

Reconstructed Nostalgia

Aesthetic Commonalities and Self-Soothing in Chillwave, Synthwave, and Vaporwave

ABSTRACT In chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, and their respective subgenres, a common element is the thread of nostalgia, constant in each. This is the case for both the cover art used for these releases, as well as compositional techniques used in the music itself. Although these genres certainly approach nostalgia in different ways, they each rely on imagery that evokes nostalgic feelings or memories in a form of collective, imaginative self-soothing. The memories evoked, however, tend to rely on unrealistic depictions of reality and center on times and places that have perhaps only existed in the listener's imagination.

This article argues that the re-interpretation of cultural memory is an important structural feature in chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, and vaporwave subgenres such as mallsoft and the associated Japanese "city pop" revival. Through a discussion of the visual and musical connections that draw these genres together, the concepts of nostalgia in music (as well as the related concept of "reconstructed nostalgia") are explored. An examination of listeners' narrative explorations of these genres posted online suggests that users engage knowingly and willingly with this "reconstructed nostalgia." Ultimately, this forms a collaborative and collective universe used by listeners as a method of escapism, through both their own imaginations and online comments.

KEYWORDS Popular music, reception/audience, nostalgia, chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave

I. INTRODUCTION

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

In her survey of the genre, Laura Glitsos has previously discussed the re-interpretation of nostalgia inherent to vaporwave¹. This article argues that the same sort of re-interpretation of cultural memory functions as a key structural feature in not only

1. Laura Glitsos, "Vaporwave, or music optimised for abandoned malls" *Popular Music* 37 (1) (2018): 100–18.

vaporwave, but also in the related genres of chillwave and synthwave, as well as vaporwave subgenres such as mallsoft², and the associated Japanese city pop³ revival. Through an exploration of the aesthetic connections that draw these genres together, this article discusses the concept of nostalgia (as well as “reconstructed nostalgia”) in music, with especial reference to how this is disrupted in this music. Examples of listeners’ narrative microfiction⁴ posted online draw together the visual and stylistic approaches of chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave into brief yet vivid stories that highlight the nostalgic feelings generated by this music.

For Frederick Barret et al., nostalgia is a “complex emotion that gives rise primarily (albeit not exclusively) to positive affect and serves to counteract sadness and loneliness,” frequently triggered by music.⁵ Barret and Petr Janata suggest that “nostalgia is often evoked by personally salient music,”⁶ while, for music that is unfamiliar, it is unlikely that autobiographical memories will be evoked.⁷ Nostalgia for music usually tends to involve familiarity; “a person’s relationship to a given song may be expressed as how familiar they are with it, as well as the degree to which the song is associated with a personal memory. An attribute of a person’s experience while listening to a song may include how aroused [or stimulated] a person feels during listening, as well as the particular emotions that a person experiences during listening.”⁸ In sum, nostalgia usually relies on “a person’s relationship to a given song, which may be expressed as how familiar they are with it, as well as the degree to which the song is associated with a personal memory.”⁹ In the case of the music within the nostalgia genre continuum, this is upended. Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood suggest that, in the case of lo-fi hip hop (as well as other music on the nostalgia genre continuum) “the specific, personal nostalgia becomes merged, in real-time, into a past which the listener already knows never to have existed.”¹⁰

Russo has discussed similar themes in relation to a psychedelic rock revival, arguing that “the longing for a time lost, the effacement of the present in favour of the perceived stability of the past, is demonstrated by those who have no experiential ties to the past time which is favoured,”¹¹ and continues by pointing out that this relies on “highly mediated representations of our collective memory of the past.” He summarizes by stating that “it is ultimately these mediated representations . . . that are likely to evoke that

2. The term “mallsoft” refers to a vaporwave subgenre that focuses primarily on the notion that the music either evokes or imitates a shopping trip, or acts as the background music that a listener might hear in a shopping mall.

3. The term “city pop” refers to Japanese popular disco and funk-inspired music of the late 1970s and early- to mid-1980s.

4. Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study To: Contradiction and Paradox in Lofi Hip Hop,” *LASPM Journal* 9(2) (2019): 40–54.

5. Frederick Barrett, Kevin Grimm, Richard Robins, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, and Petr Janata, “Music-Evoked Nostalgia: Affect, Memory, and Personality,” *American Psychological Association* 10 (30) (2010): 390.

6. Frederick Barrett and Petr Janata, “Neural response to nostalgia-evoking music modelled by elements of dynamic musical structure and individual differences in affective traits,” *Neuropsychologia* (2016) 91: 234–46.

7. Barret et al. *Music-Evoked Nostalgia* 2010, 391.

8. *Ibid.*, 390.

9. *Ibid.*, 390.

10. Winston and Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study,” 47.

11. Nicholas Russo, “Psycherelic Rock: Ersatz Nostalgia for the Sixties and the Evocative Power of Sound in the Retro Rock Music of Tame Impala,” *Volume!* 11 (1) (2014): 2–3.

collective memory.”¹² Likewise, members of the contemporary rockabilly subculture reassemble “objects and values from an array of vintage traditions,”¹³ constructing a new reinterpretation of the past.

This article discusses the imagery that connects the disparate genres of chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, as well as vaporwave’s subgenres, and argues that these form a kind of collective “reconstructed nostalgia,” shared by listeners. While Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth have discussed some of these genres, with reference to the internet-mediation of several related genres of the 1990s and 2000s,¹⁴ and Glitsos has discussed vaporwave specifically, these genres as a collective and interrelated whole have not been given enough attention in English-language publications.¹⁵ Although the genres on this “nostalgia genre continuum”^{16,17} certainly make heavy reference to both the music and imagery of the 1980s and 1990s, it is an imagined form of the 1980s and 1990s that never existed, or did not exist in the form suggested. Listeners collectively embrace the chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave reinterpretations of these eras, often relying, in some part, on their own memories, but ultimately creating something that is simultaneously nostalgic and new.

