

Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth?

Cognitive Mapping of Late Capitalist Affect
in the Virtual Lifeworld of Vaporwave



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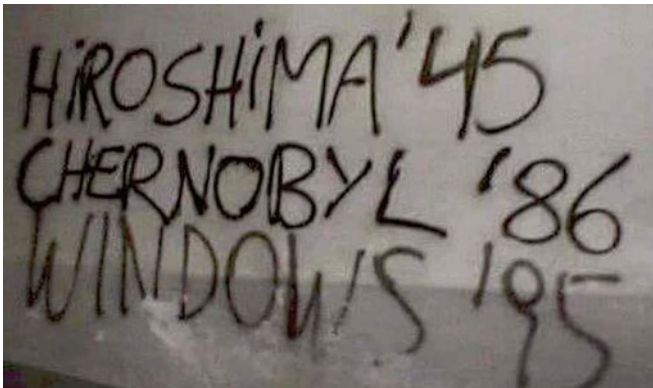
In "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Frederic Jameson (1991) mentions an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" as a new form of radical aesthetic practice to deal with the set of historical situations and problems symptomatic of late capitalism. For Jameson (1991), cognitive mapping functions as a tool for postmodern subjects to represent the totality of the global late capitalist system, allowing them to situate themselves within the system, and to reenact the critique of capitalism that has been neutralized by postmodernist confusion. Drawing upon a close reading of the music and visual art of the nostalgic internet-based "vaporwave" aesthetic alongside Jameson's postmodern theory and the affect theory of Raymond Williams (1977) and Brian Massumi (1995; 1998), this essay argues that vaporwave can be understood as an attempt to aestheticize and thereby map out the affective climate circulating in late capitalist consumer culture. More specifically, this paper argues that through its somewhat obsessive hypersaturation with retro commodities and aesthetics from the 1980s and 1990s, vaporwave simultaneously critiques the salient characteristics of late capitalism such as pastiche, depthlessness, and waning of affect, and enacts a nostalgic longing for a modernism that is fleeing further and further into an inaccessible history.

KEYWORDS

Affect, Postmodernism, Late Capitalism, Cognitive Mapping, Aesthetics

Purgatory

A widely shared image on the Internet asks viewers to reflect on the atrocities of the past century. Providing no information on its creator or whereabouts, the grainy image depicts a stark grey concrete wall with “HIROSHIMA '45 CHERNOBYL '86 WINDOWS '95” hastily graffitied onto it in black spray paint, evoking a sense of urgency to the message. The message is intended as a kind of black humour in the Apple-saturated and dehistoricized postmodern consumer world of the present. We get the joke – that the Internet medium through which we are viewing this image has contributed to a suppression of history through which



Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and Windows 95 may as well have been comparable in their historical significance and respective contributions to human suffering (Jameson, 1991).

Yet at the same time, the image seems saturated with haunting affects that come to life as you meditate on it. The former two events cited in the image evoke affects of inconceivable suffering and catastrophe, brought into the collective consciousness through black-and-white images of mutation, rubble, and ruin, but somewhat obscured through history, and a bleakly warming sense of cultural otherness. “Good thing I wasn’t there,” the viewer might think. On the other hand, the latter event brings to life a different sort of affect that is likely more familiar to the image’s viewers: a kind of throbbing of the “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy” forms of suffering that characterizes late capitalist life as it freezes and glitches, prompting one to try to “ctrl-alt-del” or “restart”, knowing full well that things would never be the same after that God-forsaken operating system, at least not for a while (Povinelli, 2011, p. 54).

Toward the end of Fredric Jameson's 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", which also functions as the first chapter to his eponymous book, Jameson (1991, p. 46) argues that attempts to make moralizing judgments on postmodernism are a "category mistake". According to Jameson (1991), cultural critics and moralists of postmodernity are too deeply involved in its cultural categories to enact a traditional ideological critique. Jameson (1991, p. 48-49) aptly notes the demoralizing and depressing "moment of truth" of postmodernism in which the radical edge of previous Leftist conceptions of cultural politics has dulled or rusted due to the fact that these politics can no longer achieve a "critical distance" from the system they wish to critique. For Jameson, the solution to this seems to be found in a new form of radical aesthetic practice dealing with the fresh set of historical situations and problems symptomatic of late capitalism. Drawing on Kevin Lynch's idea of disalienating urban space through one's own mental mapping of the city, and Louis Althusser's notion of ideology as, "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence", Jameson (1991, p. 51) calls for a radical practice he refers to as an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping". For Jameson (1991), cognitive mapping can be understood as a tool for postmodern subjects to represent the totality of the global late capitalist system, allowing them to situate their subject position within it, and to reenact the critique of capitalism that had previously been neutralized by postmodernist confusion.

