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REVIEWS

What is visual Vaporwave?
Vaporwave arts and their history and position in China

ZHANG Xiaolong | Xi'ian Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

ABSTRACT

By Vaporwave we refer to a digital-born electronic music genre and a trend in visual aesthetics. It emerged in some US-based online communities in the early 2010s, and now its visual expressions are in vogue in Chinese visual media context. In this article, Vaporwave's aesthetics are discussed through three stages of analysis. In the first part, the paper outlines relevant theories and general features of Vaporwave's (both visual and musical) aesthetics; next, the paper focuses on Vaporwave's visual characteristics, and, to provide a deeper understanding of its visual aesthetics, I discuss a school of painting derived from early twentieth-century Italy—Metaphysical art. In the second part, the article discusses why and how vaporwave aesthetics are inseparable from some Japanese visual characteristics and how it is represented in China, with particular reference to examples of Japanese comics from the 1980s/early 1990s and one popular Chinese video-focused social media TikTok in recent years. In the third part, the article focuses on illustrating Vaporwave's visual features in the Chinese context in recent years, and several examples are provided.

1. Introduction

Since previous research have focused mainly on exploring vaporwave music rather than vaporwave images. Even the characteristics and general features of visual Vaporwave are not well defined and analysed, so one of my aims for this study is to discuss vaporwave images in the first instance. In addition, since Vaporwave is currently known to a large Chinese audience mainly through the platform TikTok (more than 600 million Chinese people use TikTok now), it is important to investigate how Vaporwave visuals represented on TikTok. Thus, in section 1, I will introduce the origin of Vaporwave. After that, vaporwave music and visuals will be analysed in sections 2 and 3, respectively. Of course, the focus of the discussion will be on visual Vaporwave. In sections 4 and 5, I will discuss vaporwave arts and their history and position in China.

Vaporwave is a neologism that is thought to be derived from "vapourware", a term that is used to describe "products that miss their previously announced release date" (Bayus, Jain, and Rao, 2001: 3) or products that are publicly announced or advertised but never reach production (Born and Haworth, 2017; McLeod, 2018). In 1982, when Ann Winblad, president of Open Systems Accounting Software, visited Microsoft and sought to know whether the company was really planning to develop "Xenix" operating systems for her company, and she was told by two engineers of Microsoft (Jhon Ulett and Mark Ursion) that the project was only "vaporware", as it had stopped (Bayus, Jain, and Rao, 2001; McLeod, 2018). Later, Ann Winblad described it as "selling smoke" (Mcleod, 2018: 125). Taking its name from vaporware, Vaporwave "employs a corny depiction of retro imagery to evoke capitalist sleaze, working to expose the emptiness underlying the glossy sheen of late consumer capitalism" (Koc, 2016: 61).

The term "Vaporware" was popularised by the editor of *InfoWorld*, Stewart Alsop in 1985, as he presented Bill Gates with the Golden Vaporware award at the Alexic Hotel in Las Vegas to celebrate Microsoft's release of the first version of the Windows operating system. Although "vaporware" was coined in the 1980s, Vaporwave emerged in the early 2010s, and it refers to a kind of "audio-visual Internet aesthetic characterised by a fascination with retro cultural aesthetics" (Koc, 2016: 61). However, it is worth noting that Vaporwave appeared as music in the first instance. According to Born and Haworth (2017: 634), it first appeared in one anonymous post on the experimental music blog Weedtemple in 2011. Soon after, Vaporwave emerged on the Internet across various formats, including still images, GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format), memes, videos, etc. Therefore, Koc (2016) defined it as audio-visual aesthetics.

In sum, vaporwave aesthetics generally present themselves in two types of presentations: one is the musical form, and the other is the visual form. Due to the popularity of video platforms, vaporwave artists tend to combine these audio-visual contents together into one video; but regardless whether it is in audio or visual form, Vaporwave is usually considered as an "Internet genre", as "it emerged solely on and through digital platforms" (Glitsos, 2018: 103). In the following two sections, I will start with a discussion of vaporwave music; the following discussion will focus on the outgrowth of vaporwave music—vaporwave visuals, because "Vaporwave" first appears as a genre of music; subsequently, vaporwave visuals are derived from vaporwave music.

2. A misty music

The history of "Vaporwave" is not very long. It is widely accepted that Vaporwave first emerged as a genre of electronic music on the Internet in the early 2010s, and several new media platforms and websites like Tumblr, Turntable.FM, Reddit, and 4Chan have been mainly used by vaporwave artists to share their outputs (Born and Haworth, 2017; Killeen, 2018; Whelan and Nowak, 2018;). Also, it is consistently recognised that Macintosh Plus's *Floral Shoppe*,[1] James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual*,[2] and Chuck Person's *Eccojams Vol. 1*,[3] are the three foundational albums in the vaporwave genre, and these albums have been named as the "big three" (Glitsos, 2018; Whelan and Nowak, 2018). Macintosh Plus's *Floral Shoppe* (2011) in particular generally stands as the prototype of vaporwave music (Glitsos, 2018: 103); one track of this album, リサフランク 420 - 現代のコンピュー (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing), is widely recognised as the defining work of this genre (McLeod, 2018). Although the name of this track is in Japanese, it is based on Diana Ross's *It's Your Move*, an English-language song.

In general, vaporwave music is not original music, as it is created by using pre-existent music. York (2020: 105) directly points out that vaporwave music "is far from original: it does not use samples in a clever or innovative way, it just rips the original music and slows it down". More specifically, vaporwave music generally takes extensive samples from "elevator music" of the 1980s/early 1990s, including mellow adult-contemporary pop music, smooth jazz, MoR (morendo music; dying away in tone and time), easy listening, ringtones, Tv advertising soundtracks,[4] and so on (Born and Haworth 2017; McLeod 2018; Whelan and Nowak 2018). The structure of vaporwave is usually short and repetitive (Glitsos, 2018). Having recycled the crude samples of

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[1] *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus (Ramona Andra Xavier, an American artist, she also creates under the pseudonyms of Vektroid, New Dreams Ltd, PrismCorp, Virtual Enterprises, Laserdisc Visions and 情報デスク VIRTUAL), and this album was released in 2011.

[2] *Far Side Virtual* by James Ferraro, this album was released in 2011.

[3] *Eccojams Vol. 1* was released in 2010 by Chuck Person (Daniel Lopatin, he also goes by Oneohtrix Point Never).

[4] Elevator music refers to popular songs that often played in the elevator and in retail stores; this term was first used in 1963. "Elevator music." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elevator%20music (Accessed 21 Aug. 2021). The advertising soundtracks particularly refer to "those for consumer electronics, luxury hotels, and other icons of consumer capitalism" (Born and Haworth 2018, p. 636).

music that dates from the 1980s/early 1990s, these samples are orchestrated by blending, slowing down (sitting around 60-90 BPM),[5] reverbing, looping, and adding noise, which aims to make the music enigmatic, nostalgic, "stretched out" and lo-fi, and then to give the audience a sense of detachment from the real world.[6]

Vaporwave is generally capable of provoking and evoking the memory of the 1980s/early 1990s because of its heavy use of music samples that date from that time. This capability of triggering a strong surge of nostalgia for the days of the 1980s/early 1990s is more explicitly and obviously manifested through its visuals (this issue will be discussed in the section 3). Glitsos (2018: 100) therefore treats Vaporwave as a kind of project that "produces, and takes pleasure in, a kind of 'memory play'"; Born and Haworth (2017: 633) directly indicates that "Vaporwave is the most 'current' of the nostalgia genres". However, Vaporwave cannot be simply read as "retro aesthetic" because the recycled or borrowed historic music samples are produced by cutting-edge digital systems; it embraces the Internet as its medium; its circulation is net-based (Gliitsos, 2018; Born and Hawaorth, 2018). As a result, Vaporwave "both constructs and represents the anxieties in digital communities that emerge from tensions between memory and amnesia" (Glitsos, 2018: 106).

