Anemoia and the Vaporwave Phenomenon: the 'New' Aesthetic of an Imagined Nostalgia

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to show how vaporwave music, which emerged exclusively through the Internet in the beginning of the 2010s, embodies the longing of a generation born in the 1990s and the 2000s for a time they hardly knew – if at all. Vaporwave music is a microgenre, a concept which, according to Anne H. Stevens and Molly C. O'Donnell, can refer to "digital musical phenomena" catering to a "niche" audience (2020: 1). Vaporwave relies heavily on sampling musical genres ranging from 1970s' smooth jazz to 1980s' Japanese city pop, and on drawing visual inspiration from the digital landscape of the 1990s. It cannot and should not be defined as a purely musical phenomenon; it is also an aesthetic and a language–as Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth explain, vaporwave "circulates more like a 'meme' than a music genre" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 80) and is "embraced not only as a cultural and social but as an aesthetic medium, visual as much as musical" (ibid 79). Vaporwave plays on different aspects of nostalgia – such as reflective and restorative nostalgia, two concepts defined by Svetlana Boym – and on an ambiguous rejection of the present. Through the case study of "mallsoft" music, a subgenre of vaporwave recreating as a nostalgic bubble the soundscape of the American mall of the 1980s and 1990s, this paper will develop the concept of "anemoia," defined by John Koenig in a 2014 YouTube video entitled "Anemoia: Nostalgia For A Time You've Never Known."
Keywords: Nostalgia, Music, Æsthetic, Vaporwave, Retro

Résumé : L'objectif de cet article est de montrer comment la musique *vaporwave*, apparue exclusivement sur Internet au début des années 2010, incarne la nostalgie d'une génération née dans les années 1990 et 2000 pour une époque qu'elle a à peine connue, voire pas du tout. La musique *vaporwave* est un microgenre, un concept qui, selon Anne H. Stevens et Molly C. O'Donnell, peut désigner des «phénomènes musicaux numériques» s'adressant à un public «de niche» (2020 : 1). La *vaporwave* s'appuie fortement sur l'échantillonnage de genres musicaux allant du *smooth jazz* des années

1970 à la pop urbaine japonaise des années 1980, inspirée visuellement par le paysage numérique des années 1990. Elle ne peut et ne doit pas être définie comme un phénomène purement musical ; c'est aussi une esthétique et un langage - comme l'expliquent Georgina Born et Christopher Haworth, la *vaporwave* «circule plus comme un «mème» que comme un genre musical» (Born et Haworth, 2017 : 80) et est «adoptée non seulement comme un médium culturel et social, mais aussi comme un médium esthétique, visuel autant que musical» (*ibid*., 79). La *vaporwave* joue sur différents aspects de la nostalgie - comme la nostalgie réflexive et la nostalgie réparatrice, deux concepts définis par Svetlana Boym - et sur un rejet ambigu du présent. À travers l'étude de cas de la musique «mallsoft», un sous-genre de la *vaporwave* recréant comme une bulle nostalgique le paysage sonore du centre commercial américain des années 1980 et 1990, cet article développera le concept d'»*anémoia*», défini par John Koenig dans une vidéo YouTube de 2014 intitulée «*Anemoia* : Nostalgie d'une époque que vous n'avez jamais connue».

Mots clés : Nostalgie, musique, esthétique, *vapor wave*, rétro

Introduction

Music journalist Simon Reynolds, whose critical work in the history of music offers insight into a 21st century characterized by a myriad of musical microgenres, opened his essay *Retromania* with the following statement: "We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration" (2011: ix). To be able to understand our current fascination with all things retro, it is imperative to first define such a concept. According to Reynolds, two major elements defining what retro is are, firstly, that "[it] is always about the relatively immediate past, about stuff that happened in living memory" (*ibid* xxx) and secondly, that "[it] involves an element of exact recall" (*ibid* xxx). These words date back to 2011, the year in which the musicologists Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, in their contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, locate the very dawn of vaporwave, which emerged exclusively through the Internet in the early 2010s. The aim of this article is to show how vaporwave, a musical microgenre questioning these very elements of definition given by Reynolds, embodies the longing of a generation born in the 1990s and the 2000s for a time they hardly knew – if at all.

