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Multimodal Mist: The Musicolinguistic Landscapes of Vaporwave

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The background to this project is the idea that language is important to musical genre, and this is something that's been of interest to both ethnomusicologists and linguists for a long time: what is the relationship between language and musical genre?

Scholars have looked at this from the lens of variation from spoken language – how sung language differs in phonology or syntax from spoken language. People have also looked at how sung language varies across multiple genres – for instance how different morphology might be used in different musical genres, or how different genres could use languages differently. Scholars have also looked at this idea through the angle of authenticity – what kind of linguistic features are necessary or often coincide w/ diff musical genres?

One characteristic that all this work has in common is that it is primarily focused on spoken and sung language, and isn't really looking at visual language, so that's what I want to talk about today in terms of vaporwave. And while the idea of visual language in music might not be immediately transparent, all music has some sort of visual component as part of the musicking experience, whether that's album art, watching a live performance, reading liner notes, or watching the world go by as you have your headphones on.

These visual components of music are especially important in so-called internet-mediated musics. These are musics that are both made and consumed primarily over the internet, and the idea is that for these internet-mediated musics, the digital linguistic landscape that's present while listeners are consuming them is a central and indispensable part of the musicking experience, which allows this visual language to become codified as a part of the genre as well. So that's what we'll look at today with Vaporwave.

Vaporwave is a relatively new internet-mediated musical genre, and it has themes of critiquing consumerism via alienating representations of familiar sounds. It takes things like 1980s pop music and elevator music, smooth jazz and commercial jingles, and then alters them in various ways to create this idea of distorted nostalgia, fuzzy memories, or misremembering. The idea is that these themes of vaporwave are constructed not just through music, but also through spoken, sung, and visual language presented concurrently with that music across multiple modalities.

To give you an idea of how visual language can play into musical experience on the internet and with vaporwave in particular, I want to talk real quick about Bandcamp. Bandcamp is a popular platform for internet-mediated musics like vaporwave. It lets you stream and download music like spotify, but rather than being a subscription or ad-supported service, it lets you pay what you want (usually starting at \$0) directly to artists to purchase and play their music. It's become popular for internet musics because it's sample-friendly, meaning it doesn't require you to prove you own the copyright or have sample clearance for everything you upload – crucial since internet musics like vaporwave rely heavily on sampling.

Most importantly, it uses page-based streaming. So rather than just listening to the music within some central library like you would on Apple Music or Spotify, every album that you listen to on Bandcamp has its own custom page, with its own digital linguistic landscape.

This is an example of one album viewed on BC as you would stream it. You have the album art, you have text in banners, information about the artist, and if you scroll down you have the tracklist but also user comments from supporters, and also any descriptions or prose that can go along with the music on the bottom left. And this is the same whether you're streaming from a computer or a mobile device.

This digital linguistic landscape that's possible through Bandcamp is central to how vaporwave is read by listeners, and one of the biggest markers used in Vaporwave is the use of Japanese text. This was established early on in the genre with the first vaporwave release, *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus. I'll show you what that looks like to give you an idea of what vaporwave is and sounds like.

*Floral Shoppe* was released in 2011, and was created by MacPlus, also known as Ramona Langley of Portland, Oregon. In terms of the music, it uses slowed chopped and screwed 80s pop music. In terms of the language, we have an accompanying linguistic landscape of Japanese track titles and flavour text on the album art. For instance, the second track on the album, *Lisa Frank 420/Modern Computing*, like all tracks on the album is rendered in Japanese. The music that goes along with that language is a sample of "It's Your Move" by Diana Ross.

[play]

One thing that's important about vaporwave is that all this Japanese text employed by non-Japanese-speaking vaporwave artists isn't meant to be understood in a linguistic, communicative sense. Rather, it's used as an orientalist indexical marker of "otherness" and exotification that serves to reinforce the genre's theme of alienation and distorted memories. The way that this pop music is being distorted, then, is not only through slowing it down, but also in it being presented in the context of this new, unassociated Japanese linguistic landscape, taking it out of its original context and distorting the musical memory.

And as further evidence for the fact that Japanese text in vaporwave isn't meant to be understood linguistically, we have the vaporwave text generator, a web app that takes text input and converts it to a vaporwave aesthetic. And we can see what it's doing is taking the input, converting it to full-width text, and adding some random Japanese kana on the end. We can tell that this is literally random, because re-translating the same text gives different results, most of which are totally ungrammatical strings of Japanese glyphs. If we do it again, we get 'sa' given a voicing marker and a half-voiced marker at the same time, which, of course, doesn't work. Again, using the indexical associations of Japanese text, without doing anything linguistic with it.

So, these digital linguistic landscape of potentially arbitrary Japanese combines with the altered English language of the music to create this distorted nostalgia of vaporwave. And vaporwave as a genre is constructed thru these multimodal bundlings of music and language. But the really cool thing here is that this bundling itself actually takes place across multiple modalities at the same time.

Because in addition to these digital linguistic landscapes that make up vaporwave, vaporwave also uses specific musical production techniques which create soundscapes in which listeners can imagine visual language being situated. So they create imagined musicolinguistic landscapes that

language can be visually situated in within the mind of the listener. These imagined musicolinguistic landscapes then allow listeners to participate directly in the genre's themes of alienation and distorted memory through their listening experience.

Today i'm going to show how these imagined musicolinguistic landscapes are created through musical production in three subgenres of vaporwave, each shown through a representative artist,: mallsoft, future funk, and signalwave.