On the other hand, drawing on Trainer's (2016) and Healy's (2006) discussions on memory and nostalgia, Glitsos (2018) indicates that Vaporwave creates a tension between memory and forgetting in the listening experience, as the aroused memory during the listening, in fact, may never happen, or it happened but has been imperceptibly forgotten or discarded in terms of one's memory. This is because, in the age of media oversaturation, the "mass-marketed" memory we consume is generally an "imagined memory" that can be rapidly replaced by another one. Hence, it can be more easily forgotten than lived memories. Drawing from "vaporware", Vaporwave is a mockery of capitalism's windbaggary, which "plays with the idea of nostalgia for something that never happened" (Glitsos, 2018: 104). Hence, Vaporwave discursively mixes (or remixes) and repurposes pre-existent music to "construct a phantasmal and liminal *remembering experience* in which memory both happens and does not happen"

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[5] BPM is an abbreviation of Beats Per Minute.
[6] Here is a free link for Macintosh Plus's *Floral Shoppe*: https://youtu.be/cCq0P5O9UL4?t=207.

(Glitsos, 2018: 106); the contradictions between "happen" and "unhappen" and old and new in Vaporwave, in effect, empower Vaporwave to create a kind of surreal auditory and visual feeling that pass through the boundaries between the past, the present, and the future (Glitsos, 2018: 114).

3. Vaporwave visuals

General features of vaporwave visuals

Vaporwave's "retro aesthetic" (Reynolds, 2011: 349) is more directly and vividly apparent in vaporwave visuals. Visual Vaporwave is derived from musical Vaporwave, so the general aesthetic features of visual Vaporwave conform to the aesthetics of vaporwave music, which, to recapitulate briefly, are lo-fi, fuzzy, distorted or "glitched", both old and new, both familiar and odd, etc., and more importantly, like vaporwave music, visual Vaporwave is a created based upon pre-existent artefacts. However, for both vaporwave music and visuals, critics and the audience hold different views regarding them.

First, the title of vaporwave outputs, on the Internet, is usually typed in full-width Unicode text or with full-width capital letters (McLeod, 2018; Killeen, 2018). In doing so, the audience has to read the "partitioned" word letter for letter; therefore, the "fractured" and elongated visual effects of the text are in line with Vaporwave's audio expressions, whose "glitched" and slowed down samples produce a lo-fi and muzzy quality that feels as if it is not from the real world.

Vaporwave visuals are often comprised of collages with low-resolution images, including images of 1980s commodities (like the Nintendo Entertainment System, Video Home System, Sony Walkman, soda cans, etc.), dated 8-bit computer graphics, Greco-Roman sculpture busts, checkboard patterns, geometric patterns, Japanese characters (Koc, 2016; Mcleod, 2018; York, 2020; Glitsos, 2018), as well as "isolated Japanese cityscapes, idealised images from popular Japanese culture—invariably in neon colours" (Born and Haworth, 2017: 636). With equal significance, the visual aesthetics of Vaporwave frequently and heavily rely on pastel colours (predominantly pink). Figure 1 shows the album cover of *Floral Shoppe*: the colour tone of this picture is pink, which is the key to set a kind of magic, fantastic and chic mood; moreover, the pastel lime green of the title, the fluorescent purple reflected by the sea surface and the

orange of the sunset, all have the same effect in the image of creating a fantastic and dream-like atmosphere.

Fig. 1. *Album cover of Macintosh Plus album, Floral Shoppe (2015).* **Source:**
https://warosu.org/fa/thread/6308267 - Fair use,
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=56767115

In addition to the heavily used pastel pink, the most salient object in Figure 1 is the image of a marble portrait of Helios, the ancient Greek sun god, set on a pink-and-black checkboard pattern. In contrast to the Greco-Roman statue, the title of this album is written in Japanese characters (*katakana*, *hiragana*, and *kanji*), which represents Japanese culture. Previous research (Bartal, 2013; Seaton, 2001) has found that in the case of Japanese advertising design, the use of Japanese characters (except for *rōmaji*) often represents a sense of tradition, and the image of Helios is even truer of symbolisation of traditional fine arts culture; however, an image of a contemporary metropolis is placed on the right side of this figure. In line with vaporwave music, therefore, this juxtaposition of a contemporary city with an ancient bust creates an anachronisticit construction of "old and new". It is also a collision of tradition and modernity. It is, by its very nature, a paradoxical genre that "generally disavows capitalism and consumerism" (McLeod, 2018: 128). Like one article from the magazine *Tharunka* says,

> Vaporwave [...] seeks to investigate capitalism "from within" instead of challenging it "from without." By sampling, mixing, chopping, and mashing heavily commercial

music and sounds from the 80s and 90s, Vaporwave questions the promise and idealism of that era. It was 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. The disappointment of many at the hands of neoliberal economics, in combination with our clear failure to achieve the promised techno-utopia, gives rise to the resistance within Vaporwave (Mangos 24 August 2017).

Similar opinions are also given by many other critics. For example, Grafton Tanner indicates that "the majority of vaporwave albums can be read as indictments of life under the sign of consumption" (Tanner, 2016: 44), as the sonic and visual representations and distortions in vaporwave are the aesthetics of parody and dissent that criticise the logic of capitalism (Killeen, 2018: 630); these aesthetics aptly demonstrate the dissatisfaction with both the political failure and the utopian dreams of 1980s' corporate capitalism (McLeod, 2018: 138), and this may also reflect why Vaporwave emerged in the early 2010s, just a few years after the 2008 global financial crisis. Therefore, Vaporwave is often described as a critique of contemporary capitalism or an exponent of dystopia. As Koc says,

> vaporwave reproduces a melancholy affect through an aesthetic representation of the depthlessness, waning of affect, new technologies, pastiche, and collapse of high/low categories into consumer culture … Vaporwave aesthetics can thus be understood as creating a cognitive map of the bleak affective space of late capitalism, inviting viewers and listeners to step inside of it and critique it from within (Koc, 2016: 40-1).

However, Nowak and Whelan comment that it would be simplistic to view Vaporwave as a critique of contemporary capitalism; if it is,

> it is the kind of critique which also undermines, or, in the interpretive idiom these writers often espouse, accelerates, the moment of critical insight by pre-emptively turning it against itself. Vaporwave is given the cake and gets to eat it too, insofar as it seems to have something to say about capitalism, but what it says could not be said without the commercial music it repurposes or the networked platform cultures that gave rise to and sustain it (Nowak and Wheland 2018, p. 457).

