Research Article

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Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave's Affective Potentials

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Abstract: As a "born digital" audiovisual music genre and visual aesthetic, vaporwave channels remnants of popular culture, advertising, and consumer technology from the 1980s and early 1990s. retrieving the strange sense of affective potential that still echoes within the outmoded, depleted myths of that era. In doing so, it opens up a unique vantage-point on our present moment, and our contemporary attachments to digital media and a still unrelenting consumer culture. Just as Walter Benjamin believed "revolutionary energies" to resound in the outmoded objects of nineteenth century culture, vaporwave invites us to recognise the affective potentials still incipient in the sounds and images of the recent past and, in doing so, to acknowledge the affective potential available in our own cultural moment.

Keywords: vaporwave, the outmoded, affect, cultural memory, media archaeology

"Now Playing": Vaporwave

The internet genre known as vaporwave is one of the more intriguing digital aesthetics to emerge in recent years. The genre rose to prominence in the 2010-2013 period, with the online release of experimental music albums such as Macintosh Plus's *Floral Shoppe*, INTERNET CLUB's *Redefining the Workplace*, and 18 Carat Affair's *High Emotion*. However, vaporwave quickly came to be marked as much by collage aesthetics and retro visuals as by the plunderphonics that informed its haunting, glitchy soundscapes. The microgenre has continued to develop in eclectic ways, despite the existence of the popular meme "vaporwave is dead". Indeed, the latter is just one of many memes vaporwave has spawned, the most prominent of which is an arch use of the term "aesthetic" (typed in full-width Unicode text— ａｅｓｔｈｅｔｉｃ). The latter is the *de rigueur* response to any digital upload that evokes a vaporwave sensibility. More than just a music genre, then, vaporwave has multiple articulations and valences among the online community.

As a visual meme, vaporwave tends to include alluring images of 1980s consumer exotica (from soda cans and Pacific sunsets to 8-bit computer graphics of highway strips), frequently saturated in purple and pink pastels, shimmering neon, and retro typography. There is, additionally, a penchant for surrealist compositing of images. Early album covers, for instance, frequently featured inserts of Japanese text and/or pictures of Greek and Roman statuary. These visual memes, spawned in the joyous spirit of bedroom creativity and participation culture that digital media has nourished, prosper on publishing platforms such as Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube, and are disseminated through discussion portals such as Reddit. Unsurprisingly, in "an era driven by a hypermemetic logic" (Shifman 4), there are all sorts of unpredictable variants and offshoots of vaporwave, (among them the peculiar 'Simpsonswave' phenomenon).

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In what follows, I will chiefly address vaporwave as a music genre, while also engaging with its broader visual elements. Whether understood as a music genre, a visual meme, or both, the important point to note is that the core of the vaporwave "sensibility" derives from an engagement with remnants of popular culture, advertising, and consumer technology from the 1980s and early 1990s. Crucially, however, vaporwave is *not* a nostalgic aesthetic. As I shall argue, in its exhumation of the sounds and images of this expired era, vaporwave retrieves the affective remainders that still echo within these insignia of the now outmoded, depleted myths of 1980s popular culture. In doing so, it opens up a unique vantage-point on our present moment, too. In playing with "then," vaporwave plays, also, with "now," and with our contemporary attachments to digital media and a still unrelenting consumer culture. Nevertheless, I will also argue that the popular conception of vaporwave as a "capitalist critique"—while being beyond dispute—is over-determined. As I see it, vaporwave primarily tarries with the 1980s in order to expose the affective relations of the period and the ghosts (or vapours) of potentials past. In the process, it also exposes the potential that inevitably resides in our affective capacities right now in our current moment, and, in an oblique and enigmatic way, vaporwave entreats us to register and assume that potential.

In developing my analysis, I will engage with recent scholarship on vaporwave as well as with prominent currents in affect theory. My critique pursues diverse trails, among them an engagement with Roland Barthes's meditation on the function of "myth" and Lawrence Grossberg's studies of the role of "affective investment" in diverse cultural formations. While in some respects I will later read Grossberg *against* himself on this issue, an engagement with the American thinker is advantageous for a number of reasons. While discussion around affect has surged over the past two decades, Grossberg—like Brian Massumi and Meaghan Morris—was one of the earliest theorists to apply Gilles Deleuze's influential meditations on affect to topics in cultural studies. More significantly, in his disquisitions on diverse phenomena of 1980s popular culture, from rock music and fan practice to television and advertising, Grossberg addressed the very audiovisual regimes that vaporwave itself now draws on and interrogates. During this era, Grossberg was—as Melissa Gregg has put it—"the principal figure to recognise passion, emotion and affect as the new frontier for politics" (*Affective Voices* 105). In particular, Grossberg observed the way in which the hegemonic conservative forces of 1980s politics in the U.S. (exemplified by Reaganomics and the "New Right") attempted—via the manipulation of the affective dimensions of popular culture—"to colonise the very mood, the very imagination and hopes of a citizenry" (81). Vaporwave is part of the legacy of that manipulation, to which it provides a decidedly ambivalent yet nevertheless potentially liberating and affirmative retort.

