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Nostalgia Isn't What it Used to Be: On Vaporwave's Glitched, Aspirational Aesthetics

Abstract

Vaporwave is an internet-native aesthetic movement that emerged in the early 2010s. It directly addresses the presumed condition of living at the "end of history" that was proposed during the 1990s by enmeshing images from aspirational consumerism into an audiovisual aesthetic. This aesthetic is mainly distinguished by its use of the glitch as a unifying element, ironically fusing different forms of noise, muzak and interference with visual and aural refrains and pop culture objects and other images belonging to neoliberal consumerism. This article argues that Vaporwave's "glitched" aesthetics are the manifestation of an aspirational form of hauntology wherein certain ahistorical visions of the past continue to superimpose themselves over the present through aesthetic means that were once subversive but are now customary. Furthermore, I contend that certain aspects of the work of Chris Marker that allude to the de-historicizing of images through their distortion, and the bleak imagining of an actual post-historical society presented in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film *Pulse*, can be taken as a counterbalance to Vaporwave's fetishization and lack of historical engagement with the images of the "end of history."

And so our little life, it just
keeps getting littler, as whoever has just been lucky enough to talk to
you
drops into the apparently bottomless well — fantasmatically suffused,
perhaps,
but meaningless, basically, as the noise of a train heard from a distance.

— Patrick Mackie, *Mental Muzak*[1]

Introduction

Audiovisual media has adopted glitches as an aesthetic element that is often intentionally added to evoke a sense of disorientation or uneasiness in the viewer, particularly in regards to fears of the encroachment of technology into everyday life. The glitch has become a familiar aesthetic refrain that is especially visible in artistic forms that are generated in the internet, due to the ease of their digital circulation.

In this text, I argue that among these forms, the case of Vaporwave (an internet-native and decentered aesthetic movement that is thematically associated with the idea of the "end of history" propagated mainly during the 1990s)[2] is illustrative of how the habituation to an element like the glitch, which originally carried the potential to create "a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought and action with the 'inadmissible,'"[3] can reduce its capacity to be a truly critical aesthetic device and instead transform the images to which it is applied precisely into the familiar, the admissible and the assimilated.

By describing the interplay between the aesthetics of Vaporwave and the glitch itself, this article aims to describe the process through which a once-destabilizing aesthetic element can transform into an enabler of a purely aspirational (or self-deluded) view of history and, as a contrast, I present the case of Chris Marker's films *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *Level Five* (1997) which here are regarded as early harbingers of the problems inherent in succumbing to the temptation of modifying and altering historical images through glitches as a means to underscore their condition as discrete representations instead of accentuating their role as part of larger historical narratives. I close the text by proposing the film *Pulse* (2001) by Kiyoshi Kurosawa as an exemplary case of a coherent and challenging questioning of the concept of "end of history" that also uses glitches as aesthetic elements, but in a more subversive way than that in which Vaporwave did so to approach similar questions about historical engagement.

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1) Patrick Mackie, "Mental muzak," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2000), 59.

2) A very thorough historical reassessment of the idea of an "end of history" can be found in: Yascha Mounk, "The End of History Revisited," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020), 22–35.

3) Debra Benita Shaw, "The Aesthetics of Retrieval: Beautiful Data, Glitch Art and Popular Culture," *Anthropocenes — Human, Inhuman, Posthuman* 1, no. 1 (2020), accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.anthropocenes.net/article/id/666/.

The *Intentional* Glitch as an Aesthetic Marker

Glitches — i.e., "artifacts of errors in electronic transmission" but which, very important-ly, "do not stop transmission"[4] — are amongst the forms of interference and error that have been turned into prominent aesthetic elements. Because glitches, as they are com-monly understood in terms of "mismatches and deviations from the expected norms of machine function",[5] are unexpected, short-term disturbances in physical systems that are miniaturized, delicate, compact, and ultimately *intangible*, they complicate the relation-ship between the essential invisible forces that make electronic transmission possible and the physical media — whatever they might be — in which the end-user, a viewer, a listen-er, or a consumer is ultimately experiencing their manifestation. The association of the glitch with the ghostly and the uncanny has been well established: their startling presence enabling a machine to appear "haunted," "sentient" or, at the very least, "*alive…* living, real, not dead."[6] This makes of glitches a seducing and yet troubling form of imperfection, with their abruptness being a crucial characteristic that dislocates the receiver's expecta-tions and brings attention to the medium of transmission itself, but which, instead of pro-ducing a distancing effect, only heightens the disquieting realization of the inseparability of the medium from its message, where any attempt at a rupture would demand violent in-tervention (with the radical act of shooting the TV set being a prominent illustration.[7])

The glitch, or, more precisely, the *intentional* glitch as opposed to its fundamental *un-expected* variant — bereft of its accidental nature —, has therefore turned into a particu-larly effective, persistent, and reliable visual or aural *refrain*, capable of both de- and re-territorializing mediatized experience,[8] conventionally used as a shorthand to indicate the presence of stealthy immaterial forces, but steadily decreasing in its capacity to induce anxiety when intentionally placed, and as technology itself has increasingly moved to-wards intangibility and inscrutability. Unlike machines of the not so ancient past, which could be disassembled, repaired, or, in essence, tinkered with, the subsequent sleek and permanently interconnected *devices,* with their nanoarchitectures and their dependence on immersive, all-encompassing networks whose complex internal workings are hard to commensurate with the routine-like behavior with which most users engage with them, might well be delicate slabs of materials imbued with fairylike properties: small, shiny, nimble, sleek, glistening, even *transparent*.[9]

These interconnected devices turned out to be not inscrutable monoliths but rather

4)   Sean Cubitt, "Glitch," *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 1 (2017), 19–33.

5)   Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Theory: Art and Semiotics* (Savannah: I'm Press'd-Cinegraphic Media, 2023), 6.

6)   Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 2–3. Author's emphasis.

7)   In his introduction to *Haunted Media*, Sconce describes various incidents of people violently attacking the medium of the television with the intention to somehow *kill it* as a defense mechanism against the unbear-able notion of it being a living, breathing being. See: Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 1–20.