Recently, McLeod (2018: 128-9) has found evidence that vaporwave seemingly falls into the embrace of capitalism, as some leading vaporwave artists sell their works

online, from albums to related products like T-shirts and hoodies that feature the album cover of *Floral Shoppe*, for example.

Although the success of Vaporwave's audio and visual messages increases its own popularity, media exposure, and Internet fame and then it is passively or actively associated with consumption in some respects, its original intentions are more likely to be related to the critique of capitalism. For example, the work of most vaporwave artists is released under various offbeat company names such as New Dreams Ltd., Virtual Information Desk, PrismCorp Virtual Enterprises, and Laserdisc Visions (McLeod, 2018). The use of a language of empty business names and the heavy use of pseudonyms makes vaporwave or vaporwave artists akin to one of the most famous hacking groups— Anonymous, and very interestingly, 4Channnel.org (4Chan) was one of the most important platforms for both Vaporwave and Anonymous in their very beginning stages. The "anonymous" phenomenon constructed by vaporwave creates an aura of worldwide ambiguity and mystery, as it evokes "a dystopic and vaporous, if not vapid, techno-corporate world" (McLeod, 2018: 127), or in short, it evokes "vaporware".

More significantly, Vaporwave is a critique of capitalism, but clearly not limited to it. Vaporwave's nostalgic contents or themes indeed mock the previously mentioned concept of "vaporware". But it is not only a critique of the failure of capitalism, it is also a critique of the rapid expansions of capitalism in the 2000s/2010s, or, for the major fans of Vaporwave (predominantly, the generation who is born after 80s/90s), a deep reminiscence for the lost 1980s, in which the culture and consumer exotica they once dreamed of and desired to have become obsolete or faded before they could embrace or achieve them (Zhao, 27 September 2019). It is, therefore, a kind of mourning and nostalgia for the lost 1980s/early 1990s. Nostalgia is a sentiment that we can find among all generations; in Svetlana Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia*, the author notes that

> Nostalgia… is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, and dream and everyday life. The moment when we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface (Boym, 2001: xiii)

Thus, in Figure 1, the anachronistic juxtapositions of, for example, the image of Helios with the image of the modern metropolis, certainly breaks the frame itself and brings the

audience to a mysterious world that appears as neither the present nor the past, but it satisfies the nostalgia of the 1980s/early 90s, and people are immersed in the melancholic atmosphere this figure creates. In support, Killeen (2020: 632) also demonstrates that in the early stage of Vaporwave's development, vaporwave artists did not solely treat their work as social critique, "but as a more poetic intervention, one borne of a fascination with the surpluses of intensity transmitted by these outmoded audiovisuals".

Visual aesthetics of vaporwave and Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings

Regardless of the social critique of Vaporwave, nostalgia and melancholy would appear to be the overarching themes in visual Vaporwave (as well as in music). The nostalgic theme can be represented by the vaporwave artist's engagement with visual elements of cultural nostalgia, childhood memory, and dated technologies, but these elements could not ensure the melancholy theme in vaporwave being properly manifested. According to Koc (2016: 64), the effect of melancholy or melancholic nostalgia in Vaporwave is largely created by "an aestheticisation of the feelings of estrangement produced by the salient characteristics of late capitalism". That is to say, in vaporwave visuals, there must be something through which it is possible to reconstruct these nostalgic contents to be "untouchable" or "impalpable", just like Koc (2016: 57) defines as a nostalgic longing for the 1980s' and 1990s' capitalism "that is fleeing further and further into an inaccessible history".

However, in his article, Koc's (2016) text analysis partly fails to explicate what exactly constructs the melancholy in Vaporwave, as he merely believes that the use of visual elements like VHS, Windows 95 operating system, outdated video game consoles can at least reproduce a bleak affective space of 1980s/90s late capitalism.[7] According to Boym (2001: xiii), "fantasises of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future"; in light of this statement, Vaporwave arts are the manifestations of our current longing for the past. However, if there really is a market for these "old" technologies, it is apparent that today's world has no barriers or

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[7] The concept of late capitalism was introduced by Ernest Mandel in his 1972 book *Late Capitalism*. Tratnik (2021, pp. 39-40) remarks that later capitalism was "signified by the establishment of multinational corporations, globalized markets and work, mass consumerism and the fluid flow of capital, which has taken place from the 1960s onwards", and the present globalized market "is still in the phase of late capitalism" (p. 39).

challenges to reproduce these commodities, but why is our society today not flooded with these obsolete products? This is because what we truly yearn for is "a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhymes of our dreams" (Boym, 2001: xiii) rather than the material outmoded commodity. Therefore, for achieving or producing an "untouchable" feeling towards the so-called past, in the context of Vaporwave, a range of discursive visual elements are used to furnish the feeling, as it can create a surreal image. Therefore, the visual elements of outmoded objects in Vaporwave largely convey people's longing for the past. Melancholy at this point may only be manifested through the aesthetic that makes the past "untouchable". In spite of the wide popularity of vaporwave visual styling, it has not been without criticism. Some critics just see it as a kind of "mash-up" art (Glitsos, 2018), and some viewers directly question "is this art?" (Koc, 2016: 64). Is this art? In this article, I will now argue that Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, in particular, his work *Canto d'amore* ('Song of Love', 1914), may have the explanatory power for this issue.

Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) was an Italian artist. In 1915, he met Carlo Carrà (a former Futurist artist) in the Military Hospital in Ferrara, and they founded the *Pittura Metafisica* school (the school of Metaphysical Painting). Hassall writes that his "place in the canon of twentieth-century art is not only secure, but was indeed pivotal" (2020: 100). Broadly speaking, metaphysical painting refers to building a dream-like image or creating a visionary world of the mind which goes beyond the real physical world. As noted by Brazeau (2019: 20-1), de Chirico's metaphysical paintings are usually pastiched by unconnected/loose and mutually bizarre objects. Hence, it can be seen from this perspective that the visual aesthetics of Vaporwave are quite similar to de Chirico's metaphysical aesthetics, as they both refer to the creation of discursivity and the oneiric world; however, metaphysical painting is not the only genre that applies unsystematic visual elements, similar expressions can also be found in art movements such as Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism. Therefore, what makes Vaporwave and de Chirico's metaphysical painting similar, in effect, is the nostalgic and melancholy themes they both present.

Many of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings are titled with the word— "melancholy" such as *Malinconia di una bella giornata* ('Melancholy of a Beautiful Day', 1913), *Mistero e malinconia di una strda* ('Mystery and Melancholy of a Street', 1914), *La malinconia della partenza* ('The Melancholy of Departure', 1916). Giorgio de Chirico's emphasis on

"melancholy" is understandable because when he was very young, his father died; he experienced the First World War (1914-1918), and he was weary of relocating due to the war and his family issues. Therefore, he usually pinned his longing for the "hometown" or childhood memory to his paintings. The dream-like objects or scenes in de Chirico's metaphysical paintings are nothing but his nostalgia for his childhood, a beautiful memory of no return, doomed to live in his mind. De Chirico himself said that "to become truly immortal a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream" (cited in Friedenthal, 1963: 231).

