

# Metamodernity of Vaporwave Music and Album Covers

*Melchior Philips – 19/04/2021 (4<sup>th</sup> draft)*

## INTRODUCTION

The main question that this research will attempt to answer is “To what extent can early 21-st century Western Vaporwave music and album covers be characterized in terms of metamodernism?”

Vaporwave is a contemporary musical genre and visual arts aesthetic originating on the internet around 2010. The most recognisable and genre-defining Vaporwave album is *Floral Shoppe* (2011), which uses slowed-down and chopped samples of 80 pop music to instil a sense of overtly sentimental nostalgia. This sense of nostalgia for the late 1980s and 1990s is reinforced through an aesthetic of early computer-generated graphics, a classical bust of Helios and corporate VHS-footage. While constructed ironically, the work has since attained a status of sincerity, as the genre of Vaporwave has often been declared “dead” in the years following the release. A metamodern affect of sincerity on a foundation of irony is salient, and distinct from the post-modernist affect.

There have been some efforts to characterise metamodernism in contemporary literature, poetry (Kersten & Wilbers, 2018), literary fiction (James & Seshagiri, 2014), architecture and film (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). However, there does not yet exist that much literature exploring the metamodern structure of feeling in contemporary music and the visual arts. This essay will explore the potential metamodernity of Vaporwave, and show that does not fit within the classifications of modernity nor postmodernity, but fits with the current characterisations of metamodernity.

## 1. THEORY

### 1.1 DEFINING VAPORWAVE

The name *Vaporwave* is a portmanteau of *vapourware*, meaning discontinued software, and *chillwave*, the dreamy retro-pop microgenre that it originally satirized. It is a musical genre and accompanying visual aesthetic that plays heavily into feelings of nostalgia using a wide array of anachronistic digital soundscapes and imagery. Therein lies its appeal for study: it brings together two separate artistic disciplines into one coherent, contemporary structure of feeling that has rippled into mainstream media and other arts. Emerging in the early 2010s, it lays at the crossroads between the newly emergent lo-fi music and a resurgence of interest in – and nostalgia for – retrofuturism, originating in and perpetuated by internet meme culture. The music borrows heavily from the principles of chopped and screwed music – slowing down songs and adding breaks and audio effects such as heavy reverb, as popularised by DJ Screw's hip-hop remixes in the 1990s – and applies it to pop music and digital sound samples from the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. The visual aesthetic of Vaporwave is highly eclectic, usually featuring elements of Ancient Greco-Roman sculptures, outdated CGI and UI designs, retro video game graphics and Otaku culture, all anachronistically presented in a vibrant palette of bright pastels. The 2011 album *Floral Shoppe* by electronic music artist Vektroid is one of the defining cornerstones of the Vaporwave movement, and it remains the most recognisable album of the genre.



The album cover of Macintosh Plus - *Floral Shoppe* (2011)

### 1.2 DEFINING METAMODERNISM

Metamodernity has arisen after the turn of the century, and marks a return to some of the modernist values after postmodernism. As a result, it is marked in its employment of both modernist and postmodernist techniques – which also causes works to receive both modernist and postmodernist labels (Kersten & Wilbers, 2020) – but there is not yet a rigid definition. Papers that employ the label 'metamodernism' often use it in contrastive definitions and across different artistic disciplines. However, a description of the metamodernist structure of feeling is available in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017). It is clear that – whereas modernism focussed on futurism, and post-modernism focussed on presentism – metamodernity focusses on an "asynchronous present" (*Metamodernism*, 2017: p.48) in-between futurism and presentism.

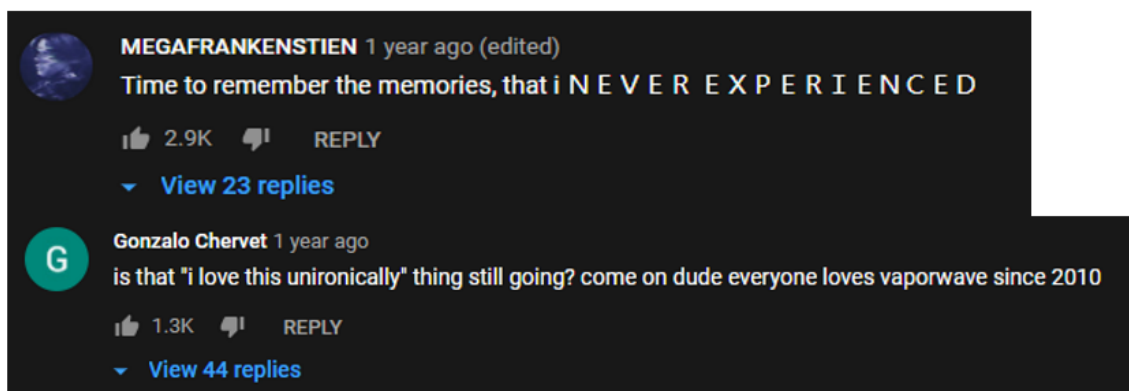
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### 1.3 METAMODERN HISTORICITY IN VAPORWAVE