The paradox of this form of nostalgia is that much of the nostalgia in these cases is for impossible situations; here, users long for events that never existed, or are completely fictional. These fictional situations may have ties to popular culture of the past; for instance, much of the synthwave visual and musical style references 1980s sci-fi movies. The paradox of the nostalgia inherent in these genres is certainly not without some predecessors. Arjun Appadurai, for instance, describes “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory,” and uses the terms “ersatz,” “armchair,” or “imagined” nostalgia interchangeably.¹⁸ Stacey Mendel Baker and Patricia F. Kennedy use “simulated nostalgia,” and Christina Goulding uses “vicarious nostalgia.” This article suggests that the most useful term for the specific paradoxes and contradictions of the internet-based nostalgia genre continuum is “reconstructed nostalgia,” specifically because it highlights both the cultural references and the manner in which the listener’s own experiences of nostalgia are rebuilt within these genres. While nostalgia in general certainly involves a certain level of reconstruction,¹⁹ as Glitsos points out, in vaporwave releases “the listener

12. *Ibid.*, 4.

13. Kim Kattari, “Identifying with the Rebel of the Past: An Ethnographic Exploration of Nostalgia in the Contemporary Rockabilly Scene in the United States,” *Volume! II* (1) (2014): 186.

14. Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre” *Music & Letters* 98 (4) (2018): 601–47.

15. Júlia Dantas de Miranda has written in Portuguese regarding a selection of some of the visual connections between these genres. However, this primarily focuses on the synthwave subgenre of “darksynth,” which includes aspects of metal.

16. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 625.

17. Born and Haworth use the term to refer to less recent “nostalgia genres,” such as microsound, hauntology, hypnagogic pop, as well as chillwave and the more recent vaporwave. This is a useful catch-all term for these genres, and the term is used throughout this paper to collectively refer to chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave, as well as their subgenres.

18. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 77–78.

19. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York, Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

draws upon their own repository of past experience but only in order to ‘plug into’ the complex and collective (re)production of memory as a form of play, albeit one that is produced within the margins of liminality.”²⁰

Winston and Saywood discuss similar paradoxes in the comparable YouTube-based genre of lo-fi hip hop. They argue that lo-fi hip hop relies on this unusual form of nostalgia, which can involve “hyper-specific memories of popular media” connected with a listener’s childhood, but also, at the same time, “a vague, abstract longing for a past which the listener *is fully aware never existed*.”²¹ Winston and Saywood continue by pointing out that YouTube users’ comments on various uploads reveal “a transparent fictionalization of [nostalgia for an imagined past], as several pseudonymous users post emotional narrative microfiction in response to the track . . . we read [these] as a kind of ‘playing along,’ a suspension of disbelief.”²² This is similar to the fictionalization seen across the “nostalgia genre” continuum, but is particularly highlighted in chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, and their related subgenres to the point where this is a fundamental building block of the genre. This is partially due to the music itself, which tends to reference music of the past through sampling²³ but also because of the non-musical aspects of the genre.

I. THE AESTHETICS OF CHILLWAVE, SYNTHWAVE, AND VAPORWAVE

Although the particular visual and textual representations used by these genres use nostalgic references in different ways, each relies on similar foundational imagery.

CHILLWAVE

Born and Haworth categorize several genres as those that focus on nostalgia as a core element, such as hauntology, hypnagogic pop, and chillwave,²⁴ and point out that, among these various “nostalgia” genres, hauntology, hypnagogic pop, and chillwave all involve the imagery of various forms of analog media, such as cassette tapes, analog synthesizers, and tape machines.²⁵ Of these, hypnagogic pop as a term is fraught with some difficulty; Adam Trainer even points out that the terms “hypnagogic pop” and “chillwave” have been used interchangeably, although he does argue that chillwave is perhaps “more indebted to the retro/revisionist fetishization of the 1980s and 1990s.”²⁶ For the purposes of this article, the term “chillwave” will be discussed rather than “hypnagogic pop.”

20. Glitsos, “Vaporwave,” 105.

21. Winston and Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study,” 41.

22. *Ibid.*, 47.

23. For a discussion of an unusual example of the hypertextual use of interphonography in rock music, see: Paul Ballam-Cross, “Nonagon Infinity, open the door!” – formation of a cross-album concept through motivic interrelation in the music of King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, *Perfect Beat 20* (1) (2019) (forthcoming).

24. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 626.

25. *Ibid.*, 626.

26. Adam Trainer, “From Hypnagogia to Distroid: Postironic Musical Renderings of Personal Memory,” *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016), 416.

Trainer quotes the semi-anonymous blog post that coined the term chillwave, which summarises much of the aesthetic feel important to the genre: “Feel like chillwave is supposed to sound like something that was playing in the background of ‘an old VHS cassette that u found in ur attic from the late 80s/early 90s,’”²⁷ and concludes by stating that “the chillwave sound may be the logical end to the 1980s-inspired musical leanings of the first decade of the new millennium, taking revisionism to a new level of cultural fluidity through irony and pastiche.”²⁸

Chillwave aligns with broader musical trends of the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as “an increased embrace of sampling and electronics, a de-emphasizing of guitars, a sonic approach that favored tactile sensuality rather than the bookish sensibilities that pervaded 2000s alternative music, and an unabashed love of all things retro.”²⁹ For Emilie Friedlander, chillwave in turn opened the floodgates to other similar styles, arguing that it was “the internet electronic micro-genre that launched a hundred internet electronic micro-genres,”³⁰ such as lo-fi hip hop (see Winston and Saywood), as well as synthwave and vaporwave. Prominent chillwave performers include Washed Out, Toro Y Moi, and Neon Indian. Musically, chillwave can be characterized by “an emphasis on cheesy-sounding old synths, vintage drum machines and an expressively degraded, echo-and-reverb-laden production aesthetic,”³¹ and highlights some of the imagery common to chillwave releases by stating that common trends included “washed-out vintage vacation photographs, neon palm trees, and songs with titles such as *Terminally Chill*, *Surfin/Body in the Water* and *Waves*.”^{32,33} Much of this imagery has bled through to synthwave and vaporwave releases as well.

A clear example of the visual aesthetic of chillwave is YouTube user Ovidio Calvo’s fan-made video for Washed Out’s song “Feel It All Around.”³⁴ This video highlights several of the common chillwave images, including the ideas of vacations, the ocean, and sunsets (see EX. 1).