Human beings are physically constrained by time and space, so de Chirico believed that the only way to go back to childhood or the "imagined childhood" is to break the general logic of time and space. Therefore, in his paintings, the viewer can often see that the typical Italian town squares are depicted in a realist style, but these squares are unnaturally empty. This seems to say that "I" have been here, but where are my friends, my family (which also reminds the audience it is a dream. e.g., Figure 2 and Figure 3)? In doing so, a sense of melancholy arises spontaneously in the viewer's mind. Similarly, as noted by Koc (2016) the depiction of a town's emptiness is very common in vaporwave visuals, which aims to produce an "elsewhere" imagery which looks like a faded memory, consequently giving the audience a feeling of desolateness and melancholy (for example, Figure 4).

Fig. 2. *Piazza d'Italia ('Italian Square'),* Giorgio de Chirico (1913). **Source:**
https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-de-chirico/piazza-d-italia-191

Fig. 3. *Malinconia di una bella giornata ('Melancholy of a Beautiful Day'),* Giorgio de Chirico
(1913). **Source:** http://www.psicoattivo.com/meditazione-vipassana-mindfulness-e-
dipendenze/de-chirico-melanconia-bella-giornata/

The employment of a range of discursive objects is manifested more explicitly in
another painting by de Chirico, *Canto d'amore* ('Song of Love', 1914); the alien and
impenetrable feeling this work (see figure 5) engenders is more alike to Vaporwave's

visual aesthetics. It can be seen from the comparison of Figures 1 and 5 that, at the forefront of these two images on their left sides sit the bust of Helios; in contrast to this ancient cultural element, "modern" cultural elements are placed on the right sides of the two figures: in Figure 1, there is an image of a large city; in Figure 5, there are a rubber glove and a green sphere or ball. In Figures 1 and 5, these irrelevant objects have been brought together in strange juxtapositions, and then these artists broke the frames and achieved their goals of going back to the past, but an untouchable past; as a result, the melancholy is manifested. Furthermore, in de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, the artist usually blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal by breaking the laws of the scientific linear perspective of architectonic elements. Brazeau (2019: 26) calls this "paradoxical perspectives". In vaporwave visuals, artists generally use low-resolution, "glitched" images, oversaturated/boosted colours to build a phantasmal and dream-like world. This use of colour is also common in the cinema, for instance, in Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *L'ours* (*The Bear*, 1988). After eating the poisonous (or hallucinogenic) mushroom, the little bear looks like it is drunk and hallucinates, for which the director uses iridescent colours to depict the little bear's affected vision.
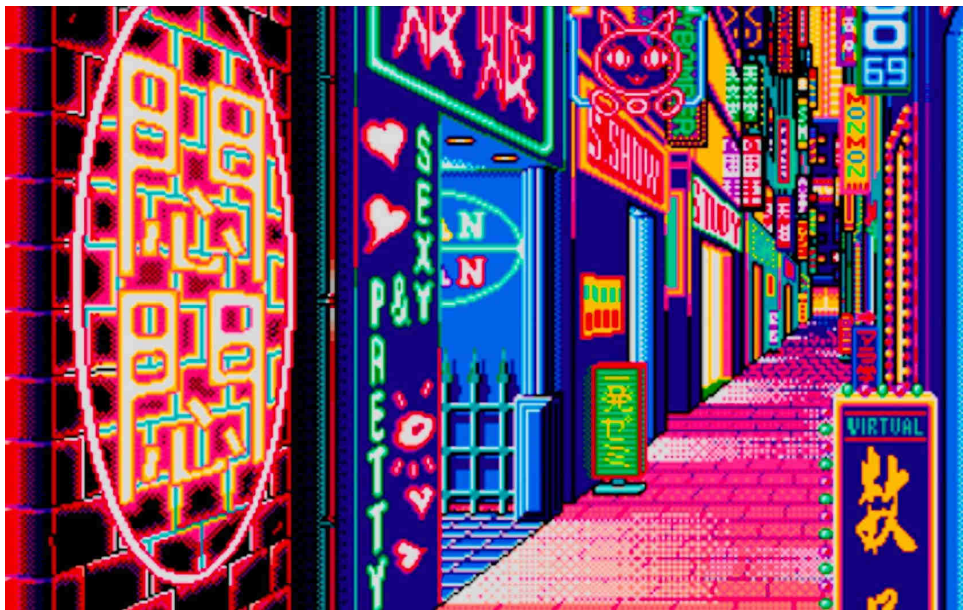
Fig. 4. *The Empty City (a screenshot from Zhong Hua Wan Jia's video, 9 March, 2017, Bilibili).*
Source: https://www.bilibili.com/video/av9052895/

Fig. 5. *Canto d'amore ('Song of Love'),* Giorgio de Chirico (1914). **Source:**
https://campeyblog.wordpress.com/2018/03/28/canto-damore-di-giorgio-de-chirico/

From my discussion on vaporwave visuals and general features of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, it may be safe to conclude that the visual aesthetics of Vaporwave seek to bring the audience back to the glory days of the 1980s (predominantly) that the audience once experienced or never experienced (only imagined) by combing miscellaneous and ambivalent elements in one single image. This kind of practice not only makes the past "unapproachable" but also functions as a lampoon that satirises the promise of late capitalism that still remains forever out of reach because it plays with the idea of a peculiar nostalgia "for something that never happened" (Glitsos, 2018: 104).

For some viewers, Vaporwave is the "antidote" to their nostalgia, or more thoughtfully, a social critique to the failure of a utopian economic future that once promised by 1980s' capitalism; but for some others, Vaporwave is just a collage art, "mash-up" art, and kitsch art, and some Internet users even use words like "garbage" to comment it. For example, on one of the most popular Chinese question-and-answer websites Zhihu , an Internet user named "Aniima" commented that "it is too disgusting,

I cannot accept it" (own translation).[8] Besides these two groups, some viewers merely see it as a liberating, trendy, cool, and avant-garde art, and an art, by its nature of pastiche and collage, which enables ordinary net citizens to easily create their own Vaporwave. Thus, just like many other art trends, the interpretation of Vaporwave is up to its audience. Nonetheless, these commentaries (critical or not critical) that Vaporwave is receiving now make it different from most other Internet art genres, which tend to have a shorter lifespan; Vaporwave, however, has been around for many years (Nowak and Whelan, 2018: 451), and now it greatly thrives in China in a commercialised manner. Thus, in the following sections, I will look at Vaporwave in China and find out how it has been commercialised.

4. Japanese cartoon culture in visual Vaporwave of China

As has already been discussed, Vaporwave is a totally net-based genre; but in fact, it was mainly established on some US-based websites and new media platforms such as 4Chan.org, Tumblr, and Reddit.com in the early 2010s. [9] At the outset of its development, it absorbed many features of other electronic music genres like Synthwave and Chillwave (McLeod, 2018), which take inspiration from American science-fiction films. In its early stages, Vaporwave had already applied Japanese characters as well, the main goal being to "depict a globalised future that is alien and impenetrable to its presupposed demographic of white Western viewers" (Koc, 2016: 65). But in China, the popularity that Vaporwave has achieved, to a great extent, is due to the Chinese audience's affection for Japanese culture and anime. For example, some famous Chinese vaporwave artists use Japanese-style pseudonyms (more specifically, names of Chinese-Japanese translation and most of them are meaningless) such as 幸子小姐拜托了 (literally, "Please，Sachiko san"), 小町幸子 ("Sachiko Komachi"), and 葛-城-美-里 ("Katsuragi Misato", this name referring to the character in the anime series *Shinseiki Evangelion*). These artists' works are also generally titled with Japanese

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[8] Retrieved from https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/29361771 on 23 July 2021.
[9] 4Chan.org is set up in the USA, a simple image-based digital community where the Internet user can anonymously post and share images; Tumblr is established in the USA, and now it is one of the most popular blogs in the world, and its main users are youths; Reddit is a website that focuses on what is hot, new, or popular on the Internet, and this website provides the user the "vote" function to help decide what is popular.

characters, and the content (audio or visual) draws extensively from Japanese comics and animations from the 1980s and early 1990s.