The ambivalence of vaporwave's aesthetic resides in its being what Lauren Berlant might call a "genre of the impasse." For Berlant, the "impasse" describes a period of crisis we are currently living through in Western society: a perpetual transitional state in which we seem to have become stalled and suspended (195). It is a moment in which the fantasies of the "good life" that once nourished a communal optimism in the post-war era have stagnated and entered crisis, undone by the diverse forces of rampant capitalism in recent decades. At the same time, irrespective of this impasse, the bulk of people persist in their attachments to these frayed fantasies, despite the cruelty and the disillusionment to which their "good life" optimism often exposes them. Though often melancholy, Berlant's examples of the "impasse" nevertheless demonstrate how human subjects may adapt to it, finding the necessary "gestures of composure" to do so (199). Vaporwave might be regarded as a genre that—while drawing attention to the predicament of all of us "whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms" (192)—also locates some potential for adaptation and manoeuvre within our modes of cultural expression, and locates it, moreover, in the very white heat of the capitalist imaginary.

Vaporwave is thereby ultimately imbued with a decidedly neutral quality. Perhaps befitting a genre of the impasse, it does not make allegiances: it does not necessarily know which "side" it's on. (Of course, that has not prevented vaporwave from being co-opted by one discourse or another.) Vaporwave can be regarded as a genre based around the residue of social myths that appear burned out, purged of all their mythic significance. It is not, for all that, an "empty" genre. Vaporwave is surprisingly *full*. Though the music is often slow and indistinct, it pulsates with an enigmatic intensity nonetheless. It seems uniquely to summon a sense of affective potential—an emergent potential as yet unmarked by ideological determinations.

My essay is concerned with that affective potential. Identifying vaporwave as a mode of media archaeology, I will suggest that, via an engagement with the audiovisual relics of a previous era, vaporwave artists retrieve from within these relics the "revolutionary energies" that Walter Benjamin believed to reside in forms and objects of "the outmoded." Attempting to understand what such "revolutionary energies" entail, I revisit Barthes's influential essay on myth, arguing that the specific energies that vaporwave retrieves are in fact the complex processes of (involuntary) affective investment that always underlie any mythic production, and which are usually excised or obscured by the reification of the myth itself. Vaporwave, then, is fundamentally concerned with the rechannelling of the affective investments of the 1980s, not simply the sounds and images, but the traces of affective potential that linger within them. Finally, via an analysis of involuntary affective investment that calls on Grossberg, Massumi, and the work of Avery Gordon, and which recalibrates the status of the human agent of "experience," I suggest that vaporwave—by playing with the echoes of old refrains—ultimately calls attention to one thing above all: the sense that, as Massumi puts it, our "freedom" ultimately resides in *how we play our implication* in the myriad fields of affect within which we are always immersed.

"Liquid Air": Affective Economies

As an engagement with affect theory is central to my work here, it will help to outline what I wish to denote by the term "affect." Despite the voluminous writings on affect, affect itself—perhaps necessarily—eludes simple definition. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg have suggested that this is because affect "arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (1). Their terminology here recalls Brian Massumi's influential definition of affect as "an ability to affect and be affected" ("Notes" xvi). For Massumi, affect is "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (xvi). A state of *affection* occurs during any "encounter between [an] affected body and a second, affecting, body" (xvi). Ultimately, affect is always relational and implicated in transition and process. However, as Patricia Clough has stressed, affect is also about technology and the affective exchanges between all sorts of human, non-human, and technological bodies, especially in our current era of advanced technics and "biomedia" (2). The latter is significant, as one of the chief characteristics of vaporwave is that it plays with the ways in which the technological culture of the 1980s (and early 1990s) informed the affective tonalities of that era, often at a peripheral or unconscious level.

Importantly, a vital characteristic of affect, as espoused by Massumi and Clough, among others, is that affect is "pre-personal" or "pre-conscious." That is to say, it precedes feelings and emotions. The latter—feelings and emotions—involve a conscious negotiation of affect on the part of the "person," a negotiation the person makes in light of the representational knowledge they have of themselves and of their environment. Feelings and emotions are steeped in both a narrative and an ideological context, then. In channelling the audiovisual detritus of popular culture and consumerist iconography of the 1980s, vaporwave certainly explores the conscious feelings and emotions associated with those sounds and images, and with the social narratives (or myths) that still nestle within those feelings—myths of happiness and prosperity, or "good-life genres," as Berlant terms them (2). But vaporwave also probes deeper, channelling our more pre-personal—or impersonal—affective capacities to experience emotion in the first place: the very capacity *to feel*, to be affected. Ultimately, what vaporwave attempts to capture and (re)transmit is the affective undertow of lived experience in the 1980s: the residual textures and tonalities of the era as conveyed primarily through its audiovisual remainders, whether these be passé images of consumer decadence, as popularised in advertising, television, and music genres of the decade, or traces of the consumer tech that pervaded and defined the period. If, as Eric Shouse has described it, affect is what determines "the background intensity of our everyday lives (the half-sensed, ongoing hum … that we experience when we are not really attuned to any experience at all)" (Shouse), then vaporwave—in its harvesting of the 1980s imaginary—can be understood as channelling the *background hum* of that era: the sounds and images through which a generation's affective capacities inevitably developed and meandered, and at times were cynically diverted

and captured, culminating in multitudinous forms of expression, resonance, transformative encounter, or debilitating repetition.