8)   Janne Vanhanen, "Loving the Ghost in the Machine: Aesthetics of Interruption," in *Life in the Wires: The CTheory Reader*, eds. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Victoria: New World Perspectives — CTheory Books, 2000), 380–387.

9)   Carolyn L. Kane, *High-Tech Trash: Glitch, Noise, and Aesthetic Failure* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 9–11.

soft machines: so soft in fact that they integrate seamlessly into the weightless space of dreams and expectations. They anticipate our thoughts and react to our mood ("the dawning realization that our computer knows us more intimately than any person ever could."[10]) They behave like portable membranes granting osmotic access to a ceaseless stream of basically *everything*. And even though they might ostensibly be "designed to fail"[11], they remain eternally aspirational devices and their latent obsolescence only adds to their potential as backwards-incompatible media to later feel nostalgic about, continuing the cycle.

Paradoxically, as technology shed so much weight, it became somewhat less mysterious. In this way, the consolidation of previously distinct realms was accentuated, the flexible and the rigid became indistinguishable, large amounts of information turned into mere feedback, and the opportunities for the glitch to manifest multiplied enormously but now in the form of a familiar aesthetic twitch. Consequently, the glitch would no longer need to crawl out of the TV screen in the form of a haunted creature like it used to (as in the iconic image from Hideo Nakata's 1998 film *Ring*) because it is there looking at us *all of the time* (and shooting at the screen would no longer be an ultimate recourse to find closure because all screens are intermingled anyway: as David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* predicted in 1983, media-machines could become coextensive not only with the human psyche but with flesh itself, and their effects felt even as they were disconnected from their power sources, going as far as being capable of pointing the gun back at the viewer, as embodied in the infamous image of the white-noise-hand holding a pistol and emerging menacingly from the membrane-screen.)

Glitches are therefore a part of the particular hauntology that characterizes the internet era. Following Mark Fisher, we can outline this concept as the persistence of remnants of cultural life that are "*no longer* actually present from the *past* but which remain effective as a virtuality" and, concomitantly, as "that which has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual."[12] The "virtual" here can be understood as sharing many common elements with the aspirational, since a condition of aspirationality is to always preserve a virtual, idealized alternative to the actual past. Similar to ghosts whose presence one would have become accustomed to, glitches constantly descend from the virtual to haunt the historical, they "represent the past, but they are not from the past."[13] They are haunting more because they're everywhere and because they can easily evoke nostalgia, than because they represent any inherent threat. Their presence is only haunting in the sense that, as Fisher also articulates in his view of hauntology as a cultural force, they are part of those mediatized cultural elements that "can trigger a sense of temporal disjuncture."[14]

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10) doctorb, "The Transcendental Art of Wardrobe Malfunction in a time of Post-Everything," *Private Suite*, no. 3, October, 2018, accessed September 22, 2024, 31–34, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-3. [Note: All references from *Private Suite* refer to the magazine issue first, since his contributors were anonymous and used pseudonyms that do not adjust well to academic formatting].

11) Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 4.

12) Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 18.

13) Sadeq Rahimi, *The Hauntology of Everyday Life* (Boston: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 5.

14) Lisa Perrott, "Time is out of joint: the transmedial hauntology of David Bowie," *Celebrity Studies* 10, no. 1, (2019), 119–139.

Contemporary consumers reflect on the past and feel nostalgic for a variety of unrealized futures in the company of glitches because after all they have become a very recognizable symbol for the apparently interminable parade of high-frequency and low-intensity quotidian anxieties that act as a form of late-capitalist background noise: the glitch has been domesticated (it is, for example, a staple preset in multiple video editing software[15]) while ironically maintaining its identity as a marker of unpredictability because it is recognizable and yet can assume many forms.

And if the glitch is made of the same predictable-yet-frustrating materials that make up the multiple apprehensions that accompany materialistic life in late capitalism, then it is at the very least part of the stuff of which aspirations are made of too: technological possibilities have always aroused new fears as much as new expectations, and the spaces that separate one group from the other are now the loci occupied by the glitch, being a stand-in for malaises and illusions that are no longer phantasmal or monstrous except in their persistence; more irritating than frightening. Glitches, as noted above, do not halt the flow of transmission, they simply make things exasperatingly less smooth.

The Character of Vaporwave

Glitched visual and aural markers — spasmodic audio and video signals, pixels out of place, deformations of a graphic matrix, etc. —, utilized as much allegorically as literally in order to artificially instill dread or evoke a haunting aspirationality into transmedial interactions, infuse all forms of media as convenient solutions to the problem of how to represent the "new kind of outside," the unrelenting form of uncertainty brought by the emergence of new media in the "technological unconscious."[16] However, they are particularly evident in internet-centric forms of art, since online life is a perfect ground for re-contextualization: as Xtine Burrough argues, "contemporary artists tactically manipulate noise on the internet to demonstrate that noise has evolved from an erroneous part of a communication system into a central channel for revisionist practices,"[17] and, as we have seen, "noise" here could be almost taken as synonymous with glitch, in the sense of being an error transfigured into a prominent aesthetic feature.

Among these internet-centric forms, glitches stand out as a key attribute that since its inception has accompanied Vaporwave, an internet-native musical and visual phenomenon,[18] or what may as well be (or *have been*, since one of Vaporwave culture's main characteristics is that it insists on repeating that the genre itself is dead[19]) the first truly distinct

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15) To mention one example, the popular editing software plug-in provider FOUR Editors offers a package for Adobe Premiere Pro and DaVinci Resolve named "glitch presets" that includes more than 100 varieties of pre-generated glitches (https://foureditors.com/en-de/products/glitch-presets).

16) Vanhanen, "Loving the Ghost in the Machine: Aesthetics of Interruption," 381–382.

17) Xtine Burrough, "Add-Art and Your Neighbors' Biz: A Tactical Manipulation of Noise," in *Error – Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, ed. Mark Nunes (New York: Continuum, 2011), 93–94.