Like the other genres on the nostalgia genre continuum, the nostalgia inherent in chillwave relies on the listener’s acceptance of the associated imagery. In chillwave, the vacation, summer, and vintage-related themes are certainly more realistic than those of other genres along the nostalgia genre continuum; it is plausible, for instance, that the vacation- and summer-related imagery of chillwave would spark nostalgic feelings for listeners, and by accepting this imagery, listeners are invited to escape to a world

27. *Ibid.*, 416.

28. *Ibid.*, 416.

29. Larry Fitzmaurice, “Tame Impala, Chillwave, and Other Dispatches from the Vibe Generation,” *Vice Op-Eds* (2015). https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/64y5pg/dispatches-from-the-vibe-generation.

30. Emilie Friedlander, “Chillwave: a momentary microgenre that ushered in the age of nostalgia,” *The Guardian* (2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/21/chillwave-microgenre-nostalgia-pop>.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. “*Terminally Chill*” is by Neon Indian, and “*Surfin/Body in the Water*” is by Memory Cassette. Since there are several songs titled “*Waves*” by various chillwave performers, it is difficult to know precisely which “*Waves*” Friedlander is referring to here.

34. See Karpovich’s 2007 chapter “Reframing Fan Videos” in *Music, Sound and Multimedia – From the Live to the Virtual* for an in-depth discussion of fan-made media.



Washed Out - Feel It All Around (High Definition Video)

1,189,238 views • Nov 16, 2009

9K 109 SHARE SAVE ...

EX. 1: Screenshot from YouTube user Ovidio Calvo's fan-made video for Washed Out's "Feel It All Around."

populated by perfect summer days. This taps into the listener's own memories of trips to the beach, or, given the focus on outdated media such as that of an "old VHS cassette,"³⁵ childhood memories of encountering these nostalgic objects.

SYNTHWAVE

Although the terms "outrun," "retrowave," and "futuresynth" are sometimes used interchangeably for this genre,³⁶ synthwave is undoubtedly the most popular term. Musically, synthwave is distinguished by its focus on reviving aspects of 1980s film scores while also taking influence from the electronic music of the '80s.³⁷ Likewise, much of the visual inspiration of the genre imitates '80s sci-fi movies (Andrei Sora suggests influences include *Blade Runner* and *RoboCop*, among others) and video games from the late '80s and early '90s, such as *Street Fighter* and *Out Run*.³⁸

Some of the stylistic aspects of synthwave have also been taken into popular culture more broadly, such as the music for the popular Netflix TV program *Stranger Things*. The program references the music of 1980s composers John Carpenter, Giorgio Moroder, and Tangerine Dream,³⁹ among others. Likewise, the recent video games *Hotline*

35. Trainer, "From Hypnagogia to Distroid," 416.

36. Julia Neuman, "The Nostalgic Allure of 'Synthwave,'" *Observer Music* (2015). <https://observer.com/2015/07/the-nostalgic-allure-of-synthwave>.

37. Andrei Sora, "Carpenter Brut and the Instrumental Synthwave Persona" in *On Popular Music and its Unruly Entanglements*, ed. Nick Braae and Kai Arne Hansen (Palgrave Macmillan 2019), 143–44.

38. *Ibid.*, 144.

39. Sean O'Neal, "'Stranger Things' score is a gateway into synthwave." *For Our Consideration – AV Club* (2016) <https://tv.avclub.com/stranger-things-score-is-a-gateway-into-synthwave-1798250478>.

Miami (released in 2012, developed by Devolver Digital) and *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*⁴⁰ (released in 2013, developed by Ubisoft) are both heavily inspired by synthwave visually and musically (see EX. 2).



EX. 2: Cover art for Ubisoft's 2013 game *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*.

While the genre came to mainstream prominence in the early 2010s, there were certainly notable prior synthwave releases in the 2000s, such as Kavinsky's 2006 *Teddy Boy* EP, which arguably formed the basis for much of synthwave's style. Synthwave's early-2010s shift into the mainstream can plausibly be at least partially attributed to composer Cliff Martinez's score for the 2011 film *Drive*,⁴¹ and, more specifically, attributed to the film's use of Kavinsky's 'Nightcall.'⁴² A measure of Kavinsky's influence on the genre is that one of the more recent phrases used in connection with synthwave is the term

40. For further discussion of the synthwave inspiration in *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*, see: Sloan, Robin, *Videogames as Remediated Memories* (2015)

41. O'Neal, "Stranger Things' score."

42. Andrei Sora, "Carpenter Brut and the Instrumental Synthwave Persona" in *On Popular Music and its Unruly Entanglements*, ed. Nick Braae and Kai Arne Hansen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

“outrun” (generally used in connection with the particular visual style of the genre), which is also the title of his 2013 album. It is important to note, however, that the title of Kavinsky’s release in turn refers to the 1980s SEGA game *Out Run*.

The sort of imagery present in the game *Out Run* is particularly important as a reference point in all of the musical styles across the nostalgia genre continuum; for instance, one of the frequent images associated with chillwave is a 1980s Californian sunset,⁴³ although this is also equally associated with synthwave. This type of imagery is reflected in the bright and summery colors of the *Out Run* game (see EX. 3).



EX. 3: Screenshot of SEGA's 1986 arcade game *Out Run*.

It is not difficult to see why the game *Out Run* has become a popular reference to draw from in both chillwave and synthwave releases; the image above demonstrates the freedom of driving down a highway in a fast car and incorporates summery imagery, such as palm trees, as well as including a strong 1980s color palette in the game’s logo. Synthwave releases likewise often use these same visual references; in Miami Nights 1984’s 2010 album *Early Summer*, the cover art includes a red sports car, a beach, sunset, as well as a 1980s color palette in the primary logo. This is, of course, quite apart from both the artist and album’s names (see EX. 4).

Similar 1980s-inspired cover art, in some cases blended with sci-fi themes, recurs in many synthwave releases. It is worth noting, however, that Sean O’Neal has argued that synthwave’s use of this nostalgic imagery is ultimately restrictive, stating that “the fetishization of the same analog gear and small frame of reference is limiting in a way that artists may embrace, but it doesn’t leave much room for innovation—or

43. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 630.



EX. 4: Cover art of Miami Nights 1984's 2010 album *Early Summer*.

surprises.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the consistent use of similar imagery allows listeners to tap into this evocative “reconstructed nostalgia” across a number of synthwave releases.

