

Personal Take: Vaporwave is Dead, Long Live Vaporwave!

A D A M H A R P E R

A grand dichotomy sometimes emerges around the role of early-twenty-first-century digital technologies in cultural life, all too stark but nevertheless deeply ingrained, vividly observed, and acutely revealing: online or offline? A host of similar discriminations line up in parallel: digital or analogue, physical or virtual, user or bot? One formulation tellingly folds authenticity into ontology: URL (that is, a web address) or IRL ('in real life')? Supporting all of this is that monolithic construction, 'the Internet', singular and definitive, discussed not as a network of servers and devices but as if it were a shared geographical space to be visited or lived in, an alternative (and often lesser) plane of reality, a new Wild West peopled by exotic subcultural aliens, conmen and other dangerous sorts.

Such narratives have significant consequences for the production and reception of music, but then they always did. Concerns over the worth and survival of 'real music' in relation to its urban, mechanical or electrical antagonists extend as far back as John Philip Sousa's fulminations against recorded music (1906) – quoting Wagner on the importance of sincerity in 'the expression of soul states' (279) – and beyond that to late-eighteenth-century literary Romanticism. More recently, rock musician Jack White has banned phones from his gigs in pursuit of a '100% human experience' and enjoyment of the music 'IN PERSON'.¹ There have also been strong statements about the benefits or dangers of opening the doors of cultural production to technologically enabled amateurs, whether using digital platforms as discussed by Astra Taylor (2014), or, in the 1980s, the cassette (the enthusiasm of grass-roots 'cassette culture' versus the industry's 'home taping is killing music').

These are the values that participants in digital cultures must reckon with, especially if they find themselves following in the footsteps of earlier countercultures: young, weird and rebellious. The backlash against Silicon Valley's techno-utopianism, expressed by Taylor and others, echoes the anxieties of mid-twentieth-century counterculture over the 'machine' of technocratic society, even in their debts to Romantic notions of archaism and escape.² In the mid-2000s indie subcultures, observing a latest iteration of this aesthetic preference for archaic musics and technologies by reviving vinyl and cassettes, found themselves using the Internet

extensively: it superseded paper fanzines as a medium for news and networking. Websites such as the blog *Gorilla vs. Bear* disavowed their digital nature in a visual design of blurred, grainy, analogue photography and even, at one point, wood panelling, as they provided their listeners with MP3s of guitars and old-fashioned synthesisers. The aesthetic was as offline as online could be.

It speaks to this treatment of the Internet as incidental that when one of the earliest musics to emerge in sight of this milieu was christened ‘blog house’, it seemed to make sense. The faintly derisory term alludes to the fact that the music – a hard-edged disco with basic analogue synthesiser sounds for an indie audience – was celebrated and disseminated on blogs. Today the term might imply too broad a form to refer to so specific a content – imagine ‘vinyl jazz’ or ‘CD techno’ – but then the appellation ‘SoundCloud Rap’ (named after the streaming platform rappers had uploaded to) became common currency in 2017, even in the upper echelons of music journalism.

Since blog house’s nominal acknowledgement of the digital sphere, online musicians and listeners have begun to grapple more directly with their existence within impersonal, digital-commercial superstructures that their countercultural superegos might be telling them they should be wary of. Many underground musicians began to turn away from archaic idioms and technologies towards more comprehensively electronic ones. This move, represented most prominently by artists Oneohtrix Point Never and James Ferraro and later taken up by Holly Herndon, Arca and artists of the PC Music collective (Harper 2017; Waugh 2017), can be read as indicative of a new interest in digital modernity.

By this point the growth in speed and infrastructure had made it easy to maintain every level of a complex musical culture from networked digital devices, even the live streaming of concerts. Though widely heard as a satirical representation of the propaganda of digital living with its ersatz timbres and restlessly upbeat mood, Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual* (2011) was nevertheless released on a vinyl LP for an underground audience of attentive listeners – a fact which introduces an irony into the work it might not otherwise have had. Yet around the time *Far Side Virtual* was released, artists were beginning to exchange music with like-minded others without releasing it (as the parlance goes) ‘physically’. This music, later known as vaporwave, offers an archetypical case of a musical style and subculture being digital not just in form but in content.

A typical vaporwave track either is made up of a single looping sample of smooth adult-contemporary pop or jazz produced in the newly digitised studios of the late twentieth century, or offers a close pastiche of it. Often the samples are altered slightly: slowed in time and pitch simultaneously,

effects added. Releases are almost always album-like collections; initially these were free zip files downloadable through MediaFire (a common way to pirate MP3s at the time), but the SoundCloud and Bandcamp platforms later provided a structure of dissemination, which has sometimes required payment and even enabled physical purchases. As Born and Haworth (2017) and Glitsos (2018) have detailed, the genre soon developed a fan community based on social media websites such as reddit and Tumblr.

A very significant – perhaps definitive – dimension of the vaporwave experience lies in its paratexts, almost all of which are part of the fiction: the album cover and name, the video, the track titles, the blurb, and even the marked location and social media presence, with text frequently incorporating Unicode symbols or East Asian characters. All of it contributes to the suggestion that the release was produced by some corporation as mood music for a lifestyle of business, shopping or luxurious downtime. While a few genuine biographical details are known about a handful of the most famous vaporwave producers, the majority are deliberately anonymous, and this impersonality is a part of the intriguing alienation vaporwave courts.