For some other notable Chinese vaporwave artists like Dr. Wu[10] and Believer,[11] although their aliases are composed of Latin letters, their creations are also mainly based upon the heavy use of materials of manga and anime (e.g., drawing from *Cowboy Bebop, Bishōjo senshi Sailor Moon Sailor moon, Cat's Eye, Yōju Toshi/Supernatural Beast City,* aforementioned *Shinseiki Evangelion, City Hunter*). As the aforementioned leading vaporwave artists primarily publish their work through Chinese online video platforms (like bilibili and TikTok), the main media form of visual Vaporwave is the video; still images, illustrations, and memes are, currently, relatively rare in the Chinese digital community.

Visual Vaporwave occurred as a complex mixture of the Occident-Japanese style long before Vaporwave entered China. Visual Vaporwave evokes Europe and America because visual elements like the image of Helios, palm trees in United Sates' West Coast, Fiji water bottles, and English letters are common in vaporwave visuals; it evokes Japan because it represents Japanese text and imagery like Sony Walkman, dated Nintendo colour TV games, the 1991 Toyota Camry, and shimmering neon lights of Tokyo's nightlife. Although Japan-inspired visual elements are an important component of early vaporwave visuals (or early Vaporwave outside of mainland China), they differ greatly from the entirely "Japanised" vaporwave visuals in present China. For instance, in many Chinese artists' vaporwave videos, one important visual element of Vaporwave, the statue of Helios, has never been used; they just montage pre-existent Japanese animations. This phenomenon may be due in large part to the huge influence of Japanese TV animation on the Chinese mediascape in the 1980s and early 1990s (Chen and Teng, 2006). Moreover, Japan's newer cultural-diplomatic strategies since

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10 Dr. Wu's TikTok archive:
 https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAA7uZoKLuM7ji-
 B3GQiyU6ST45uLp9jsPTmlWzGVU49Ac?enter_method=video_title&author_id=65465864045&group
 _id=6963554398244982016&log_pb=%7B%22impr_id%22%3A%22021624718243314fdbddc0100
 fff0030ac2d10e00000048e29b8a%22%7D&enter_from=video_detail
11 Believer's TikTok archive:
 https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAAvkcbFjFwr3vexB20t0N9Rjv39oFph_gWPXWRaulJk
 m0?enter_method=video_title&author_id=94787312967&group_id=6821771537511648519&log_pb
 =%7B%22impr_id%22%3A%22021624719663593fdbd400a040000000a70522e000001f76d9b36
 %22%7D&enter_from=video_detail

the 2010s (such as "Cool Japan"[12] and "Menmeiz pop-up"),[13] to a lesser extent, have a certain influence too.

As previously shown, the main theme of vaporwave aesthetics is nostalgia or, more precisely, melancholic nostalgia. The emergence of Chinese vaporwave artists as well reflects their longing for their childhood; it was a time that was brimming over with Japanese comic and anime. The 1980s and early 1990s can be described as a "honeymoon period" for China-Japan relations. According to Chen and Teng (2006: 78), Chinese state television introduced a number of Japanese TV animations during that period (more than 50 different TV animation series), and the main audience was 3–12 years old children. Today, these former children form the biggest part of Vaporwave's fans in China, and some of them have become vaporwave artists; for example, the pioneer and leader in the field of Chinese Vaporwave, 银河骑士李老板 (or 李老闆, which can be roughly translated as "Galaxy Knight Boss Lee" in English), is the generation of people born in the 80s. This artist is recognised as the first people who introduced vaporwave music into China; afterwards, with the popularity of TikTok, a short video social media platform, Vaporwave (both visuals and music) became known to a wider public in China via the video format.

Japanese TV animations, had been dominating the Chinese mediascape since the early 1990s; but its rapid development was ended by the arrival of the China Broadcast Bureau's ban on foreign animation in 2006 (Wang, Li, and Chen, 2018),[14] which aimed, officially, to protect Chinese local animation industries, as the foreign animation's dominance allegedly threatened Chinese relevant industries. Among these foreign animations, Japanese animation could be the greatest "threat"; for instance, in 2004, among the top 15 national longest-broadcasting TV animations in the Chinese market,

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[12] Tamaki remarks that "'Cool Japan' is an instance of Japanese government's nation branding exercise as part of its soft power projection in which the unique selling point is identified as Japanese national identity" (p. 108).

[13] Menmeiz Movement: "Menmeiz" is derived from a Chinese Internet slang which means "kawaii girl"; "The Menmeiz pop-up is planned to be the first in a cross-country series aiming to bridge the divide between Japan and its neighbouring countries through the soft power of kawaii, retro-infused art" (Lee, 12 July 2019). The head of the "menmeiz" project, Saho Maeta, indicates that the project aims to aims to disseminate the "transnational kawaii" culture. Retrieved from: https://tokion.jp/en/2021/03/27/menmeiz-leading-the-kawaii-culture/ (Accessed on 15 October 2021).

[14] This ban is on all foreign animations in the Chinese market.

there were 11 Japanese animations, accounting for 73% of the total (Wang, Li, and Chen, 2018: 89).

Nevertheless, the 2006 foreign animation restriction of the Chinese government did not dampen the passion for Japanese animation of these "amine natives" at all. For example, from 2014 to 2015, "online anime distribution rights to China increased by 78.7%": this shows a high demand for Japanese animation among young Chinese audiences (Pellitteri, 2018: 469). Thus, thereafter, Chinese fans of Japanese animation have gradually shifted from television to the Internet. However, online video viewing does not seem to bring an equivalent happiness to that which these anime natives once achieved from watching animations on television sets when they were kids.[15] This may be due to that they are today grown-up and mature, so for them now, those manga are not that attractive any longer, or in the age of informational oversaturation, manga works have become easily accessible in China today, so they seem to be no longer that precious. But visual aesthetics of Vaporwave have the ability to take them back to the past by imitating the visual effects of the outdated CRT (cathode ray tube) TV as well as its use of various fragmented outdated televised animations.

