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Teagan Kim

The Johns Hopkins University, teagan.m.kim@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

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Accelerationism and Techno-Orientalism in Macintosh Plus's *Floral Shoppe*

Teagan Kim

Johns Hopkins University

Abstract

Vaporwave is an internet-mediated music genre that has gained worldwide popularity within the last decade, and *Floral Shoppe* (2011) by Macintosh Plus is widely considered to be the most famous vaporwave album. *Floral Shoppe*, widely considered to be the seminal album of the vaporwave genre, indexes accelerationism and techno-orientalism in its sampling style and its album art. Drawing on Dr. David Roh's theories of techno-orientalism in media, Dr. Ken McLeod's research regarding techno-orientalism in the genre of vaporwave, Dr. Alessandro Duranti's theories of indexicality, and Dr. James Clifford's art-culture system, I will place *Floral Shoppe* within the larger history of the vaporwave genre and explore how *Floral Shoppe* has influenced other vaporwave artists to index accelerationism and techno-orientalism in their album art and music. Later vaporwave albums such as *Blank Banshee 1* (2013) by Blank Banshee and *新しい日の誕生* (Birth of a New Day) (2013) by 2 8 1 4 index techno-orientalism and accelerationism in their musical and visual aesthetics. These albums are evidence that *Floral Shoppe* set a precedent for the rest of the genre in indexing these concepts.

Keywords: vaporwave, techno-orientalism, internet musics, Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*

Vaporwave is an Internet-borne genre from the early 2010s which “heavily relies on the creative manipulation of samples of mellow adult-contemporary pop music and Muzak that date from the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s” (McLeod 123). Vaporwave grew out of other similar internet microgenres such as chillwave and seapunk that were also created in the early 2010s and subsequently disseminated on social media sites like Tumblr and 4chan. *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, released in 2011, is widely considered to be the most famous album in the genre. In this album, Macintosh Plus layers, chops, speeds up, and stretches samples of 1980s and 90s jazz music into polytonal and polyrhythmic textures.

This album and the genre of vaporwave in general are widely considered to be critiques of American capitalism and consumption during the ‘80s and ‘90s, with its corporate-Muzak-esque samples glitched into sonic decay. Yet other social forces are at play within this album. All of the eleven track titles on the album are in Japanese, indicating that the Japanese culture or language holds some sort of importance to the album. This seminal album’s usage of Japanese characters has also carried over into other parts of the vaporwave “aesthetic,” even becoming an index for vaporwave aesthetics as a whole. Wu Yuan (Brent Lin), a writer and researcher at McGill University, argues that cyberpunk, a predecessor of vaporwave, used Japan as a structure on which to project the West’s fears of a hyper-capitalist future overridden by foreign technologies (Lin par. 4). This concept of the West imagining Japan as an accelerationist dystopian future is also present throughout the genre of vaporwave, such as in 2 8 1 4’s *新しい日の誕生* (*Birth of a New Day*) album art, which features a digitally-rendered illustration of Japanese billboards and glowing neon signs that stretch far into the night.

Despite the fact that *Floral Shoppe* indexes accelerationism in many facets of its production and marketing, it also relies on technological advancement and exploits the Japanese language for its aesthetic. As one of the seminal albums of the vaporwave genre, *Floral Shoppe* set a precedent by indexing destructive forces of capitalism as a function of employing techno-orientalist techniques.



Fig. 1: album covers for *Floral Shoppe*. At left is the original 2011 album art, and at right is the 2012 reissue album art (Xavier, *Floral Shoppe*; Xavier, *Floral Shoppe* (Album Reissue Cover)).

Vaporwave was first created in the early 2010s around the same time when other similar microgenres such as chillwave and hypnagogic pop were popular. These genres use hallmarks of the 1980s such as digital synthesizers and cassette tapes to create a retro sound (Born, 605). Vaporwave also grew up alongside movements like seapunk, which is “an internet-based micro-culture centering on an aquatic, oceanic aesthetic” (McLeod 125). All of these microgenres strongly influenced vaporwave: its focus on sampling sounds from the 1980s is borrowed from chillwave and hypnagogic pop, and its focus on propagating a unique visual aesthetic is borrowed from seapunk.

Yet vaporwave holds certain distinctive characteristics that set it apart from other microgenres from its time period. For one, vaporwave is created, distributed, and sold entirely on

the internet: it has no physical birthplace, and hardly any live vaporwave shows are ever held. As Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth put it, "...the net itself becomes central to the creative practices defining the genre, acting as shared horizon of meaning, content medium, production studio, and means of distribution" (Born and Haworth 605).