While Reynold's 2011 work does not yet deal with a fully-fledged vaporwave, it does take interest in Daniel Lopatin and his "echo jams" (*ibid* 80-82) as well as James Ferraro (*ibid* 346), both precursors of vaporwave music, which relies heavily on sampling musical genres ranging from 1970s' smooth jazz to 1980s' Japanese city pop,[1] and on drawing visual

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1. Among the artists sampled are for instance Lonnie Liston Smith for the smooth jazz genre, as well as Tatsurō Yamashita and Mariya Takeuchi for city pop.

inspiration from the digital landscape of the 1990s which witnessed the birth of the Internet. Indeed, vaporwave is essentially an Internet phenomenon, made widely available through online platforms such as Bandcamp and YouTube:

> Vaporwave is therefore characterized by an intense material and citational reflexivity in relation to the Internet. Indeed, the genre is a product of the net, which acts at once as content source, creative medium, means of delivery and communication, and as a concept informing all these practices. (Born and Haworth, 2017: 81)

Additionally, Simon Reynolds emphasizes the part played by the Internet as a crucible in which the old mingles with the new, favorable to the emergence of a retromania: "The Internet places the remote past and the exotic present side by side. Equally accessible, they become the same thing: far, yet near… old, yet *now*" (Reynolds, 2011: 85). In his work on music and memory, Adam Trainer argues that it is nowadays through the Internet that we think our relationship to the past:

> Our relationship with memory and the representation of our individual and collective pasts have changed. The personal and affective are undeniably tethered to our negotiation of culture through increasingly mediated experiences, which now occur predominantly in the digital realm. (2016: 409)

The term "mediated" used by Trainer is interesting when one considers that nostalgia, which functions as a link with a distant past – which has been lost but not erased – can now be experienced in a context of immediacy, as it always lies just a few clicks away. Indeed, in his interview with the journalist Hussein Kesvani, the author and musician Grafton Tanner explains that vaporwave is a new expression of nostalgia in an era where memories, the aesthetic and records of periods pasts are readily available:

> On social media, you have access to nostalgia at your fingertips. You can be recommended old photos or Facebook posts that can invoke memories, or sometimes, when you want to remember a better time, you can scroll back to old photos. So in a lot of ways, the way we use the internet is partly rooted in nostalgia, and you can read vaporwave as a genre that reflects that moment of time. (2019: §11-12)

In the age of vaporwave, our memory is digital, our nostalgia virtual. This article, through the analysis of concepts such as "anemoia" and "hiraeth," focuses on nostalgia as a multifaceted process as well as on the importance vaporwave grants not merely to memories but to the act of remembering itself.

The nostalgia(s) of *vaporwave*

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In his work entitled *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts*, Grafton Tanner explains that vaporwave transcends the musical field and is used in other media by artists sharing the same "vaporwave sensibility" (2016: iv). To some extent, this sensibility is generational; it is shared mostly among people born in the very embers of the 20th century, who only hazily remember – and to some extent imagine – the atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s through childhood memories and associate its musical echoes with blissful carefreeness. As the art journalist Genista Jurgens comments: "[Vaporwave] speaks to a generation in a way not seen since disco in the 70's, hip hop and pop of the 80's and grunge of the 90's" (2016: §9). Thus, vaporwave is intimately linked to the notion of nostalgia, defined by the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym in her work *The Future of Nostalgia*, published in 2001: "Nostalgia (from *nostos*–return home, and *algia*–longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (2001: xiii). The emotion pervading the feeling of nostalgia is eminently bittersweet; the heart is heavy while the imagination grows wings. Indeed, the impalpable quality of nostalgia can be found in a vaporwave building up the realm of the ideal: "It is worth noting that the term *virtual* is particularly well represented among vaporwave artist names and song titles, here representative not only of the digital and online realm but also of a kind of ideological utopia free from the tangible everyday" (Trainer, 2016: 420). For instance, vaporwave artist Ramona Xavier released two albums in 2013 under the pseudonym PrismCorp Virtual Enterprises. These two albums entitled *Home™* and *Clear Skies™* are characteristic of a specific subgenre of vaporwave called Utopian Virtual, which celebrates the sense of safety found in a pristine world akin to the pages of a catalogue. Thus, listening to vaporwave is akin to world-building – the denizens of such a world, like music critic Scott Beauchamp, belong to it as much as it belongs to them:

> Listen to the entire album [*Far Side Virtual* by James Ferraro], if you can spare the time. Put it on in the background as a soundtrack to work to. It's crisp, upbeat, and pleasant. The sounds that it's composed of are recognizable to me, like familiar voices from my past or little nodules of experience from my childhood. I grew up in the late '80s/early '90s, and an upbeat sound collage of voices from a Utopia that couldn't quite pull itself off aren't just simply pleasing—they feel like part of my identity. (2016: §11)

World-building, here, thus refers to the active process of constructing, more than an atmosphere, an environment from half-remembered

memories and more or less vivid impressions. As such, it could be argued that the nostalgic process is as much one of construction as it is one of reconstruction. Indeed, in the case of vaporwave and its siblings, the nostalgic process appears to be active, as the concept of "reconstructed nostalgia" offered by the musician Paul Ballam-Cross seems to show: "[Reconstructed nostalgia] highlights both the cultural references and the manner in which the listener's own experiences of nostalgia are rebuilt within [vaporwave, synthwave and chillwave] (2021: 72). Synthwave music is characterized by its use of imagery and instruments from the 1980s, such as the analog synthetizer. While the dynamic rhythm of synthwave can evoke the action-packed movies from the 1980s, such as *Escape from New York* (1981) directed by John Carpenter, chillwave offers a slower musical experience – for instance through the use of reverb, an effect also used profusely in vaporwave music. Vaporwave, then, is perhaps more about the very experience of nostalgia as a process rather than the mere nostalgic effect produced by the retro element. The world of vaporwave does not exist as a place, however – it exists as a time outside of time, in protest against an era of constant acceleration, as can be interpreted for instance from its frequent use of reverb. This is consistent with Boym's conception of nostalgia:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time–the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. (2001: xv)