However, it is notable that Japanese TV animation of the 1980s/1990s is selectively used by Chinese vaporwave artists. As noted by Chen and Teng (2006), in 1980s/1990s, various genres of Japanese TV animation had been imported into China, including *Doraemon, Ikkyū san, Evangelion, Dragon Ball, Saint Seiya* and so on; especially, *Saint Seiya* could be the most popular anime in the 1990s in China. But why have only Japanese TV animations, these "urbanite-story-based", "kawaii-girl-based", and futuristic TV animation stories, been mainly used? Except for the "hybrid images" of mixing features of Japanese imagery and features of Euro-American imagery these animations suggest paradoxical features of Vaporwave's visual aesthetics, which can create a weird and odd but fantastic atmosphere to its target audience. Nonetheless, two other possible factors might explain why these Japanese animations are so ubiquitous in vaporwave visuals of

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[15] In June 2020, Sina Weibo Animation issued the "2020 Weibo Animation White Paper", which shows that the main audience of animation in current China is the post-95s (37.18%) and post-00s (23.85%), while the post-80s (the so-called anime natives) only account for almost 4%. Retrieved from: https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=444 on 15 December 2021.

China but not others: the peculiar image of Japan in the 1980s/early 1990s and the dominance of so-called *kawaii* aesthetics in Japanese pop cultures.

As previously mentioned, Vaporwave is often viewed as an ironic critique of 1980s' capitalism, and its themes are associated with nostalgia and melancholy. Considering these three factors, Japan, to some extent, is often regarded as a "national equivalent of vaporwave" (McLeod 2018, p. 133): from the start, vaporwave aesthetics are inspired by unique images of 1980s Japan (Lee, 12 July 2019). This is because Japan's economic glory from the 1980s to the early 1990s and the following story of its "lost decade",[16] is a vivid example of "vaporware". Of course, this also ties with the effect of Japan's national image, in particular, the image of Tokyo (or other economically and technologically developed areas in Japan) all over the world, as many non-Asian people see "Japan as populated by robotic salaryman workers and obsessed with technology and consumerism" (McLeod 2018, p. 133). Hence, in this case, "urbanite-story-based" Japanese animation is pertinent to the core of vaporwave aesthetics that criticises capitalism and consumerism.

However, one Mcleod's (2018) argument may not be correct. In his reading, the author attempted to relate Vaporwave with what David Morley and Kevin Robins termed "Techno-Orientalism" for revealing why Vaporwave is inherently linked with Japan, as this so-called Japanese Techno-Orientalism assumed and suggested that if the technology is our future, then Japan is our future (Morley and Robins 1995, pp. 168–9). The concept of "Orientalism" was popularised by Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1979), in which he "unpacks the Orient as 'almost' a place of European invention. […] the Orient becomes a site ironically inhabited by the dominant West's most persuasive yet passive cultural contestants" (Kushigian, 2021: 95). Hence, "Orientalism" is inherently biased by the European perspective. Therefore, to Western societies, this "Japanised" future existed as "the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power" in the framework of Techo-Orientalism. This figure has been exemplified by many Euro-American cultural products such as William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) and Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982, McLeod, 2018: 134). Hence, for

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[16] For more detail, please see Fletcher and Von Staden (2013).

McLeod (2018), Techno-Orientalist stereotypes in Vaporwave critique the utopian images of capitalism's developments.

Techno-Orientalism within the political and cultural discourse of most Euro-American scholarship is usually a criticism of capitalism, but what it is actually criticised is the idiosyncrasy of anti-humanity in capitalism and technicism (or technolatry); this kind of critique often appears in Cyberpunk artistic output, as it aims to create a mood that everything is amazing, and nobody is happy (Brown, 2010; Martin, 2015; Lai, 2019). For instance, Figure 6 is a frame from Rupert Sanders' cyberpunk film *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017).[17] The whole frame is driven by a dark and cool tone, and although this picture is full of high buildings, the audience cannot see any human beings on the streets, this represents the heartlessness of capitalism. Therefore, at this point, McLeod's (2018) ideal seems to enter a mistaken position, because Vaporwave is a sardonic critique of the lost promise of 1980s capitalism rather than a critique of a dehumanised picture of capitalism and technicism. At a more basic level, through comparing the use of colour between cyberpunk visuals and vaporwave visuals (Figure 6 vs. Figure 1), the colour tone of cyberpunk visuals is dark-grey and dull, whereas vaporwave visuals are prone to use oversaturated-garish colours, this shows the different purposes of their respective visual aesthetics.
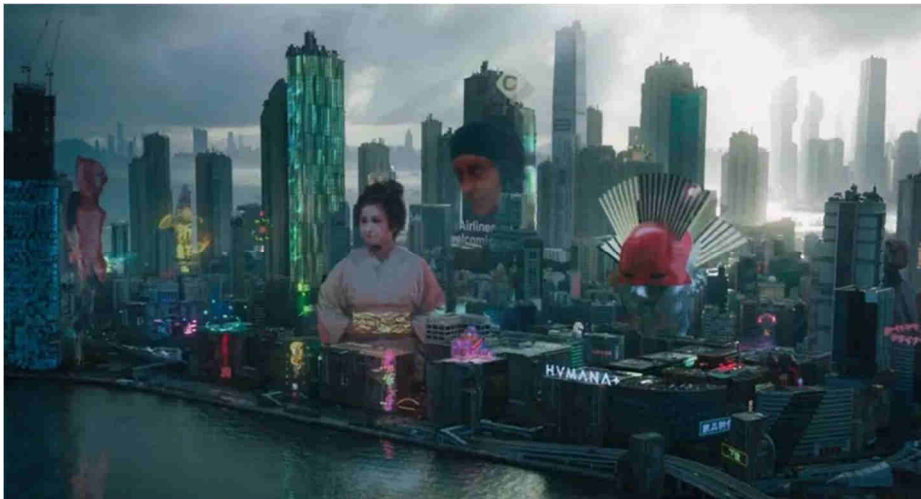

Fig. 6. *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017)**.**

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[17] This film was adopted from Shiro Masamune's comic of the same title.

Japan, during its glittering period from the 1980s to the early 1990s, provided and premised its domestic and overseas consumers with numerous media commodities; most people had never thought that this country would experience such a great fall (Okazaki and Mueller, 2011; Bell and McNeill, 1999) in its peak. The financial bubble's burst in Japan brought not only Japan itself into a prolonged recession but also let the consumer market down. In Lee's (12 July 2019) interview with F*Kaori (a leading Japanese pop-art illustrator), the artist says that the nostalgia of 1980s Japan at play in Vaporwave reflects artists' strong desires for tracking back to the past, a glamorous and fairy tale-like past, and the answer for this phenomenon is quite simple— "Because reality is painful", F*Kaori says, so this also reflects a kind of escapism in vaporwave aesthetics. Thus, "urbanite-story-based" Japanese TV animation from the 1980s/early 1990s, by its nature, obviously feeds people's desire for a fantasised past—a place where they can temporarily escape from the troubles of the present.

In addition, this "escapism" in Vaporwave is also fulfilled by the visual pleasure of *kawaii* culture (predominantly, *kawaii* female characters in Japanese animation). First, as noted by Kinsella's (1995: 224), from the outset *kawaii* objects were used by Japanese youths to erase and blur the wartime period; this may be due to the fact that the concept of "*kawaii*" often stands for a "good side" of our world, and "This choice can be perceived as a form of distraction from reality", as Bîrlea (2021: 56) notes; in support, building upon Eiji Ōtsuka's work (*Shōjo Minzokugaku*, 1997), Pellitteri (2018: 9) argues that the emergence of *kawaii*-stylised cartoon characters (*kyara*) after the 1970s like Alare and Hello Kitty represents "Japanese's desire to leave the war behind and fully plunge into the postmodernity". Second, the pop culture in 1980s Japan, was dominated by *kawaii* aesthetics (Kinsella, 1995: 220); also, "*kawaii*" is highly related to the genre of teenage girls' visuals (Pellitteri, 2018; Yiu and Chan, 2013). Therefore, when Chinese vaporwave artists utilise the aesthetics of these aforementioned Japanese TV animations, the image of *kawaii* girls, naturally, becomes the main subject of Chinese visual vaporwave, especially when it functions as a visual pleasure which helps the audience of Vaporwave to escape from their tough reality.

