INSAM

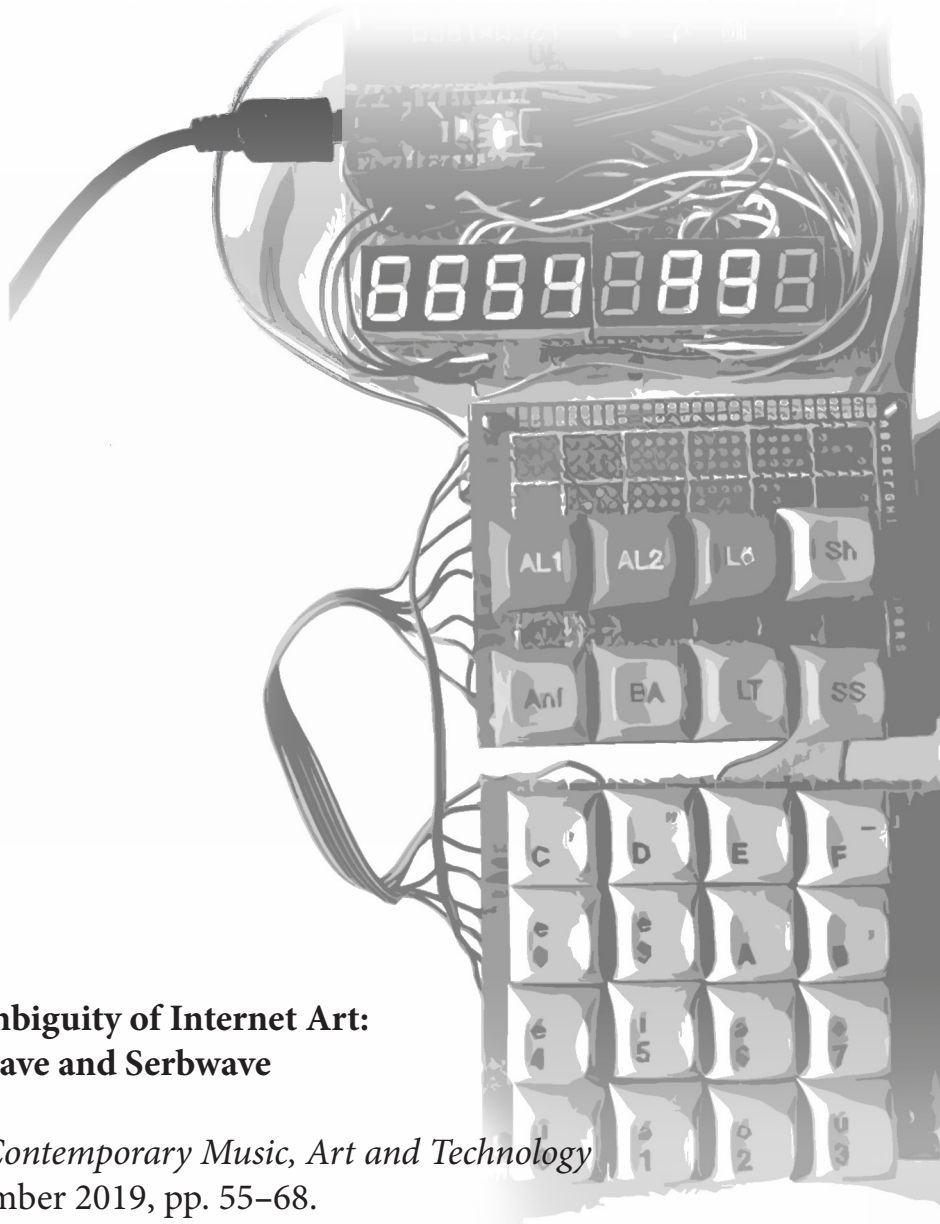## JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY

The Ideological Ambiguity of Internet Art:
Vaporwave, Yugowave and Serbwave
Tisa Jukić

INSAM

Tisa Jukić*
Academy of Arts
Novi Sad, Serbia

THE IDEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY OF INTERNET ART: VAPORWAVE, YUGOWAVE AND SERBWAVE

Abstract: This paper concerns the recent internet-based music genre of yugowave. I first analyze the relation of this genre to its original Western model, vaporwave. Differences between the two, in terms of subject matter, ideology, and aesthetics are discussed, along with the complex question of the memory of the SFRY and Yugonostalgia in yugowave. Introducing serbwave as a relation of yugowave, the encounter in praxis between the in theory politically neutral genre of vaporwave and propaganda is also discussed. Finally, I offer two possible readings of serbwave: either as one of several current neo-nationalistic appropriations of the vaporwave aesthetic, or, possibly, a way of processing cultural trauma caused by the wars of the 1990s.

