The Rise and Fall of Vaporwave: Resistance and Sublimation in on-line Counter-Cultures

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This essay examines issues of identity and resistance in the digital age via the short-lived micro-genre of Vaporwave. First, it is established that subculture and music play important roles in identity formation. Next, the rise and fall of Vaporwave is described. Finally, Vaporwave's demise suggests that internet-only subcultures cannot serve as sites for counter-cultural resistance.

Virtual communities such as Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr offer networked architectures, attracting settlers who may then establish 'communities of practice' in pursuit of shared goals and interests (Johnson, 2001). Individuals who participate in these communities benefit from the exchange physically, emotionally, and cognitively, and these interactions play a prominent role in identity formation (Preece, 2001). The young, especially, may use the internet as a medium for the development of identity, since 'virtual spaces [are] ripe for the development of youth identity and subculture' (Ebare, 2005). One such subculture arose from the virtual communities of Reddit and Tumblr. It was a community of practice oriented around a genre of music, one developed by its members, and included a distinct aesthetic, and - more impressively - an ideology. Music constitutes a locus for negotiations of meaning and identity among music fans: in the process of developing genre and subculture, young people are 'taking part in the negotiation of culture [and are] refining their self-concept or identity as they mature' (Ebare, 2005). Thus this new community, with its tropes and styles, promised fertile ground for the development of sub-cultural identity.

Vaporwave emerged in the early 2010s (Harper, 2012), deploying mutated samples of 1990s pop and soul, ringtones, computer system sounds, advertising jingles, and videogames to create a narcotic lounge music, an aural 'memory cave' composed of aural cultural detritus. Vaporwave sought to 'reveal the false promises of capitalism' or evoke 'the idea of libidinal energy being subjected to relentless sublimation under capitalism' or even to parody 'American hyper-contextualisation of e-Asia circa 1995' (Harper, 2012). While Adorno (2002: 458) suggested that mass music and mass audiences were equivalent objects, 'kneaded by the same mode of production as the articraft material foisted upon them', the producers of Vaporwave appropriated that 'articraft material' in order to frame a critique of modern society. Visually, Vaporwave employed the language of screensavers and clip-art to render garish, over-saturated, aggressively-juxtaposed collages of formerly-fetishised objects. Whether such descriptions evoke interest, excitement, or annoyance in the reader, Vaporwave was clearly a viable concern. With its fully-realised mythology, Vaporwave had every reason to metastasize into something significant. There was precedent: music-oriented subcultures gave us the Teddy Boy, the B-Boy, the Goth. More recently, the hard-core, anti-drug straightedge movement achieved prominence due largely to the internet (Williams, 2006). Yet Vaporwave - like the much-hyped but never delivered vaporware products that inspired its name - never quite materialised. Instead, it is referred to in the past tense, as a microgenre attached to a microculture (for instance, by Wikipedia). Ultimately, Vaporwave was a victim of its own success, and of the capitalist forces it attempted to undermine. Pearson (2015) identifies two initial culprits in the genre's demise: MTV and TumblrTV. Seeking hip, new, youth-credible imagery, their respective marketing teams saw the nascent Vaporwave scene and gutted it. Overnight, the iconography of anti-corporate resistance became the iconography of corporate branding. Worse, these corporate brand exercises were most people's introduction to what had once been Vaporwave. The styles persisted. The aesthetic was intact. But the referent had been obliterated. Vaporwave was dead, even as Vaporwave - its styles and fashions - were suddenly everywhere.

The story of Vaporwave illustrates the limits of what can be achieved online and undermines assertions that the mediascape represents 'a more generative discursive space [which] breaks what one might call the fetishising of the local' (Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 7). Music may serve to construct 'our sense of identity through the

direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability' and offer 'experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives', but the nature of the internet is to remove the referent from which that cultural narrative is derived (Frith, 2004). Without a 'local', fetishised or not, subcultures which exist entirely online lack the power to assert an identity in the face of competing claims to that identity. When Johnny Rotten hawks tea, or Iggy Pop sells insurance, punk does not die, its anarchic credentials remain intact. It is the physical presence of the scene - defined by its talk, clothing, actions and other behaviours - that protects it from Vaporwave's fate (Williams, 2006). Where a physical locus is absent, the styles and tropes become free-floating, signifiers without signified. The products that are produced in response to and support of the scene are alienated from their producers, prone to appropriation by those entrenched industries that exist to monetise culture (for a discussion of alienated digital labour, see Fuchs, 2012). Indeed, if one googles 'online communities', the majority of returns are marketing tracts seeking to 'capitalise on electronic communities' (Lesser et al, 2009). This, in turn, destroys the ability of a subculture to provide a stable framework for the development of identity. Identity, as with genre, as with subculture, involves processes of exclusion as much as of inclusion (Ebare, 2005). In the case of Vaporwave, and similar online-only subcultures (other casualties include Seapunk), exclusion is impossible. Thus, despite the internet's promise of cultural empowerment, its architecture acts to eliminate those subcultures which seek to subvert its architects. As a medium, the internet is uniquely inclined to sell out (Williams, 2006), and in the process, identity is the first casualty.

In conclusion, online communities, like music, play important roles in adolescent identity formation. However, without an offline locus, the membership of internet subcultures effectively produce on behalf of the culture industries and may have the meaning of their work discarded, their product appropriated, and their cultural identity destroyed without warning and without the possibility of resistance.

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