If, as Shouse has argued, "the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning," then the 1980s should rightly be considered the decade when this ability was refined to an extraordinary degree. This, in fact, was one of Lawrence Grossberg's key points about Ronald Reagan's cultural presence within the North American and Western imaginary in this period. As Grossberg acerbically put it, thanks in large part to Reagan's understanding of the affective potentialities resident in the media image, the then U.S. President did not use mass media to circulate ideas, but rather to "market passion" (*Dancing in Spite of Myself* 259). Reagan "seemed to care about something" and the affective undertow of this caring—irrespective of any motivating content—was ultimately all that needed to be communicated through television and other media (259). Cultural historian Gil Troy makes a similar point: it was Reagan's facility for merging politics and culture, and thus to commandeer "a politics of images and postures" (14), that enabled him to suffuse his own image within the affective media economy of the period: that *background hum* which was broadly experienced as, to use Troy's expression, an "era of Good Feelings" (20). These *good feelings* arose in large part from the ubiquitous images of happiness, prosperity, and technological progress that circulated within mass media outputs such as advertising, MTV, and mainstream television, and embodied in the consumer technology—Walkmans, VHS players—of the age. As Reagan's famous re-election campaign ad of 1984, "Morning Again in America," demonstrated, the visual aesthetics of advertising and MTV—i.e. slick montage, images steeped in movement and symbol, faces charged with positive emotional expression—had come to dislodge any duty to communicate an argument, giving way to the more insidious purpose of modulating the viewer's affective response.

This, then, is the affective economy—or the ghosts of an affective economy—with which vaporwave now plays, all too conscious of the fact that the affective economy of our own age, and our optimistic attachments to new media forms, is not only resonant with but has been broadly underwritten by this previous era.

"Channel Surfing" (for Revolutionary Energies)

We may ask the question: what *is* vaporwave? But ultimately that question will prompt a different question: what can vaporwave do?

Typically, vaporwave's cut-and-paste sound collages are generated from samples of vintage pop, rock, and R'n'B of the 1980s period, adverts and infomercial clips, corporate mood music, and antiquated video game sonics. Vaporwave visuals, meanwhile, centre on the appropriation of dated computer graphics, degraded VHS textures, and the vibrant, kinetic advertising and music videos that marked the period. Vaporwave artists—most of whom release their albums anonymously—do more than merely refashion retro elements into collages, however. They also *screw* with them. "Screwing and chopping" is the term for a range of distortions (from tempo-shifting to pitch-bending) that many producers in the age of digital audio workstations (DAWs) now casually inflict on a source track, even though—like sampling—the practice has its roots in the pre-internet era (Reynolds 81). In a manner analogous to this "screwing" of the source music, vaporwave artists will also very often "glitch" the visual accompaniments in idiosyncratic ways. To this extent, vaporwave is an aesthetic invested in the values of digital remix culture and glitch art; one undertaken by the intrepid "nomad[s] of noise artifacts" that Rosa Menkman calls for in her influential Glitch Studies Manifesto (184).

In terms of identifying how these diverse elements gel together, a good place to start is the prototype for vaporwave: Daniel Lopatin's album *Eccojams Vol. 1*. Lopatin is one of contemporary electronic music's most admired artists, better known today under the moniker Oneohtrix Point Never. But his echo jams constituted a significant chapter in his artistic development. The *Eccojams* album, (accredited to a pseudonym, "Chuck Person"), gathered together the experiments that Lopatin had been releasing through YouTube in the years beforehand, generally via the username "sunsetcorp." Isolating suggestive vocal excerpts from a range of 1980s chart songs—among them Toto's "Africa," Fleetwood Mac's "Gypsy," and Chris de Burgh's "Lady

In Red"—Lopatin used chop-and-screw techniques, as well as looping and echo effects, to induce weird moments of transportive reverie within these distorted samples. With their tempo slowed to a crawl, the tracks could lull the listener into a strange state of suspension, one triggered by the eerie vocal loops and vertiginous sonics that make time appear at once oppressively viscous and yet deliriously light. This approach quickly became the dominant creative template for what would become vaporwave, and the immediate influence of Lopatin's echo jams can be heard in work by Computer Dreams a year later on "All Night Long" and on vaporwave's own zeitgeist-defining anthem, Macintosh Plus's 2011 track, "リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー."

As Will Straw has argued, the internet is not simply a space of chaotic accumulation. but has evolved into a realm wherein "the past is produced as a field of ever greater coherence," complete with "its own characteristic forms of knowing" (4). As Straw notes, this *knowing* resides not just in textual modes, but in visual and aural modes also. In relation to the internet genre of vaporwave, I would suggest that its characteristic form of knowing the past—through the creative remix of sounds and images, rather than through the textual critiques of conventional history—is one founded on feeling rather than on rational thought. It is fundamentally about using fragments of the past to disclose to the listener/viewer an intensive sense of presence in their own *present* moment. In this way, in its interactions with the sedimented media cultures of the past, vaporwave participates in the broader practice of media archaeology, whereby it retrieves from within an older technology "a fold of time and materiality where the past might be suddenly discovered anew" (Parikka 2-3).

Certainly, a conscious attempt to work with the affective remainder of the past was at the heart of Lopatin's project. In an artistic statement published as a Tumblr post around the time of the *Eccojams* release, he celebrated the act of excavating the endless audiovisual ephemera now gathered online. Such an activity, he says, opens up productive "spaces for ecstatic regression." Within such spaces, "prenatal patterns" enshrined in the technologies of a previous era can—through the artist's creative intervention—"storm back from the abyss of history," and arrive transformed in a new era (Skulltheft). Lopatin here clearly salutes the same "revolutionary energies" that Walter Benjamin similarly identified as resident in "the outmoded" artefacts of a prior age (181), which Benjamin observed most keenly in the Surrealists' love for vintage bric-a-brac. For Benjamin, too, these energies presented themselves explicitly at the level of affect and mood: the Surrealists, he declared, engaged with the outmoded in order to coax "the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion" (182).