Keywords: hauntology, cultural memory, cultural trauma, vaporwave, yugowave, serbwave, Yugosphere, Yugonostalgia

Introduction

At the time of writing, a thorough insight into the music genre of yugowave, its production in the contemporary Yugosphere,[1] and the ways it relates to and differs from vaporwave, its primary stylistic model, is yet to be achieved. Even vaporwave has not previously been a subject of much discussion in academic circles, with the exception of several pieces by a few authors (Tanner 2016; Glitsos 2018). Therefore, the majority of sources and references in this article on the subject of vaporwave consist of pieces of music journalism instead of academic works. Amongst them are

---

*Author's contact information: tisa.jukic@gmail.com

1 The term "Yugosphere" is attributed to the British journalist Tim Judah who introduced it in 2009, referring to countries that were once part of Yugoslavia and now, after its break-up, coexist with relatively healthy economic and social bonds, connected by their language group and shared past. I will be using it throughout this article because, in my opinion, it efficiently describes the region in question—in historical, geographical and cultural terms—better than the vague "Western Balkan", "former" or "ex-Yugoslavia", or "South-East Europe" (Judah 2009).

several comprehensive articles and books written by prominent music critics of the past two decades (Reynolds 2010; Harper 2012; Colton 2017).

This paper intends to present an introductory overview of yugowave with a brief analysis of selected works by several artists, and offer some points about how yugowave as a genre relates to the Yugosphere's past and present. I do not take into account all currently existing and working yugowave artists, just a small selection that I believe accurately represents the full scope of the genre, in both content and stylistic terms. Similar to how works of vaporwave weave a tight and intricate web of cultural references, this paper will be reminiscent of a patchwork project as I attempt to showcase how yugowave as a music genre intersects with questions of memory culture, nostalgia studies, trauma studies, the philosophical concept of hauntology, and political theory.

Vaporwave and yugowave: similarities and differences

For a discussion of yugowave's narratives, and its implications and characteristics as a separate genre, it is first necessary to establish all the ways in which it conforms to vaporwave's stylistic profile and adapts its core message, and all the significant ways in which it differs.

It is widely understood that, as an "internet genre", vaporwave has no distinct material origin. Because it appeared simultaneously at the beginning of this decade on various internet platforms such as SoundCloud, Bandcamp, Last.fm, Tumblr, and Reddit, and achieved wider popularity sometime around 2013, it is considered to be "globally ambiguous" (Glitsos 2018, 103, 104). The use of pseudonyms by most of its artists and producers, as well as its clandestine origins (most vaporwave creators work from home and then publish their work online), make vaporwave a genre with an obscure history and non-existent identity, apart from the music itself. But paradoxically, it is a genre that concerns itself directly with ideas of history, memory and nostalgia, of the past, the way we understand it and construct it anew with each passing year. The underlying message of vaporwave, uniformly agreed upon by authors and critics, is a critique of a glorified memory; it is a dissection of the hyper-capitalist society of the 1980s and 90s (Ward 2014), driven by the contemporary perspective of global fatigue created by neo-liberal capitalism. Vaporwave is thus understood to be a subversion and satire of late-capitalist lifestyle, iconography, and ideology. Directing its critique primarily at consumerist lifestyles in the West, vaporwave does not, however, extend its critical gaze to Western politics at that time. For example, figures and events which have marked the last decades of the 20th century in the US, such as presidents Reagan and Bush, the end of the Cold War, or the various military excursions that were conducted, remain largely out of focus. The genre can therefore be described as overtly politically neutral. Vaporwave is instead devoted solely to the recollection and deconstruction of the minutiae of idealized American suburban life, often signified as "mall culture" (Glitsos 2018,

102) before 9/11. To recreate and satirize the soundtrack of corporate lifestyles of the 1980s and 1990s in the USA, vaporwave tracks are usually produced from samples of "peripheral music",[2] which are then transfigured in a number of ways (cut, looped, reverbed, lowered/raised in pitch, slowed down/sped up, layered) to produce a distinct and evocative sound. The signature style of vaporwave is an amalgamation of textures in the slow-tempo range, with an emphasis on the "glitch aesthetic"—deliberately clumsy sampling, "cut-and-paste" editing, unnerving repetition of samples, lowering and distorting of pitch (Tanner 2016, 22)—meant to produce an atmosphere embedded in a sense of nostalgia.[3] Because the web of references vaporwave as a genre relies on is primarily connected to the culture of the US (and, to a lesser extent, Japan), Stefan Colton (2017) recognizes that vaporwave is a music genre made, and best understood, predominantly through the lens of Western cultural memories and identity.

But the world does not universally share memories of the US in the 1980s, nor does it collectively experience nostalgia for that specific time and place. Music critic Simon Reynolds, writing at the beginning of this decade, already understood the future implications of memory play in "plunderphonics", observing the differences between the UK movement of hauntological music and hypnagogical pop in the US (both predecessors of the phenomenon of vaporwave). Reynolds understood that objects of nostalgia, so closely connected to personal memories and cultural notions of childhood, are different for each generation. Therefore, he believed that as the commodification of nostalgia in pop-culture and the art world becomes more prevalent in the second decade of the 21st century, each successive generation in every part of the world would be obliged to produce its own version of vaporwave, giving shape to "... a self-conscious, emotionally ambivalent form of nostalgia that sets in play the ghosts of childhood" (Reynolds 2010, 384). One of the first music genres to match Reynold's prediction is yugowave.