Jameson's idea of representing the totality of the myriad of processes in late capitalism has drawn fire from a numbers of critics, as noted in Robert T. Tally Jr.'s (2000) "Jameson's Project of Cognitive Mapping: A Critical Engagement", which notes the poststructuralist line of questioning around who is doing the representing and what is being represented. Tally Jr.'s (2000, p. 414) work also takes very literally the Lynchian influence in Jameson's work, seeing cognitive mapping as the first step in what he terms "cartographics", a "set of critical practices that would engage with issues of space and spatial relations in connection with cultural and social theory". Rather than understanding the cartography of cognitive mapping in a necessarily physical geographical sense, I want to argue here, drawing on Jameson's (2000) assertion that cognitive mapping is "nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness'", that cognitive mapping can also be understood as the mapping of an affective space produced by late capitalist culture. Specifically, this essay will be looking at the phenomenon of vaporwave, an Internet aesthetic from the early 2010s founded on a nostalgic fascination with mainstream cultural aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s, as a possible attempt at creating an aesthetic of cognitive mapping. As I will argue, vaporwave reproduces a melancholy affect through its aestheticization of the depthlessness, waning of

affect, new technologies, pastiche, and collapse of high/low categories into consumer culture that define postmodernism for Jameson. Vaporwave aesthetics can thus be understood as creating a cognitive map of the bleak affective space of late capitalism, inviting viewers or listeners to step inside and critique it from within.

Remember I Was Vapor, Remember I Was Just Like You

How's this for a cognitive map: a hot pink background with a black and pink tiled dance floor stretching into the infinite, evoking the Black Lodge from the last episode of David Lynch's (1991) *Twin Peaks* television series, or perhaps the dance floor on which George Michael (1984) had his last faithful dance with his star-crossed lover immortalized in "Careless Whisper". At the forefront of the image on its left side sits a bust of Helios, the personification of the sun in Greek mythology, staring back at the viewer as if to serve as a satirical reminder of what "aesthetics" once referred to.



Album artwork, *Floral Shoppe* (フローラルの専門店), Macintosh Plus, 2011

The "beauty question" is also referenced to the right of Helios in a window to a better world: a cheesily melancholy image of a boat sailing through the sky's golden reflection over the water toward a city skyline. Above it reads "MACフローラルの専門店" in a fluorescent green font. As you stare at the image, music begins to play – a slowed-down rendition of Diana Ross' 1984 single, "It's Your Move" that sounds like a retrospective on 80s pop music by way of Houston, Texas' codeine-fueled "chopped and screwed" music style seeps out, vapor-like,

permeating the air with a musical equivalent to cheap perfume. The song's title is "リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー (Risafuranku 420/Gendai no Konpyū Lisa Frank 420/Modern Computing)" by Macintosh Plus, an alias of electronic artist Vektroid.

So what is this and what does it all mean? Vaporwave refers to an audio-visual Internet aesthetic characterized by a fascination with retro cultural aesthetics. Following on the heels of the short-lived micro-cultures of "seapunk" and "chillwave" on Tumblr in the early 2010s, vaporwave draws from a bizarre canon of nostalgic imagery of the 1980s and 1990s (Beks, n.d.). Taking its name from a spoof on "vaporware", a practice of promoting nonexistent products adopted by computer companies to keep competitors at bay, vaporwave employs a corny depiction of retro imagery to evoke capitalist sleaze, working to expose the emptiness underlying the glossy sheen of late consumer capitalism (Lhooq, 2013). In attempting to create a sensationalized depiction of late capitalist alienation, vaporwave art uses neon colours, Windows 95 glitch art, corporate logos, images of Greek and Roman busts, melancholy 8-bit images of cityscapes, beaches, and other quasi-utopian aesthetic "elsewheres", and Japanese anime and text. As a musical genre, vaporwave has been variously referred to as "chillwave for Marxists," "post-elevator music," and "corporate smooth jazz Windows 95 pop", using heavily manipulated samples of forgotten corporate music from the 1980s such as pop ballads, elevator music, smooth jazz, and computer and video game scores to create alienating reinterpretations of familiar sounds (Lhooq, 2013; Beks, n.d.). Conceptually, vaporwave music attempts to evoke the generic atmosphere of the mundane temples of global late capital, such as the office lobby, the hotel reception area, the mall, the beach resort, and the corporatized plaza (Harper, 2012).