18) Laura Glitsos, *Somatechnics And Popular Music In Digital Contexts* (Lincolnshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 99–114

19) A succinct summary of the history of the ubiquitous phrase "Vaporwave is dead" that also decries its commercialization can be found, fittingly, in an undated blog post by the Vaporwave-inspired fashion and life-

and genuine music genre belonging to the "end of history" and able to come to terms with its "emptiness,"[20] if for no other reason than, as Roisin Kiberd writes, it was "a way of seeing, of being, pitched somewhere between the internet and real life", adding that it was a form "native to the internet, where nothing is ever real enough to grant satisfaction."[21]

Kiberd's position anticipates Vaporwave's everlasting aspirational condition — discussed below —, but it is just as central to establish firstly that having originated inside the internet was what introduced in Vaporwave a profound sense of deterritorialization that is simultaneously liberating: its scene remains scattered all over the world, there is no borderline where gatekeepers can stand, there are no Vaporwave pilgrimage places beyond fleeting and imaginary virtual topographies, with the *Digital Plaza*, a virtual, idealized image of the shopping mall, which stands as a nostalgic symbol for consumer culture in the late 1980s and 1990s (hence the presence of distorted TV commercials of that era in a large number of Vaporwave videos), being an important landmark that nobody ever actually visited, although it was known to be submerged in "pink hues."[22] But, as the above quote highlights too, an even more important attribute of the genre is that it embodies the conflicting condition of occupying a liminal space, a completely new inside/outside dynamic, which is why it has been constantly linked to the hypnagogic[23], with liminality being central to its success, suggesting that leading online and offline lives and oscillating between them — or even being unable to distinguish between the two — is basically a form of sleepwalking.

Vaporwave has changed so much during its lifespan and therefore proven to be so hard to pin down that it has eventually reached *I know it when I see it* status. Vaporwave is in fact hard to pin down because it is very easy to produce and therefore it multiplies and disseminates at a very fast pace; proliferating, as it still does, in an environment where all of a sudden virtually all existing music, enormous amounts of audio tracks from all possible sources (but especially commercial jingles, videogame music, TV and film soundtracks and radio broadcasts from the 1990s) and a large variety of audio editing software are available to be easily downloaded — this often meaning *pirated* — the Vaporwave compositional impulse, influenced by the idea of plunderphonics, which championed sampling as a creative act,[24] "enables anyone with a computer to produce amateur or perhaps professional-grade sampled music."[25] The genre has flourished haphazardly along a large va-

style brand Vapor95 titled *Did Vaporwave Die and Who Killed It?*, written by Adan Kohnhorst, accessed September 22, 2024, https://vapor95.com/blogs/darknet/did-vaporwave-die-and-who-killed-it.

20) Ross Cole, "Vaporwave Aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2, (2020), 297–326.

21) Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2021), digital e-pub version.

22) ｍａｔｔｔスベト, "Letter from the editor," *Private Suite*, no. 1, June 17, 2018, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-1/.

23) Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-mediated Musics, Online Methods and Genre," *Music & Letters* 98, no. 4 (2017), 601–647.

24) "'Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative,' presented by John Oswald to the Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference in Toronto in 1985," *plunderphonics*, accessed September 22, 2024, http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html.

25) Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016), digital e-pub version.

riety of styles and subgenres often verging on the absurd, with notorious cases such as *Simpsonswave* or *Mallsoft* (the first one being the glitching of audio snippets from *The Simpsons*, with its accompanying videos being looped and distorted images from different episodes of the series, and the second the modification of easy-listening music that used to be played as background noise in shopping malls) coexisting with a myriad others.

As it developed during the early 2010s Vaporwave retained its core identity through all these iterations until at some point it simply "died." And then died again. And again.[26] Vaporwave, at first proudly, then ironically, and finally self-parodyingly,[27] has announced (and continues to announce) its death as insistently as punk announces that it hasn't died yet.[28] This obsession with its own demise stems from the genre's own self-deprecating and decentralized nature. Vaporwave has always demanded and thrived in paradox; it has never been neither fully dead nor only half alive. The genre is primarily known for maintaining an unexpected sense of unity amidst alarming levels of haziness and incoherence.

Vaporwave has never been mainstream and yet it is undoubtedly very popular, seeing as its streaming numbers in Bandcamp and YouTube — where it mainly circulates — remain very healthy.[29] The genre is, for the most part, if not necessarily anonymously created, then produced attempting to draw as little attention as possible to its composers, with artists publishing their music using such a large number of aliases that the notion of identity itself became muddled and wound up as a form of self-mocking, concealing an identity being beside the point, since the goal has ultimately been to make the music appear as coming from a disembodied fissure, and when the music "comes from nowhere" then it "can be attributed to no one."[30] Unsurprisingly, this is one of its strengths and one of the reasons why it is so easy for it to catch unsuspecting listeners (and viewers: the importance of YouTube for its diffusion cannot be overstated) and lull them into states of hypnagogic half-remembrance and wakeful dreaming; the fact that Vaporwave is largely presented as hollow and incorporeal enables deterritorialized selves to submerge in it and fluidly adopt a new persona with each Vaporwave release.

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26) A 2015 Vaporwave album by Sandtimer available in the Internet Archive is titled precisely *Vaporwave is Dead* (https://archive.org/details/sandtimer-vaporwave-is-dead) and the phrase recurs in many descriptions of Vaporwave albums and tracks in Bandcamp, SoundCloud and other spaces where the genre continues to be showcased as in, for instance, the album Vaporwave is dead again, by 空隙 (https://antifur.bandcamp.com/album/vaporwave-is-dead-again).

27) Adam Harper, "Personal Take: Vaporwave is Dead, Long Live Vaporwave!," in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, eds. Nicolas Cook et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), digital e-pub version.

28) Nick Fulton, "Vaporwave's little known roots are anti-capitalist and totally punk," *Document Journal*, August 28, 2019, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.documentjournal.com/2019/08/vaporwaves-little-known-roots-are-anti-capitalist-and-totally-punk/.

29) Vaporwave YouTube mixes like *Employee of the Month* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRMPfEnltdM) or *Vaporwave / Chillwave — Ultimate Mix* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SolEjKrcg4E) count 1.2 and 4.2 million views respectively and mixes like ΣTERNAL SPA (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CZHL-8w52Co) accumulated tens of thousands of views in just weeks, with several channels dedicated to Vaporwave mixes having thousands of subscribers. On the other hand, in Bandcamp's search page, when selecting experimental genres, where Vaporwave is featured, there are always at least a few Vaporwave releases featured, see: https://bandcamp.com/discover/experimental.