When it comes to the ghosts of childhood...

Yugowave is, in many ways, the complete opposite of vaporwave, even though it is technically descended from it. The most important distinction between the two genres stems from the vastly different socio-economic and political circumstances of the USA and the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the

---

2 Grafton Tanner describes peripheral music as anything pertaining to generic instrumental music meant for workplaces and public spaces, such as music produced by the Muzak company, easy-listening records, smooth jazz, television and radio jingles, middle-of-the road radio, and others (Tanner 2016, 51).

3 Two albums are most often singled out as exemplary works of vaporwave: "Chuck Person's Eccojams vol. 1" (2010) by Daniel Lopatin and "Floral Shoppe" (2011) by Macintosh Plus (pseudonym of producer Ramona Andra Xavier). For anyone seeking to quickly grasp the fundamentals of vaporwave, these works, which effectively communicate the message of the genre as a whole while also being highly accomplished in an artistic and technical sense, should be the first to refer to.

1980s and 90s. Compared to decades of corporate exuberance and suburban bliss in the US, in the SFRY the situation was quite different. The same decades were marked by great political turbulence, national upheaval, the rise of nationalism, devastating war, population displacement and an unprecedented economic crisis.[4] Most importantly, they have witnessed the complete dissolution of a previously fast-developing federate, multinational state, forcing its citizens to grapple with complex questions of national and ethnic identity, not to mention the existential terror of a destroyed home, in both the literal and metaphorical sense.

As a result, it can be argued that yugowave has a much more developed sense of both locality and temporality compared to vaporwave. Consciousness of the passage of time, of "then" and "now", or "before" and "after", while existing in vaporwave as well, is much more prominent in yugowave, a genre dedicated to the memory of the SFRY, a unique socio-political entity which today is no more—in its titles, functions, bodies of government, constitution, visual symbols such as the flag, national organizations and corporations, holidays, social customs, and language. Yugowave is, therefore, consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or not, *always* about specific historical events, and the political and governmental processes that occurred to make the change from the place/time of the SFRY to the place/time of today. This is the first fundamental difference between the two genres. Yugowave is a movement which adapts vaporwave's signature aesthetic (both visual and aural), but the object of its dissection is not, in fact, late 20th century corporate and capitalist Western culture, but rather the memory of "idyllic" life in the SFRY's "coca-cola socialism" (Vučetić 2012), as well as the implicit memory of the idyll's violent dissolution.

Considering the socio-economic, political, and, ultimately, vast cultural differences between the two states in this time period, it follows that Muzak and its kin are not the musical markers of the 1980s and 90s in the SFRY. Having never, in any case, achieved any sort of prevalence in the SFRY, "peripheral music" is not the material yugowave artists choose to repurpose. Instead, a different sort of nowadays-often-mocked genre emerged as the musical debris which yugowave producers rummaged through and from it created their own means of expression. The rubble of late-SFRY culture which yugowave concerns itself with is, in fact, turbo-folk and similarly kitchy, often patriotically intoned yugo-pop. The use of turbo-folk especially, a genre autochthonous to Yugoslavia, creates in yugowave a "musical flavor" highly distinct from that of vaporwave.[5]

4 The socio-political and economic situation of the SFRY at the time has been thoroughly documented, discussed, and theorized by many eminent authors. For a contemporary perspective and succinct overview of the subject matter, I recommend historian Marie-Janine Calic and her History of Yugoslavia (2019).

5 Not unlike Muzak, turbo-folk carries its own set of negative connotations, as "music of the war", or "the rhythm of the Milošević era" (cited in Slavková 2010). Considered a highly disreputable genre today, it represented a union of newly-composed folk music and the beats, textures, and attitudes of pop and rock'n'roll music. It has been adopted by many as the musical signifier not only of the nationalist discourse of the 1990s in Yugoslavia, but also as a tool of political propaganda and manipulation of the masses (see more in Slavková 2010).

The third difference between vaporwave and yugowave can be observed on a technical level. Yugowave corresponds to the highly polished and advanced art of vaporwave sound collage only to a certain degree. There are (1) creators who find it sufficient to simply slow down selected material and filter it through a reverb sound effect (such as the YouTube channel "TheAthelasProject"), (2) creators who work with different samples in order to produce completely new tracks in a style similar to vaporwave (SoundCloud artist SyntheticSnow), and (3) creators who make detailed, fully transformative remixes of pre-existing songs, which change the original's pitch, timbre, mood, instrumentation, and textures (YouTuber Tim Klošar). All of these creators, linked by their subject matter, still share the title of yugowave or "serbwave" (to be further discussed below), even if they do not always fully adhere to all of the signature technical-stylistic markers of vaporwave, such as repetitive sampling, slow tempo, heavy reverb effects, and synthesized textures (Glitsos 2018, 101–2).