The term "vaporwave" is thought to have originated from "vaporware," a term coined in 1983 by software executive Ann Winblad. Winblad used "vaporware" to refer to products that were announced to the public before they were released to the market — products that sometimes failed during testing and were never released. Winblad compared this process to "selling smoke" (Shea 48). This aspect of "selling smoke" is relevant to vaporwave in two aspects: one, that vaporwave content is largely intangible and virtual as it only exists online, and two, that emphases on the concepts of buying and selling are prevalent within the genre.

The first vaporwave album is widely considered to be *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1*, released under an alias by producer Daniel Lopatin in 2010 (Colton par. 1). *Eccojams* featured slowed-down, chopped, and distorted samples of 1980s songs, notably "Toto" by Africa. This album as well as producer James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual*, released in 2011, are considered to be the two prototypes for the vaporwave genre (Colton pars. 1-2). Yet although *Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1* and *Far Side Virtual* are widely considered to be the first two albums in the genre, *Floral Shoppe* by Ramona Xavier under her alias Macintosh Plus is considered to be one of the most influential.

Floral Shoppe was released in 2011 on Bandcamp.com by the label Beer on the Rug and subsequently gained a cult-following status among online communities, especially on Tumblr (FLORAL SHOPPE | BEER ON THE RUG; Born and Haworth 637). In particular, the track "リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー" ("Lisa Frank 420/Modern Computing") is the most

popular track on *Floral Shoppe* and has become somewhat of an internet meme itself. “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー” has, at the time of writing, acquired 8,046,600 views, 1,828,634 views, and 1,063,894 views on its three most popular re-uploads on YouTube (ChocolateGinger; *a e s t h e t i c s*; SunLevi).

The success of “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー” can be partially attributed to its usage as background music in a YouTube video uploaded in February 2016 by the channel for the social media site Digg, titled “The Most Satisfying Video In The World.” This video, at the time of writing, has garnered 18,896,537 views (Digg). The popularity of the song immediately spiked after the video was uploaded, as evidenced by Google Trend search query data. Searches for both “Lisa Frank 420” and “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー” peaked in popularity from February 2016 to February 2017. Ever since its release, the track has gained popularity worldwide. The top three countries that have searched for the English translation of the title are the United States, Italy, and Brazil. The top three countries that have searched for its original Japanese title are Brazil, Japan, and the United Kingdom (“Google Trends”).

Although vaporwave’s dissemination on the internet and the sampling process inherent in its creation make the genre completely reliant on technology, the genre is often seen ambiguously as either critique or praise of capitalism. Vaporwave is often linked to accelerationism, the viewpoint that the only way out of a capitalist system is to increase the speed at which it functions, in order to self-destruct. Vaporwave’s linkage to accelerationist schools of thought is due to the fact that these social trends “...push for the intensification of technology and capitalism (and associated merging of the digital and human) as an ironic means

to an ultimate liberating revolution against both or as their logical conclusion” (McLeod 128). McLeod also notes that the speed at which relatives of the vaporwave genre such as future funk, vaportrap, and Simpsonwave proliferate “testify to the rapid pace at which online musical culture evolves” (McLeod 128). Musicologist Adam Harper was one of the first to pick up on vaporwave’s connection to accelerationism in 2015:

These musicians can be read as sarcastic anti-capitalists revealing the lies and slippages of modern techno-culture and its representations, or as its willing facilitators, shivering with delight upon each new wave of delicious sound. We could apply to their music a term used to describe a certain sentiment and praxis that has recently gained currency among philosophers of capitalism: accelerationism... ‘Life is being phased-out into something new,’ says philosopher Nick Land in a 1992 essay. ‘And if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem.’ The anarcho-capitalist pop of these musicians, whether we hear it as ironic and satirical or as truly accelerationist, is something of a soundtrack to Land’s visions (Harper par. 3).

Another important facet of vaporwave is its emphasis on visual aesthetics. The vaporwave genre and its corresponding art movement are inseparable. The art movement, which similarly focuses on technology, the internet, and nostalgia, is directly inspired by *Floral Shoppe*’s album cover (see fig. 1.). *Floral Shoppe*’s original 2011 album art features a bubblegum-pink background, a tiled floor reminiscent of a checkerboard transparency grid for digital photo editing, a marble bust of Helios, and a hazy, purple-filtered pre-9/11 photo of the New York City skyline. Above the skyline photo, in mint-green text, is “Macintosh Plus” in Japanese: “MAC プラス” (“MAC plus”); below is “フローラルの専門店” (“floral specialty store”). Next to the text is a logo of an isometric illusion made of cubes. The visual aesthetic that

this album portrays, drawing on 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s nostalgia, early video game art, Roman architecture, corporate logos, and Japanese text, has served as a template for other vaporwave album art and come to signify the genre as a whole. In other words, these specific facets of vaporwave-related art serve as indexes for vaporwave.