The term "rebellion," used by Boym, raises an important issue concerning vaporwave, resonating with Trainer's words of "ideological utopia": its political dimension. While, as the academic and musician Laura Glitsos points out, "[t]he pleasure of vaporwave is [...] understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself" (2018: 101), some artists and listeners use vaporwave music as a political statement expressing a rejection of the times they are living in. These two opposed conceptions correspond respectively to Boym's concepts of "reflective nostalgia" and "restorative nostalgia,"[2] each drawing upon a different aspect of nostalgia:

> Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself and delays the homecoming–wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on

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2.   Reynolds also mentions these concepts in his prologue to *Retromania*, xxvii-xviii.

> the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (2001: xviii)

Consequently, Boym warns about the potential danger of drowning in a nostalgia and of letting the distinction between imagination and reality be blurred: "The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill" (*ibid* xvi). Indeed, Grafton Tanner, in his interview with Kesvani, reflects upon the political distortion of the original concept of vaporwave:

> You have a generation who live in uncertain times, and the danger of this kind of music is that it doesn't take long for someone who, in a state of intense nostalgia, can be manipulated into thinking that we should return to the past when things were better […]. You'll have people who think things were better in the past because they were more stable and fixed. And people in more dangerous vaporwave communities like the far right — who have their own vaporwave community known as "fashwave" — can say, 'Yes, in the past, things were better when there wasn't gender or racial equality.' That yearning for the past — for a better time — can lead to people forming their politics based on misremembering. (2019: §13)

In an article entitled "'Fashwave': synth music co-opted by the far right," Michael Hann focuses on the way fashwave was born from the distortion of synthwave music and aesthetic: "The graphics associated with fashwave look like those of synthwave, too: the same reliance on 80s sci-fi, especially Tron. […] What fashwave adds is swastikas, pictures of Donald Trump or Adolf Hitler" (2016: §10). While such distortions[3] appear incompatible with the pleasure of those listening to vaporwave for the sake of reflective nostalgia, it remains that vaporwave cannot be studied through the artistic lens alone – an important part of its essence does lie within a political and metaphysical rejection of the present and of a certain kind of future. Indeed, as Ross Cole points out in his article "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," "[Nostalgia and utopia] amount to a rejection of the present, whether in favor of the safety of recognition or the possibility of change" (2020: 302).

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3. The anti-capitalism linked to vaporwave will be analyzed in the following section.

Rejecting the present and a certain kind of future

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Thus, according to Grafton Tanner, the essence of vaporwave is not solely derived from the mere pleasure of basking in the harmless, reassuring glow of nostalgia and familiar retro; it also stems from the need to express and share a deep existential angst, as vaporwave artists entertain

> this desire to turn our fascinations and fantasies into more disquieting forms, to suggest that not all is perfectly well, to remind us that maybe we have not been liberated in the Internet Age. These artists are skeptical of capitalism's promise to redeem us in the name of material goods and of the nostalgia that hangs over an era obsessed with the clichés of history. (2016: iv)

Consequently, Stefan Colton opposes two categories of artists: "nostalgics who take pilgrimages to defunct blockbusters to worship the ruins of VHS, and anti-consumerist crusaders against the kitsch of capitalism" (2017: §11). Indeed, by taking back for itself corporate imagery and symbols of capitalism, vaporwave is understood and promoted by some as an indictment of the vacuity and absurdity of late-stage consumer culture, but this indictment is at the same time an artistic sublimation: "[V]aporwave luxuriates in an unruly and ambivalent celebration-cum-critique of late consumer capitalism" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 82). Thus, vaporwave is essentially two-faced, an ambiguity also underlined by the musicologist Adam Harper: "Is it a critique of capitalism or a capitulation to it? Both and neither" (2012: §3). This ambiguity is so prominent that it is conceptualized by Adam Trainer as musical post-irony: "Moving past the cynicism of irony, musical post-irony is both a critique and a celebration, an unapologetically confused rendering of subjective experience that fuses the intertextuality of contemporary pastiche with personal and experiential affectivity" (2016: 424). This would reconcile the love-hate relationship of vaporwave listeners towards the atmosphere they grew up with, composed of "advertising soundtracks for consumer electronics, luxury hotels and other icons of consumer capitalism, computer game soundtracks and sonic idents" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79) and associated with the innocence of childhood as well as with the disillusions they experienced when becoming adults. A darker hypothesis linked to vaporwave's celebration of corporate aesthetic can be found in the concept of accelerationism, analyzed by Harper:

> Accelerationism is the notion that the dissolution of civilisation wrought by capitalism should not and cannot be resisted, but rather must be pushed faster and farther towards the insanity and anarchically fluid violence that is its ultimate conclusion, either because this

> is liberating, because it causes a revolution, or because destruction is the only logical answer. (2012: §3)

This could contribute to explain the inherent absurdity of the vaporwave aesthetic,[4] with its random montages of motley elements. Absurdity thus becomes significant; while vaporwave may constitute an acceptation of society's pointlessness to some extent, it defies meaninglessness through the creation of a system of signs,[5] the randomness of which is so systematic it becomes codified.

Vaporwave's rejection of capitalism is inscribed in its creative process; it is meant to be shared without limits and without regard for authorship and copyright:

> The anonymity of vaporwave erases the notion of authorship altogether. In a way, a vaporwave release belongs to the genre at large and not to any one producer, establishing a multifarious genre field that eschews something so totalizing as ownership. (Tanner, 2016: 12)

Thus, vaporwave artists are not creating for a profit, and vaporwave as a microgenre is "driven entirely by an online network of artists who remained largely anonymous and often gave their music away for free[6] (in addition to freely sampling others' work without a second thought to copyright laws)" (Goldner, 2019: §10). According to Sean F. Han and Daniel Peters, vaporwave's disregard for copyright laws has another layer of signification; while it is linked to a rejection of capitalist logic, it also offers a commentary on vaporwave itself:

> The rampant stealing of material is essentially a huge middle finger to today's consumerist society – a silent mockery of its own fans for buying into something that's merely repackaged and presented back to the population. The 80s-centric sampling hints at capitalism's obsession with the new and updated, forcing listeners to appreciate music that was meant and limited by an era we left behind more than 30 years ago. (2016: §18)

In other words, vaporwave does not escape from the flaws it denounces. This could be interpreted as another aspect of its essential ambivalence: while vaporwave rejects the crushing wheel of late-stage capitalism, it still acknowledges it as its matrix.

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4. For a detailed analysis of the visual dimension of vaporwave, see Ross Cole's "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse" (2020).
5. Let us not forget vaporwave also spreads as a meme, and thus could be considered a form of language.
6. Numerous vaporwave albums are available on online platforms such as YouTube.

According to Anne H. Stevens and Molly C. O'Donnell, some micro-genres "seem to be […] tethered to particular moments of cultural anxiety or technological innovation" (2020: 5). The intimate link between vaporwave and the early days of the Internet that has been pointed out earlier is also a manifestation of a sense of wonder in front of the infinite potential of new technologies – a sense of wonder still uncorrupted by the dystopia of a technology pervading and ruling each and every aspect of life. Thus, as the journalist Julia Neuman argues:

> Now that we're in the thick of a data-driven takeover with no signs of turning back, where are we supposed to seek comfort? The '80s were the final years before technology snatched us in its inescapable grip. Temporarily dialing back to a time when technology was a controllable beast, and robots were just a wild prediction, seems like a pretty good answer. (2015: §12)

In Tanner's opinion, there is a specific historical event, at the dawn of the 21st century, that marked the end of an era and that has forever lost to the past the carefreeness celebrated by vaporwave – September 11, 2001:

> With unprecedented access to the Internet, the flattened desert where past, present, and future comingle, we find ourselves living in a state of atemporality, yearning for a time before the present. In the West, the time for which we pine is one before the twenty-first century, which arrived violently on September 11, 2001, and before the rise of the Internet. (2016: iv)

Consequently, it is no coincidence if the musical and aesthetic inspirations of vaporwave do not go beyond the end of the 1990s: "The vaporwave era of inspiration thus generally ends in 2001, after the dot-com bubble burst and 9/11. The intact Twin Towers appear on many vaporwave album covers,[7] including *Floral Shoppe*,[8] as a symbol of the era" (Colton, 2017: §7). Some vaporwave artists such as Jornt Elzinga – best known under his pseudonym 猫 シ Corp[9] – cultivate through their music the art of evasion. As the music journalist Simon Chandler notes from a 2017 interview with Elzinga: "[猫 シ Corp.]'s suggesting that *NEWS AT 11*—and perhaps his other records—are involved in an attempt to deny the reality of certain historical traumas" (§3). According to Beauchamp, this attempt at denying the pain of reality is manifested through the creation of an alternate, ideal world "[offering] up an alternative history of post-Cold War America" (2016: §15). 猫 シ Corp thus explains to Chandler