While vaporwave has traditionally been understood as a critique of late capitalist consumer culture, its exact theoretical influences have been disputed. In an influential essay titled "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza", Adam Harper (2012) notes that vaporwave's capitalist critique can be understood in the context of accelerationism, the philosophy of pushing capitalism toward its inevitably violent conclusion developed by British philosopher Nick Land in the 1990s. As Harper (2012) writes, vaporwave musicians, "let flow the music that lubricates Capital, open the door to a monstrously alienating sublime, twist dystopia into utopia and vice versa, and dare you not to like it". Harper (2012) cites an interview conducted with vaporwave artist James Ferraro, in which Ferraro argues that realism and idealism "bounce off one another repeatedly in a paradigm" in the late capitalist moment, and that he applauds the future rather than fearing it. However, in an interview with the prolific vaporwave artist, Robin Burnett, better known as INTERNET CLUB, Burnett expresses a desire to do something "Debordian" by creating a "the defamiliarisation of things we've become so use to that we don't notice them any more" (Harper, 2012).

Contrary to Harper's analysis, Burnett's reference to Guy Debord, the leader of the neo-Marxist Situationist International signifies an undeniably idealistic desire to disrupt the everyday spectacles of capitalist society, rather than to accelerate them. Yet, Harper (2012) also cites psychoanalytic and Marxist influences in vaporwave's name, drawing on the concept of sublimation in Freudian thinking, and Marx's quote from the *Communist Manifesto*, in which he states that "all that is solid melts into air" – referring to the constant changes to society under capitalism. Surprisingly missing amid the theoretically confused party of accelerationists, situationists, psychoanalysts and Marxists credited with influencing vaporwave's late capitalist critique is Fredric Jameson. As I will argue, the characteristic traits of postmodernism that Jameson identifies in his eponymously titled book are not only evident in vaporwave aesthetics, but function in creating a cognitive map of the affective space of late capitalism. I will now turn briefly to a summary of the affect theory that informs this argument, before reading some of Jameson's arguments in *Postmodernism* in relation to vaporwave aesthetics and the affects they produce.

Hit Vibes

In his essay, "The Autonomy of Affect", Brian Massumi (1995, p. 96) draws on Deleuze and Guattari's adoption of the term "affect" from Spinoza, defining affects as "virtual synaesthetic perspectives anchored in...the actually existing, particular things that embody them". For Massumi (1995, p. 91), affects thus refer to a set of deeply embodied presubjective vibrations that exist simultaneously in actual life, as well as what Massumi terms the "virtual": a paradoxical realm of potentiality in which intensities that cannot otherwise be experienced can be felt. Massumi (1995) distinguishes affect from emotion, using the latter to refer to socially or personally qualified feelings rooted in the actual, and describing the former as a set of prepersonal feelings that defies perception and articulation through its transcendence of the actual. While the autonomy of affect for Massumi exists in its ability to escape perception, articulation, and subsequently, more traditional materially-oriented means of social analysis, affect carries important ramifications in thinking about both politics and aesthetics. Massumi (1995) cites the powerful feelings of confusion and awe surrounding Ronald Reagan's mimetic communication style, and Reagan's subsequent two-term presidency as one of the first instances of the mobilization of affect in postmodern politics. For Massumi (1995), the rapid rate at

which information is circulated in the postmodern period signifies the end of ideology in defining the global functioning of power, and heralds the growing need for scholars and politicians of the left to begin thinking about politics affectively.