Finally, it is important to note that yugowave has not yet, it seems, achieved early maturity. Still in its infancy, this micro-genre is represented by hardly a dozen artists, mainly on SoundCloud and YouTube. A telling sign that yugowave is still in its developmental stages is the fact that, although globally known, the related genres of synthwave, vaporwave, and chillwave all have their own separate (and active) communities on the popular forum website Reddit, while yugowave does not, suggesting it is still in the process of self-definition. I have chosen to discuss within this article three separate case studies within the genre to showcase the differing ideologies that have so far been cultivated in, and articulated through, yugowave: the overtly Yugonostalgic albums of SyntheticSnow, the neo-nationalist-leaning content of TheAthelasProject, and work by a third author, PahaMuumiJumala (the music video "Neon Bombarder"), which represents an oddly successful synthesis of both of these directions.

Between sincerity and sarcasm: SyntheticSnow

Research[6] has shown that in the contemporary Yugosphere, three countries in particular exhibit high levels of Yugonostalgia amongst its population: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia (Kolstø 2014, 768). Interestingly enough, the youngest age group questioned, born exactly after the generation of "last pioneers" (see more in Popović 2017), had only an indirect memory of the SFRY—the question of whether or not they regret the federation's dissolution was answered with an almost uniform split between those who felt a sincere sense of loss and those indifferent to the SFRY's legacy.[7] [8] Much of this attitude informs in great part the poetics of yugowave, which unites the critical edge of vaporwave with somewhat genuine Yugonostalgic sentiment.

A perfect example of this is the work of Sarajevo-based SoundCloud artist SyntheticSnow. Their two albums (*Waves in the Balkans*, 2017; *Eighties in the Nineteens*, 2019) currently represent a small percentage of yugowave artists whose aim is to produce music, on a technical and stylistic level, similar to that of Western vaporwave.[9] SyntheticSnow's work is, thus, centered on creating unique vaporwave soundscapes, with an atmosphere of recollection, nostalgia, and yearning, while drawing on music "native" to the SFRY as inspiration. I have chosen to analyze the fifth number of their second album, which I believe represents the best possible summation of the complete album, as well as one possible ideological profile of yugowave. The work in question is "I Miss Yugoslavia", a track based on Lepa Brena's 1989 song "Jugoslovenka".[10] It is centered around the conflict between two kinds of Yugonostalgia: the first being "an expression of reconstructive longing for an essential Yugoslav past", while the second "relies on a self-consciously ambivalent, politically engaged, and critical frame in indulging fantasies of this past" (Lindstrom

---

6 The research in question refers to the project, "Symbolic Nation-Building in West Balkan States: Intents and Results", funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN), project number 203356.

7 In Serbia, 50% of the people questioned answered positively, the other 50% negatively, on whether or not they regret the SFRY's dissolution (Report: Nation Building – Serbia 2011, 81). The situation in B&H and Montenegro is similarly evenly divided between regret and indifference. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the relation of yes/no is 51/49% (Report: Nation Building – BiH 2011, 122), while in Montenegro it is slightly more tilted 44/56% (Report: Nation Building – Montenegro 2011, 78).

8 For a more recent survey, conducted on a smaller level and focused on the so-called "e-mail generation", which produced similar results, see "Percepcija SFRJ kod mladih u Srbiji", in: Socijalizam i Jugoslavija u različitim kulturama sjećanja: društvo, kultura i nauka (2018).

9 The Western model is evident in the last number of Eighties in the Nineteens, which notably references the Canadian producer Blank Banshee.

10 The symbolism of the figure of Lepa Brena must be mentioned as she is considered to be a major representative of the Yugoslav mainstream culture policy project in the 1980s, writing music that successfully joined newly-composed folk music with popular Western genres such as rock, samba, and tango. Not only that, but her public persona represented the multi-cultural, multi-national "Yugoslavian dream". Today her reputation is as one of the greatest musical legacies and cultural icons of the SFRY (Hofman 2011, 23).

2006, 234).[11] The track mainly plays with looping the original song's naïve refrain, reminiscent of folk-song: "Oči su mi more jadransko, kose su mi klasje panonsko, sretna mi je duša slavenska, ja sam Jugoslovenka". Whenever the titular word "Jugoslovenka" appears, it is skipped over, cut, or reverbed, suggesting that the cherished memory is, in fact, becoming displaced and distorted. It could also, alternately, underline the contemporary falsehood of the flowery refrain's sentiment. The continuous repetition of the phrase, voice noticeably lowered in pitch, with a completely disfigured synth keyboard accompaniment and frequent insertions of comic sound effects, all further play into the distortion of the original fervently patriotic message, slightly mocking its legacy today. The direct, emotional sincerity of the simple title, "I Miss Yugoslavia", contrasted with the way Lepa Brena's song is treated, shows the ambivalence of its creator regarding restorative and reflective nostalgia, which is, as mentioned, an ambivalence that underscores the attitude towards the SFRY in the greater part of today's Yugosphere.