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7. Other examples include *9/11* by Pepsiman (2016) and *Soft Nostlagic* by vcr-classique (2022).
8. Released in 2011 by Ramona Xavier under the pseudonym Macintosh Plus. *Floral Shoppe* is considered one of the most emblematic examples of vaporwave music.
9. Read "Cat System Corp."

that "the loss of innocence is key" (2017: §1) in understanding vaporwave. He further describes his 2016 album Class of '84 as "an image of a (past) world that we love to escape to because our old world died in 2001" (ibid §1). However, the idea of a "past world" needs to be specified; Chandler's words suggest that vaporwave is perhaps less about reconstructing the world as it was in the past than it is about constructing it as it should have been today: "[Vaporwave's] tropes help artists such as [猫 シ Corp] — and perhaps society as a whole — to deny that history has branched off in the way it actually has, and to act as if things have continued as their nostalgia reconstructs it" (ibid §4). In striving to artistically create an alternate reality where his listeners can meet with an innocence and a carefreeness they no longer enjoy in their daily life, 猫 シ Corp has become vaporwave's "greatest exponent of mallsoft" (ibid §1), a subgenre of vaporwave recreating the soundscape of the American mall of the 1980s and 1990s as a nostalgic bubble. Thus, through mallsoft music and its aesthetic, nostalgia can be experienced both as a time and as a place.

Mallsoft music: soundscapes and imagined nostalgia

According to composer Raymond Murray Schafer, "Music forms the best permanent record of past sounds" (1994: 103). While mallsoft could arguably be defined as music, it is more accurately a soundscape, a concept developed by the expert on urban design Michael Southworth in his 1969 article "The Sonic Environment of Cities." A soundscape is thus a sonic environment, an atmosphere linked to a very specific landscape. It is crucial to observe with the historian David Crouch that landscapes are not mere sceneries devoid of meaning – they are *experienced* by the individual:

> The idea of landscapes in western culture is centered around consumption rather than production. A landscape appears as constructed by someone else: a company, a designer, a government, a wealthy owner, or by Nature. It is read as an icon of what people stand for, but rarely of an ordinary everyday culture; rather of someone else's idea: an image of the countryside; of the past; of a nation; an idea of a region's identity and heritage. (1993: 27)

By recreating a specific soundscape, mallsoft enables its listeners to enjoy the experience – by echo – of a landscape that has become unrecognizable; that of the typical American mall of the 1980s and 1990s. The work of Raymond Murray Schafer allows one to polish the definition of mallsoft even further; in his seminal 1977 work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Turning of the World*, Schafer develops the idea of lo-fi soundscape, a specific sort of soundscape

characterized by a sonic blur: "In a lo-fi soundscape individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds" (1994: 43). Indeed, mallsoft does not only rely on sampling Muzak®, "an easy-listening style of music often played in shopping centers" (Glitsos, 2019: 110); it also recreates the muffled echoes of the customers' voices, the commercial announcements made through loudspeakers, as well as all the other sounds of life in a busy commercial area.[10]

The mallsoft experience is the embodiment *par excellence* of vaporwave's ambiguous relationship to capitalism. On the one hand, the mall constitutes the epitome of consumer culture:

> Today and tomorrow, capital lives everywhere, in our TVs, phones and minds, but nowhere is it more holy than in the gleaming temples of its interface with the public – the office lobby, the hotel reception area, and most of all, the shopping mall. This music belongs in the *plaza*, literal and metaphorical, real and imaginary – the public space that is the nexus of infinite social, cultural and financial transactions and the scene of their greatest activity and spectacle. (Harper, 2012: §9)

On the other hand, it is also the altar of nostalgia, a sheltered shrine reminding the listeners of golden days[11] when they accompanied their parents on a shopping spree, immersing themselves in jumbles of sounds and neon glimpses. As the writer John Koenig explains, mallsoft "[is] a nostalgia for shopping trips with your mom when you were just a little kid, with tinny Madonna playing in the background" (qtd. in Kesvani, 2019: §5). Thus, in his 2019 article on the mallsoft experience, Kesvani provides the testimony of listener Michael Tills:

> It sounds stupid, but mallwave does let me escape from the shittiness of everyday life […]. It's just a couple of hours in a day where everything at least feels okay, that I don't have to worry about whether or not I'm going to get a job, the political situation in the U.S. — all that shit. I guess it makes me think that there was a better time, or a time when people in this country felt better. (*ibid* §8)

Mallsoft cultivates the art of the echo, of the haze, of the blur. Indeed, as Harper remarks, "vaporwave typically takes material from the early 1990s onwards that can pass for contemporary" (2012, §13). The choice of the words "pass for" highlights the uncanny dimension of vaporwave,

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10. 猫 シ Corp's 2016 album Shopping @ Helsinki offers a typical illustration of a mallsoft soundscape.
11. As Chandler notes, "it's the memory of simpler and more innocent times that plays a big part here in 猫 シ Corp.'s artistic vision" (2017: §7).

the blurring of the authentic and the fabricated – a dimension noticed by Ross Cole, who mentions the anachronistic tendency of the microgenre: "Vaporwave fetishizes the look of the '90s internet yet meshes this with the 1980s; it sounds like familiar chart music yet also sounds *unheimlich*" (2020: 317). The concept of the uncanny, introduced by the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch and expanded upon by Sigmund Freud, addresses the blurring between the known and the unknown – the experience of the familiar as unfamiliar.