At first glance, Massumi's, (2009, p. 7) assertion that ideology no longer functions as the global mode of power, and his echoing of Deleuze and Guattari in stating that, "no situation is ever fully predetermined by ideological structures or codings" seems at odds with Fredric Jameson's explicitly Marxist project of cognitive mapping. Indeed, for Jameson (2000, p. 418), who refers to his aesthetic of cognitive mapping as "nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness'", this project functions as an effort to revive a Marxist capacity to struggle by giving individual subjects a sense of their place within late capitalism's global system. In stark contrast to Jameson's desire to map the connections between the late capitalist system and its aesthetics, Massumi's intellectual forebear, Gilles Deleuze opposes the tendency to draw straightforward correlations between facets of culture and their respective origins, economic or otherwise. As Deleuze (1994 p. 176 & 193) states in *What Is Philosophy?*, "art is the language of sensations", yet "no art and no sensation have ever been representational" of reality. Put beside the sassy anti-representational aesthetics of the hip new poststructuralists on the block, Fredric Jameson begins to look like kind of a square: an old Marxist clinging desperately to seemingly outdated models of base and superstructure amid the influx of hot new discourses complicating these relationships.

Like Deleuze and Massumi, Raymond Williams presents a compelling mode of examining the relationship between affect and aesthetics. In Williams' (1977, p. 133) case, this is what he terms "structures of feeling", referring to a particular set of feelings specific to a time and place that informs formal and stylistic conventions in art. Like Massumi's affects, these structures indicate a mode of feeling and thinking that exists "in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate", that are otherwise unintelligible through the study of fixed social forms and exist in a complex relationship to the already articulate (Williams, 1977, p. 130-131). Like Jameson however, Williams' (1977, p. 133) aesthetics also function as a part of a Marxist project, seeking to enhance the traditional base and superstructure model by describing the rich sets of feelings produced in this dynamic in a capitalist system, and treating "forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process". In situating the mapping of art's affects within the Marxist base and superstructure model, Williams' structure of feelings concept thus functions in reconciling some of the tension between a Marxist aesthetic of cognitive mapping and poststructuralist theories of affect.

In “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales”, Steven Shaviro (2010) also draws a parallel between Jameson and Deleuze by noting the scholars’ insistence on mapping their respectively unrepresentable terrains of late capitalism and affect. For Shaviro (2010, p. 6-7), both scholars seek to “know” their respective systems in a non-representational way that he terms “an aesthetic of affective mapping”. Drawing on Williams’ correlation between affect and aesthetics in his “structure of feelings” concept, Shaviro (2010, p. 2) refers to “a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today” that accounts for “what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century”. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to the aestheticization of late capitalism’s affects mapped in vaporwave as a “virtual lifeworld”, borrowing Massumi’s term. Like Shaviro’s (2010, p. 7) “aesthetic of affective mapping”, the notion of a virtual lifeworld refers to a loose aestheticization of feelings circulating within a particular space and/or time, mapped across a diverse array of expressions. In the case of vaporwave, I will argue that the virtual lifeworld being mapped is one characterized by a uniquely postmodern affect of melancholic nostalgia. As I will try to show, this effect is largely created through an aestheticization of the feelings of estrangement produced by the salient characteristics of late capitalism outlined by Jameson, and the hinting at a sense of nostalgia for a romanticized time in the early late capitalist period.

A New Day

The first characteristic of postmodernism that Jameson (1991) outlines is the emergence of depthlessness or superficiality as a formal feature in art. Here, Jameson (1991) uses Andy Warhol’s pop art as an example of an uncritical, and even fetishistic approach to commodification, which challenges a modernist approach to art interpretation by creating a work with no lead into a hermeneutic analysis. The “you-get-what-you-see” tendency of postmodern art that Jameson notes is also one that is actively called attention to and satirized in vaporwave aesthetics. Here, Warhol’s uncritical presentation of the commodity in its raw form is taken to its limits with a somewhat obsessive hypersaturation of nostalgic commodities in vaporwave visual art. In one notable example, this takes the shape of a purple image of a sunset over the water, pasted with pictures of Fiji water bottles, cans of Arizona ice tea, the Nintendo 64 logo, Japanese anime characters, and in the centre of it, a series of Windows 95 windows all displaying tacky Internet stickers on a hot pink screen, their tabs all titled with the question, “IS THIS ART?”