One popular talking point about vaporwave has been that it is ‘dead’, in the typical subcultural narrative of an underground scene killed off by outside observers.³ Given the amount of material released in the mid-2010s that looks and sounds like vaporwave, this can only be true for the first artists to make it, who have since explored other styles – in fact, the continual description of vaporwave as a ‘microgenre’ seems at odds with its vast representation on Bandcamp and the fact that it has spawned several offshoot styles. Another possible reading is that vaporwave has always been ‘dead’ inasmuch as it is not ‘live’ music, and enshrines a bittersweet exploration of what is impersonal, absent and defunct. The musical idioms and audio-visual quality of some vaporwave releases (especially those produced early on by INTERNET CLUB and 情報デスクVIRTUAL) suggest a world that, though tired, could still pass for contemporary. But a degree of archaism in music and visuals that connotes the era of the worn VHS tape has become commonplace. Academic accounts of vaporwave given by Trainer (2016), Born and Haworth (2017), Glitsos (2018) and myself (2017) emphasise this. Glitsos develops the point most fully, seeing in vaporwave ‘a kind of “memory play”... a process of audio-visual collage that deploys the act of remembering as a central feature and concern’ (2018, 100, 114). Born and Haworth observe ‘a reflexive and politicized material and aesthetic play with the very historicity of the Internet’ and ‘an extraordinarily acute awareness of the historicity of the Internet as an unfolding medium’ (2017, 74, 79); Trainer pithily calls vaporwave ‘the muzak of the dawning of the digital era’ (2016, 419–20).

In this respect, then, vaporwave offers archaism within a contemporary frame, just as *Gorilla vs. Bear* and *blog house* did – the difference being that vaporwave’s medium was broadly speaking continuous with rather than separated from its technological past, so bridging the analogue/digital divide. A notable example of this is INTERNET CLUB’s hosting of zip-file albums such as *NEW MILLENNIUM CONCEPTS* on an Angelfire website laid out in Times New Roman, suggesting an online setting at least a decade out of date. The same might be said of their moniker, quaintly recalling a time when the Internet could be a hobby rather than a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life.

The Internet itself, however, is less often directly represented in vaporwave than the sounds and imagery of personal computers and operating systems (especially Windows 95). Still more common are digitally ripped VHS tapes of advertisements, particularly from Japan. And perhaps the most recognisable index of vaporwave as a subculture, the ancient Greek or Roman bust, has a far from obvious relationship to the early Internet prior to vaporwave’s own semiosis. It is best explained as a period reference, an opulent cliché of 1980s interior design and neoclassical public spaces, glaring quizzically from the cover of what is by far the most famous vaporwave release, Macintosh Plus’s *FLORAL SHOPPE* (which, at the time it was reviewed by YouTube critic Anthony Fantano, was not a recent or particularly representative example of vaporwave, but has since come to symbolise the genre, perhaps partly as a result of that exposure). This association might not wholly account for the persistence of marble bust imagery: the reference became its own self-reflexive cliché, only further emphasising the ‘deadness’ of the music. But as a metaphor, it has much in common with the ancient ruins that mesmerised the Romantics (in Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’, for example), and cheekily agrees with Sousa’s complaint that mechanical music is ‘as like real art as the marble statue of Eve is like her beautiful, living, breathing daughters’ (1906, 279).

Indeed, although vaporwave might present a key example of compelling combination of the form and content of digital culture, it cannot be reduced to a uniquely ‘online’ culture. Though it may have dared to leap across the grand dichotomy of URL and IRL, vaporwave nevertheless displays the same exoticism and archaism that previous generations hesitant about technocratic, commercial modernity displayed, in this case inheriting it from indie and alternative musics.⁴ My original reading of vaporwave as a music critic situated it in an imaginary ‘virtual plaza’, ambivalently mirroring late capitalism’s play of virtuality, technological acceleration and planned obsolescence.⁵ That some artists and listeners complained that this read vaporwave as too dispassionate and calculated only underscores

the aesthetic commitment of its community to sincerity, even when living in the belly of the digital beast and suited in corporate imagery.

Thus in this case, the paradigm shift represented by a culture in digital rather than analogue surroundings can be cast all too dramatically. Traditional constructions of authenticity have not collapsed in the digital setting, but find a new arena in which to be negotiated. Online or offline, musicians and listeners still explore the complex relationships between self and other, modernity and history, just as they once did with the synthesiser, the electric guitar and the recording studio. Few of us talk of ‘personal computers’ or ‘surfing the web’ nowadays: similarly, it seems probable that with time, the tendency to reify multifarious digital technologies as an ‘Internet’, a locus of narrow cultural and aesthetic values one might participate in, reject or even comment on, will wane. Certainly, vaporwave scholarship is ‘dead’ – and thriving as a result.

Notes

- 1 Luke Morgan Britton, ‘Jack White bans phones at gigs for “100% human experience”’, *NME*, 24 January 2018, www.nme.com/news/music/jack-white-bans-phones-gigs-2227093.
- 2 In his critique of ‘the digital age’, Powers (2010) invokes Thoreau throughout; in his seminal text on 1960s counterculture and technocracy, Roszak (1969) invokes Blake and Wordsworth.
- 3 Leor Galil, ‘Vaporwave and the observer effect’, *Chicago Reader*, 19 February 2013, www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/vaporwave-spf420-chaz-allen-metallic-ghosts-prismcorp-veracom/Content?oid=8831558.
- 4 Taylor’s exploration of the 1990s lounge revival (2001) and Dolan’s analysis of kitsch in indie pop (2010) provide instructive ‘offline’ comparisons with vaporwave.
- 5 Adam Harper, ‘Comment: Vaporwave and the pop art of the virtual plaza’, *Dummy*, 12 July 2012, www.dummymag.com/features/adam-harper-vaporwave.