Discussing hauntological music, Reynolds (2010) mentions, but quickly sidelines, the potent idea of this genre as a commemoration of lost utopias (371). The idea of a "paradise lost" manifests itself quite clearly in "I Miss Yugoslavia", but it is paired with a sense of dispassionate awareness of what came during, and after the SFRY's dissolution. The distortion of Lepa Brena's song signifies that yugowave comes from the perspective of younger generations (born after "the last pioneers", i.e. after 1982). The focal point of their childhood was the Yugoslav Wars and their aftermath, much more than fond memories of the SFRY at the height of its economic and political stability. It becomes obvious, too, that this album is not working from direct recollection, but is instead a product of a hazy memory, transferred from older generations to the young as nostalgia moves transgenerationally (see more in Popović 2017). It explores the cultural memory of Yugoslavia in a format and style more appropriate to the trends of the "internet age". It is interesting, too, and odd, that the figure of Josip Broz Tito—*the* elementary signifier of the SFRY in its "golden age"—is not referred to, not even once, in SyntheticSnow's work. With all these characteristics in mind, it can be considered as close to vaporwave as yugowave can be. It expresses longing for a by-gone era's fashions, economic security, and overall satisfaction of lifestyle, maintaining a slight critical awareness while attempting to avoid expressing biases or explicitly endorsing any political opinions.

However, this type of content, which appeals to vaporwave's stylistic sensibilities, appears to be very unpopular, with SyntheticSnow's account barely amassing more than a hundred subscribers and listeners on YouTube and SoundCloud. This brings us to a discussion of the strand of vaporwave, which in both an aesthetic and poetic sense is further away from the model of vaporwave, but is at least partially popular within certain circles. It carries a slightly modified label, which informs us quite sufficiently of the ethnic identity and political leanings of its creators and fans:

---

11 Lindstrom's work, reliant on the dichotomy of restorative and reflective nostalgia, is, of course, in great part influenced by Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia.

serbwave.

Serbwave: from appropriation to re-assessment

Some consider Yugonostalgia to be a counter-cultural and political force in the Yugosphere intended to "curb the power of hegemonic nationalist discourses dominant in the 1990s and 2000s" (Lindstrom 2006, 242). It is, therefore, a testament to the ambiguity of vaporwave, which manifests itself quite clearly in yugowave as well, that works within this genre can stand for completely opposite, even antagonistic worldviews. Thus from the tellingly Yugonostalgic (even if critical) yugowave, we turn to yugowave as an expression of neo-nationalism, i.e. serbwave. It is somewhat disconcerting to notice that these works, whose subject matter is decisively not the SFRY itself but the memories of its violent dissolution, are not only at times very imaginative, but have also acquired a following online, with some amassing more than 150,000 views. Serbwave music videos generally feature imagery such as archive footage of the Yugoslav Wars or the figure of Slobodan Milošević molded as a Greek marble bust, and tracks consist of remixes of 1990s Serbian war songs such as "Oj, Alija, Alija" and "Mlada srpska garda", all of which are distinguished by an aggressively nationalistic and militant rhetoric.

It has to be said that serbwave is by no means the first descendant of vaporwave to be used as a form of promotion for certain ideological stances. But the comparisons, while perhaps expected, are still not very flattering. Two similar cases are fashwave and trumpwave. These recent manifestations occurred, as Bullock and Kerry (2017) write, because of the ease of exploitation of vaporwave's

> ambivalence about the cultural detritus that inspired it. This careful tension between irony and earnestness was part of what made vaporwave fun—it flirted with the implicit transgressiveness of appreciating its aggressively commercial source material. But that ambiguity left the aesthetic distressingly easy for the alt-right to appropriate by stripping it of irony and playfulness—by taking it literally, as a glorification of capitalism.

Serbwave, once again, reflects something similar but contextually quite different. Instead of glorifying capitalism, productions of serbwave seem to revel in memories of war, violence, and terror that gripped the region following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. A major representative of this is TheAthelasProject. Their video, "Chilling in the 90s", for its central image appropriates a still from the 1996 film "Lepa sela lepo gore" (Pretty Village, Pretty Flames), which was (and still is) at the time of its distribution an honest, realist depiction of the brutality and tragedy of the Yugoslav Wars. Pasted together with this image, on an appropriately neon background, is a completely unrelated, fast-paced synth instrumental called "Running in the 90s" by Max Coveri. The resulting audio-visual synthesis—a distilment of complex