30) Tanner, "Babbling Corpse."

Many descriptions of the feelings evoked by albums found in reviews published in the short-lived Vaporwave-centric magazine *Private Suite* (2018–2020) depict the music as allowing for the immersion into a virtual landscape, often in synesthetic and disjointed terms, where the listener might have found themselves blissfully submerged: one review portrays a listening experience as having "found myself cruising down the overpass of my imagination" while "a distant sun set on the horizon of my mind" leading into feeling "immersed in bursts of ebbing neon blues and pinks, backlit with black-light purples and ombres [sic] of luscious yellows."[31] Some venture into stranger territories, describing how the tracks "flow unpredictably between human sadness and digital apathy like rose water and absinthe snaking down a pulsing river" pushing the listener to "understand what it's like to astral project into a discarded, coffin-shaped flash drive floating freely on the Dead Sea,"[32] inviting them to discover new virtual ground "plugging in to your old dial-up modem and finding a gateway to a forgotten internet that's teeming with new life" offering access to a "pristine virtual wilderness,"[33] or even to envision the interactions between imagined digital spaces like videogame environments: "what if like, we took that banging soundtrack from *Minecraft*, and then made it sound like it was playing on the Water Temple from *Ocarina of Time*?"[34]

These experiential images are invitations to enact modes of wandering by, being inside or floating through motion-blurred spaces or hallucinating inside something akin to a Windows 95 screensaver, and in this the Vaporwave audiovisual experience could be said to resemble phantom rides, those early disembodied "actuality films" that showcased cinema's special relationship with space.[35]

Vaporwave's territorializing entails a spatial enactment by a wandering figure, but this *flâneur* of the deep internet is no longer a person, instead it is a deeply lonely aspirational creature that accumulates virtual memories, an intruder that irrupts and skips through different spaces with awkward, jerking motions in the same way the glitch does, a self as disembodied and anonymous as the makers of the music. This also explains the genre's lyrical barrenness: no actual singing is to be found in Vaporwave, only pitch-shifted samples of anonymized voices that converge into incorporeal and reverb-saturated utterances.

As the above description shows, Vaporwave's character is dependent on a form of virtuality that is almost synonymous with depersonalization. This anticipates its association with the "end of history," where historical engagement is negated, and which finds it roots in its reliance on a nostalgic and aspirational understanding of its own themes and imagery.

31) Review of sheepo, "LFO Dreams: Nitewind," *Private Suite*, no. 3, October 12, 2018, 6, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-3/.

32) Review of deliriously…Daniel, "「彼女の死」Her Death by Neko Furēku," *Private Suite*, no. 8, August 20, 2019, 15, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-8/.

33) Review of DJ Nonn, "*NETSCVPE* by NETSCVPE," *Private Suite*, no. 12, April 30, 2020, 29, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-12/.

34) Review of s h e e p, "*Alpha v1.2.3_04* by Digital Haunt," *Private Suite*, no. 7, June 17, 2019, 24, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-7/.

35) John Edmond, "Moving landscapes: Film, vehicles and the travelling shot," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 5, no. 2 (2014), 131–143.

Aspirationality and Nostalgia as Core Elements of Vaporwave Aesthetics

Vaporwave has established a complicated relationship with nostalgia, which has been recognized as "the main affective dimension of the movement."[36] As a contributor to *Private Suite* put it: "most music will play on your feelings, but Vaporwave plays on your memories,"[37] conceiving the past "as a genuine refuge from the artificiality of the present"[38] by yearning for cultural artifacts and gestures of the pre-internet or early internet eras, mainly taken from different forms of lifestyle advertising, video games, late-night TV, slice-of-life anime series, etc., offering "an amplified focus on past things, reflected in a partial detachment from everyday life,"[39] which, as a matter of fact, is one of the strategies of nostalgic marketing: exploiting idealized visions of the past to influence consumerist behavior extending a supposed opportunity for a "redemption sequence" where reconciliation with the past is possible because its negative aspects are transmuted into positives,[40] as there is a "re-shaping of incidents and relationships stored in memory so that they yield pleasure in the recollection, even if they were not pleasurable at the time they were experienced."[41] Moreover, Vaporwave's images of the past are always blurred, modified, decolorized, saturated, looped — which, again, is to say *glitched*, suggesting that disruption is necessary to highlight the source of their historical detachment.

The irony here is that this past is purely imaginary and in Vaporwave aesthetics there is never any attempt at confronting or even performing what Marianne Hirsch calls "post-memory work," i.e. seeking the testimony, narration and actual lived historical perspective of other embodied memory-subjects to make sense of past crises and enable a process of intergenerational mnemonic continuity.[42] Vaporwave remains satisfied with engaging only with artificial and aspirational images of neon-lit streets, new gadgets, happy office workers, sparkling soft drinks, the texture of plastic, toy commercials, the pixelated aura of video games and many more markers of late 20th century conspicuous consumption: these are the images that accompany its videos, album covers and other visual elements. Thus, the genre has shaped its (distorted) idea of the past exclusively through images that are devoid of proper historical context (not unlike the aliens that presumed to have understood the complexities of human life on Earth by having seen nothing but broadcasts of American sitcoms in a notable episode of *Futurama*.[43])

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36) Gytis Dovydaitis, "Celebration of the Hyperreal Nostalgia: Categorization and Analysis of Visual Vaporwave Artefacts," *Art History & Criticism* 17, no. 1 (2021), 113–134.

37) m a k i, "*Five Days in Tokyo 20XX*," *Private Suite*, no. 4, December 12, 2018, 34–39, accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.utopiadistrict.com/archive/private-suite-mag-volume-4/.

38) Marco Pichierri, *Nostalgia Marketing: Rekindling the Past to Influence Consumer Choices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 2.

39) Ibid., 4.