Alessandro Duranti interprets Peirce and Jakobson's theories of indexicality as "[c]ommunication...[that] is also a way of pointing to, presupposing or bringing into the present context beliefs, feelings, identities, events" (Duranti 37). In this case, *Floral Shoppe*'s usage of Japanese text and logos indexes techno-orientalism and brings it into the present context, regardless of Ramona Xavier's original intentions. Techno-orientalism, as mentioned earlier, is the idea that the West's hegemony and dominance over technology are threatened by Eastern postwar advancements.

In *Floral Shoppe* and the vaporwave genre as a whole, techno-orientalism and accelerationism are closely intertwined — acceleration serves as a consequence of technological takeover by Eastern powers. indexes of techno-orientalism in this album are often the same ones used to index accelerationism, as they both place emphasis on the growing pervasiveness of technology. *Floral Shoppe* indexes accelerationism and techno-orientalism at every level from its dissemination and proliferation to its lyrics and sampling style.

Table 1

Tracklist for the 2011 release of *Floral Shoppe* and samples used in each track, compiled from data about *Floral Shoppe* tracks from WhoSampled.com ("Floral Shoppe by Macintosh Plus").

Track number	Track title	English translation	Sample	Sample artist	Sample release year
1	ブーツ	Boot	"Tar Baby"	Sade	1985

2	リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー	Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing	"It's Your Move"	Diana Ross	1984
3	花の専門店	Floral Shoppe	"If I Saw You Again"	Pages	1978
4	ライブラリ	Library	"You Need A Hero"	Pages	1981
5	地理	Geography			
6	ECCO と 悪寒 ダイビング	Chill Divin' with ECCO	"Deja Vu"	Dancing Fantasy	1993
7	数学	Mathematics	"Worldwide"	Dancing Fantasy	1993
			"Warm World"	Donn Wilkerson	2010
8	待機	Standby	"Hang Loose"	Dancing Fantasy	1993
9	て	Te			
10	月	Moon	"I Only Have Eyes For You"	Zapp	1985
11	海底	Seabed	"Sleeping Pill"	Jamie Foxx	2010

At the most microscopic level, accelerationism is indexed through the sampling style throughout the album. Samples are cut and duplicated, creating a texture that imitates the skipping of a CD. Tempo increases and decreases seemingly at random, like a machine starting up, then slowing down again. Xavier also references accelerationism in song structure. Parallels to accelerationism are especially salient in “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー”. The samples that are used in this track come from soul singer Diana Ross’s 1984 hit “It’s Your Move,” which is a cover of Australian singer Doug Parkinson’s track of the same title from the year prior (see Table 1). The use of samples to index accelerationism and techno-orientalism brings to mind Murry Schafer’s unease about the impact of technological advancement on music

production and dissemination, especially the splitting of sounds from their sources, a phenomenon he described as “schizophonia” (Keil and Feld 258). To summarize his anxieties, he writes: “...the overkill of hi-fi gadgetry....creates a synthetic soundscape in which natural sounds are becoming increasingly unnatural while machine-made substitutes are providing the operative signals directing modern life” (Keil and Feld 259). In this case, a “synthetic soundscape” is formed by stitching together cloned samples of Diana Ross’s voice that becomes “increasingly unnatural.” “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー” opens with a repeating slowed and pitched-down sample of the first eight bars of “It’s Your Move,” then progresses into a slowed sample of the song’s chorus. A snippet of the first verse of the song, “don’t say no,” is then repeated eight times. Then the pre-chorus of the song is sampled. Originally, Ross’s lyrics for the pre-chorus and chorus are as follows:

I'm giving up on trying
To sell you things that you ain't buying

[Chorus]:

It's your move, I've made up my mind
Time is running out, make a move
Oh, we can go on, do you understand?
It's all in your hands, it's your move (Diana Ross – It’s Your Move)

This sample is then manipulated in “リサフランク 420 / 現代のコンピュー” to form these lyrics:

I'm giving up on trying
To sell you things that you ain't buying
I'm giving up on trying
To sell you things that you ain't buying

[Chorus] (2x):

It's your move, I've made up my mind
Time is running out, make a move
Oh, we can go on, do you understand?
It's all in your hands, it's your — oh!