"Digital Mist": Capitalist Critique or Poetic Intervention

Where does vaporwave's trafficking with "atmospheres" and "revolutionary energies" lead it, however? The most prevalent view insists that they lead it towards capitalist critique. Stretching back to Adam Harper's influential 2012 essay in *Dummy* magazine ("Virtual Mall"), the predominant critical understanding of vaporwave has been rooted in the idea that, in appropriating and distorting sounds and images of consumerism and pop music, vaporwave artists are motivated by a desire to critique the logics of capitalism, and that, as such, the early vaporwave albums were predominately steeped in an aesthetics of parody and dissent. Grafton Tanner, for instance, suggests that "the majority of vaporwave albums can be read as indictments of life under the sign of consumption" (44).

What can be too easily obscured here is vaporwave's provocative and ambivalent relationship to affect, and particularly the way it harvests the prior articulations of "affective investment" that still resonate in outmoded 1980s imagery. Indeed, while Tanner's illuminating study does not address vaporwave in terms of affect, he is very sensitive to the "subversive potential" of the genre's "emotional appeal" (70-71). Another commentator, Alican Koc, *does* explicitly address vaporwave in terms of affect—specifically the affective dimensions of vaporwave memes. But he, too, views the genre primarily as an aesthetics of capitalist critique, one that trades in an intentionally "shallow and soulless aesthetic" (66) and "focuses on the bleak, melancholy affects of late capitalism" (71). While the memes that Koc uses to support his argument are certainly primed with such melancholic attributes, they are not indicative of *all* vaporwave material online

or of all of its eclectic variations. Of course, this points less to failings in Koc's analysis than to the dangers of addressing vaporwave as a unified phenomenon when, in fact, it is a hydra-headed figure of contemporary digital culture. It also points to the way that vaporwave, having emerged as an enigmatic music genre, has been diverted, captured, and co-opted by many other forms and modes of address since then. Sure, the jaded melancholy of the vaporwave memes Koc examines are now part of the wider vaporwave stable, but—no less than their recent contraries, the "fashwave" and "Trumpwave" memes that romanticise 1980s corporate culture and exoticise fascism—they have taken the stylistic elements of a genre that, at its outset, seemed relatively value-neutral, and assigned it an ideological position.

Intriguingly, while most of the original vaporwave albums did nurse a critique of capitalism, a fact openly admitted by the vaporwave artists themselves, these artists were nevertheless dismayed by Adam Harper's initial article on the genre, and by the fact that—as INTERNET CLUB's Carl Burnett put it—their creative activities had been reduced to mere "Marxian plunderphonics" ("Invest"). Among other things, what had troubled the modest network of original vaporwave producers was that Harper had not paid close enough attention to the affirmative elements within vaporwave. It moved Harper to concede:

> the characterisation of vaporwave as a sarcastic, satirical and insincere gesture probably went a little far.... the incredible thing about vaporwave is it's not emotionally or aesthetically detached, not superficially ironic.... I would now say that the position of vaporwave is ... that an essence of something sacred and Utopian can be recovered from a popularly-based musical language stunted by industrial capitalism and the relentless march of time. And what's more, that this can be [a] politically progressive manoeuvre itself, not simply a capitulation to an industrial hegemony. ("Invest")

Harper's reference here to the idea of vaporwave disclosing something Utopian or "sacred" from within the bowels of vintage consumerist imagery again carries echoes of Benjamin's hopes for revolutionary energies of the outmoded. Yet, bearing in mind that one of the sub-genres within vaporwave is titled "faux-utopian," we need to tread carefully here. It seems to me that the revolutionary energies in vaporwave are mostly oriented toward imparting a sensation of affective openness (or even "emptiness"), a sensation that preserves *affective potentials* but does not necessarily direct them on any course. If vaporwave channels revolutionary energies, they are unmarked; energies-as-potential.

In any event, vaporwave is clearly more than capitalist critique: in many respects, it can perhaps best be understood as reversing the logics at work in that ideological mechanism that Roland Barthes termed "myth." According to Barthes, the construction of myths—i.e. those dominant "everyday" representations of a reality that is "natural" and just "goes-without-saying"—can only function by first "emptying reality" and depriving every object and sign of its history (*Mythologies* 142). That is to say, the production of what we commonly know as "reality" and "history" actually depends upon a conscious ideological depletion and manipulation of material reality and history itself. But what is it that is emptied or dispatched by this lurch toward mythic representations? If we agree with Brian Massumi, then we would say that what is dispatched is a cognizance of the intricate process of affective relations that precede all representations, power structures, and ideologies (*Politics* 87-89). For Massumi, power structures and the ideologies that enshrine them must always be understood as the "secondary effects of affective encounters" (93). In this light, what myths *empty* is the primacy, complexity, and intricacy of affect itself.