and thought-provoking art from the era in question into a provocative YouTube thumbnail—through appropriation of certain stylistic markers of vaporwave, presents a glorification of the very thing the original film is a critical examination of. The comment sections underneath TheAthelasProject's posts appear to confirm the obvious—that their work resonates with popular feeling in Serbia in recent times following years of increasingly conservative, right-wing rhetoric and nationalistic fervor promoted both by politicians and the mainstream media, all presenting an extreme end of the spectrum regarding strategies of symbolic nation-building after the SFRY's disappearance (see more in Kolstø 2014). As it happens, as an art-form, these works leave little to the imagination and even less to examination. They are an unimaginative adaptation of the vaporwave aesthetic, intended to disseminate political ideology to the "internet generation". It would be prudent to continue on from this point and address our final case, which provides much more food for thought, with the previously mentioned malleability of ideology within vaporwave fortunately allowing for rich possibilities of subsequent interpretation. As such, we can open up an interesting discussion pertaining to vaporwave, serbwave, and the processes of healing cultural trauma.

Haunted: Serbwave as a way of processing, re-framing and overcoming traumatic memories

In an interesting article exploring vaporwave, Laura Glitsos (2018) offers a unique interpretation of the genre's style, claiming that some of its productions, by reprocessing media artefacts that represent cultural trauma, can in fact be a way of coming to terms with cultural trauma (107). As an example, Glitsos uses the track "Jon Benet" by 18 Carrot Affair, which by its title references the 1996 murder of an American child named JonBenét Ramsay. This event, sensationalized by the press, has, as Glitsos (2018) writes in somewhat sensationalist terms herself, "for nearly two decades haunted the Western psyche". Reading this work as a means of processing the aforementioned trauma, Glitsos further says that vaporwave

> calls forth collective trauma through the empty sound of tinny beats and hollowed out drum tracks, to express forms of anguish that alienate and isolate the individual. It is an empty soundtrack for the emptiness of an innocence destroyed, one that cannot be 'made sense of' by the media or by the community. (108)

This notion of vaporwave as a means of the expression of cultural trauma is supported by Grafton Tanner (2016) as well, who, more broadly, suggests that most USA-produced vaporwave mourns life before 9/11 (10), an event which shook the very foundation of American national identity and everyday life. Following his interpretation, the paralells between yugowave and vaporwave's sense of transition

from idyllic "then" to the perennially unsatisfying "now" become much more apparent.

Glitsos's idea of vaporwave as a purge of trauma through the remix of existing cultural artefacts which are reminiscent of trauma translates exquisitely onto the field of yugowave, where a different kind of foundational event has "haunted the Balkan psyche" for more than 20 years.[12] We must circle back, in the endlessly looping nature of vaporwave itself, to the notions of hauntology and hauntological music, and some of their more interesting aspects. Together with the meaning of haunting in the literal sense of a recurring memory, image, or figure, comes the idea of hauntology, frequently applied to plunderphonic music. This term, taken from philosopher Jacques Derrida and adapted by Simon Reynolds, was coined in the mid-00's to describe art which is "…all about memory's power (to linger, pop up unbidden, prey on your mind) and memory's fragility (destined to become distorted, to fade, then finally disappear)" (Reynolds 2010, 377). The "haunting" in hauntology occurs in the disconnection of space and time, or, more precisely, when "a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" (Fisher 2012, 19). Could this encounter with "broken time" be applied to a society in stasis, marked by recent war trauma, and frozen in an endless loop of reminiscing the last two decades? There are few places to which this description is more apt than the contemporary Yugosphere, most particulary Serbia, as it approaches the 20th anniversary of NATO's bombing of Belgrade. Still considered to be in a transitional period post-SFRY, the Yugosphere is even now undergoing the processes of consolidation of new nation-states based on the politicization and mobilization of ethnic and religious identities (Kolstø 2014, 765) through political rhetoric and discourse in the media. This discourse, originally one of the key components of the Yugoslav conflict, is implicitly re-igniting memories of the wars in the contemporary Yugosphere every day. Therefore, serbwave, which directly addresses traumatic memories instead of building narratives around them, can be read as an attempt to re-examine and come to terms with a painful shared past and, finally, to overcome personal and cultural scars left by the wars.

The most significant example of the re-working—with great ironic detachment— of these painful memories is the 2016 YouTube video "Neon Bombarder", a re-imagining of the 1995 nationalistic turbo-folk anthem "Crni Bombarder" by Roki Vulović into an 80s power pop dance track, which has at the time of writing garnered over 350,000 views. It is currently, by far, the most creative re-working of original material within yugowave, bearing in mind that the style of the original song is almost non-existent in this remix. The original melody is transferred to synthesized textures rather than sung. The refrain "Prijatelju stari iz prošloga rata/ Stavićeš i sebi omču oko vrata/Sa Srbima ne smije inat da se tera/Izgubićeš jato crnih bombardera" is repeated several times by a computerized voice, reading the

---

12 For a concise insight into cultural trauma, its transgenerational transmission, and the narative of victimization in the contemporary Yugosphere, see Lazarević Radak, 2018.