It's all (all, all, all...) in your hands, it's all in your hands

It's all in your hands, it's all in your hands (Lyrics adapted from “AZ Lyrics.Az | Macintosh Plus - フローラルの専門店 (Floral Shoppe) Album Lyrics” n.d.)

Xavier’s emphasis and repetition of the words “sell” and “buying” in her manipulation of the sample is followed by a chorus that devolves into a polyrhythmic, almost dissociative repetition of the words “it’s all in your hands” (ca. 5:35-5:54). After this, the sample from the opening of “It’s Your Move” is played at a sluggish pace. One could draw parallels to accelerationist theory here as samples of a bright 1980s pop cover emphasizing “buy” and “sell” build on each other until they form a chaotic mass of sound that crashes into a catatonic tempo. These musical signifiers of destruction echo accelerationist theories that predict a collapse of capitalism under its own weight.

The next level in which *Floral Shoppe* indexes accelerationism is in its song titles. Titles like “ブート” (“Boot”), “ライブラリ” (“Library”), “待機” (“Standby”), and “現代のコンピュータ” (“Modern Computing”), as well as the alias Xavier takes for this album, Macintosh Plus, can be seen as referencing computers and technology in general. Track titles like “リサフランク 420” (“Lisa Frank 420”), “花の専門店” (“Floral Shoppe”), and the album title itself can also be viewed as direct references to corporate culture.

One could also argue that the way *Floral Shoppe* indexes nostalgia is inherent to its indexing of corporate culture. Laura Glitsos claims that vaporwave incites feelings of nostalgia for something that never happened. She cites Chris Healy’s conclusions about “compensatory nostalgia” as a result of Andreas Huyssen’s suggestion that the “relationship between memory and forgetting is actually being transformed under cultural pressures’ ...as a result of ‘new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption’” (Glitsos 104). Arjun

Appadurai also talks about the concept of “nostalgia without memory” borne by the “ironies and resistances” brought on by ever-changing, ever-intersecting global cultural flows (Appadurai 3-5). *Floral Shoppe* was released in 2011 and uses contemporary production technology, yet eight out of eleven of the tracks use samples of songs released before 1995. The album cover also references nostalgia through its neon green and pink color scheme, its VHS-filtered pre-9/11 photo of a New York City skyline, and its intentionally retro digital composition. This nostalgia of a blossoming technology-centered capitalist past is ironically juxtaposed with the anxieties around a technology-oriented future.

The apprehension regarding an accelerationist future indexed in *Floral Shoppe* is directly caused by techno-orientalism. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu define techno-orientalism in their book *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* as “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (Roh et al. 2). David Morley and Kevin Robins, the creators of the term “techno-orientalism,” suggest that:

...[i]f the future is technological, and if technology has become ‘Japanised’, then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too...As the dynamism of technological innovation has appeared to move eastwards, so have these postmodern technologies become structured into the discourse of Orientalism (Morley and Robins 168-169).

Because the centers of technology production and innovation are moving eastward, Japan and other Asian countries have become “screens” on which to project Westerners’ technological fantasies and anxieties of being taken over (Roh et al. 4). Techno-orientalism has been conveyed in many types of media, including novels, art, and movies, but it is also present in music.

As stated previously, *Floral Shoppe* exhibits techno-orientalism in its appropriation of the Japanese language coupled with its futuristic sampling methods and an obvious emphasis on technology. Although this appropriation of Japanese writing might seem insignificant, its effects on the genre as a whole are not. Post-*Floral Shoppe*, Japanese and other Asian languages have become indexes of the vaporwave genre.

For example, Canadian vaportrap artist Blank Banshee started uploading his music videos to YouTube in 2013, and these videos heavily feature logos of fictional Asian companies with their names in English and subtitles in their respective languages. Moreover, these fictional companies are always related to the technology industry, such as “SILKSUN HOLOGRAMS” and “eTEXTURE™ TECHNOLOGIES” (Blank Banshee - B). Although these companies’ subtitles might not always be written in Japanese — Blank Banshee uses Arabic, Korean, and Chinese as well — these images of fictional Asian corporations recall Morley and Robins’ “Japan Inc.,” a hyper-capitalist view of Japan “pursuing GNP growth at the expense of everything else, spreading pollution and spawning intimidating futuristic megalopolises” (Morley and Robins 154). Morley and Robins’ prophetic words from 1995 remain relevant here: “the techno-mythology is centred around the idea of some kind of postmodern mutation of human experience...the association of technology and Japaneseness now serves to reinforce the image of a culture...lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world” (Morley and Robins 168-169; Blank Banshee - B). The companies emanate a nihilistic aura adorned with trademark symbols, i.e. “DEPRESSTECH INDUSTRIESSM: MAKING DEPRESSION WORK”, “VIRTUAL EXODUS™” and “ESC ディスク©” (see Fig. 2). In combining nihilism, Asian text, and visual indexes of capitalism such as logos and trademark symbols, Blank Banshee further perpetuates the same narrative of Asian technology as cold, empty, and emotionless.