The forceful reiteration of the latter question seems to indicate a desperate critique of postmodern art's superficiality, while the constant citation of nostalgic commodities like the outdated Nintendo 64 console both mock this superficiality and signify a kind of longing for a retro elsewhere. While Warhol's depthless art seems to defy hermeneutic analysis through its unadorned presentation of ordinary commodities, vaporwave art is saturated with Japanese text in order to depict a globalized future that is alien and impenetrable to its presupposed demographic of white Western viewers (Lhooq, 2013). Vaporwave music also places an emphasis on the banal, mundane, and everyday that would likely surpass Warhol's sensibilities. Eco Virtual's *Atmospheres*第1, which is themed around weather forecast music serves as a good example of the latter. With its soft, clicky beats, smooth jazz saxophones, sparse piano notes, and song titles like "Acid Rain", and "Tropical Depression", Eco Virtual turns the numbing mundanity of weather forecasts into a powerful critique of a world in which mental illness and environmental hazards are

transformed into commodified everyday occurrences that are accompanied by soulless music and images of blue skies.



The depthlessness of postmodernism is closely linked to what Jameson (1991, p. 15) terms the “waning of affect”, following the death of the modern subject. As Jameson (1991) argues, the organizational bureaucracy of the postmodern world has led to the dissolution of the centred modernist subject that existed in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family. Here, Jameson (1991) famously cites Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* as a modernist expression of alienation and anxiety no longer appropriate to the world of postmodernity. It must be noted here that the notion of a waning of affect characterizing the postmodern condition may at first seem contradictory to my emphasis on the affective space of postmodernism that is being depicted by vaporwave aesthetics. This is noted by Brian Massumi (1995), who argues against Jameson’s assertion by claiming that if anything, late capitalist culture is characterized by a surfeit of affect. The distinction between Jameson and Massumi’s conceptions of affect must be noted here. While for Jameson, affect is related to the subject, falling under what Massumi would term emotion, Massumi’s notion of affect is presubjective, and primary to emotion. In this regard, the waning of affect that Jameson refers to serves as a contributing factor to what I refer to as an affect of mundanity in vaporwave’s depiction of the virtual lifeworld of late capitalism, drawing on a more Massumian conception of the term. This is to say that the banal affects produced by vaporwave’s shallow and soulless aesthetic can be understood as a reaction to the turn away from a modernist aesthetic of expression as exemplified *The Scream*. In the virtual lifeworld of vaporwave, the wild cries of the exasperated modernist subject have been replaced by dull, inarticulate expressions of a mundane collective suffering. Instead of the manic state of existential horror brought to life by “the cry, the raw vibrations of the human throat”, the vaporwave lifeworld presents its “broken dreams and silent screams” in

technicoloured hues, evoking a faded memory of a time predating the unemotional starkness of postmodernity – a place in a long lost past captured on a discarded VHS cassette, a place where colourful expressions and frenzied cries of hope and purpose would burst across the cultural landscape (Jameson, 1991, p. 13).



For Jameson (1991, p. 37), the technological advances of late capitalism can be understood as a contributing factor to the “crisis of temporality” that characterizes postmodernity. The prominence of the Internet in late capitalism has played a significant role in accelerating the “blank parody” of pastiche, pushing history further and further away as we attempt to seek it through our own representations and simulations of it (Jameson, 1991, p. 17). “DESTROY 2000 YEARS OF CULTURE”, reads one particularly poignant image of a trio of depressed-looking statues in seeming response to Jameson.



In addition to pastiche, the image also evokes an aesthetic question as it appears in the neon-coloured, dehistoricized postmodern world of vaporwave. Vaporwave’s visual aesthetic has been a long-running joke throughout its short-lived history.