words in the tellingly detatched way of audio software. The synthetic texture of the song is enriched with several new layers of driving beats, complimentary sound effects, and surplus embellishments, while the original melody is processed in such a way as to appear more polished and studio-produced than its 1995 predecessor's low-budget tape recording could ever have been. The aesthetics of the original 1995 music video are fairly simplistic and direct, quite *de rigeur* for this particular sub-genre of militant turbo-folk. Vulović, dressed in a military uniform, walks through nature and addresses the camera while singing, the footage interspersed with clips of tanks moving, fighter-jets in the air, and soldiers running. The yugowave version, instead, offers us a simple cyber landscape in neon pink and purple hues, void of any upsetting imagery—the epitome of the *virtual plaza* (Harper 2012). Vulović, who has in recent years become a small internet celebrity and known for still endorsing similar political views to those expressed in his music in the 1990s, has been reduced to a cut-and-paste sticker on both sides of the screen, his eyes replaced by two beacons of light. "Neon Bombarder", which quickly became very popular in certain internet circles, has in all these ways avoided the question of ideology and the position of its creator on the wars of the 1990s. It, instead, takes a deliberate position of disengagement with the topic by reducing the role of the singer, a dispassionate treatment of the original song's lyrics, and complete omission of war imagery.

From an outsider's perspective, there is not much to suggest that "Neon Bombarder" is in any way descended from the collage art of vaporwave. Instead of a careful selection and layering of samples, we are presented with an intense and thorough remix of just the one, yet contextually significant, song. However, as has been established, at the core of vaporwave stands the basic yet also radical act of reframing (Parker and Croggon 2014). Several authors have, too, compared vaporwave production to the "found object" art of the dada movement in the early 20th century (Harper, 2012; Reynolds, 2010; Glitsos, 2018). Connecting vaporwave and yugowave at their core, no matter how stylistically different the end products are, are the processes of collecting and re-framing existing cultural debris. While vaporwave employs the robotically cheerful tunes of Muzak to create entirely different works of foreboding, uncanny, and haunting character, so too does "Neon Bombarder" borrows musical remnants from Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It plunders the genre of turbo-folk at the height of its kitsch and grotesque political engagement, erasing all the historical and political baggage of the original in order to transform it into an upbeat, smooth synth track. Once again, the idea of lost utopia emerges, but in a different way. Instead of mourning the Yugoslavia that *once was*, as in the case of SyntheticSnow, the author of "Neon Bombarder" seems to be mourning a Yugoslavia that *could have been,* in the "the artistic mode of realizing this failure of the future that was promised in the past" (Tanner 2016, 46). Perhaps it suggests that had the dissolution and the war never occurred, 1995's Yugoslavia would have been a time and place where such music could have been created. "Neon Bombarder" reframes the object of national and personal trauma (implicitly the 1999 NATO air strikes,

which occurred four years after the original song was recorded), transforming it from a turbo-folk nationalistic Serbian war anthem to a triumphant, yet heavily ironic, power-pop dance tune.

Conclusion

Regarding what has been briefly analyzed in this overview, it seems that the production of yugowave could potentially open up interesting discussions about transgenerational nostalgia and cultural trauma. Most importantly, it is a subject which, when adequately researched, examined, and interpreted, could provide substantial information on how generations born after the SFRY relate not only to the past of the Yugosphere, but its present and future. Even if interest for the genre gradually disappears in the near future, which is more than likely, its production and reception now inform us about this particular moment in time in the region. A statement repeated by several authors (Hofman 2007; Kolstø 2014; Ćulibrk / Čavić 2018) and which seems to have found confirmation in this paper as well, is that Yugonostalgia in present society is a reflection of the current dissatisfaction with living standards. However, it has been shown through analysis of select works that yugowave, while still an expression of Yugonostalgia, is undoubtedly Yugonostalgia in its "updated" form. This furthers the idea that the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia is not a "fixed" occurrence, but rather a rich and multifaceted process of sentiment which evolves over time. Fond of reminiscing, yugowave nevertheless maintains a largely neutral perspective on decades past, holding a firmly critical gaze on the SFRY, the object of adulation of previous generations. Not only that, but I would argue it has directed the impulse for re-examination towards the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia itself as well, and urges for its deconstruction. Serbwave presents the counter-balance, reflecting as it does the other ideological force in the contemporary Yugosphere. The fact that this genre is currently achieving wider popularity in comparison to yugowave is a testament to the prevalence of nationalistic discourse in contemporary society. The ambiguity in terms of its message leaves serbwave, thankfully, open to different interpretations, and allows us to entertain the possibility that in the future it will be fully elevated into a thoughtful artistic consideration of the legacy of war in the region, and achieve the same reputation as a deconstructive art movement as vaporwave is now being "inscribed" in contemporary music history.

As has been already noted, this paper was intended to be an introductory overview of the recent production of yugowave and serbwave, and a light examination of these genres in view of present socio-political circumstances in the Yugosphere. It is my hope that it will be a good place to start for anyone who wants to examine this topic more thoroughly, or view it from a different perspective, in the future.