5. Visual Vaporwave in China: Its story with Chinese capital giants

In This article previously indicated that Vaporwave emerged as social critique of capitalism in the early 2010s on the Internet. However, the case in China is quite

different, as Vaporwave and vaporwave aesthetics (mainly visual) have been highly utilised by capitalism both online and offline (predominantly, online). In the following section, I will merely focus on discussion of vaporwave visuals in China.

On the Internet, the present Chinese social media giant, TikTok, can be seen as a vaporwave-aestheticised social media platform, because its logo heavily uses visual aesthetics of Vaporwave, which may be seen as an indicator that Vaporwave is popular in China. Meanwhile, other mainstream online shopping platforms in China like Taobao and JD also embody visual aesthetics of Vaporwave in their online advertising to attract the Chinese young and not-so-very young consumers in China; some Chinese pop musicians apply visual vaporwave aesthetics in their MVs (music videos) for improving the creativity of their videos; vaporwave live concerts have been organised by Chinese leading musicians like 传琦 Sama ('Denki Sama') and 银河骑士李老板 ('Galaxy Knight Boss Lee') many times. Most of these activities are commercial, and their billboards and the stages all display vaporwave style. Moreover, visual aesthetics of Vaporwave have been used by various kinds of store operators to embellish or decorate their shops, including restaurants, gyms, pubs, arcades, karaoke parlours, and so on. For instance, there is a vaporwave style pub located in Zhuhai, China.[18] In the light of this, Vaporwave in China seems to be highly associated with the consumerism. Thus, the rise of visual Vaporwave in China clearly no longer adheres to its original purpose—a criticism of capitalism.

Visual Vaporwave has been largely used by Chinese business magnates to attract their consumers and expand their markets, because first, in the new era of digital communication, visuals, in some aspects of communication, are replacing or have already replaced the written text, as they "have imposed themselves as the preferred way of cognition and communication […] Many people feel that images are more natural than text and promise/give quicker access to realities" (Briel, 2018: 6). Although Briel (2018: 6) mentions that the image is usually considered as "a stepping stone, an early stage to deeper knowledge to be acquired from written code", in the case of business (especially, in today's competitive business environment), the visual (image-based appeal) has already proven its higher efficiency in attracting global

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[18] For more details: https://www.sohu.com/a/346152065_147249 (Accessed on 15 December 2021).

customers than written/verbal text (information-based appeal) does (Okazaki, Mueller, and Diehl, 2013).

Additionally, the use of the visual aesthetics of Vaporwave in China is not limited to advertising; vaporwave aesthetics are also used by some Chinese social media platforms to make their UI (user interface) designs like logos, icon, colour use, more visually appealing or to improve the creativity of their platforms' entertainment functions, the filters and effects, for instance. Among these Chinese social media platforms. TikTok (Douyin in Pin'yin, or 抖音 in Chinese written form) could be an exemplary vaporwave-aestheticised social media application. Therefore, in this section, I will discuss Tik Tok as an example to study how Vaporwave has been commercially used by this Chinese social media platform.

As noted by Wang and Wu (2021: 3269), the number of TikTok's daily active users reached 600 million in August 2020. Founded in September 2016, TikTok is a short music video social media platform; it is owned by ByteDance, the second-largest Chinese enterprise in market value today. On this platform, users are encouraged to wildly run their imaginations and set their expressions for free.[19] Therefore, in itself, this platform does not produce content; the content is created by its users (which includes casual users, institutions, brands, and so on). Its business model or revenue model is mainly based on third party advertising, which enables users to consume content for free. Also, once a user has many followers, he/she can make money through this platform as well, but only a tiny group of users can be Internet celebrities. With respect to the background of its emergence, the existence of TikTok suggests that since the advent of video technologies, the most popular form of video in the world is the music video (MV); but it is too difficult for one individual to create a relatively decent MV. Hence, a group of passionate people identified a fresh business opportunity, and they tried to compress various video technologies together into one mobile application (app). Based on previous popular online video platforms in the Chinese domestic and global markets, they created TikTok, a short video platform.

Through this brief introduction of TikTok, we can see that TikTok aims to attract the Internet users with a relatively new socialising means of visuals and music. But how

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[19] For retrieving Tik Tok's website (Douyin): https://www.douyin.com/.

has TikTok been related with Vaporwave? This article now looks into visual creations and representations on Tik Tok in relation to visual Vaporwave. In this regard, people's use of Vaporwave in the virtual world of Tik Tok and their relationship with this app should be seen as what Fung, Emi, and Yan (2015: 483) call "a social relation mechanism". Thus, this may lead us to look at how TikTok uses Vaporwave to attract Chinese Internet users, what messages or agendas these vaporwave visuals express on TikTok, how these visuals are perceived by the audience, how Vaporwave is created and represented on TikTok, and how other Chinese companies get money by using visual aesthetics of Vaporwave.

My discussion in this section of this article will start with the logo of TikTok. Figure 7 is TikTok's welcome screen, which shows this app's name (抖音) and logo. Unlike many other apps' logos that tend to make their logos bright-coloured, high-quality, and clear-figured, TikTok's logo is glitched. The background of this frame is fully black, and the image quality is an imitation of the outdated CRT television set. These design aspects would appear to run counter to the mainstream logo design of mobile apps in the Chinese market; but TikTok's great success in the present Chinese market may suggest that in a largely homogenous market, the user may experience aesthetic fatigue,[20] and they need something new. Vaporwave is a new thing in the Chinese media. As previously illustrated, Vaporwave was introduced to the Chinese market in 2015 by 银河骑士李老板 ('Galaxy Knight Boss Lee'), just one year before the foundation of TikTok in 2016. Also, in one recent article published on a Chinese magazine (*Little Thing 恋物志*) the author also indicates that Vaporwave brings Chinese young people a new art trend in the "tasteless" or "boring" Chinese pop culture market. [21] Therefore, the features of Vaporwave have been used by TikTok to catch the attention of young Chinese Internet users. Particularly in the era of digital-visual oversaturation, the "bizarreness" of Vaporwave makes its visual expressions more outstanding in the Chinese market.

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[20] Li, Cheng, and Xiao (2018, p. 356) notes that when a type of commodity has been largely homogenised in a given market, the consumer is bound to generate aesthetic fatigue.

[21] Retrieved from: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/v6M6qnfHd_nTcg31fggbhQ on July 3, 2021. This magazine was founded by 达摩麦田文化传播 ('Damo Maitian Culture Communication') Co, Ltd. in 2008, and focusing on creativity and aesthetics. It is distributed in both paper form and electronic form, and simultaneously circulates in Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, and Japan.