While never explicitly citing its theoretical sources, the prominence of Greco-Roman statues and columns in vaporwave seems to function as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the critiques of discourses of beauty and fine art in Kantian aesthetics undertaken by Marxist cultural theorists. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) mentions that the replacement of the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric with that of criticism created a mode of aesthetic criticism whose emphasis on the aesthetic function as sublimity and beauty in works of literature served to distinguish the bourgeoisie from lower class consumers of



non-literature. Following the critiques of theorists such as Williams and Terry Eagleton, numerous scholars such as Michael Bérubé (2005, p. 16) have embraced a “populist strain of cultural studies”, searching for beauty and intellectual material in popular cultural texts, and effectively dissolving the modernist distinction between high culture and mass culture into a uniform commercial culture (Jameson, 1991). In vaporwave aesthetics, the employment of Greco-Roman sculptures and columns then seem to function as tombstones of sorts, recalling a dim memory of stability in the respective definitions of aesthetics, beauty, and fine art predating the cultural tornado of postmodernism. Similarly, the prominence of dated cultural artifacts associated with early postmodernity like the original PlayStation console or the Nintendo Game Boy can be understood as portals into a more innocent time of postmodernity for the millennial viewer, before technology and late capitalist culture fully reduced history into a uniform blur accessible only through pastiche.



The aforementioned period of postmodernity which roughly spans the late 1980s through the mid-1990s plays an important role in the nostalgic melancholia of vaporwave’s virtual lifeworld. Following Jameson, this paper uses the terms “postmodernity” and “late capitalism” interchangeably, referring loosely to their circulation and discussion in the postwar period. By referring to the late 1980s and early 1990s as a period of “early postmodernity” cited in vaporwave’s aesthetic, it should be noted that I am referring to the period immediately predating the

dramatic changes in late capitalist life facilitated through digital technologies such as the widespread access to home computers and the Internet. It is interesting to note here that the historical period represented in vaporwave not only corresponds to the childhoods of vaporwave's presupposed Western millennial subjects, but also the time at which Jameson was most actively theorizing postmodernity. In the virtual lifeworld of vaporwave, the presupposed millennial subject constantly seeks to flee the feelings of isolation and numbness generated by postmodernity's detachment from history, depthlessness, and muted expression, by returning to a warm place in their childhood preceding the trauma that followed postmodernity's final fracture from history through digital technology, and subsequent departure into its pastiche-fueled, "schizophrenic" eternal present (Jameson, 1991, p. xi). By ransacking the treasury of technological artifacts, cultural relics, and quotidian objects of this period, vaporwave's aesthetic appears to be attempting to reestablish contact with history by salvaging the long lost fragments of modernity's captivatingly expressive affects. Upon encountering these nostalgic objects however, things become distorted – the objects lose their



historical context, familiar songs or episodes from television programs bleed into one another, and the subject comes to realize the futility in trying to access the past in the schizophrenic eternal present of postmodernity. A 2016 YouTube phenomenon called "Simpsonwave", serves as an excellent example of this, incorporating vaporwave soundtracks over mashed up and distorted footage from *The Simpsons*. "I'm just a kid...", echoes Blank Banshee's "Teen Pregnancy" track over clips of a stoned-looking Bart embarking on a psychedelic walk through Springfield in a video entitled, "S U N D A Y S C H O O L" by Simpsonwave originator, Lucien Hughes (2016). Here, the viewer is encouraged to step into Bart's shoes, attempting to escape a series of melancholic memories by navigating through a space that is at once familiar yet foreign.

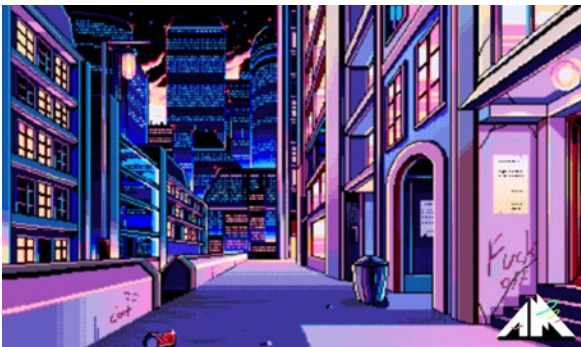
The video's powerful affective grasp on the viewer seems here to be the contradiction between the viewing subject's attempts to once again return to the place of childish innocence embodied by Bart as he navigates the familiar terrain of his hometown, and their subsequent inability to do so in the warped postmodern rendering of the show. Throughout the video, episodes from several early episodes of the show are melded together and distorted with fake television static evoking fading memories, while a mashup between Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and Boards of Canada plays overtop. The message seems clear: in mapping

the nostalgic affects of postmodernity's schizophrenic haze, vaporwave seems to function like The Eagles' proverbial Hotel California, reminding its guests that they can check out anytime they like, but they can never leave (1976).