List of references

Bullock, Penn, and Eli Kerry. 2017. "Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music." *Vice,* January 30, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgwk7b/trumpwave-fashwave-far-right-appropriation-vaporwave-synthwave.

Colton, Stefan. 2017. "Love in Time of VHS: Making Sense of Vaporwave." *thepolitic.org.* April 15, 2017. https://thepolitic.org/love-in-the-time-of-vhs-making-sense-of-vaporwave/.

Ćulibrk, Predrag, and Isidora Čavić. 2018. «Percepcija SFRJ kod mladih u Srbiji.» 27-48. Filozofski fakultet Banja Luka; Savez studenata Filozofskog fakulteta Banja Luka.

Fisher, Mark. 2012. "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1: 16-24.

Glitsos, Laura. 2018. "Vaporwave, or music optimized for abandoned malls." *Popular Music* 37, no. 1: 100–118.

Harper, Adam. 2012. "Comment: Vaporwave and the pop-art of the virtual plaza." *DUMMY.* July 12, 2012. https://www.dummymag.com/news/adam-harper-vaporwave/

Hofman, Ana. 2012. "Lepa Brena: Repolitizacija muzičkih uspomena na Jugoslaviju." *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* LX, no. 1: 21–32.

Hofman, Ana. 2007. "Tabu na sećanja: Bolest zvana jugonostalgija." *Nova srpska politička misao: časopis za političku teoriju i društvena istraživanja.* http://starisajt.nspm.rs/kulturnapolitika/2007_hofman2.htm.

Ipsos Strategic Marketing. 2011. *Report: Nation Building - BiH.* University of Oslo. https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/forskning/prosjekter/nation-w-balkan/dokumenter/nb_b-h.pdf.

Ipsos Strategic Marketing. 2011. *Report: Nation Building - Montenegro.* University of Oslo. https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/forskning/prosjekter/nation-w-balkan/dokumenter/nb_montenegro.pdf.

Ipsos Strategic Marketing. 2011. *Report: Nation Building - Serbia.* University of Oslo. https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/forskning/prosjekter/nation-w-balkan/dokumenter/nb_serbia.pdf.

Judah, Tim. 2009. *Yugoslavia is dead; long live the Yugosphere.* The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Kolstø, Pål. 2014. "Identifying with the old or the new: nation-building vs. Yugonostalgia in the Yugoslav successor states." *Nations and Nationalism* 4, no. 20: 760-781.

Lazarević Radak, Sanja. 2018. "Postjugoslovenski prostor i studije traume: između akademskog okvira i političke stvarnosti." *Sveske* (128).

Lindstrom, Nicole. 2006. "Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Former Yugoslavia." *East Central Europe/ECE* 231–242.

Parker, James, and Nicholas Croggon. 2014. "The Trouble with Contemporary Music Criticism." *Tiny Mix Tapes,* January 16, 2014. https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/the-trouble-with-contemporary-music-criticism.

Popović, Milica. 2017. "Yugonostalgia: The Meta-National Memory Narratives of the Last Pioneers." *Nostalgia on the Move.* Belgrade: The Museum of Yugoslavia. 42–50.

Reynolds, Simon. 2010. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past.* New York: Faber and Faber.

Slavková, Markéta. 2010. "Echoing the beats of turbo-folk: popular music and nationalism

in ex-Yugoslavia." *Lidé města*, no. 2: 419-439.

Tanner, Grafton. 2016. *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts.* Winchester: Zero Books.

Ward, Christian. 2014. "Vaporwave: Soundtrack to Austerity." *Stylus,* January 29, 2014. http://www.stylus.com/hzwtls.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AMBUIGIUTY OF INTERNET ART: VAPORWAVE, YUGOWAVE AND SERBWAVE
(Summary)

As a presentation of the wealth of intersections that occur in productions of the recent music genre of yugowave, this paper, formulated as an overview, touches upon the subjects of nation-building in the contemporary Yugosphere, transgenerational Yugonostalgia, trauma studies, and essential musicological questions of music history and stylistics. Attempting to understand yugowave as a separate genre, I first briefly examine the most important notions connected to vaporwave, yugowave's primary stylistic model. The relations between the two genres are mapped out within four distinct categories: historical and political background, subject matter and material, technical-stylistic characteristics, and respective stages of evolution and popularity. The main body of the paper is divided into three case studies, chosen to showcase the scope of the genre in both its stylistic diversity, subject matter, and ideological content. Serbwave, as a relation of yugowave, is specifically examined as a rare occurrence in which the in theory politically neutral model of vaporwave encounters present and local political reality and propaganda in praxis. Lastly, notions of hauntology in music and society, and processes of trauma, are discussed. I advance the theory that serbwave is an expression of collective war trauma in the contemporary Yugosphere and an attempt at its re-processing.