Vaporwave, in effect, turns the tables on this very process of emptying signs of their affective meaning. It does so by playing with the ideologically loaded images of affect we find within 1980s audiovisual regimes (in particular, adverts) and reclaiming the autonomous and excessive affective currents that circulate within these now "burned out" signs. In doing so, vaporwave exposes the suppressed intensities and potentials that still reside within them. For instance, a vaporwave video such as that for Saint Pepsi's "Private Caller" takes the images of *staged* joy in Japanese adverts for soft drinks and luxury goods, but manages to suspend or defamiliarize its oppressive ideological command to consume, and instead focus on the complex affective interactions and intensities at work in the images themselves. Drained of their ideological support, and divorced from their historical context (the Japanese economic surge of the late 1980s), we may recognise in these images something akin to an experience of "joy," no matter how manipulated the image's construction. But, more significantly, we sense more indeterminate energies, connections, and

affective potentials resonant within every frame. We might sense these as belonging to what Barthes—in *Camera Lucida*—calls the "blind field," the dynamic, irreducible surplus of the world beyond the frame (57). In a study of how peripheral or dejected cultural fragments frequently return to haunt the cultures within which they have been repressed or excised, Avery Gordon has used Barthes's idea of the "blind field" to denote the repressed life-worlds such fragments bring into view (107-09). The outmoded images of consumerism and affective immersion retrieved by vaporwave similarly bring something previously hidden or obscured into view: the teeming energies and affective potentials inevitably invested by the masses into these formerly ubiquitous images. However, vaporwave does not do so strictly as an *indictment* of the capitalist system which orchestrated such investments. Rather, it seems to disinter these potentials in a more neutral, perhaps somewhat poignant spirit, as if to say, lives and life-worlds are always teeming with potentials, even within cultures that would close them down. With vaporwave, then, we need to do more than *see through* the myths of capitalism that it certainly does toy with and expose. We also need to recognise the testament to affective relations still incipient in the signs that prop up such myths and recognise our inextricable immersion in those relations.

At the close of his seminal reflection on myth, Barthes identifies the essential reason why myths must be challenged and resisted. Myths "immobilise the world," he says, hindering the dynamic and necessarily incomplete process of the human "inventing" itself (*Mythologies* 156):

> Bourgeois ideology continuously transforms the products of history into essential types.... it cannot rest until it has obscured the ceaseless making of the world, fixated this world into an object which can be for ever possessed,... and injected into reality some purifying essence which will stop its transformation, its flight towards other forms of existence. (156)

This is absolutely key to understanding the sense of affirmation that flares up unexpectedly in vaporwave. Just as the consumerist imagery of our present moment does, the consumerist significations of the 1980s presented to us a reality blanched of the conflicting material and affective processes that underlie "history." Mythic reality is a picture of the world that seems, in its extraordinary plenitude, to proclaim that our communities could never have arrived at any other destiny divergent from the one this picture proffers. Those who would confront such oppressive imagery must attempt to reveal a reality—still resonant within these very images—which is, by contrast, ever in the grip of "transformation" and a "flight towards other forms of existence." The distinct aesthetic operation that vaporwave performs on these faded myths of consumerist bliss—all of them naturalised narratives that, as Barthes says, had first to "evaporate" the contingencies of historical material reality in order to thrive—is to *reframe* them, so that they now conduct the inherent vitality, dynamism, and transformation of life itself, the haze of potential that remains spectrally resident in these sounds and images.

This then offers an explanation as to why vaporwave artists of the genre's foundational period did not view their engagement with the visuals and sonics they plundered from YouTube as simply being one of social critique, but as a more *poetic* intervention, one borne of a fascination with the surpluses of intensity transmitted by these outmoded audiovisuals.

Significantly, Barthes recognises that an ineluctable aporia resides in the constitution of all myths. He points out that, despite all the distinctive myths of nation and taste that might circulate around an ideological construct such as the idea of "good French wine," it remains the case that "wine is objectively good, and at the same time, the goodness of wine is a myth" (158). This is a fundamental aporia that also marks, for instance, the *consumer tech* commercial images so savoured by vaporwave. The idea that, say, listening to a Walkman while jogging across a sun-drenched beach will transport you beyond the mundane cares of everyday life is a myth. On the other hand, the capacity to immerse oneself in music whilst propelling one's body into an elated state of motion does seem, in no small measure, to be "objectively good." According to Barthes, there is no way of overcoming an aporia like this. As such, myths leave us between two alternative procedures that he appears to regard as mutually exclusive:

> either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologise; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetise.... I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry. (159)

What Barthes' formulation suggests, then, is that we either cast nets of language upon the world to represent it or else we divert such exploits of language, via poetic endeavours, in order to preserve the world's irreducibility. Yet, in some weird way, the early vaporwave albums—and I should temper this by saying *the most inventive and affecting* albums—can be regarded as pursuing this unlikely synthesis of the mythic speech of ideology and the poetic speech that runs counter to it. Vaporwave candidly acknowledges and redeploys the mythical emblems constructed by ideology and yet poetically registers at the same time the ultimately irreducible, processual, affective reality that *reverberates* within these emblems. It does so not simply in the familiar iconoclastic registers of parody, pastiche, and satire, but in a different vein, with more sincerity and more "heart," and yet nevertheless in a manner where the sounds and images it appropriates are certainly given a double articulation. Vaporwave exists there, then, poised *between* the two modes, ideological and poetic.