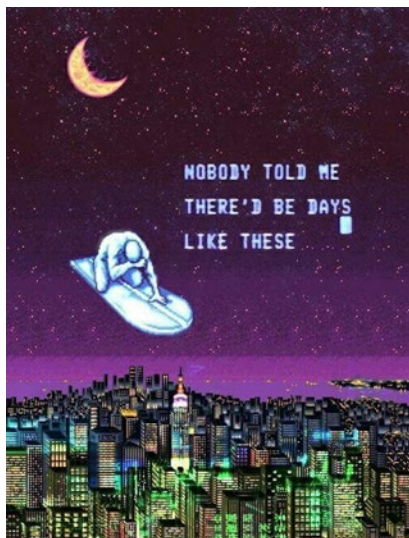
DREAMISLAND

We begin our voyage of mapping the virtual lifeworld of late capitalism like De Certeau (1984) did in New York, gazing at the space from above. In this instance, it's a monolithic cityscape, illuminated by a rich 8-bit purple glow with stars gleaming in the sky. It's almost perfect. Drifting over the city, in all lower case letters hovers a deliciously apt question, "where are you?" Good question. Everywhere we walk, the city's streets are deserted.



There are traces of activity here and there – the lights are on in a couple of apartments, a pop can sits littered on the sidewalk, a message spray painted on a wall by an anonymous vandal tells you to “Fuck off” – yet there's nobody on the streets. Perhaps they're at home on their computers. Maybe they're at the mall.

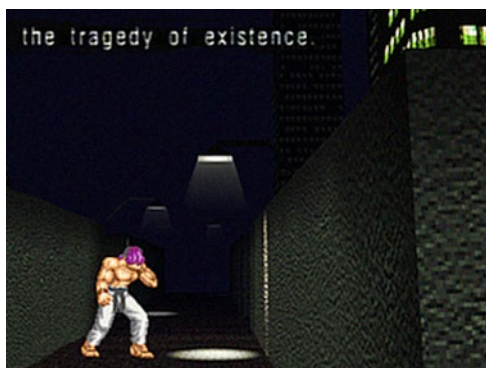
Is this what Jameson (1991, p. 37) meant when he described the “technological sublime” of the new decentred postmodern space? Yet what about this space is sublime? A deep sense of melancholy permeates the air – the few characters that wander around are fallen heroes whimpering depressed monologues on “the tragedy of existence” into their sleeves.



Upon exiting the space, the entire cityscape begins to fall apart – “DON’T WORRY, YOUR DREAMS WILL EVENTUALLY DIE – IT’S ONLY 2 AM ANYWAY”. Perhaps it was all a dream. Or maybe just a glitch. What’s the difference, really?

I am arguing in this essay that the cognitive map of vaporwave aesthetics seems to be one that focuses on the bleak, melancholy affects of late capitalism. This lifeworld evokes both the feelings of alienation and emptiness of late capitalism, as well as a deep sense of longing for a modernist sense of historicity, meaning, and expression. While a his-

torical comprehension of modernity is lost in the postmodern moment, the obsessive citation of early postmodern technology such as VHS, cassette tapes, outdated video game consoles like the Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Game Boy, and of course, the Windows 95 operating system, seems to function as an index to the final moment of departure into the hyperreality of the late capitalist moment for millennial creators of vaporwave art. Similarly, these objects seem to harken the listener back to a time immediately preceding the completion of the entrance into the postmodern moment in which the promises of technological sublimity and global connectivity in a late capitalist utopia were still vaguely believable. If postmodernism proves itself incapable of “imagining those great utopias that have occasionally broken on the status quo like a sunburst”, as Jameson (2003, p. 704) puts it, it can at least provide a melancholic