VAPORWAVE

Despite the similar names, vaporwave differs in a number of ways from both chillwave and synthwave. While synthwave prioritizes a reinterpreted form of 1980s film scores and culture, often seeming like an extended act of homage, vaporwave reinterprets popular media with a heavily ironic edge. As Born and Haworth state, vaporwave engages with “technological imaginaries of the present and recent past . . . through ironic remediations of sounds, images, and practices characteristic of earlier phases of the internet, the historicity of the net becomes focal for vaporwave aesthetics.”⁴⁵ Musically, Trainer suggests that vaporwave “presents sounds filtered through the bass-empty sheen of early digital instrumentation and synthesised instrumentation” and represents “an evolutionary step into the muzak of the dawning of the digital era.”⁴⁶

Representative vaporwave releases appeared in the early 2010s, such as Daniel Lopatin’s 2010 album *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1*⁴⁷ and James Ferraro’s 2011 *Far Side*

44. O’Neal, “*Stranger Things*” score, 2018.

45. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 605.

46. Trainer, “From Hypnagogia to Distroid,” 419–20.

47. Marvin Lin, “Daniel Lopatin’s [and?] Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1” in *The 33 1/3 B-Sides*, ed. Will Stockton and D. Gilson (Bloomsbury, New York, 2020), 171.

Virtual.⁴⁸ Marvin Lin summarizes the vaporwave approach by stating that it “transform[s] disposable cultural debris such as boardroom muzak, kitschy smooth jazz, and elevator music into sound memes for a new generation.”⁴⁹ Lopatin’s *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1*, for instance, opens with a heavily modified (though nonetheless recognizable) sample from Toto’s 1982 hit “Africa.” Other tracks on the album likewise sample other 1970s and 1980s pop hits, in each case with high levels of added reverb, and often pitch-shifted.⁵⁰

Distinctive visual imagery is a fundamental part of vaporwave, and indeed this may be part of its success; Lin argues that the popularity of the genre was “aided in large part by anachronous, post-ironic imagery of early digital culture, dead symbols of capitalist globalization, and tokenized artifacts from different eras and cultures.”⁵¹ Cover art for vaporwave releases often juxtaposes surreal imagery drawn from early computing, such as “online images, GIFs, videos, and interactive media.”⁵² Despite the seeming disparity and surreal nature of these, this imagery is rigorously codified,⁵³ much as in the recurring imagery of sunsets or ‘80s color palettes in chillwave and synthwave. The ur-example of the synthwave style is the cover art of the 2011 release *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus (see EX. 5).



EX. 5: Cover art of the digital release of *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus.

48. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 635.

49. Lin, “Daniel Lopatin’s Eccojams,” 171.

50. Marvin Lin, “*Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1*” in *The 33 1/3 B-Sides* (2020) for a brief discussion of the musical techniques used here.

51. Lin, “Daniel Lopatin’s Eccojams,” 171.

52. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 634.

53. *Ibid.*, 634.

Glitsos suggests that this album artwork forms the backbone of the vaporwave visual style, stating that “countless memes, tributes and homages to the ‘vaporwave aesthetic’ borrow directly from *Floral Shoppe* ‘album cover’ themes: a Roman bust against a neon pink background featuring a city skyline at dusk adorned with Japanese language characters.”⁵⁴

Chandler agrees, and summarizes vaporwave releases as drawing on imagery of:

- Shopping malls
- Video games (particularly retro or obsolete systems)
- Eastern text or imagery (usually Japanese)
- Neo-classicism/Surrealism
- Hazy skylines
- Living spaces
- Obsolete tech and design
- 1990s television
- Summer and the sea⁵⁵

Several of these can be seen in the example above, although both a color palette tending towards pinks and purples, and checkerboard patterns must be mentioned as recurring devices as well, primarily due to the influence of *Floral Shoppe*.⁵⁶ This imagery is pushed to an extreme in some of the physical releases of *Floral Shoppe*, such as in the cassette release. Most notable here is the addition of the “Sega Saturn” logo (an obsolete Japanese ‘90s video game console) to the upper right paired with the paradoxical “compact disc” logo, as well as the checkerboard pattern of the tape itself (see EX. 6).

Born and Haworth have argued, however, that the imagery used in vaporwave releases is ultimately restrictive.⁵⁷ For instance, online text generators can be used to imitate several of the textual clichés inherent in vaporwave releases (see EX. 7).

The examples on the right exemplify the text used in multiple vaporwave releases, including the use of full-width characters,⁵⁸ either combined with Japanese characters or imitating them. Similar Japanese text can be seen on the cover of the cassette release, as above. Like the visual restrictions inherent to synthwave, vaporwave’s preoccupation with Japanese text is, as Simon Chandler states, “not without its problems: often, vaporwave’s dependence on Asian characters can be seen as coming dangerously close to fetishizing the Other.”⁵⁹ Macintosh Plus’s *Floral Shoppe* release, for instance, goes so far as to list the titles for each track primarily in Japanese characters (see EX. 8).

54. Glitsos, “Vaporwave,” 103.

55. Simon Chandler, “Escaping Reality: the Iconography of Vaporwave,” Bandcamp (2016). <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/vaporwave-iconography-column>.

56. Glitsos, “Vaporwave,” 103.

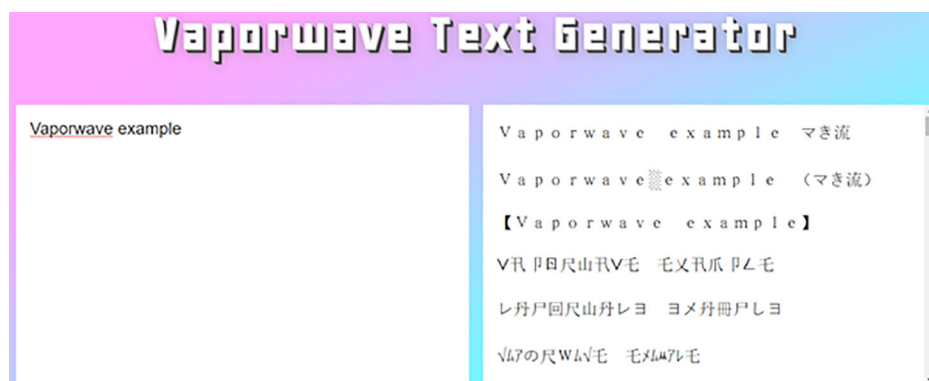
57. Born and Haworth, “Beats to Relax/Study,” 634.