Vaporwave, therefore, does not involve a simple mockery of the signs that prop up myth but rather performs a complex, imaginative, and poetic confounding of them (in the etymological sense of the term "confound": i.e. to mingle the registers, to bring into disarray). The important point to note is, that in confounding these signs, vaporwave pursues the additional act of retrieving from 1980s mass media (and its ubiquitous signs of consumption) the affective dimensions that such signs inevitably traversed and were continually traversed by: the contingencies of everyday *lived feeling*, and the exposures to the more fluid and unpredictable operations of sensation and vitality that oppressive mythical significations had attempted to vaporise in order to stage, in their place, a stable ideological meaning. In fact, vaporwave is an exemplary model of what Barthes would later go on to call *the neutral*. Vaporwave suspends the provenance of these sounds and images so that they are no longer straightforward mythical images of ideology and desire that can either be *bought into* by the consumer or else exposed, deciphered, by the hermeneutical activity of the mythologist. Instead, they become something that resists such either/or rationale. According to Barthes, the neutral is that which "outplays the paradigm" (*The Neutral* 6), the paradigm being the either/or conflictual knowledge system that requires one to locate oneself within such binary structures in the first place. Such systems are, by definition, ideological. Significantly, Barthes says that his notion of *the neutral* should not be mistaken to denote "indifference"; on the contrary, it can very much "refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states" (8).

Vaporwave approximates many of these characteristics of the neutral, as Barthes describes it. The studied anonymity of the producers, for instance, imbues these albums with a quality of the "impersonal" that seems respondent to such a summons to an enigmatic neutrality. One need only consider the deadpan and yet clinically precise choice of Lopatin's alias for the release of *Eccojams Vol.1*: the indeterminate, vaguely American everyman, "Chuck Person." Moreover, in channelling these densely familiar sounds and images of 1980s consumerism and technological *progress*, yet distorting the sources, vaporwave retrieves their affective residue as merely impersonal evidence of human existence, the "fact-of-man" as little more than a vague series of media memories, a "noise of nature," just one affecting wound or "scintillation" punctuating the surface of our reality (12). In this, vaporwave—as a mode of poetic intervention and remix—can be understood to participate in what Tom McCarthy has described as the fundamental function of poetry since the time of the Greeks: it calls attention to the centrality of "the signal" within human life, and to our technologies of transmission and reception (McCarthy). Of course, these technologies are essentially indifferent to the messages they impart. Often, their indifference *is* the message.

"You Can Sense It": Neutral Affective Investment

The strange way in which vaporwave is conducive to channelling an impersonal, neutral affective quality can be glimpsed in an evocative example provided by music critic James Parker, who notes:

> [V]aporwave isn't just "about" Muzak or the acoustic experience of capital. It doesn't just stage a moment of either approval or condemnation.... What it stages is the profound ambiguity of the music it takes as its source material: that moment when you catch yourself humming along to a pan-pipe cover of Billie Jean as you wait to be connected to the call centre, and, to your horror, you notice your own pleasure. (Parker)

There is a sense here of pleasure as impersonal and neutral, a sense of pleasure borne not so much of a libidinal desire, but rather of a passive (yet impassioned) absorption in one's own affective potential. Moreover, it is a pleasure belonging not to the person experiencing it as such, but rather to something at once within and without the confines of the constructed self, something we could conceivably, if enigmatically, call *experience*. Experience here should be understood, in Massumi's terms, to be a "transindividual" phenomenon, buoyant always upon a relay of affects *between* bodies (94); an "event." Such an insight inevitably lends itself to a thesis about the relationship between vaporwave and that which is now called the posthuman. I do not have the space here to pursue that topic further, but it remains implicit in what follows. What I do wish to draw attention to in the pleasurable, even impassioned neutrality of such affective absorption, is the degree to which it attests to the inevitability of our affective implication in the popular culture milieus that encompass us.

Grossberg's work on the relationship between popular culture and diverse social formations is significant here, as Grossberg is uniquely sensitive to the operations of affect in both informing and disorienting the production of identity and ideological attachment. For Grossberg, affect is one mode of communication among others in the economies of everyday life. Other modes, he says, include those of ideology and libidinal desire. According to Grossberg:

> affect is not a subjective property, but the historically specific processes in which the subject is defined by the intensive qualities (the affective states) through which it passes. That is, the subject is constituted nomadically, by its movements across the fields of affective difference. (*Dancing in Spite of Myself* 160)

This aspect of *nomadic movement across fields of affective difference* would account very well for, among other things, the average Western citizen's everyday banal exposure to television advertising, corporate mood music, and ubiquitous MOR (middle-of-the-road) music, from which vaporwave draws its inspiration.

Crucially, for Grossberg, the relationship between the audience of any popular text—be it a soda advert, a power ballad, a segment of Muzak, or anything else—is always "an active and productive one" ("Affective Sensibility" 52). As such, he does not regard the masses as merely trapped and tranquilised by mass media.

> How a specific text is used, how it is interpreted, how it functions for its audience—all of these are inseparably connected through the audience's constant struggle to make sense of itself and its world, even more, to make a slightly better place for itself in the world. Audiences are constantly making their own cultural environment from the cultural resources that are available to them. Thus, audiences are not made up of cultural dopes; people are often quite aware of their own implication in structures of power and domination, and of the ways in which cultural messages (can) manipulate them. (53)

Instead, for Grossberg, the determining factor in how artefacts of popular culture impact on the individual emerges from the specific "sensibility" (54) that provides a context for the relations between any individual and any popular text. Grossberg's reflections here are useful to a discussion of vaporwave because he specifically distinguishes between the sensibility of the *consumer* of popular culture and the sensibility of the *fan* (who actively invests in a specific text or constellation of texts within popular culture, deriving from it a source of "empowerment"). In Grossberg's terms, so-called consumers of pop culture seek and respond to a sensibility of pleasure. Fans, by contrast, seek and respond to sensibilities of mood and affect—which by virtue of their intensity and particular inflection ("caring, passion")—help to produce "mattering maps" which "direct [their] investments in and into the world," empowering them in a variety of ways (57).