Mallsoft belongs – as most vaporwave does – to the realm of hauntology music, a term echoing the concept mentioned by Jacques Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx*. Adam Harper's considerations on hauntology music, developed in a blog post entitled "Hauntology: The Past Inside the Present," enable a better understanding of the relationship between phenomena such as vaporwave and nostalgia; the former is a way to experience nostalgia itself as a process. In this regard, vaporwave – the music itself on the one hand and the philosophy behind it on the other – is both object and the prism through which it is perceived: "Hauntology is not a genre of art or music, but an aesthetic effect, a way of reading and appreciating art" (2009: §8). Thus, the mall as a soundscape is paced, haunted by mallsoft listeners in the same way as it is haunting them: "Mallsoft music isn't meant to get stuck in one's head immediately but possibly returns to your memory days or even weeks later" (McNeil, 2015: §2).

Interestingly enough, the ghosts of hauntology music hover at the crossroads of memory and imagination; as Laura Glitsos points out: "vaporwave is undoing and deforming memory in order to construct a phantasmal and liminal *remembering experience* in which memory both happens and does not happen" (2018: 106). Indeed, the type of nostalgia generated by vaporwave music – and mallsoft in particular – has a peculiarity: in some cases, it revolves around memories that never were from a time that was never lived:

> Chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave, as well as their respective subgenres, share a connective bond in that each genre references nostalgia as a fundamental building block of both their musical and visual aesthetics. While nostalgia in music (and reference to the music of the past) is certainly not new, the way in which nostalgia functions in relation to these differs from the majority of music revivals. Chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave rely instead on imagery and themes which evoke comforting nostalgic feelings or memories as a form of collective imaginative self-soothing, ultimately generating a nostalgia for times and places that have perhaps existed only in the listener's imagination. (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 70)

That is also how 猫 シ Corp defines the essence of vaporwave to Chandler: "a glorification of a past that never was" (§7). Thus, in Tills' case – a young man born in 1999 – Kesvani explains that his nostalgic experience of the mall springs essentially from his imagination:

> The mall is a happy place, reminiscent of a time when he was younger and carefree — where his life played out to a soundtrack of Weezer, No Doubt and the Counting Crows. Except, Tills never experienced such a mallrat adolescence. In fact, the closest mall to his home, the Fayette Mall in Lexington, is so small that you could probably visit every store in under an hour. […] Indeed, Till's life at the mall is imaginary. He's nostalgic for the 1990s, which he thinks was a better time to live. (2019: § 2-3)

According to vaporwave artist Jake Stevenson, the rousing of such a feeling is the goal of a significant portion of vaporwave music. He insists on its creative aspect and its ability to elicit the "completely new" out of a sensation of familiarity:

> While not all vaporwave aims for nostalgia specifically, most vaporwave aims to build a soundscape of escape by referencing lost places of the past (seen in numerous pop culture samples) or by creating something so effectively nostalgic it feels like a lost memory, despite being completely new. (2020: §17)

This peculiar type of nostalgia – an imagined nostalgia – is encapsulated in two concepts: that of "anemoia," as defined by John Koenig, and that of "hiraeth," as understood by 猫 シ Corp.

In a 2014 video posted on his YouTube channel *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, John Koenig defines the feeling of anemoia as "a pang of nostalgia for times you've never experienced" (0:18-0:22). This "obscure sorrow" is at the very core of vaporwave, which takes up its name from "a pun on 'vaporware,' the name for commercial software that is publicly announced but never goes into production[12] […]" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79). A cousin concept would be the feeling of hiraeth, which in Welsh refers to the longing linked to homesickness. It is this feeling that informs 猫 シ Corp's mallsoft music:

> The concept that most modern vaporwave aims to achieve is called "hiraeth," defined in the description of the album HIRAETH by the legendary Cat Corp. as "a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the

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12.   One of the pseudonyms of vaporwave artist Gabriel Eduardo is Windows96, an operating system abandoned by Microsoft.

> yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past." (Stevenson, 2020: §16)

While anemoia and hiraeth refer to the longing – the feeling itself – Laura Glitsos tries to conceptualize its mechanisms. In her 2018 article, she applies to vaporwave the concept of compensatory nostalgia developed by academic Chris Healy in his 2006 article "Dead Man: Film, Colonialism, and Memory" in order to understand how one can be nostalgic for something one never experienced: "As Chris Healy explains, 'compensatory nostalgia' (2006) stems from the paradox between remembering and forgetting that is ubiquitous in contemporary Western culture, and which occurs as a result of media saturation (p. 222)" (104). Consequently, this again posits vaporwave as a product of its time, the slowness of its flow going against a relentless stream of information. The craving of Western culture for this blurring of the line between memory and imagination can also be found in a microgenre sharing striking similarities with vaporwave and serving as one of its major influences – Japanese city pop. The critic and journalist Cat Zhang describes this type of music – coming from what Reynolds calls "The Empire of Retro" (2011: 162) – in the following terms:

> Essentially, city pop is Western music that's been adapted by the Japanese, now coming back to us as a retrospective source of fascination. The head of the internet music label Business Casual once said that listening to city pop was like "seeing old commercials from another world, selling the same brands and consumer products but in a different way than I remember." It is familiar enough to be comforting, but implicitly exists at a slight remove; the Japanese lyrics preserve an aura of exoticism and mystery, giving Western listeners room to freely project their desires. On YouTube, where city pop flourishes, listeners dwell fondly on artificial memories of Japan: "I remember back in the day when I'd drive through the Tokyo streets at night with the window rolled down, neon lights on buildings, everyone having a good time, the '80s were great," wrote one commenter to the popular mix "warm nights in tokyo [city pop/ シティポップ],"[13] before the illusion dissolves: "Wait a minute, I'm 18 and live in America." Every city pop upload is filled with similar comments. (2021: §4)

Thus, in microgenres such as mallsoft and Japanese city pop, the nostalgia is – to a significant extent if not entirely – imagined. It derives from a double creative process initiated by the artist and completed by the listener; in other words, it is a collaborative world–building experience:

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13.   This mix had been deleted by YouTube for a copyright issue before being posted again.

> In engaging with this music, listeners embrace a collective form of nostalgia for situations that are unlikely to have existed. In this collaborative memory, it is not the real 1980s or 1990s for which listeners are nostalgic, but the plainly fictional form found only in the listeners' imagination, often taking inspiration from popular culture. By engaging with the imagery of this (either in the cover art of the release or in similar media), users construct a collective "memory" of times and places that have never (or will never) exist. (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 90-91)

The resilience of vaporwave

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While vaporwave is by no means the only microgenre drawing upon the retro for musical and visual influences to have emerged from the depths of the Internet's "data sea" (Reynolds, 2011: 84), it distinguishes itself from similar phenomena such as chillwave and synthwave, the latter being, according to Aleix De Vargas-Machuca in his article on the origins of vaporwave and its different subgenres, its "direct sibling" (§3). One major difference would be the ironic dimension inherent to vaporwave: "While synthwave prioritizes a reinterpreted form of 1980s film scores and culture, often seeming like an extended act of homage, vaporwave reinterprets popular media with a heavily ironic edge" (Ballam-Cross, 2021: 78). Considering this microgenre with its characteristic irony in mind and its rejection of capitalist logic, one observes that vaporwave artists are more concerned with what their music conveys rather than with its marketability. Vaporwave has no calling for – in lay terms – going mainstream:

> Vaporwave, itself a kind of musical parody of pop consciousness, never strived for mass appeal. It doesn't need our validation. That's true for any artifact of counterculture: mass acceptance would weaken its claim to authenticity. Forcing it into a form fit for mass appeal would dilute its identity. (Beauchamp, 2016: §3)

In fact, since – as a rule – vaporwave music profusely resorts to unauthorized samples of already existing music, its commercialization is quite simply impossible.

However, this extensive use of sampling also raises another issue: with nothing "new" to offer, vaporwave was likely doomed to a very swift death by exhaustion. Yet, when Adam Harper checked its pulse in 2013, it was still alive and well: "Although vaporwave can all too easily become formulaic, the many releases this year that either tagged themselves 'vaporwave' or clearly adopted the style show a startling creativity and diversity"

(§2). More recently, in 2019, after almost ten years of existence, vaporwave had its first dedicated music festival, which took place in New York: 100% ElectroniCON. This tends to show that the microgenre – despite all odds – not only endures but continues to gather a growing audience. Going back up the stream of creativity noticed by Harper, one may observe that vaporwave music is a creative process rather than a finished product; with its cousin lo-fi (understand low-fidelity music), it draws attention to its creative ropes and material dimension:

> Vaporwave stands in opposition to the sleek production of contemporary music and can also call attention to the artifice of music production with oddly cut loops (causing the jagged samples to resist turning over on the downbeat of a measure), continuous repetition, and by exposing the audible "click" of the sample looping over in the mix. (Tanner, 2016: 10)

Another crucial factor explaining vaporwave's survival and thriving is its versatility; it is indeed much more than a purely musical phenomenon:

> Vaporwave is a product of this age: cultivated almost entirely within the medium of the Internet, and remarkable for the extent to which the net is embraced not only as a cultural and social but as an aesthetic medium, visual as much as musical. (Born and Haworth, 2017: 79)

Thus, on the one hand, it possesses an easily identifiable aesthetic (a mix of classical sculpture, digital paraphernalia from the 90s and rudimentary montages in a pastel color palette); on the other hand, Born and Haworth also show that vaporwave functions as a language – a language familiar to Internet users from the 2010s onwards: "[V]aporwave circulates more like a 'meme'[14] than a music genre" (*ibid* 80).