58. The semi-ironic term of praise used in regards to vaporwave, “aesthetic,” is often stylized using fullwidth characters as “a e s t h e t i c”.

59. Chandler, “Escaping Reality.”



EX. 6: Cover art of the cassette release of *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus.

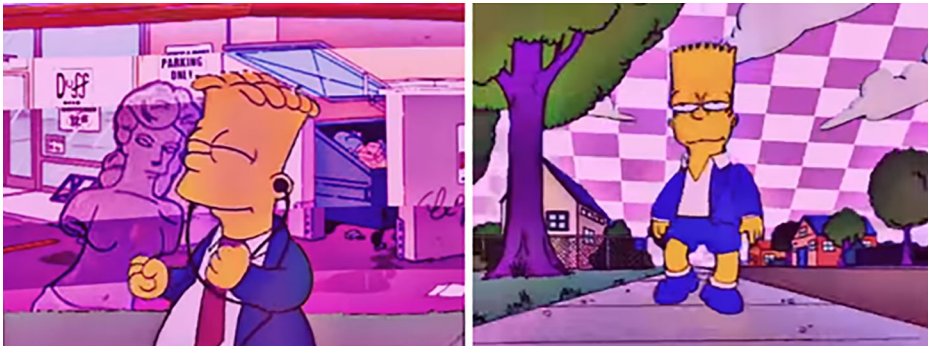


EX. 7: Vaporwave Text Generator (lingojam.com/VaporwaveTextGenerator).

Given these easily imitated stylistic trends, several parodic offshoots have appeared. For instance, the TV program *The Simpsons* has inspired a number of users to create parodies collectively referred to as “Simpsonswave.” This parodic style lifts many of the hallmarks of vaporwave releases, such as in the YouTube upload titled “SUNDAYSCHOOL” by user Lucian Hughes. For YouTube users, *The Simpsons* itself may generate nostalgic memories, and the semi-ironic mash-up of the program with the knowledge of vaporwave styles can plausibly provoke an amused reaction. In the two screen captures below, several of the vaporwave trends can be seen, including the use of Greek busts (itself a knowing reference to a different episode of the program), a color palette trending towards pink and purple and a checkerboard pattern, as well as the use of *The Simpsons* itself as a 1990s reference (see EX. 9).



EX. 8: Bandcamp release page for *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus.



EX. 9: Screen captures from Simpsonswave release “SUNDAYSCHOOL,” uploaded to YouTube by user Lucien Hughes.

“Simpsonswave” is certainly not the only vaporwave parody, and similar YouTube uploads exist for properties such as the videogame series *The Legend of Zelda* or other 1990s television programs, such as *Frasier* or *Seinfeld*. These likewise often contain vocal or musical samples from their respective series, combined with down-tempo drums and synths. As in Lin’s description of vaporwave, these samples tend to be from the early digital era,⁶⁰ evoking nostalgic memories of familiar properties or programs. Like chillwave and synthwave’s connections to familiar or soothing material, vaporwave does so similarly, albeit through a lens of irony and juxtaposition.

60. Lin, “Daniel Lopatin’s Eccojams,” 171.

This easily copied style has led some authors to suggest that vaporwave may be over as a valid genre, although this has been the cause of some debate.⁶¹ It is worth noting, however, that Macintosh Plus's upcoming second album⁶² is titled *Rise From Your Grave*,⁶³ seemingly referencing vaporwave's status as an unviable musical genre.

(1) MALLSOFT

As a subgenre of vaporwave, mallsoft certainly includes some similarities. As Glitsos suggests, in vaporwave releases, “the satirisation of the emptiness of ‘mall culture’ as a shadow of neoliberalist fantasy connects partly with the notion that vaporwave music is cobbled together through a patchwork of found sounds, not its own thing but echoes of other things, and ultimately, empty.”⁶⁴ Mallsoft takes these references to consumerism and capitalism and turns them in on themselves, presenting the act of shopping in a mall or buying items as pleasurable in and of itself. For instance, several mallsoft albums are constructed so as to form a virtual soundscape of visiting the mall. In the album *Palm Mall* by 猫 シ Corp, track titles include ‘Special Discount,’ ‘First Floor,’ ‘Second Floor,’ and “Veni, Vidi, Emi’ (‘I Came, I Saw, I Bought’ in Latin). Several of the visual references of chillwave and synthwave, plausibly originating in the *Out Run*-inspired visual style, can also be seen here, such as palm trees and a pastel color palette (see EX. 10).



EX. 10: Bandcamp page of the album *Palm Mall* by 猫 シ Corp, also known as Cat System Corp.

61. Adam Harper, “Vaporwave Is Dead, Long Live Vaporwave!” in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook et al. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019) 119–23.

62. The musician behind Macintosh Plus, also known as Vektroid, has written several other albums under different performing names between the release of *Floral Shoppe* in 2011 and the projected 2020 release of *Rise From Your Grave*.

63. The phrase “rise from your grave” refers to the 1988 video game *Altered Beast*, which begins with a (now) somewhat dated digitized voice saying the phrase.

64. Glitsos, “Vaporwave,” 103.

There are also related releases that would be difficult to simply categorize as either vaporwave or mallsoft but which certainly take inspiration from the nostalgic appeal of these genres. YouTube user Cecil Robert's uploads take popular songs (generally those of the 1980s, although not limited to that time period⁶⁵) and re-equalize them so that they sound as if they are emanating from different sources. For instance, the most popular upload on the channel is the 1982 song "Africa" by the band Toto re-equalized to sound as if it is being broadcast in an empty shopping center (see EX. 11).



EX. 11: YouTube upload by user Cecil Robert of the song 'Africa' by Toto re-equalized.