Significantly, I draw attention to Grossberg's distinction between the "affective sensibility" of fans and the "pleasure-seeking sensibility" of consumers in order to collapse it. The distinction that identifies the *consumer* of, say, popular music with the seeking of pleasure and the *fan* of popular music with the nurturing of a specific affective sensibility must be acknowledged as heuristic at best. It is certainly insufficient to demonstrating any notion that passive "consumers" of popular music do not make similar affective investments in the everyday popular culture in which they are immersed, or that they are unable to find opportunities for resistance and empowerment via those investments. Precisely because affect is "the most mundane aspect of everyday life," and yet also that which "gives 'colour,' 'tone' or 'texture' to our experiences" (56), it must be pivotally to the fore in all of our most mundane, non-directed interactions with

popular culture, which would necessarily include our incidental exposure to the corporate mood music, advertising regimes, and modes of popular entertainment that vaporwave concerns itself with. At the level of affective potential, all of us make considerable "affective investments" in such popular materials, even if we are not necessarily aware of this process. (Indeed, one could even make a plausible argument that, in fact, one can only make "affective investments" unconsciously and involuntarily. Grossberg's notion of conscious affective investment was queried by Massumi, and later Shouse, precisely on the grounds that affect—as a pre-personal intensity—could not consciously be "invested" in anything.)

Departing from Grossberg, then, while retaining his notion of affective investment, I would stress that people do not merely use the diverse phantasmagoria of popular culture as a means of expending their libidinal energy. We are immersed at all times in pop culture and its miasma of sound and vision, and it textures a great many facets of our lives, colouring and toning our life potentials. It is this range of largely unconscious—or better, *impersonal*, "neutral"—affective investments in the audiovisual registers of consumer culture that vaporwave channels, summoning us to (re)experience them in the vein of what Benjamin called a "profane illumination." As Avery Gordon has pointed out, such profane illuminations tend to be triggered in our lives by "flashing half-signs": half-signs "ordinarily overlooked until that one day when they become animated by the *immense forces of atmosphere concealed in them*. These illuminations can be frightening and threatening; they are profane but nonetheless charged with the spirit that made them" (204). Such illumination opens up "a discerning moment," says Gordon, one that "describes a mode of apprehension," rather than a mode of "critique or commentary" (205). It involves what Gordon—recalibrating Marx, while also evoking Jacques Derrida's influential concept of hauntology—calls "a sensuous knowledge," an intimation of a cultural order or process in which you are always already implicated, and which is experienced as "a something to be done" (204-5).

While I am uncertain if vaporwave genuinely enlists its listeners into a *something to be done*, it is certainly the case that its uncanny "flashing half-signs," its enigmatic fragments that blink between ideological and affective registers, alert us to our affective implication in everyday popular culture. This alert may trigger apprehensiveness. It may trigger capitalist critique. But it need not necessarily trigger either. What it does inevitably disclose, however, is the pre-personal or impersonal qualities of our affective investments. And if in that disclosure there appears the requirement for a response, a "something to be done," it may only be to acknowledge the primacy of our implication in relational fields of affect, beyond our positioning by ideology. As Massumi has pointed out, there "is nothing essentially liberatory or progressive about affect" (*Politics of Affect* 101). Moreover, affective dynamics "not only can but are destined to give rise to oppressive structures" (103-4). On such terms, capitalism can be conceived as a dense relational field of multitudinous affective encounters, and its myths have come into existence simply to enshrine the power structures that have emerged from and re-emerge in those encounters. What vaporwave brings to light, then, is that our affective potential is always in traffic with these structures and their myths; and that "agency" is not something we wield—a subjective tool of the "self"—but something that occurs in the traffic between bodies in an "event" of mutual affection. What vaporwave tells us about the consumer spaces and the mass media is that the agency we seek exists *there*—there in those sites of encounter, whether these sites are material or virtual. If vaporwave carries some incidental message, it is that we cannot simply wrest control of our agency back from our immersion in consumer culture or our immersion in ideological structures. Our agency arises *in* the processes underlying that immersion. The weird and poignant attraction of vaporwave is that it points out that—even there in the popular images we commonly associate with capitalist oppression or indoctrination—our affective potential, our agency, was—as it always is—*in play*. As a result, vaporwave helps us to realise, as Massumi has put it, that "our freedom" ultimately resides in "how we play our implication" in any given relational field of affect. (158).