Starting with mallsoft, this is a genre that was pioneered by this artist, known as CatSystems Corp., whose real name is Jornt Elzinga from the Netherlands. His album 'Palm Mall' kickstarted this subgenre, and I'll walk you through the bundlings of this album and its musicolinguistic landscape. In terms of music, palm mall relies on samples of muzak/elevator music, along with announcements and commercials in both English and Japanese.

In terms of the digital ling landscape, it uses both English and Japanese song titles, and also has a bilingual description beneath the album, which includes untranslated Japanese in the English portion: "make sure to buy these black cat watches, and if you get tired stop for a bite at McDonalds".

In terms of the musical production, importantly, palm mall makes use of both hi-cut and low-cut filters on its central samples, which emphasizes mid-range sounds and creates the sensation that the music is being pumped out of a peripheral ceiling speaker. That's combined with ambient noises and conversations, and heavy cathedral reverb, which gives the impression that not only is this mall music, but that you're listening to it inside a mall. I'll play a short excerpt, and listen out for these as well as the English and Japanese commercials.

[Play PM]

All these musical production techniques then create a soundscape which listeners latch onto, in order to situate the visual and spoken language within the imagined space. Listeners comment:

[Read comments]

So people are attenuating to the idea of this being inside a mall, but where something is different, fuzzy, and distorted, because of the distorted, unplaceable musicolinguistic landscape of inside this linguistically-underspecified mall.

Moving onto future funk, a more dance-focused subgenre, we'll look at Macross82-99, real name Gerald, a producer from Mexico City. His album 'Sailorwave' was one of the first big future funk releases, and in terms of music, it samples english lg disco and japanese lg city pop from the 1980s. In terms of the digital linguistic landscape, we see predominately Japanese track titles with some English mixed in. But in terms of musical production, Sailorwave makes use of dynamic EQing and filter sweeps to create a sense of motion towards and away from the music, to give you the sensation that you're passing by or going towards different musical events as you listen to the album.

The first example is Hino Rei, and in this intro to the track you can hear it move from a low-pass filter to a high-pass filter, which simulates drawing closer to the sound source. At the same time that this filter sweep is taking place, there's a gradual fade out of ambient street noise, culminating in a brief pause, that gives the sensation that the listener is approaching a closed door, and then opens it to enter the musical space behind.

[play example]

The second example I want to show you takes place over the duration of a song called Street Romance 2049, and it starts out with an introduction that uses an extreme low-pass filter, and ambient street noise, giving the impression that you're walking **over** where the music is taking place, like walking past a subway entrance.

[play]

In the middle of the song, however, it breaks through that production and switches to compressed levels near the top of the peak threshold, gated drums, and tiled reverb – all giving the impression that you're in a narrow tiled space with the music (like a subway station).

[play]

And finally, the outro returns to the extreme low-pass and street noise, as if you've left the station and are back aboveground.

[play]

So through the use of dynamic EQing, reverb, and filtering, Macross82 licenses this imagined musicological landscape which listeners interpret as a city that they're moving through as they listen:

[read comments]

These changes in production then are creating a space in listeners' minds where the musical and linguistic signs can be melded and distorted by their juxtaposition, resulting in perhaps 'tokyo', but also a 'fictional' city, that you're cruising through at night.

Finally, I want to take a look at signalwave. The most prolific signalwave artist is Asu Tenki, nominally from Osaka, Japan, and since they release small collections of songs, instead of an album I'll look at their digital discography. In terms of music, it relies on Japanese weather reports and commercials, predominately from the 1980s. In the digital linguistic landscape, we see both Japanese and English titles. And in terms of musical production, asu tenki relies on two different techniques to create the imagined musicological landscape of their music. The first is a combination of audible tape hiss, compression, and static, which mimics the sound of a well-worn VHS tape, which can be heard in this example 'explore your world':

[play]

The second production technique asu tenki uses is a combination of RF static, compression, tape warble, and source-switching, which makes this track (commercial break vol 23) and others like it sound like they're being listened to on an analogue TV as it changes channels:

[play]

The combination of these alternating production techniques for asu tenki's listeners creates the sensation of listening to these tracks in front of a slightly malfunctioning analogue television. Listeners say:

[]read[]

And of course, the fact that this imagined musicolinguistic landscape is filled with 80s japanese television reports and commercials instead of the sounds these commenters would likely have been listening to as children is what distorts and fuzzies the memory, creating the vaporwave experience.

Pulling all three of these subgenre examples together, then, we see how vaporwave is constructed not only through music, but also through a combination of sung, spoken, and visual language, with digital linguistic landscapes central to the experience.

But beyond that, we see how specific musical production techniques in vaporwave license these imagined musicolinguistic landscapes, into which listeners can situate these elements in a way that enables them to actively participate in the alienating memory distortion that embodies the themes of vaporwave, whether they're in an underspecified mall, a fictional city, or falling asleep in front of a transnational television.

And all of these musicolinguistic landscapes are integral to realizing vaporwave's central themes; it's not something that can be done through music alone or through language alone; rather, both musical and linguistic elements are jointed and distorted in their juxtaposition, through specific musical production techniques.

In conclusion, in vaporwave we see how language can shape and define musical genres – not just in a single multimodal bundle, but across multiple concurrent modalities at the same time. These examples show how the concept of linguistic landscapes can be combined with elements of soundscapes to extend their use to a musicolinguistic framework, and they also show the relevance of embodiment (and out-of-bodyness) in musicolinguistic experience, as vaporwave listeners situate their bodies in imagined musical spaces.

Finally, the case of vaporwave shows the importance of examining musical production in musicolinguistic analyses. Just like how considering prosody and discourse context opens up new windows of understanding in our investigations of language, when we study musical language, we need to consider not just pitches and rhythms, but the production as well.

Thank you!!