Although these uploads are certainly not vaporwave, they nonetheless tap into a similar ethos; Cecil Robert's "transparent fracturing" of a sample (or, in the case of these uploads, an entire song) can act as a conduit for nostalgia as well.⁶⁶ Trainer argues that the kind of populism represented by these uploads is an integral element of vaporwave, arguing that "these forms move beyond traditional binaries of taste and currency . . . [recontextualizing] our relationship with the products of commercial populism and capitalist-driven culture."⁶⁷ Glitsos even goes so far as to suggest, at least in regard to vaporwave itself, that the "empty sound of tinny beats and hollowed-out drum tracks" represents a kind of individualistic form of isolation and trauma.⁶⁸ These YouTube uploads of popular songs,

65. It is worth noting here that each of these videos contains a note in the description that, for a fee, the uploader is willing to edit requested tracks to resemble being played in an empty shopping center. Therefore, it is plausible that the uploaded tracks are not entirely of the uploader's own choice but instead represent the YouTube community's suggestions.

66. Winston and Saywood, "Beats to Relax/Study," 45.

67. Trainer, *From Hypnagogia to Distroid* 2016, 424.

68. Glitsos, "Vaporwave," 107–8.

designed to sound as if the listener were alone, evoke a similar form of “reconstructed nostalgia” (albeit darker in tone) to that of chillwave, synthwave and vaporwave.

(II) THE JAPANESE CITY POP REVIVAL

The musical element of vaporwave often involves sampling, and many of the samples used in vaporwave tracks come from the pop music of late 1970s and 1980s Japan, collectively referred to as city pop.⁶⁹ The term city pop is necessarily nebulous, and McNeill suggests that “like most genre constructs, city pop’s borders are blurry... it’s more of a vibe classification than a collective movement.”⁷⁰ He highlights the visual aspect of city pop releases by describing the look of the cover art as “Hockney-esque, sun-splashed fantasies populated by sailboats, ocean horizons, and luxury cars rippling with light.”⁷¹ These are, again, similar to those aesthetics popularized by chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave, although fractured and partially rejected in the case of vaporwave (see EX. 12).



EX. 12: Cover art by Hiroshi Nagai (McNeill 2018) for Naoya Matsuoka and Wising’s 1982 album *The September Wind*.

69. Luke Winkie, “City Pop, the optimistic disco of 1980s Japan, finds a new young crowd in the West,” *Chicago Reader* (2019) <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2019/01/11/city-pop-the-optimistic-disco-of-1980s-japan-finds-a-new-young-crowd-in-the-west>.

70. Mark McNeill, Liner notes to *Pacific Breeze: Japanese City Pop, AOR and Boogie 1976-1986*, Light in the Attic Records LITA163, 2019.

71. *Ibid.*

One proponent of the genre has been Chicago DJ Van Paugam, who had used YouTube to stream mixes of city pop songs,⁷² and similar mixes are hosted on his Soundcloud page. Van Paugam argues that the primary appeal for Western listeners is in the nostalgia, stating that “we’ve saturated and commercialized our 70s and 80s so much that younger generations can’t even form a cohesive impression of what those times were actually like . . . ‘city pop’ has just enough Western influence to sound like untouched, untainted versions of what we once had, but without being hyper-commercialized. I think the music’s purity is what draws people in. The fact that they can reminisce about a time and place that aren’t their own and still feel nostalgic is something new for a lot of people.”⁷³ Like chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, and mallsoft, city pop relies on a listener accepting the reliance on nostalgia; as Van Paugam points out, the sound of city pop resembles that of familiar, nostalgic Western songs enough to connect with listeners.

Adam Harper has suggested three recurring elements in music on the nostalgia genre continuum, which he refers to as “internet music.” These are maximalism, or an excess of complexity and referentiality, kitsch, or an impoverishment of culture caused by populism, decreased attention spans or commercialism, and uncanny representations of humanity.⁷⁴ For instance, vaporwave involves all three of these elements. But Winston and Saywood point out that (in the case of lo-fi hip hop, at least), the “genre’s approach to nostalgia is warm, relaxing, and, ultimately, a cocoon of sound which does not demand unease from its listeners”⁷⁵—certainly not a maximalist approach. Although Winston and Saywood’s description of this warm sense of nostalgia could certainly be applied to chillwave, synthwave and the Japanese city pop revival, if not vaporwave, Harper’s point about kitsch still stands—much of the appeal of at least some of this music tends towards the nostalgic. Furthermore, Harper’s description of kitsch sounds a negative note, but it is important to consider that the “kitsch” of much of this music on the nostalgia genre continuum also has the ability to reassure and comfort the listener; each of these genres relies on the listener to identify with at least some of the imagery present, whether through their own memories, or through a more complex form of nostalgia involving identification with reconstructed memories from the collective imagination.

II (I) NOSTALGIA AND RECONSTRUCTED NOSTALGIA IN MUSIC

While chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave all rely on the listener’s nostalgic memories as a core part of their appeal, this is particularly clear in the case of vaporwave. Daniel Lopatin’s *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1*, for instance, samples artists from the late 1970s and 1980s, such as Fleetwood Mac, Teddy Pendergrass, Peter Gabriel, and Heart.⁷⁶ It is

72. Van Paugam’s YouTube channel has since been removed due to copyright violations. Similar mixes are, at the time of writing, hosted on his Soundcloud page.

73. Winkie, “City Pop.”

74. Harper, “How internet music is frying your brain,” 89.

75. Winston and Saywood, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 46.

76. Lin, “Daniel Lopatin’s Eccojams,” 169.

plausible that the music of these artists (even if modified and rearranged) evokes nostalgic feelings for listeners, but the appeal of vaporwave is certainly not limited to those who associate the performances of the artists above with their youth; this raises the question of how listeners too young to associate these songs with personal nostalgic memories react to this music. Further research could certainly be done in this area.

