Vaporwave — Anti-Capitalism Internet Music

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Abstract: Vaporwave is a music genre that appears in the 2010s and it lives on the internet. It remixes clips from the 1980s or 90s music and electronic sounds, which gives people a strong sense of confusion, emptiness and dislocation of time and space. The unique characteristics of vaporwave actually represent the attitude against capitalism and consumer culture. This essay emphasises how vaporwave utilises its features and ideas to criticise capitalism. Specifically, there are three parts that discuss the meaning of names, the ideology of vaporwave and the visual aesthetics of vaporwave.

Keywords: Internet music, vaporwave, anti-capitalism, consumerism

1. Introduction

Stepping into the internet era, people's life has undergone enormous changes. Not surprisingly, most people's actions and needs have to do with the internet. The majority of industries either put their products on the internet for sale or transfer part of their production process by using the internet. These changes brought out various new fields, such as internet arts and internet music. Vaporwave is the first music genre born of and live through the internet. Vaporwave emerged in the early 2010s and its primary music sources 'include extracts and distortions of Muzak, 1980s and 1990s pop and groove, as well mainstream commercials and electronic sounds'. Daniel Lopatin, James Ferraro and Vektroid are considered as three important figures to vaporwave movement. Lopatin released *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* by using his pseudonym Chuck Person in 2010. This work laid the foundation of vaporwave and more importantly, the repetition and distorted 1980s music in it 'presents an implied critical commentary of readily accepted consumerism'. In 2011, James Ferraro released *Far Side Virtual*. In the same year, Vektroid released the album *Floral Shoppe* under her pseudonym Macintosh Plus. The cover of this album became the typical aesthetics among vaporwave. Finley Michaels, a vaporwave musician suggested that *Far Side Virtual* criticises people's 'overdependence on technology & capitalism'. He also wrote that 'Vektroid describing herself as an accelerationist and talking about her vaporwave was kind of an exploration on how the effects of capitalism drain ppl'. Without any doubt, these three early vaporwave music embedded the anti-capitalism idea into this new music genre.

2. The meaning of names: vaporwave and vaporwave artists

Names are as significant as making the first impression to the others when people meet for the first time. The difference between them is that names are in written form, unlike people who can make others feel intuitively through their actions. However, it is interesting and worth to interpret the meaning behind names. There are some anti-capitalism ideas embedded in the term 'vaporwave' and the names used by vaporwave artists.

The term 'vaporwave' is constituted by two parts, vapor plus wave. From the literal meaning, the vapor is a type of exhalation, but as soon as it appears, it disappears. To dig deeper of the term 'vapor', it is believed comes from what Marx and Engels stated in *Communist Manifesto* that:

all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

What these two philosophers wanted to convey is how society changed under capitalism's influence. Capitalism destroys concrete things and creates a state of unreality and illusion like vapor. The term 'wave' has a similar literal meaning to 'vapor', but it might not disappear at the end in some cases. Rather, it suggests undulating motions that go back and forth and it is exactly what vaporwave shows to the public. Vaporwave drags clips from the 1980s or 1990s music and heavily processes them. With the distorted, repetitive and slow down rhythm, along with lo-fi and electronic mixed music, listeners can go back and forth between past and present. To be more specific, when listening to vaporwave, the listener probably starts to imagine or recall life back in the 80s or 90s. However, that old memories only exist in people's minds and there is no way to go back. This kind of nostalgic feeling that vaporwave creates is to tell people that the past is just an illusion, as well as for the future, the present will become the past. Even so, the past will keep reappearing in new ways as like

those constantly updated products which stimulate customers to buy. In this way, vaporwave is satirising consumerism by imitating it. Beyond this, vaporwave's ideas of memory corruption and blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality are the same attributes as consumerism's mechanism. Some products are made to evoke people's memory of past things. That is being said, time and memory are commodified and turn into 'the daily practice through which nostalgia and fantasy are drawn together in a world of commodified objects'.

