *practice-based* inquiry, it is safe to say that one of the ways to describe *vaporwave* is to call it a set of creative rules – a certain *modus operandi* that was formed in the digital age. This set of rules serves not only in combining the various sub-definitions of *vaporwave*, but also was an essential part in forming the aesthetics as the stretched and pitch-shifted sounds do have an eerie feeling to them even the source material is „kitsch“ or „schmaltzy“ music from the 1980s and 1990s“¹⁸. Furthermore, we can clearly see that the internet culture as a whole, rather than some geographic locations plays a core role in the anonymous spread of *vaporwave*, which was not possible without this particular type of interaction opened up by this media, as indicated by the example of John Oswald's creative practice.

¹⁸ Andrew Whelan, Raphaël Nowak, *Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism: Genre Work in An Online Music Scene*, in: *Open Cultural Studies* vaol. 2, 2018, p.p. 451–462.

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