Andy Bennett has discussed the idea of “received nostalgia,” whereby listeners feel nostalgic for a time they have had no connection to. In Bennett’s argument, this feeling comes primarily from sources of popular culture.⁷⁷ As Arno Van der Hoeven states, audiences buy or engage with sources of popular culture “in order to explore popular music history and use them as cultural tools to relate their autobiographical experiences to public accounts of the past.”⁷⁸ Listeners can “construct their own understanding of a decade of which they have no living memory . . . both younger and older audiences are interested in products like reissues [and] performances of ‘classic’ albums.” Van der Hoeven’s point here can be equally applied to the genres on the nostalgia continuum; as he states, “Since music fosters a sense of belonging, people form communities with shared heritages or a common past which they nostalgically cherish. At the same time, individuals have agency to appropriate this heritage in a personal way.”⁷⁹

In the genres on the nostalgia continuum, listeners’ “reconstructed nostalgia” uses their own personal memories to build memories of a non-existent time; in their article exploring lo-fi hip-hop, Winston and Saywood suggest that the genre “engages its listeners and producers simultaneously in nostalgia for their memories of childhood, but also for what is acknowledged to be an imagined past, not only unreachable in the present, but never experienced in the first instance.”⁸⁰ They give the example of a sample taken from the television program *The Legend of Korra*, and suggest that this short sample (digitally aged and modified) has two functions. Semiotically, the sample relates to its source through the listener’s experience, “bound up with individual lived experience, and with reality.” The modification and digital aging of the sample, however, also position it in the past. As they state, “The very act of transparently fracturing the sample serves to evoke nostalgia in its listeners.”⁸¹ This can also still apply for those who do not necessarily feel nostalgia from their own childhoods for the program *The Legend of Korra*. Winston and Saywood ask “whether, for these listeners, the imagined past we discuss might also blend with their memories of childhood, blurring the boundaries between their own lived experiences and those of others” with whom users have only interacted online,⁸² ultimately reconstructing nostalgic feelings.

77. Andy Bennet, “‘Things they do look awful cool’: Ageing rock icons and contemporary youth audiences” *Leisure/Loisir* 32 (2) (2008): 275.

78. Arno Van der Hoeven, “Remembering the popular music of the 1990s: dance music and the cultural meanings of decade-based nostalgia.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20 (3) (2014): 318.

79. *Ibid.*, 319.

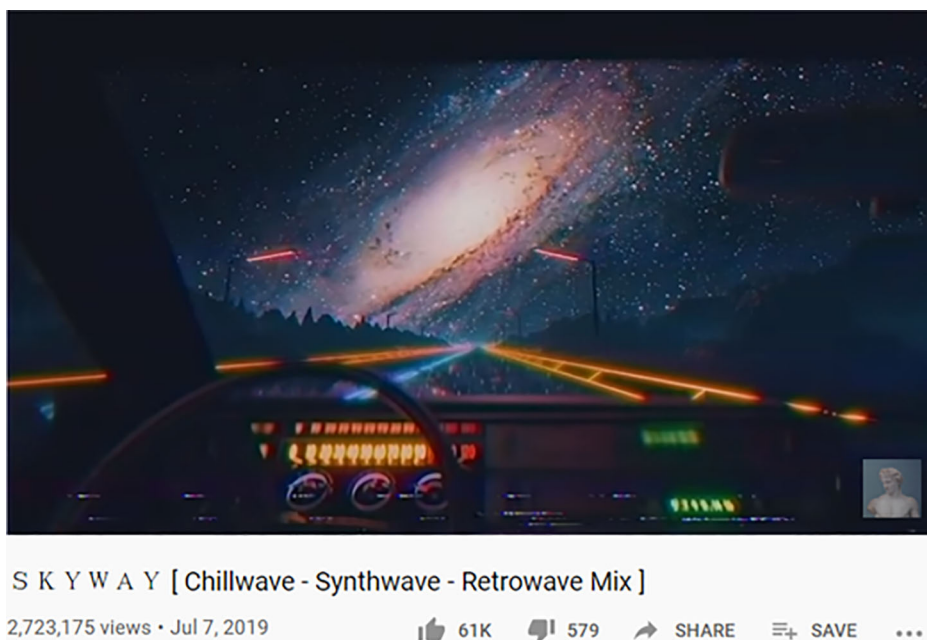
80. Winston and Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study,” 45.

81. *Ibid.*, 45.

82. *Ibid.*, 45.

(II) NARRATIVE MICROFICTION AND NOSTALGIA IN THE NOSTALGIA CONTINUUM GENRES

In the online spaces that these nostalgia genres occupy, such as YouTube, the comments left by users often evoke related imagery and emotions; Winston and Saywood refer to these posts as “narrative microfiction” and suggest these could be read as “a kind of ‘playing along,’ [or] ‘a suspension of disbelief.’”⁸³ This willing construction of these narrative microfictions is certainly the case for all the genres along the nostalgia genre continuum discussed here. These comments often rely on the image uploaded with the track as a source of inspiration; although this can in some cases be the original album or single’s cover art, this is certainly not always the case. YouTube mixes resembling a DJ’s sets combine several tracks into one upload, and frequently include eye-catching artwork. For instance, in the synthwave upload entitled “S K Y W A Y” by user Asthenic,⁸⁴ several users’ comments react specifically to the looping video of a view from a 1980s-inspired car driving in a futuristic space scenario. This imagery again resembles many of the touchstones present in the game *Out Run*, such as a fast car and a 1980s aesthetic (particularly highlighted here by the use of neon as well as the design of the car’s dashboard). Further cementing the link to the past, visual distortions similar to those present on VHS cassette tapes appear (see EX. 13).



EX. 13: YouTube upload by user Asthenic. Visual distortions similar to those of VHS tapes are visible at the bottom of the image.

83. Ibid., 47.

84. Although this user gives the title of this as “S K Y W A Y [Chillwave – Synthwave – Retrowave Mix], the video has little to do with chillwave as the term is conventionally understood, and the use of the term here is possibly simply to attract online attention. As discussed above, the terms synthwave and retrowave are often used interchangeably.