Other vaporwave albums have also followed suit in their appropriations of Eastern languages. 2 8 1 4's *新しい日の誕生* (*Birth of a New Day*), released in 2015, lists all of its track titles in Japanese despite its creation by an anonymous London-based producer duo. The album art also features a futuristic view of a Japanese city overrun by glowing billboards and neon signs, again recalling a hyper-capitalist view of Japan.

マクロス MACROSS 82-99's album *ネオ東京* (*Neo Tokyo*), released in 2013, also has all of its track titles in Japanese, despite the producer hailing from Mexico City. The album art features a pennant with an anime girl and the artist's name "マクロス MACROSS 82-99." The pennant is overlaid on a photo of a sprawling urban landscape, and the album title in both English and Japanese is displayed on the left side (see Fig. 3).

After the release of *Floral Shoppe*, indexes of vaporwave also expanded to include many technologies and other cultural hallmarks from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. *Floral Shoppe*'s retro-computer style, corporate imagery, and appropriation of Asian language has given rise to what is informally known as the "vaporwave aesthetic," often styled as "A E S T H E T I C" among online communities. Georgina Born describes A E S T H E T I C as:

... 'bad art' such as dated computer graphics, GIFs, or icons from historical operating systems. Characteristic motifs are the Windows 95 desktop view and interface, visual signifiers from the dial-up era of the net, the amateur web design of the Geocities network, and the recovery of obscure injunctions to 'interact' with the web manager (Born and Haworth 638).



Fig. 2: two screenshots from Blank Banshee's music video for "B:/ Infinite Login" featuring fictional technology corporation logos with text in Arabic and Chinese (Blank Banshee - B).



Fig. 3: album art for 2814's *新しい日の誕生 (Birth of a New Day)* and マクロス MACROSS 82-99's album *ネオ東京 (Neo Tokyo)* (Walker; Kidmograph).

Although the vaporwave era seems to have peaked in popularity in January 2017, online communities revolving around vaporwave are still going strong ("Google Trends"). Currently, the subreddit r/VaporwaveAesthetics has over 300,000 members. The heading of the subreddit reads "Aesthetics 美学." Its top posts of all time include images of cities put through a filter meant to mimic a VHS tape, a Photoshopped Windows 95 popup, Japanese text, and edits of anime clips (u/CazmStudios).

Vaporwave was once considered to be art — an ironic, slickly-produced collage ambiguous enough to be read as an ode to capitalism or a critique of it. Now it has become a laughingstock. In true internet-mediated fashion, vaporwave's easily recognizable and reproducible **A E S T H E T I C**, worldwide popularity, and rapid spread have lent itself to becoming a meme. *Floral Shoppe* itself has even become a meme, as evidenced by its article on KnowYourMeme.com, which has had 186,053 views at the time of writing since its upload in 2015 (“Floral Shoppe (フローラルの専門店)”). On James Clifford's art-culture system, it has moved from being an inauthentic masterpiece (“anti-art”) to an inauthentic artifact (“the curio collection”) as the genre has become “culturally and historically ‘contextualized’” (Clifford 224).

Vaporwave represents a new era of deep-seated anxieties about eastern technological advancement expressed through accelerationist critiques. In *Floral Shoppe*, this anxiety is expressed through the appropriation of Japanese text to index an Asian, hyper-capitalist, technology-overridden future. Yet this anxiety is ironic because vaporwave would not exist without technological infrastructure or products: the production, release, reception, and spread of *Floral Shoppe* are all very much dependent on technology. This irony has persisted throughout the vaporwave genre as other albums have followed suit in their appropriation of Asian languages. While vaporwave has devolved from art into an internet meme, the appropriation has remained intact. Because of *Floral Shoppe*, techno-orientalism and appropriation of Asian language are critical to the propagation of the vaporwave genre.

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