In addition, vaporwave can be interpreted as a critic of capitalism since the term itself is the transformation of 'vaporware'. Vaporware is a technical term meaning a software or hardware that is announced to the public but never really released. In other words, vaporware gives people expectations and promises of the future but fails to fulfil it. It is similar to the idea of consumer culture in the capitalist society, in which the product can create a nice promise to consumers of its quality and experience just like how it is shown in the advertisement. Nonetheless, the consumer can hardly have the same experience since using advertisement to do promotion is a strategy used by the entrepreneur to manipulate people's desire to buy. These capitalists' goals are to make their products an appearance in the public and enter the market instead of truly considering and giving consumers what they want.

What is more, those names of vaporwave artists 'employ a language of empty business names that evoke a dystopic and vaporous, if not vapid, techno-corporate world'. Take vaporwave musician Saint Pepsi for instance. He released *Hit Vibes* in 2013 and the person who worked with him said that his name is 'just a witty way of saying he is the patron saint to modern culture'. By naming himself like that, the musician is trying to mock the consumer culture. He wishes to protect the modern culture from destroying by the evil capitalist idea, especially the consumer culture. It is different from those corporations in capitalist society deified themselves or see themselves in a high status that can easily exploit labours and control the consumer's mind. In line with Saint Pepsi, the producer of *Floral Shoppe*, Ramona Andra Xavier has a primarily known alias Vektroid. When *Floral Shoppe* was released, she used Macintosh Plus. She also has several other aliases such as Laserdisc Visions, New Dreams Ltd., Virtual Information Desk, which all refer to fake business names. These false corporation names indicate the illusion of reality created by capitalism and vaporwave aims to break this kind of false belief. Besides this, using an alias can make people think of the features of vapor and wave, which are disappear shortly and come back unceasingly. Some vaporwave artists appear briefly when the music releases and disappear after releasing it, but later might come back with a new name. These kinds of symbolic repetition and defamiliarisation are essential in vaporwave for being critical of capitalism.

3. The ideology of vaporwave

One of the keywords of vaporwave is free, such as it is free to download and people who make vaporwave music ignores legal restraint. It is certainly unacceptable for capitalism to have unrestricted products. The reason is that as an economic system, capitalism controls a country's commodity economy and industry. Therefore, consumption and profit are important to capitalism. In the vaporwave field, purchasing or making benefits is not at all vital and even does not exist.

Since vaporwave is mostly free to download, it can be viewed as not a product for sale, but rather an entertainment for everybody to enjoy. Jumping out of the established framework of product is obviously anti-capitalism since 'consumption is mainly determined by production. For capitalism to function smoothly, people's 'needs' must conform to the requirements of the production system'. Most people think they consume products are based on their needs. In fact, with more and more new products on the market, the demand of consumers is increasing instead of decreasing. From the capitalist's perspective, what kind of product should be produced to better attract people and how could they make more money out of it are well-planned. People's needs are not their real needs, instead, it is just imposed to them by corporations through using various tactics. Vaporwave has not benefited from its production and not even say to force people to pay to listen to it. Without any doubt, in capitalist ideas, vaporwave loses its own value because of that. Jeremy Gilbert, who is a professor of cultural and political theory once indicated that, 'a commodity always depends for its status and its value on its relative scarcity; once the reproduction and distribution of that commodity become effectively free, then it necessarily loses that value and that status'. In other words, value and status are important to commodity since they constitute rarity and therefore can bring along profits. These are exactly what vaporwave despises. In particular, vaporwave not only ruins its own scarcity but also ruins others. Through remaking music from the 80s and 90s extensively but disregards the copyright issue, vaporwave destroys the rarity and value of the original music, as well as the labour work that the musician did for that music. Similarly, music that vaporwave artists produced by themselves will be used by some other vaporwave artists later on since downloading vaporwave is for free. Bypassing the copyright law and reinvention of music from the old days reflect the 'digitally fluent and heretical consumers blurring the traditional divisions and boundaries of labour'.