40) Darrel D. Muehling and Vincent J. Pascal, "An involvement explanation for nostalgia advertising effects," *Journal of Promotion Management* 18, no. 1 (2012), 100–118.

41) B. B. Stern, "Historical and personal nostalgia in advertising text: The fin de siecle effect," *Journal of Advertising* 21, no. 4 (1992), 11–22.

42) Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18–25.

43) The episode in question is 1–12 *When Aliens Attack*. It originally aired on November 7, 1999. It was written by Ken Keeler and directed by Brian Sheesley.

The past being exulted in Vaporwave imagery never truly belonged to anyone, and that is why its hauntology remains purely aspirational: it is a past shaped by inwardly-oriented images, a set of artificial remembrances, meant to work as "cushions" for subjects to fall back on in order to suppress their confrontation with less palatable versions of the past or even absent and vacant territories.

The past thusly transformed into an aspirational background hum mutates into a complicit form of what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as "silent silencing," a form of suppression that he then calls one of consumerist society's most crucial characteristics, vital for its own "self-equlibrium," which is its "capacity," developed to an "unprecedented degree," to "absorb all and any dissent it inevitably, in common with other types of society, breeds — and then to recycle it as a major resource of its own reproduction, reinvigoration and expansion."[44] In this way, any action directed at transcendence is thwarted ("nipped in the bud," in Bauman's words) by being assimilated and integrated.

The search for sanctuary into the "end of history" that accompanied the supposed victory of neoliberalism during the 1990s — a notion popularized by Francis Fukuyama's triumphant text from 1989, where he asserted that economic liberalism was the ideological last-man-standing of the post-cold war geopolitical order[45] — elevated an artificial horizon that made any attempt at dissent seem pointless, considering that historical perspective is one of its necessary prerequisites. Peeking behind that horizon would only bring unnecessary discomfort that could be easily traded for simpler forms of contentment to be found in the new modes of quotidian silence: being a good employee, taking care of a virtual pet or a penchant for passivity that was not the result of a lack of imagination but, on the contrary, of hyperactive tendencies to daydream inspired by newly available possibilities.

But unlike in Fisher's conception of hauntology, where the stagnation of cultural forms and therefore of imagination signaled the loss of several "futures" and where "the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live,"[46] it was not necessarily utopian ideation (or a disappointment at unmaterialized utopias) that propelled the creative forces behind Vaporwave. The aspirations that haunt its music and images are located neither in the present nor in the actual past, only in fragmentary symbols that arose from a bottomless pit of well-marketed self-delusions.

These impressions and sensations gave shape not to a pastiche but to a ceaselessly overwritten, self-sustaining palimpsest. Vaporwave is ultimately only self-reflexively nostalgic and there is no true object of yearning behind it except for an idealized version of the past as seen through neoliberal-tinted glasses.

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44) Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (London: Polity, 2007), 47–49.

45) Francis Fukuyama, "The end of history?," *The National Interest,* no. 16 (1989), 3–18. Fukuyama would confidently assert in an interview from 2013 that he stood by his claims: "The basic point — that liberal democracy is the final form of government — is still basically right. [...] The real question is whether any other system of governance has emerged in the last 20 years that challenges this. The answer remains no." — Francis Fukuyama, "The 'End of History' 20 Years Later," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2013), 31–39.

46) Mark Fisher, "What is hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012), 16–24.

Vaporwave and the Retreat from Historical Involvement

This brings us into the inherently paradoxical political dimensions of Vaporwave, which, unsurprisingly, are often nebulous and mistrustful, but not quite nihilistic or rebellious. One of the genre's best known tricks is to engage with Muzak, smooth jazz, chill-out and other easy-listening musical genres which typically flow, like a natural resource in commercial spaces "through channels parallel to those providing air, electricity and information."[47] In his review of *Floral Shoppe*, a seminal album by Macintosh Plus, Miles Bowe writes that Vaporwave

> is music designed to be ignored. Often built from corporate Muzak samples, it lingers in your perception, the way something might flicker in the corner of your eye. If Brian Eno conceived ambient music as something one could choose to focus on or comfortably let slide into the background, vaporwave turns that prescriptive power against the listener.[48]

And by altering this music — meant to operate only at the shallowest of registers within the psyche — applying glitch-like behaviors onto it, what resulted was a dissonant subversion that strengthened feelings of numbness, distrust and apathy while opening a space for embracing the soothing qualities of the music anyway. But this *assimilative* music is part of the program that Bauman describes, so in a political sense Vaporwave's engagement with its aesthetics is akin to declawing and defanging an animal that presents no possible threat to begin with. What exactly is there to fear then?

As a genre that, as I am suggesting here, primarily relies on a *glitched* aesthetic, Vaporwave attempts to imbue glitches with the capacity to act as disruptors not of an assimilated and contextualized past, not of the *system*, but of the way in which the internet reflects its particularly distorted version of ahistoricity into its users, thus questioning the relationship of the lonely and hyperactive Vaporwave listener-consumer with technology in general and, clearly, with the internet in particular, doing so from within; one could say from *really deep* within. Vaporwave indeed recruits glitches as frequent elements of (unsuccessful) protest and subversion, "to reformat error as an act of resistance,"[49] chiefly against agents of silent silencing, or, also fittingly for Vaporwave's contradictory aims, as symbols of failure and fallibility.[50] In its engagement with assimilative music, Vaporwave transformed the inherent pusillanimity that this music-as-wallpaper demands from the contemporary subject into a *hyperactive* pusillanimity, one which was furiously aware of its futility but at least was in charge of its own process of production and proliferation and did not come imposed from the top (i.e. the music industry.) The fear, it turns out, is of staying idle and getting bored.

47) Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space," *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 1 (1997), 22–50.

48) Review of Miles Bowe, "*Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus," *Pitchfork*, April 21, 2019, accessed September 22, 2024, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/macintosh-plus-floral-shoppe/.

49) Andie Shabbar, "Queer-Alt-Delete: Glitch Art as Protest Against the Surveillance Cis-tem," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3&4 (2018), 195–211.

50) Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 62–66.