"Personal Evaluation": *There's Nobody Here*

What's potentially liberating in vaporwave, then, is the degree to which it exposes our implication in affect and our ability to play with that implication. (Or to *re*-play it.) One way of playing might be to re-evaluate

our notion of the "personal." It would be easy, for instance, to interpret the music video for INTERNET CLUB's track "Time" as a work of "capitalist critique," detecting in its kitsch computer imagery of a casino strip a surreal parody of capitalist iconography and its positioning of the human subject. But we could also—by contrast—observe the extraordinary attention the video pays to the banal dissolution of self in its images of leisure and enjoyment. In particular, let's note the way in which the song's chopped sample, which repeatedly loops back on itself in the vein of much early vaporwave, is mirrored in the video by the seductively glitchy repetition of an image of a hand placing a CD into a car stereo, the CD promptly sliding into the system. This repeated visual seems intent on communicating nothing other than the potency inherent in the banal gesture itself, which, as Giorgio Agamben might put it, seems to carry "a promise of happiness unequivocally related to the human body" (46). In this way, the clip reveals the dynamic affective potential in even our most mundane engagements with popular culture and the technology through which it is delivered. The clip is all the more moving because it calls attention to a gesture that is in danger of becoming obsolete in an era when CD sales have collapsed and in which car manufacturers now prioritise USB ports for the connection of digital devices. As Theodor Adorno once forlornly noted in relation to the increased place of "technification" in our lives, gestures are lost in the transition from one epoch to another, and with them expires a whole relation to the world and its specific range of affective and aesthetic possibilities (40). The gesture of placing a CD into a car stereo's CD slot will be, before long, only a vague muscle memory, just as, in time, the now ubiquitous gesture of swiping right with one's thumb will also, no doubt, be dispatched to the vaults of our techno-somatic history. Through strange principles that are not just aesthetic but synesthetic, then, vaporwave takes delight in bracketing off such gestures, expressions, and acts of "transmission" as they are documented in outmoded audiovisual recordings, retrieving the impersonal affective investments and potentials within them, and offering them to us as emblems of *life* and possibility itself; life not simply structured or coded by capitalism, but a life that ultimately exceeds its predatory reach—a life not just of the single body, but belonging to a more expansive dimension of affective relations.

This quality of retrieving something involuntary—our "neutral" or involuntary affective investments—from vintage sounds and visions of consumption is also to the fore in one of vaporwave's trademark tactics: the transformation of a specific refrain from 1980s pop songs via tempo-slowing, pitch-shifting, and looping. Lopatin's "echo jams" set the template in this regard. His isolated refrains, in which a single lyric is repeated *ad infinitum*, are marked by a haunting and unsettling quality, as if—in bending the pitch—the voice now singing has been removed of its human origins. Although the warmth of Chris De Burgh's intonation is not completely wiped in "Nobody Here," the track nevertheless bristles with this sense of the inhuman, constructed as it is around the gripping repetition of a single vocal ("There's nobody here") and the twangy guitar riff and synth choir that accompanies it, all slowed and pitched to a lower register. Yet, perhaps because Lopatin preserves some warmth in the sample, the listener is not invited to take a straightforward satirical reading about the emptiness of the self—i.e. that there really is "nobody here," that the all-pervasive structures of ideology speak through the subject as if through a puppet. Instead, we are seduced into feeling the impersonal, indeterminate quality of affect at work, in part through a now heightened sensitivity to those discrete and contingent bodily textures of the voice that Barthes, influentially, considered to be fundamentally affective or "erotic," superseding subjectivity ("Grain of the Voice" 188).

Similarly, Lopatin's lost "pop" refrains, like the refrains used by Ramona Xavier in her diverse vaporwave output, call attention to the place of these *earworm* melodies in the everyday life of the listener. As Parker glimpses, in his horror at finding himself unconsciously humming along to a panpipe version of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean," pop songs are often experienced as blank canvasses or, better still, *resonant frequencies* with which we incidentally align ourselves, in a manner that certainly constitutes a form of neutral affective investment. What vaporwave succeeds in doing, through such experiments, is call attention to this involuntary affective alignment, whereby we may invest not just in snippets of pop music heard in the non-places of the shopping centre or the airport, but also in the cacophony of commercial images that solicit our attention each day. What vaporwave ultimately exposes is that we do, each day, involuntarily direct huge proportions of our own affective potential into the audiovisual phantasmagoria of consumerist imagery and popular entertainment that engulfs us, no matter how peripherally we do so.

These affective investments belong to us, even while—by virtue of the impersonal, transindividual, non-conscious, neutral qualities of affect—they do not *belong* to us. This question of to whom these affective investments belong is captured perfectly in Lopatin's choice refrain, "there's nobody here." Or in Ramona Xavier's playing with Diana Ross's "It's Your Move" so that, having had its pitch and tempo warped, the song builds to a glitchy repetition of the refrain, "Till you understand / it's all in your head," before slowly collapsing into oblivion, as if underlining how tenuous the subject's construction of its experience really is.

All of these relics of 1980s popular culture and consumer imagery are heaving with the residue of everyday unconscious affective investment, but nowhere more so than in these vaguely familiar refrains. Of course, I cannot touch on this particular subject without invoking Deleuze and Guattari's very influential theorisation of the function of *the refrain* in human life (and in life more generally). According to Deleuze and Guattari, humans—like birds—employ musical refrains as rhythms not just for the purposes of communication but to mark out territories and shelters, to secure passages and lines of flight, to facilitate and affirm changes in register. Everyday popular songs—whether in the 1980s or in any era, including our own—provide us with what Grossberg would regard as the affective materials to plot out our own mattering maps of the things that "matter" to us. In "Deleuzoguattarian" terms, a fan—but also an everyday passive consumer—of popular music can *deterritorialize* and *reterritorialize* any element of their environment and make it their "own," however briefly, finding in it an affective resonance relevant to them and to their becoming. This is a quality of our everyday lives, not to mention our everyday immersion in the aesthetics of capital, that vaporwave seems intent on foregrounding, reminding us that—however much our culture might place us at an impasse—our potential is always in play.

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