Vaporwave is metamodern in its use of a "euphoric, a-historical present" (*Metamodernism*, 2017: p.46). It evokes pleasant memories in millennials, a generation that has come of age in the digital age, but also inspires wistfulness for the loss of the optimism of the 20th century fin-de-siècle. However, the anachronistic manner in which the elements that instigate these memories are represented creates a mismatch between the artificial hyperreality and the reality to which it alludes. Vaporwave, then, is a simulacrum of the imperfect memories of millennial youth, and is a product of its inextricable contemporaneity. "It's not about time but about space," (*Metamodernism*, 2017: p.46) and in the case of Vaporwave, it is the virtual space in particular. It employs many of the methodologies pioneered by post-modernity, but it does not celebrate its presentism or decay of affect - in fact, it does the exact opposite.

### 1.4 METAMODERN AFFECT IN VAPORWAVE

Vaporwave fetishizes its affect. The affect of Vaporwave is often described in comment sections as invoking feelings of nostalgia for a time that never existed. Gibbons writes on metamodern affect that "while the postmodernist sense of subjectivity (as fragmented, socially constructed and textually fabricated) persists, it does so alongside a renewed desire to recognise personal feelings and interpersonal connections. (...) metamodern affect is situational; it is ironic yet sincere, sceptical yet heartfelt, solipsistic yet desiring of connection. Most of all, it is experimental." (*Metamodernism*, 2017: p.203) While Vaporwave started as a joke – or an internet meme – some have started to enjoy it "unironically." It has moved past its original parody, became pastiche, and further evolved into its own structure of feeling.



Two YouTube comments exemplifying Vaporwave affect.

### 1.5 METAMODERN DEPTH IN VAPORWAVE

Vaporwave is often interpreted as being anti-capitalist; although post-capitalist would be a more apt description. The genre does seem to celebrate consumerism in an era when the optimism around mass-consumption and American cultural hegemony has astringently eroded. This sentiment is echoed in Vaporwave's aesthetic through visuals of abandoned malls and musical choices that would not feel out of place at a mall in the 80s. However, Vaporwave's depth may be shallower than that. Eshelman states in their description of the depth of metamodern photographer Kurt Tong that "the contrasting of old and new evokes the genuine experience of a bygone childhood." (*Metamodernism*, 2017: p.298) Vaporwave may simply be incredibly effective in evoking nostalgic memories, and the fact that capitalism was rampant in the childhoods of young adults today can be chalked up to coincidence.

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Even politicized, the depth of Vaporwave provides key insights into the prevailing cultural sentiment and displays an erosion of confidence in futurism.

### 1.6 CONCLUSION

With the contemporaneity, historicity, affect and depth it shares with previously examined metamodernist works, Vaporwave is a salient example of a metamodern structure of feeling. With its unique unity between music and visual art, increasing mainstream popularity and decade-long selection self-reported associated items, Vaporwave may accelerate the metamodernism debate and help further define the contemporaneous structure of feeling.

## 2 FINAL PRODUCT

For the final product of this research, I want to work towards a physical event that suggests the metamodern affect of Vaporwave to the general public, and allows them to interact with the academic material in an engaging, creative manner. I will conduct a thorough academic investigation, based upon which I will set up a public creative space with visual and sonic experiences.

It will be a challenge to get the attention of the younger public, to whom the event will be primarily aimed. The subject matter is best known among young adults, which works in my favour in this endeavour. I will make the event more fashionable to the local youths by incorporating multimedia exhibits, such as playable video games, and a musical dance event with live DJ's.

The event will take place in April or May of 2022, and may span several days or even weeks. The projected location for the event will be London, where several locations have been shortlisted. For alternatives, I will also look at locations in Hull and Bristol. I hope that the event can be hosted in cooperation with a UK-based Vaporwave label such as My Pet Flamingo, and that several Vaporwave artists (both musical and visual) are willing to assist as well.