An extremely ungenerous criticism of assimilative music could dismiss it as the soundtrack to accompany the comings and goings of the *little Eichmanns* of the world, those supposedly willing cogs in the machine, toiling cheerfully at the rhythm of neoliberalism's unstoppable march, but although excessive, this is a useful critique that reveals how Vaporwave and its images have never been banally evil, but evilly banal: equally subversive *and* naïve, clearly embodying elements of transgression and disdain for late-stage capitalism and consumerism just as much as admiration and aspirational longing, in ways that could be mordantly satirizing and yet comical, self-deluded and sincerely hopeful even if they ultimately remain turned inwards: the revolution is never going to happen to the tune of a Vaporwave track. It spoke only to itself and it resisted the kind of self-mythologizing and the longing for reputation, credibility or cultural relevance that has characterized other music genres like, for instance, Punk, to which it frequently alludes with its insistence on being dead and its adoption of DIY methods of production.

In its *aspirationally haunted* character, where disarticulated fragments of imaginary memories float around like free radicals, Vaporwave attempts to investigate the end of history "from within," questioning the "promise and idealism" of the 80s and 90s, "a time when capitalism had prevailed over communism, when greed was good and, crucially, a time when computers became commercially available for the first time, offering a brighter and easier future" as Jack Mangos has suggested in a well-known article.[51] However, this questioning is self-defeating, as it is accompanied by an absence of historical consciousness because whatever "techno-utopia" had been presumably promised to the public during the early days of interconnected personal computing and neoliberal freedom, it was never a coherent narrative but rather a mishmash of aspirational contradictions mediated by capitalist intents.[52] Vaporwave, in an irony that reverses a commonly held truism by means of Benjamin's assertion that "history decays into images, not into stories",[53] was tricked by trusting what the techno-utopia was *showing* instead of the narrative it was actually not *telling*.

The Function of the Glitch in Vaporwave's Visual Language

Vaporwave's visual aesthetics are characterized by many contradictory and unreliable visual markers. Its haziness, ambiguity and, especially, its glitch-like nature, fusing and remixing the iconography of the optimistic-yet-empty promises of the early days of neoliberalist intrusion. The "multilayered" visual symbolism of the genre has been pointedly categorized by Gytis Dovydaitis into seven categories: 1) "nostalgic commodities," meaning its fetishistic relationship with gadgets — especially computers and video game consoles — and other consumer products of the 1980s and 90s; 2) "idyllic classics," which refers to the bizarre presence of statues of Greco-Roman mythological figures as elements of

51) Jack Mangos, "Welcome to the Virtual Plaza," *Tharunka*, August 24, 2017, accessed September 22, 2024, https://tharunka.com/welcome-virtual-plaza/.

52) Thomas Streeter, *The Net Effect — Romanticism, Capitalism and the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 72–88.

53) Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 476.

past melancholy and longing; 3) "melancholic landscapes," or empty, lonely urban spaces from where actual human beings tend to be conspicuously absent and where loneliness is revealed as an affective sign of the genre as important as nostalgia; 4) "gentle geometry" consisting of simple geometric solids that appear as reminders of a primitive engagement with computer generated images; 5) "depressive texts," often appearing as ironic, self-deprecating computer error messages asking questions like *Do you wish to log off and get a life?*; 6) "ecstatic brands," understood as the obsession of Vaporwave with specific products and brand images, which are treated as iconic, semi-religious artifacts; and last but not least, 7) "harsh distortions,"[54] or the category that I would like to suggest not as simply one more element in the characterization of the aesthetics of Vaporwave but as its general and overarching refrain: its glitch-like nature, the fact that *glitching* the music and all its extra-musical accompaniments was a precondition for anything to be able to evoke and resonate within the sphere of the genre.

Whether adding analog noise to digital media, adding filters that interrupted the flow of voices and melodies until they were unrecognizable, or inserting noise, aberrations, sudden repetitions and recurrent signal twitching in videos or soundtracks, or even obvious visual anachronisms (i.e. hiccups in historical understanding) like a voluminous Roman statue quietly watching over noisy videogame characters, the glitch is the agglutinant that holds the Vaporwave aesthetic together.

Glitchiness is what affords Vaporwave its ghostliness, it is also what connects it with the contradiction that was articulated earlier in regards to the lightness and translucency of new media, in the sense that Vaporwave is what transpires when a thin — or semitransparent — veneer of discontinuity is added to other sounds and images in order to interrupt their potential encoding as collective memory. Vaporwave's glitchy images, as they thrive in the seemingly hostile environments of digital piracy, appropriation, anonymity, incompleteness, incoherence, detachment and (mis)remembrance, are a flawed but at least genuine and grassroots way to understand how certain uncritical visions of the future that were projected according to an idealized, aspirational past refused to leave and continued to superimpose themselves over a present where they simply couldn't and wouldn't fit.

To summarize: the satisfaction found by the disembodied flâneur-listener in the images that accompany Vaporwave music — images of consumerist nostalgia, of early home computing and therefore of an engagement with a simpler internet, and also images of an idealized past that was perceived as having been more innocent than the complicated present — was supposed to be counterbalanced by the presence of the glitch, therefore adding a layer of dissension to its version of the past. However, as a completely assimilated, accessible and admissible aesthetic component, the intentionally-added glitch itself is no longer useful as an indicator of subversion, at least in the way in which it is utilized by those tinkering with the vast archive of "end of history" imagery and creating Vaporwave videos.

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54) Dovydaitis, "Celebration of the Hyperreal Nostalgia," 2021.

Historical Engagement with the Image as a Counterbalance to Its "Glitching"

Vaporwave aesthetic relies on adding the patina of the glitch, but the glitch in this case does not point exclusively in the direction of the ghostly. It also signals in the direction of an impossible remembrance enabled by an incapacity to distinguish fact from fiction (or aspirational gestures from truly historical ones): memory-images — even those that are the product of imagined memories — are haunting enough by themselves and glitching them is a dangerous proposition.