On top of that, vaporwave is self-sufficient, like Pierre Bourdieu claims that vaporwave has 'producers who produce

for other producers'. It is a ceaseless circulation. Vaporwave is open to everyone, which means people do not have to be professional musicians or composers to produce music. They can choose which music they like and start to do reinvention right away. Vaporwave incites individuality and individual creativity. The listener is no longer a mere recipient, but also a provider. This idea completely subverts the relationship between normal producer and consumer in capitalism. Apart from this, vaporwave breaks what creativity means to postmodern capitalism that creativity becomes "what 'efficiency' was to the bureaucratic corporations of the twentieth century: that mysterious individual and collective quality which distinguishes the successful from the unsuccessful". Within the vaporwave sphere, there is no restraint to limit people's thoughts and actions, no class distinctions as well. Moreover, there is no competition among vaporwave. 'Most of Vaporwave are products of free-labor. The producers mostly do it without any need for money or recognition'. More specifically, if there is no interest relationship among them, there will be no competition relationship. In contrast, utilitarianism is indispensable for capitalism, in other words, only by introducing the competitive mechanism will there be more benefits and vice versa.

Due to uncontrollability and excessive freedom of vaporwave, it is not accepted by the market. Thereby, some people consider vaporwave is dead. For vaporwave, this 'death' might be expected, as the author of the article 'How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed by the Internet' asserts that vaporwave is not drifted with the current and never pursue a mass audience. Also, the author points out that 'any artifact of counterculture: mass acceptance would weaken its claim to authenticity'. The way vaporwave lives in the margin of the music realm and alienates itself from markets are obviously cynical about capitalism. Even though being viewed as a dead music genre, it is not a big deal for vaporwave.

4. Vaporwave's visual aesthetics

Except for the meaning of the names of vaporwave and the ideology of this music genre run counter to capitalism, vaporwave's visual aesthetics is also alongside them and worth addressing. The cover arts of vaporwave music are creative and have their own individuality. The visual aesthetics of those covers contains elements from the past and the present as like the music itself. Most of the covers include leisure places, electronic techniques, along with ancient sculptures, usually ancient Greek or Roman busts. All these things get mixed up together express a totally different aesthetic idea from the mainstream. Vaporwave's aesthetic presentation displays the absurdity, defamiliarisation and 'collapse of high/low categories into consumer culture'. Surely, it can be considered as a collage art that criticises consumerism.

Japanese culture figures prominently in vaporwave and they do share some commons. What happened to Japan in the late 1990s 'can be viewed as the national equivalent of vaporwave'. More precisely, during the late 1980s to early 1990s, the economy of Japan developed vigorously and 'was at the forefront of corporate and consumer electronics culture'. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Japan encountered the bubble economy and had an economic recession for a long time. Therefore, the techno-economic utopia broken down or as Marx said, 'solid melt[ed] into air'. Moreover, 'Japan has always excelled at appropriating American/Western culture…and putting a unique spin on it' as well as vaporwave mostly draws sounds and images from the past and do recreations.

Many of vaporwave's covers include Japanese characters or imageries, which are directly referred to Japanese popular culture and extreme capitalism back in the 1980 and 1990s. Take the cover of 新しい日の誕生 (Birth of a New Day) as an example (Figure 1). This album is under a collaborative project called '2 8 1 4' made by HKE and t e l e g r a p h. Therefore, on the cover of 新しい日の誕生, the title of the album and the project can be seen all over the place. Also, there are many skyscrapers with their neon lights on. Among skyscrapers, the most prominent things are those huge advertising panels in many different colours, lights and styles. The visual effect of this cover is not flat like traditional ones, instead, it appears in a 3D vision. The buildings in the distance are relatively small and vague whereas the nearer ones are bigger and clearer to see. The sizes of those nearer billboards make people feel as if they are right in front of the billboards, especially the left and right ones with the title 新しい日の誕生. This kind of close distance gives people a sense of oppression since the intimacy has been taken away. In other words, as you look at billboards, they are looking at you. This upcoming discomfort might force people to look at other things on the cover, but no matter where your views go, the tall buildings and billboards that represent capitalism will surround you. Under contemporary consumerism society, it is hard for people to extricate themselves from being surveilled and controlled. Other than this, the whole cover is shrouded in purple, which creates a dreamy atmosphere. There are also a lot of white dots and scratches on the surface, probably suggest the faded scene of economic boom and prosperity, along with the broken promise in the late 1990s of Japan.