## 3 PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

With this project, I seek to develop my skills in working independently on a project that is both academic and creative. I expect to learn a lot about conducting a thorough academic investigation, as well as making the academic field accessible to the general public. My theoretical knowledge will also benefit from the added research in cultural studies, aesthetics and art history. I will also attempt to contribute to the underlying academic conversation about the newly budding research field of metamodernity.

I have some prior knowledge on the topic of Vaporwave, as I have been a fan since its inception, and I am somewhat familiar with its evolution over the past decade. The project fits within my study of English language & culture as my bachelor's programme is also about culture, and I have chosen electives that deal with pop culture studies.

My personality will help pave the way for this project. According to Myers-Briggs I am a 'campaigner' personality type (ENFP-A), according to Belbin I am both a Plant and a Monitor, and according to Leary I am adaptable. I value working with people, engaging with academics and being creative.

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I will make intermediate checks of my progress by interviewing academics of related fields, and ask them for their expertise and insights on the matter. If I can enthruse other metamodernism academics and Vaporwave artists to attend my public event, I will know that I have succeeded. I will also produce a number of essays (at least 2) in the first year of my honours programme, to serve as the foundation on which to organise the event.

### 3.1 DEVELOPMENT GOALS

During the Honours programma I hope to achieve my personal development goals, which are given in a list of skills that I hope to acquire through engaging in the Honours programme and executing this study:

- ✚ Presenting academic information to the general public  
(through the study module *Presenting and Storytelling* by Walter Breukers)
- ✚ Public event management and cultural funding
- ✚ Academic networking
- ✚ Communication skills in general  
(professional, business, (event) marketing, entertainment & academic)
- ✚ Academic and philosophical inquiry into (contemporary) cultural products

## 4 PLANNING

The first year of the Honours programme will be spent on academic research, including writing essays and interviewing academics. The shortlist of interviewees include academics Vincent Meelberg, Maarten Michielsen and Niels van Poeke, as well as the musician Vektroid, author of *Floral Shoppe*. The second year will be spent securing funding, inviting speakers and exhibitioners and organising the event, which will take place in April or May of 2022.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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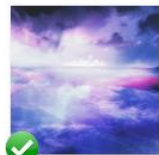
A selection of defining and well-recognised Vaporwave albums and contemporary releases.



4est - Vaporwave (2020).jpg



2 8 1 4 - Atarashi hi no tanjō (2015).jpg



2 8 1 4 - Voyage-Embrace (2020).jpg



Ahero - Spirit (2020).jpg



Blank Banshee - Blank Banshee 0 (2012).jpg



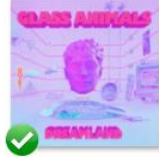
Daniel Lopatin - Chuck Person's EccoJams Vol. 1 (2010).jpg



Daniel Lopatin - Returnal (2010).jpg



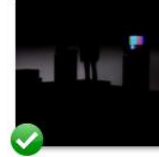
death's dynamic shroud.wmv - I'll Try Living Like This (2015).png



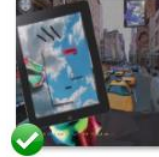
Glass Animals - Dreamland (2020).jpg



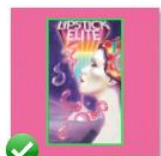
Home - Odyssey (2014).jpg



Infinity Frequencies - Into the light (2020).jpg



James Ferraro - FARSIDEVIRTUAL (2011).jpg



luxury elite - Lipstick Elite (2020).jpg



PrismCorp Virtual Enterprises - Home™ (2013).jpg



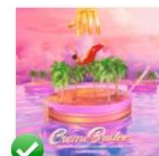
SAYOHIMEBOU - ALIEN GALAXY MAIL (2020).jpg



Shimmertrap - LOOK! (2020).jpg



Tokyo Tea Room - Forever out of Time (2019).jpeg



VanessaMichaels x Kaleena Zanders - Creme Brulee (2020).jpg



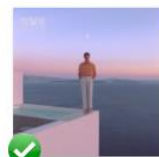
VAPERROR - Saccharine Synergy (2020).jpg



Vektroid - Macintosh Plus (2011).jpg



Vektroid - New Dreams Ltd (2011).jpg



Washed Out - Purple Noon (2020).jpg



Yung Kafa und Küçük Efendi - Dickcük (2020).jpg



猫シ Corp. - NEWS AT 11 (2016).jpg