meditation on the “memories on the horizon” of a temporal elsewhere in which utopianism was believable. In doing so, I argue that vaporwave exposes the emptiness of late capitalism, presenting an alienating hypersaturation of its own defining characteristics and using them as a form of critique by situating its audiences in a totalizing atmosphere of nostalgic melancholia. Jameson (1992, p. 18) himself alludes to this sense of nostalgia in his discussion of postmodern “nostalgia films”, noting how the latter seeks to create romantic visions of a bygone history to refract the “desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past”. Like the neon lit streets of small town America in *American Graffiti*, which Jameson (1992) chooses as an early example of this phenomenon, each space in the virtual lifeworld of vaporwave, be it the aforementioned city skylines and empty streets depicted in its images, or the malls and hotels turned into soundscapes functions as a piece of the cognitive map, working to map out the totality of a uniquely postmodern affect.

This brings us to the final question that I would like to deal with in this paper – the question of totality. More specifically, in keeping with Jameson’s (1991) assertion that the aesthetic of cognitive mapping should function in exposing the totality of late capitalism, can it be argued that vaporwave achieves this effect? This is ultimately to ask whether the affect of late capitalist melancholia is capable of accounting for the totality of processes, affective and otherwise under late capitalism. The answer here seems to be both yes and no. In the case of the latter answer, the aforementioned poststructuralist questioning outlined by Robert T. Tally Jr. points to the difficulty of representing totality and the important assertion that that what is represented as the totality of late capitalism will alter as it is represented by different groups and scholars (2000). For example, John Beverly’s essay, “Pedagogy and Subalternity: Mapping the Limits of Academic Knowledge” draws on Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern cannot speak to argue that Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping responds to new epistemologies of capital by attempting to know and thereby othering the subaltern subject (2000). Similarly, in “Mapping the Spaces of Capital”, Crystal Bartolovich calls attention to Jameson’s description of the imperial stage of capitalism to accuse his theory of totality of excluding and ignoring imperial subjects in India and Jamaica for whom this notion might not be so liberatory (2000).

While all of the critiques of the cognitive mapping project aptly take up some of the issues in representing totality, they seem to take too literally Jameson’s notion of the term. In the introduction to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Jameson responds to the question of totality by noting the reemergence of allegory in the postmodern era (1992). Allegory for Jameson (1992, p. 4), functions

as the solution to this problem, by allowing “the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall”. As Jameson (1992, p. 114) writes later in the book, “The social totality can be sensed, as it were, from the outside, like a skin at which the Other looks”. While the melancholy affects brought to life in the virtual lifeworld of vaporwave speak to the decidedly privileged class positions of late capitalist consumers and artists rather than subaltern subjects, they bring to life an allegory of late capitalist suffering from a place under the skin. This is not “class consciousness” in a traditional Marxian sense, but rather an opening into the virtual realm of late capitalism, the identification of a throbbing affect lodged deep in the collective sentiment of a social body, and one that might provide some clues on how to enact a greater Marxist critique of late capitalism next time around. As Brian Massumi (1995, p. 105–106) writes, “In North America at least, the far right is far more attuned to the imagistic potential of the postmodern body than the established left, and has exploited that advantage for the last decade and a half. Philosophies of affect, potential, and actualization may aid in finding counter-tactics”.

HIGHWAY DREAMS (朝の高速道路) 1984

I close this essay with a final image, entitled *Driving till the end...* by Argentinian artist Kidmograph. A racecar is driving along the highway through the desert. The road is completely empty, allowing the car to drive right between the two lanes. Playing in the car is a vaporwave soundtrack, perhaps ASHITAKA(アシタカ)'s *HIGHWAY DREAMS* (朝の高速道路) 1984 album.

The opening track is a slowed down and vaguely druggy-sounding take on some piano-driven Japanese adult contemporary music. It's kind of corny, but appropriate for the melancholy feel of the moment. The driver doesn't have a specific destination in mind, and there's nobody around, but some palm trees and greenery have begun to emerge on the sides of the road after miles of desert. More importantly, the road seems to lead straight into the middle of a spectacular sunset, painting the horizon in warm shades of pink, orange, and magenta. This “elsewhere” looks a lot like a faded memory, yet paradoxically offers what looks like the promise of a brighter future on the horizon. And that's exactly where the driver is going.



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