Users react to this visual and aural stimulus by creating everything from vivid “micro-fictions” to short jokes:

“2082. The world has evolved. Those born into this generation drive futuristic cars that drive in the sky and resemble the old-days DMC DeLorean. People have come and gone. You’re driving down the sky, the lights guiding you on your way to the next Galaxy over. You have no destination, no goal, no need or want. You just feel like driving on and on. Continuing into whatever may lie ahead. .” (extract from anonymous comment, *S K Y W A Y*, 2019)

“Destination: ANDROMEDA ETA: 0.25 *G A L A C T I C Y E A R S*” (Anonymous comment, *S K Y W A Y*, 2019)

Similarly fantastic commentary involving these microfictions can be found on most uploads along the nostalgia genre continuum. Users also consistently highlight the “reconstructed nostalgia” they feel upon hearing the music, and similarly highlight much of the same imagery present in chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave releases. These range from short comments emphasizing the inherently contradictory nature of their nostalgic feelings, while others construct elaborate narratives inevitably bringing out similar points:

“I’ve got homesickness for a place far across the Universe. A place that probably doesn’t exist” (Anonymous comment, *Waves—A Chillwave Mix*, 2019)

“I remember back in the day when I’d drive the Tokyo streets at night with the window rolled down, neon lights on buildings, everyone having a good time, the 80s were great. Wait a minute, I’m 18 and live in America” (Anonymous comment, *warm nights in tokyo city pop/ シティポップ*, 2019)

“You remember that time we we’re [sic] working as police detectives in Tokyo during the 80’s, and we were at this little bar in Yokohama chatting up this cute waitress when the yakuza busted in and we had to fight them to this song?” (Anonymous comment, *Mariya Takeuchi Plastic Love 竹内 まりや*, 2019)

“While listening to this I need a leather jacket, a Nissan Skyline GTR, a cigarette, and some sunglasses. Its [sic] sunset in 80s Tokyo and I’m about to rescue my unrequited crush from Yakuza thugs down at the port” (Anonymous comment, *Mariya Takeuchi Plastic Love 竹内 まりや*, 2019)

Winston and Saywood suggest that in this sort of transparently fictional comments, “not only is the nostalgic object acknowledged and cherished for its irretrievability, but for the very fact that it was never experienced in the first place,” resulting in a “complex and apparently contradictory meta-reflection.”⁸⁵ This kind of recursive nostalgia is clear in the above comments. Across the range of the nostalgia genre continuum, several elements recur in these narrative microfictions posted by users:

- Sunsets

85. Winston and Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study,” 47–8.

- Fast cars
- Women, potentially in distress
- Neon
- Science-fiction elements
- “Coolness,” signified by the inclusion of sunglasses or cigarettes
- Time period of 1980s or 1990s
- Eastern culture (particularly Japan)
- Meta-commentary

These strongly align with the imagery associated with chillwave, synthwave, and city pop tracks, although some of this imagery has certainly bled through to the more surreal vaporwave and mallsoft. Several of these could potentially be classified under a broader banner of 1980s clichés, such as neon imagery, fast cars, and sunsets as in much of the cover art for synthwave releases, although sunsets are also associated strongly with chillwave.⁸⁶ Eastern culture as a recurring element is also present in the genres on the nostalgia continuum, although especially strongly in vaporwave and mallsoft. Few chillwave releases, for instance, rely on Eastern culture as part of their imagery.⁸⁷ Meta-commentary on the user’s own comment (such as statements expressing the constructed nature of their microfictions) appears across all these genres but plausibly appears primarily in vaporwave releases. Given the ironic knowingness of vaporwave releases (as in vaporwave’s use of otherwise abandoned cultural tokens), a comment highlighting the inherent absurdity of the comment itself certainly fits the musical approach.

By posting these comments, users knowingly engage in the community creation of “reconstructed nostalgia”; their statements, although brief, tend to tie into the imagery of any associated cover art or the style of the music, further enhancing the sense of a nostalgic community formed around these releases.

CONCLUSION

The imagery of chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave (and its related subgenres) form an interconnected set of images largely inspired by a collective “reconstructed nostalgia” for popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. This “reconstructed nostalgia” is knowingly engaged with by listeners, and forms one of the core components of each of these genres.

In engaging with this music, listeners embrace a collective form of nostalgia for situations that are unlikely to have existed. In this collaborative memory, it is not the real 1980s or 1990s for which listeners are nostalgic, but the plainly fictional form found only in the listeners’ imagination, often taking inspiration from popular culture. By engaging with the imagery of this (either in the cover art of the release or in similar

86. Born and Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave,” 634.

87. For instance, no album art in releases by chillwave performers Washed Out or Toro Y Moi refers to Japan, but Neon Indian’s 2015 album *VEGA INTL. Night School* does.

media), users construct a collective “memory” of times and places that have never (or will never) exist. As in Van der Hoeven’s comment regarding the formation of nostalgia communities, users or listeners have “agency to appropriate this heritage in a personal way.”⁸⁸ Here, listeners have collectively constructed the nostalgia of this music as a form of self-soothing, personalizing their nostalgia for it to the point of unreality, although the similar imagery of these genres on the nostalgia continuum demonstrates a through-line of shared “memories.” Van der Hoeven’s point can be equally applied to the genres on the nostalgia continuum; he argues that “since music fosters a sense of belonging, people form communities with shared heritages or a common past which they nostalgically cherish.”⁸⁹ Here, the common past is reconstructed from shared memories of popular culture imagery.

Chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave each highlight a different form of this reconstructed nostalgia while sharing similar pop culture iconography. While chillwave and synthwave certainly share a predilection for images of Californian sunsets and imagery reminiscent of that of the ‘80s, synthwave tends also to posit impossible scenarios, potentially involving science-fiction themes. Vaporwave likewise follows the tendency for impossible scenarios, although pushed to surreal and bizarre lengths and often involving ironic references to consumerist imagery of the 1990s. Subgenres of vaporwave, such as mallsoft, highlight the links between consumerism and vaporwave, often to an absurd degree, while vaporwave highlights links to Asian culture through the use of samples from Japanese city pop.

All of these are related by the individual listener’s willingness to accept the impossibilities (as well as the elements of truth) in the “reconstructed nostalgia” inherent in this music on the nostalgia genre continuum. This reinterpretation of cultural memory acts not only as a musical element in several of these genres, but also as a key structural feature in understanding how this music is heard by listeners.

Ultimately, the production of this “reconstructed nostalgia” forms a collaborative and collective universe; by accepting the unreality of the memories inherent in these genres, listeners utilize the repeating visual and musical themes of chillwave, synthwave, vaporwave, and their subgenres as a form of escapism through both their own imaginations and online comments. Although the nostalgia that is such a fundamental part of this music on the nostalgia genre continuum may be generated by imagery that the audience never experienced, the soothing and comforting feelings that this engenders are nonetheless wholly legitimate for each listener. ■

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88. Van der Hoeven, “Remembering the Popular music,” 320.

89. *Ibid.*, 320.

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