Fig. 7. The logo of TikTok. **Source:** https://www.sohu.com/a/330267666_120166516

On the other hand, TikTok attracts these Internet users by its powerful videoing functions (like smart digital filters, easy-to-use editing techniques, abundant music resources, quick downloading/uploading speeds, etc.). Many Internet users thus come to this digital community to create and share their videos; of course, many vaporwave artists also come here and seek opportunities to promote Vaporwave and try to turn it from a subculture into a pop culture. For example, according to Zhao (27 September 2019), the online user has created more than 6,500 vaporwave related videos on TikTok, and these videos have been streamed more than 10 million times; vaporwave related music has been used more than 3.5 million times; in particular, the music 嘉禾天橙国际大影院 (this can be translated as 'Jia He Tian Cheng International Cinema'), has been used by other users 290,000 times; one of the most famous vaporwave artists, SUAT 栗砸, has more than 1.3 million followers on TikTok, but on Sina Weibo, an "older" social media platform in China, he only has about 59,000 followers. This evidence may prove that TikTok strongly contributes to the popularity of Vaporwave in China.

The success of Vaporwave brings TikTok with more and more users. To TikTok, these users are traffic, are money, so this app is also constantly developing new filters or visual effects for meeting people's growing demand of Vaporwave. In addition, except for TikTok's profits from people's practices of Vaporwave, some popular vaporwave artists also achieve the fame and economic benefits from TikTok: for instance, Dr.Wu directly advertises himself on his personal page on TikTok. Some popular artists stay true to the original mission of vaporwave by rejecting any advertising campaigns, and just sharing their content with their fans on TikTok; but

this does not negatively influence TikTok's revenues at all, because the audience is here, and the ad investment follows the audience.

As discussed in the previous section, vaporwave visuals meet Chinese audiences with strong Japanese characteristics; hence, to avoid repetition, the following section will pay attention to the audience's reactions. I will use a popular Chinese web crawler (also known as a web spider or web robot; it is a system that can be used to collectinformation on web pages), called 八爪鱼 (Bazhuayu in Pin'yin) to collect the audience's comments from one of the most viewed videos that was posted by the aforementioned artist Believer.[22] Although some other artists like Dr.Wu and SUAT 栗砸 seem to be more popular and notable than Believer, they also post some other genres, like Sythnwave and Chillwave on TikTok. To avoid confusion, Believer's video has been selected. More than 600 comments have been collected from this video,[23] but most of them display text like "@someone" (asking other users to see this video), and only the top 150 comments have actual analysable content. Some of them are in full-width text (which is the *de rigueur* response to the author); some of these collected comments say "love/like it"; some describe "an indefinite mood, but it is great"; some are only interjections like "wow", "holy shit", "awesome", "Geez", etc. In aggregate, negative evaluations are rare, most of which show favoured attitudes towards Vaporwave, but none of the collected comments point out that Vaporwave embeds a social critique; all these viewers seem to be immersed in the fantastic world the video creates. This may also reflect that most of them are not vaporwave connoisseurs.

Undoubtedly, the consumer's comment plays an important role in the field of business. It can improve a brand's products, speed up its product development, and even direct the production of new products (Kusawat and Teerakapibal, 2021), so TikTok will collect these comments for improving its performance, and other Internet companies come to TikTok to collect them as well, as these messages reflect the latest trend in a

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[22] https://www.bazhuayu.com/download/windows
[23] The link of this video:
  https://www.douyin.com/video/6821771537511648519?previous_page=search_result&extra_params=%7B%22search_id%22%3A%22202107040457210102121640353B85E1D9%22%2C%22search_result_id%22%3A%226821771537511648519%22%2C%22search_type%22%3A%22video%22%2C%22search_keyword%22%3A%22%E8%92%B8%E6%B1%BD%E6%B3%A2%22%7D
  (Retrieved on 3 July 2021).

given society. For instance, since TikTok was established in September 2016, Taobao (owned by Alibaba), the biggest e-commerce platform in China, launched a vaporwave-related business activity (a fashion week) in the summer of 2017. Figure 8 is a poster of this fashion week. The visual aesthetics of Vaporwave are fully apprised in this poster. The irony, however, is that many current products are placed at the bottom of this poster, and now, when you type "蒸汽波 ('Vaporwave')" in the search engine of this platform, you can find tens of thousands of vaporwave-related products. Is this still a Vaporwave? Maybe or maybe not. But Vaporwave in China definitely joined capitalism; it has been "corrupted", so to speak. But it is fully understandable, as current China is, in some respects, like 1980s Japan; with the rapid development of the national economy, the main responsibility of capital is seemingly to expand value; hence, to these Chinese capital giants, there are no things that cannot be utilised to make money.

Pushed by TikTok and other Chinese Internet companies, Vaporwave has arguably achieved the transformation from subculture to mainstream pop culture in the Chinese market, and most of these vaporwave outputs are strongly associated with consumption. In light of the previous discussion, I argue that Vaporwave is destined to lose its current high popularity in the near future in the Chinese market. This is because, on the one hand, Vaporwave's current popularity in China is largely due to the widespread day-to-day use of TikTok; however, as previously illustrated, most of these Chinese TikTok users are not vaporwave connoisseurs. Currently, these people are drawn to Vaporwave because it satisfies their nostalgia and visual/aural curiosity; but as it is only a collage art form, it will eventually become a new kind of aesthetic weariness in China as it is increasingly interlinked with mass consumption and therefore prevalent in our daily life. On the other hand, the debate over what Vaporwave actually means lengthens its lifespan; therefore, it has already died after joining the capitalistic processes. Maybe when China's economic bubble bursts, Vaporwave will emerge again with strong 2020s Chinese characteristics.

Fig. 8. Taobao Fashion Week. **Source:** https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/27001058

6. Conclusion

Building upon previous research and through the comparison of de Chirico's metaphysical paintings and vaporwave visuals, fist, I illustrated the general features of Vaporwave; it plays with the ideal of nostalgia for something that "never took place", which thus satirises the failure of 1980s capitalism; it fulfils people's nostalgia by the anachronistic and paradoxical juxtapositions of Euro-American and Japanese visual imageries, the familiar and unfamiliar objects, and the present and the past; it, therefore, conveys a sense of nostalgic melancholy. Its aesthetics have received both praise and criticism; but the mixed comments it received make it enjoy a relatively long lifespan on the Internet and be wildly spread around the world.

However, Vaporwave in China is another story. With the help of TikTok and thanks to the attractive/addictive nature of the 1980s/1990s Japanese animation, Vaporwave is no longer a subculture in China. From the very beginning, Vaporwave came into Chinese consumers' life as a serendipity; it then had many Chinese followers. But the popularity of Vaporwave in the Chinese market has attracted many investments; it, therefore, has nothing to do with the "melancholy" but "money"; when Vaporwave has been commercialised, it is "vaporised". Nevertheless, there is still a small group of Chinese vaporwave artists who are persisting in highly commercialised environments putting forward the original intention of Vaporwave. Nonetheless, TikTok's remarkable success in China may suggest that the consumer is experiencing aesthetic fatigue in a homogenous media market. Smartly/creatively using the aesthetics of avant-grade art can help the digital media stand out in a crowd.

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