Figure 1. 2 8 1 4, 新しい日の誕生 **, released in 2015**

Furthermore, shopping malls are likely the easiest for people to associate with consumerism and therefore, malls are often used by vaporwave artists in their covers to present their critical ideas. Both the cover image of *Welcome To Crystal Valley Mall* and *Cosmopolitan Dreams* clearly present the inner views of shopping centres (Figure 2, Figure 3). These malls are perfectly presented as heavenly places, such as they have open and bright spaces, 'glistening marble surfaces and white staircases that seem to rise to infinity'. Certainly, these kinds of fantastic shopping centres are set up by the consumerist society that to better attract people to consume more and even evoke their infinite desires. There is a large mall in Hiroshima was named 'Diamond City'. The name has 'the sense of utopian promise' and 'the inevitable falsehood – that we ought to seek spiritual and ego satisfaction in material consumption'. Additionally, in a research paper written in 1989, George Lewis asserted that 'over the past three decades, the shopping mall has evolved into a sort of civic centre for many suburban, middle-class Americans'. That is to say, as early as in the 90s, the daily life of people in America had already been dominated by consumerism for a relatively long time. Going to shopping malls was their custom. By using these too perfect and artificial consumption paradise imageries as their covers, vaporwave artists criticise the illusion given by the consume society that let people lose themselves and invisibly become the objects of exploitation.

Figure 2. モール **FUTURE/PAST,** *Welcome to Crystal Valley Mall***, released in 2015**
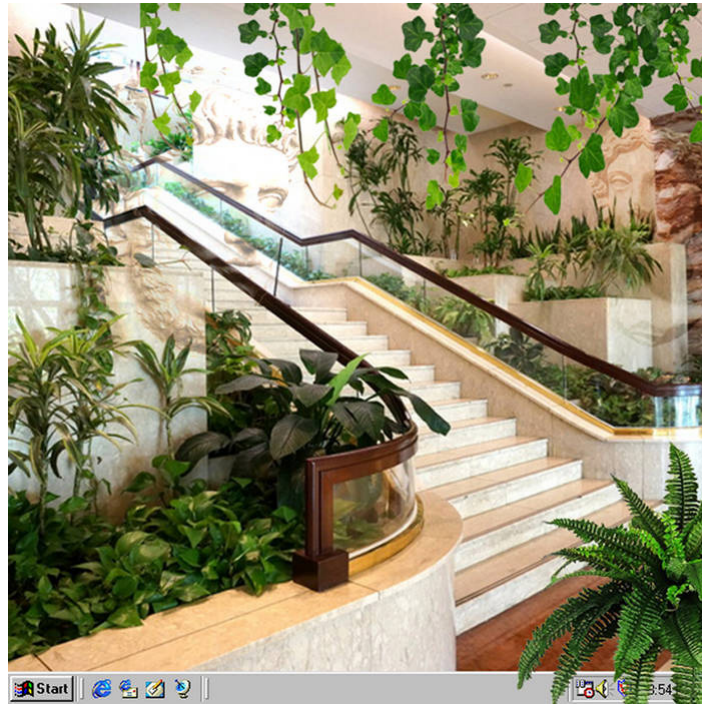
Figure 3. 猫 シ Corp, *Cosmopolitan Dreams*, released in 2014 or 2015

5. Conclusion

Vaporwave uses its own characteristics and ideas to reflect and criticise the fact that capitalism created a promising prospect for people but never fulfil it. What it cares about is to control people's behaviour and mind invisibly to gain profits. Some people suggest that vaporwave is infatuated with the capitalist society in the past and it is not critical of capitalism. However, this is how vaporwave criticise capitalism by simply being a parody of it. No matter in what aspect, vaporwave looks back to the extreme capitalism in the 1980s and 90s through using a new way.

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