Chris Marker recognized this process and brought an awareness about the temptation of allowing images to be stripped away from their narrative in order to make them more bearable in the face of the complexities of history, when, in his film *Sans Soleil* (1982), an essay film made completely from archival imagery collected during his travels, he introduced the work of his friend Hayao Yamaneko, a young man who processes video images from news reports via a synthesizer, working under the assumption that "electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination."[55] In the film we see how he converts these images into solarized, pixelated, saturated, almost irrecognizable (i.e. *glitched*) non-historical images, which he keeps in a liminal space, pinned down "like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time" inside his computer "Zone," where the images of history are forced to change, since "the images of the present don't."[56]

Yamaneko is a deeply lonely character, locked inside his Zone with nothing but images which, very tellingly, are removed from his own experience. The distorted newsreels he shows to Marker's alter ego in the film are of a protest against the building of the Narita Airport in Tokyo during the 1970s, a manifestation in which he himself did not take part. He treats the images with detachment because that is all he can do as a lone image-synthesizer and image-onlooker. And the narrator wonders of the possibility of a world "where each memory could create its own legend,"[57] where these images could actually lead independent lives, free of the need for a larger narrative, only to swiftly concede that it is an impossibility, since the worlds of appearances and memory can communicate but can only see in each other the pieces that are missing from themselves. And if projections of the past and visions of the future have become interchangeable through the glitch, then what's left is only self-delusion, a total retreat into the virtual world.

Discussing the period when film anxiously transitioned from its silent era into the new territory opened by its relationship with synchronic sound, Marker asserted that transitional periods between mediatic eras are common and precede concrete definitions: "like in any self-respecting cosmogony, a period of chaos, vague images of gods and goddesses, untied, disorderly, full of gaps and black holes, that shadowy period that always comes before the structured mythology."[58] Vaporwave might be an audiovisual embodiment of this

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55) All the quotes from *Sans Soleil* were taken from the English version transcript available on: https://www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm.

56) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See preceding note.

57) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See note 56.

58) Chris Marker, *Silent Movie* (Exhibition Catalog) (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 16–17.

period of chaos in our relationship with the internet, when cultural forms that could harness its potential to undermine the belief into an "end of history" were still being sought out.

Marker, for his part, seems to have been one of the first filmmakers to recognize the importance of the glitch as a powerful symbol in the relationship between image-making and computing. He became so interested in the way computers could distort images of the past that, in the 1990s, he announced that he would leave film behind and work exclusively with computers, an impulse that took him to create the film *Level Five* (1997), where we find a woman who, like Hayao, is in a room surrounded by nothing but warped images of historical events, only that this time, she is not the one modifying them but only anxiously sifting through them. The protagonist of the film — named Laura — is performing a work of digital archaeology, navigating through the images left behind by someone else, a man — her late husband — who was working on a videogame[59] about the battle of Okinawa during World War II. She ruminates on the asymmetrical relationship between her own private pain at the loss of her partner and the enormity of history with its endless list of victims and catastrophes. Eventually, realizing that she is facing an impossible task, Laura decides to erase herself: she slowly unfocuses the camera that is recording her with a remote control until she dissolves, becoming enmeshed with the digital realm and in this way "the empty space of her workroom opens onto the 'other space' in which the narrative closure of the film is put into reverse, and the price of accepting the past as it happened is revealed as not the fulfillment, but the eradication of the subject."[60] The film ends with the actual owner of the workspace, Marker himself, arriving to discover the empty workstation and attempting to find a trace of Laura by typing her name into the computer, getting in return a both amusing and disturbing error prompt that could perfectly fit into Vaporwave's list of "depressing texts": *I don't know how to Laura.*

Marker had said in *Sans Soleil* that the cyclical nature of historical becoming implied the existence of "a kind of amnesia of the future that history distributes through mercy or calculation to those whom it recruits,"[61] since nobody would be willing to accept their role as a responsible historical subject if they knew that each time they are risking their own self-dissolution. It is difficult then to blame the hyperactive Vaporwave subject for being unwilling to accept the task of facing history directly and being satisfied with its aspirational byproducts.

The haunting ending of *Level Five*, with the disappearance of Laura into the digital ether, is uncannily similar in its understanding of the weight of confronting images of the

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59) Interestingly, the genre of "videogames that could have been" and Vaporwave-coded videogames remains unexplored: many Vaporwave albums carry the titles of imagined computer games. A recent example being *Salary Man Simulator: 'Executive Edition'* (2023), published by the label My Pet Flamingo whose liner notes amusingly read: "Have you got what it takes to climb the corporate ladder? Welcome to the high stress, high reward world of corporate life. This exciting and immersive simulator invites players to step into the polished shoes of an ambitious office worker, as they navigate the tumultuous waters of the modern corporate world," https://mypetflamingo.bandcamp.com/album/salary-man-simulator-executive-edition.

60) Catherine Lupton, "Terminal replay: Resnais revisited in Chris Marker's Level Five," *Screen* 44, no. 1 (2003), 58–70.

61) Quote from *Sans Soleil*. See note 56.

past to a sequence in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film *Pulse* (*Kairo*,[62] 2001), a film that, if not for the fact that it precedes the appearance of the musical genre by almost a decade, could have been shaped by the negative space left behind by Vaporwave, and offers a counteractive perspective of the falsely mythologized neoliberal past.

The film's vision of a supposedly post-historical reality is, in many aspects, a mirror-image of what Vaporwave is not: if a reliable memory is an impossibility for the world of Vaporwave, illusory appearances are what is missing from the world of *Pulse*. Unlike the colorful and shallow aspirational images of Vaporwave aesthetics, with its shiny *discmans* and *walkmans*, upbeat aerobics classes with smiling participants, bubble gum-colored products and adorable cartoon characters, where Japan is a lively, colorful, neon-lit, techno-utopia, the Tokyo of *Pulse*, where a group of young people are facing strange disappearances as people are slowly and willingly allowing themselves to be absorbed into a ghostly realm, is instead monochromatic and empty.

In *Pulse*, Japan is being slowly invaded by ghosts that, subverting horror film tropes, look like unassuming people instead of like monstrous beings or spectral apparitions, and many young people are shown killing themselves in a robotic and preemptive manner, giving up before they are reached by these phantoms that are only perceived as uncanny because they move like machines attempting to imitate human beings. These ghosts, as one character theorizes, come from a parallel (virtual) reality that has become overcrowded and are spilling out, claiming the space of the living, and their chosen form of communicating with this realm is via the internet, which they have realized is not a medium for connection but for isolation.