Yet, in meme culture, a meme "dies" precisely when its use is normalized – when it is used by whom some initiates half-jokingly, half-scornfully call the "normies." Such people are defined by the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "one whose tastes, lifestyle, habits, and attitude are mainstream and far from the cutting edge" (§2). Thus, by that measure, in the middle of the 2010s, vaporwave died – or so a part of its community thought:

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14. The second entry of the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a meme as "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture." The first entry specifies that it circulates by being "spread widely online especially through social media."

> In 2015, MTV unveiled a major re-branding. Vaporwave art (glitchy collages of palm trees, mall aesthetics, '90s computer graphics) and vaporwave music had replaced punk in its transitions and shorts: MTV had co-opted vaporwave overnight. The Viacom executives had decided it was this that would surely reach those millennials. (Colton, 2017: §14)

Granted that "[t]he re-appropriation of corporate cultural artifacts *is* vaporwave" (*ibid* §13), then vaporwave got an unpleasant taste of its own medicine. Indeed, it should be kept in mind that companies have taken due notice of the retromania Reynolds writes about, and have developed the concept of pseudo-nostalgia as a marketing tool – a fact illustrated by the academics Tom van Laer and Davide Christian Orazi through the example of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*:

> A key feature of contemporary marketing is the development of products and services that feature a new theme on an old idea. Called "retromarketing," it is the relaunch or revival of a product or service from a historical period, which marketers usually update to ultra-modern standards of functioning, performance or taste. Sure, nostalgia sells – but what retromarketers really try to induce are feelings of "pseudo-nostalgia." We call it pseudo-nostalgia because younger consumers of these revived products and services have never experienced the original. Generation Z will not have been there, done that. (2022: § 4-6)

Thus, what van Laer and Orazi call pseudo-nostalgia[15] appears to spring from the same emotional source as anemoia; yet while vaporwave aficionados seek to evade consumerism to go back to the essential simplicity of nostalgia, companies have turned nostalgia and memories into consumer goods. This tendency had been noticed as soon as 2001 by Stephen Brown, an expert in business studies:

> Marketing, as everyone knows from day one, class one, study one, is customer orientated and it therefore follows that the rise of retro is a direct reflection of customer preferences. As consumers age,[16] they are more inclined to retrospect and marketers are simply responding to the demand. (10)

Grafton Tanner, in his interview with Hussein Kesvani, highlighted the growth of this trend almost twenty years later:

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15. Pseudo-nostalgia appears to be functioning in the same way as Arjun Appadurai's concept of "ersatz nostalgia." As Glitsos explains: "[W]e see the relationship between media and the production of nostalgia without 'real' memory, or what Arjun Appadurai describes as 'ersatz nostalgia' – a kind of 'nostalgia without memory' (1996, p. 82)" (2018 106).
16. Vaporwave, however, shows the proclivity of a younger audience to reminiscing.

> Nostalgia is a popular tool in marketing, and it's probably the most defining cultural product of our time. You see it in movies and TV with reboot trends, and of course, apps like Spotify use algorithms that recommend music that you've probably listened to in the past. (2019: 11)

How to explain, then, vaporwave's survival to the relentless blows of its sworn enemy, corporate capitalism? According to Jake Stevenson, it is thanks to a dedicated audience that the vaporwave phenomenon was able to outlive its life expectancy as an Internet microgenre: "It used to be a running joke back around 2016 that vaporwave was dead, but a passionate and active community helped to maintain the music's growth and reshape its modern viability" (2020: §29). The formation of a community around shared nostalgic bearings – and more importantly, the same vision of the nostalgic experience – has allowed vaporwave to transcend the mere counter-cultural dimension characteristic of microgenres. In her article "Why Won't Vaporwave Die?", Genista Jurgens thus notices the reflective power of Simpsonwave, one of vaporwave's subgenres drawing upon the television series *The Simpsons*, a landmark of pop culture and a nostalgic bridge between the 1990s and the 2020s: "The shallow and superficial irony that was haunting vaporwave has been replaced by honesty, sincerity and emotional connection" (2016: §12). Consequently, a microgenre which started as the wistful acknowledgment of a loss has been able not only to survive, but to thrive, to build, to connect. Beyond passion and dedication, it is the ability of both the artists and their audience to perpetually breathe life into vaporwave, to create, in the words of Jake Stevenson, "an entirely new type of music and also one you've heard before" (2020: §5) – to always find new ways back home.

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