One of the criticisms that has been leveled at the idea of an "end of history" is precisely that it misplaced a great deal of confidence on the assumption that because post-cold war societies enjoyed "a level of connectivity never before seen in history" this "facilitated communication could lead to a safer world by bolstering mutual understanding and cooperation,"[63] while, in fact, ideologically-fueled conflicts continued to multiply everywhere and what *Pulse* offers is, poignantly, the vision of an isolating internet that entraps and dissolves, causing a retreat from history. Vaporwave's aesthetics, having their origin in unfulfilled promises of interconnectivity as a way towards a more empathetic political order, are a reflection of the reluctance of the current misinformed and terminally-online era to admit that it once truly believed into the post-historical utopia and, in this sense, the genre can perhaps be seen as a harbinger of how nostalgia and self-delusion continue to preclude an imagining of a future for the historical image beyond the invisible line demarcated by this "end" that, in fact, was never really there. But in *Pulse*, I believe, there is a fully realized vision of what might have been on the other side of that horizon.

Later in the film, we are shown how, in a computer lab, a young student has built a simulation resembling a screen saver, where a multitude of white dots move around a map on the display, never being allowed to connect with one another because contact would mean

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62) The word *kairo*, 回路, means closed-circuit, or loop. The translation of the title as *Pulse*, while very suggestive, does not accurately represent the intention of the original title, which conveys how a self-feeding loop is established between the internet and the world of the "ghosts."

63) David Akhvlediani et al., "After the End of History," *Transition Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2010), 311–319.

their cancellation. The phantasms soon start to appear in this simulation as semitransparent spots that leave faint traces behind themselves and accompany the fully-opaque points that represent actual people never interacting with each other. Interestingly, the ghosts don't interrupt the flow of the simulation, they just go on, carefully following the opaque spots, although this term seems inexact as it implies a sort of predation or stalking. What these ghosts actually do is to accompany, to place themselves alongside the living, and, seemingly, feed on the loneliness of this satellite-like individuals that never seem to want to crash into each other, preferring the endless void to any form of confrontation.

A young woman named Harue succumbs to the irresistible calling of the ghosts who appear as neighbors or random strangers, neither angry nor haunted, and especially nonviolent. As she puts it: "the ghosts won't kill people, because that would just make more ghosts. Instead they'll try to make people immortal, by quietly trapping them in their own loneliness." This seems to be the birth of a new post-internet kind of monster, a pusillanimous ghost that, rather than killing, prefers to suspend, like a computer eternally left in sleep mode. Harue looks at the screen, where she had previously seen the image of another young man who disappeared after killing himself, slowly becoming a black stain on a wall, and suddenly we shift into the impossible point of view of one of the ghosts, observing Harue as she feels its presence. Then the image glitches, jerking uncontrollably, displaying her own image reflected on the screen, and finally transforms into a recursion, awkwardly oscillating between the infinity projected into the screen and her vacant stare. Becoming a glitch is how the ghosts finally entrap her into her own loneliness.

Harue and many others finally succumb to their own fear of confrontation, afraid to face the world that comes after the supposed end of history, which in the film is portrayed as the slow vanishing of every single person in Japan (portending fears of depopulation): in one of the final scenes, we see a TV set on which a disembodied voice matter-of-factly announces the names of people who have been reported missing while displaying their photos. At this point, another character named Michi — she's what Carol Clover labelled a Final Girl, but who in this case has no killer or monster to destroy ahead of her, only the always-receding horizon of the future[64] — who has been the only one not to surrender to total apathy by frequently displaying compassion and self-awareness, witnesses a plane falling from the sky in the middle of the city (a haunting allusion to the September 11 attacks) and boards a boat, hoping to leave the island. The film begins and ends in the same way, with a wide shot of the boat dwarfed by the vastness of the ocean and another shot of Michi, looking into the distance from aboard the ship, seeing nothing but water, hopeful and unaware that she has survived the end of history.

By refusing to revel in the typical utopian view of a post-historical world, the panorama that Kurosawa describes in *Pulse* restores the glitch to its rightful place as a truly frightening and disrupting force and shows us what was waiting for those who woke up from the aspirational fantasies of the virtual plaza and the pink-infused online world of Vaporwave: a world less colorful, but more real.

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64) Carol J. Clover, "Her body, himself: Gender in the slasher film," *Representations*, no. 20 (1987), Special Issue: *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, 187–228.

Conclusion

Vaporwave's use of glitches, which once could have been regarded as a subversive, disruptive aesthetic tool, in fact merely perpetuates a haunting form of nostalgia that detaches itself from historical context. Through its aesthetic, Vaporwave evokes a sense of longing for a past that ever truly existed, driven by the commodification of nostalgia congealed in dream-like visual creations that have at their basis images from aspirational advertising and consumerism, which are removed from historical discourse because they were created with purely aspirational purposes and were never intended to be anything but illusions.

The movement proposes a flawed but unique interaction with history, presenting a distorted yet familiar vision of the past. This transformation underscores Vaporwave's role in exploring the complexities of memory and historical awareness, highlighting how technology can alter our perception of history itself. Vaporwave offers a space to explore the tension between memory and history in the digital age, where the line between reality and idealized memory is increasingly blurred. It also reflects a broader cultural trend in which nostalgia is increasingly detached from historical context, leading to a longing for a past that is more imagined than real.

In its development into a mostly nostalgic expression, Vaporwave highlights the fluid nature of cultural memory and its glitched imagery continues to resonate, if not as a critique, then perhaps as an invitation to reflect on how to reconstruct the past in the digital age. And while Vaporwave embraces the disconnection from history at its core and highlights the importance of the glitch as a symbol of technological fears, films like Marker's *Sans Soleil* or *Level Five*, and Kurosawa's *Pulse* use similar techniques in a different direction: to underscore the persistence of memory and the inescapability of history.

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Filmography

Level Five (Chris Marker, 1997)
Pulse (Kairo; Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001)
Sans Soleil (Chris Marker, 1982)

Biography

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