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MUSIC, AESTHETICS, AND NOSTALGIA: IDEOLOGICAL APPROPRIATIONS OF DIGITAL AUDIOVISUAL TRENDS

Abstract. Music has always served as a medium for conveying ideological content, but in the digital age it has gained new possibilities for reinterpretation and adaptation. This article examines two internet-based aesthetic-musical movements—*vaporwave* and *synthwave*—as well as their ideological appropriations in the form of subgenres such as *laborwave*, *tradwave*, and *fashwave*. I explore how these nostalgia-driven styles become spaces for various political and propagandistic narratives. Particular attention is given to the phenomenon of the “colonization” of internet audiovisual aesthetics and how their elements can be utilized as tools of influence in the digital sphere.

Keywords: internet culture; vaporwave; synthwave; nostalgia; audiovisual propaganda

MUZYKA, ESTETYKA I NOSTALGIA – IDEOLOGICZNE ZAWŁASZCZENIA CYFROWYCH TRENDÓW AUDIOWIZUALNYCH

Abstrakt. Muzyka od zawsze pełniła funkcję medium przekazującego treści ideologiczne, jednak w erze cyfrowej zyskała nowe możliwości reinterpretacji i adaptacji. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje dwa internetowe ruchy estetyczno-muzyczne—*vaporwave* i *synthwave*—oraz ich ideologiczne zawłaszczenia w postaci subgatunków, takich jak *laborwave*, *tradwave* i *fashwave*. Badam, w jaki sposób style te, czerpiące z nostalgia, stają się przestrzenią dla różnych narracji politycznych i propagandowych. Szczególną uwagę poświęcam zjawisku „kolonizacji” internetowej estetyki audiovizualnej oraz temu, w jaki sposób jej elementy mogą być wykorzystywane jako narzędzia wpływu w sferze cyfrowej.

Slowa kluczowe: kultura internetu; vaporwave; synthwave; nostalgia; propaganda audiovizualna

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Music as a medium for carrying meaning is by no means surprising. Beyond its lyrical layer, it shapes emotions and atmosphere, co-creating and complementing context—from everyday situations (e.g., background music for coffee) to film soundtracks. In the digital age, this media function of music has gained new dimensions and dynamics—its flexibility and connection to digital technology make it particularly susceptible to ideological reinterpretations. The ideological adaptation of music is not a new phenomenon and can be easily observed in the surrounding world—for example, in national anthems, revolutionary songs, or propaganda music. However, the digital era has opened up an entirely new field and space for this kind of creativity—both original and its subsequent reinterpretations, appropriations, transformations, or even the colonization of artistic movements.

To fully describe phenomena operating in the digital domain, it is crucial to recognize that they are not limited solely to the auditory layer but also encompass the visual aspect. Many musical movements have long been associated with a specific (to varying degrees pronounced) visual aesthetic that complements the character of the music. This is no different in the case of contemporary audiovisual trends—or, more precisely, *audio-aesthetic* movements—which emerge and function mainly in the online space.

This article focuses on two crucial currents in online audiovisual creativity—*vaporwave* and *synthwave*. Although they originated in the early twenty-first century as online phenomena, their influence on popular culture is visible. The aesthetic frameworks they established have provided the foundation for invasive subgenres that transform them into carriers of specific ideological narratives. The remix culture of the internet facilitates these transformations, enabling the reinterpretation and appropriation of musical aesthetics within new contexts.

1. VAPORWAVE AS A DECONSTRUCTION AND REINTERPRETATION OF NOSTALGIA IN DIGITAL MUSIC

Vaporwave emerged as an experimental music genre that deconstructs both the sonic and aesthetic elements of 1980s and 1990s popular culture. The genre's characteristic sounds—based on samples of *easy listening* music, *smooth jazz*, and commercial jingles—undergo processes of slowing down, looping, and glitching, leading to their complete transformation. The result is an atmosphere that is both nostalgic and alienating, where familiar sounds take on an uncanny quality, and the commercial iconography of the 1980s and 1990s acquires an almost surreal character.

The origins of *vaporwave* are often linked to the album *Floral Shoppe* (2011) by *Macintosh Plus*, a project by American artist Ramona Andrei Xavier. The most

recognizable track from this album—often described as the “anthem” of the genre—is “リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー” (“Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing”). This track is a heavily manipulated version of Diana Ross’s “It’s Your Move”, drastically slowed down and subjected to glitch effects.

Visually, *vaporwave* is difficult to define precisely—its aesthetic is composed of numerous elements that evoke a sense of nostalgia. Among the most recognizable motifs are classical ruins and decayed statues referencing antiquity as a symbol of a bygone era, 1980s and 1990s anime and cartoons, logos of corporations that thrived during the economic boom, liminal spaces, as well as imagery associated with drug culture—particularly graphic depictions of marijuana. Shopping malls and computer hardware from the early days of graphical user interfaces are also recurring visual themes. Elements from the “old internet” frequently appear as well—dialog boxes from early operating systems, icons from vintage software, and interfaces from early web browsers. The genre also incorporates sound effects associated with outdated technology and the early days of the internet. Listeners may recognize the distinctive startup sounds of old operating systems, the dial-up noise of modem connections, or notification sounds from early instant messengers.

All these aspects are reflected in the very name of the genre. As Adam Harper notes in his article for the *Dummy* magazine:

Often the fog element is induced by some lo-fi effect such as screwing. But the significance of “vapour” doesn’t end there. It’s one letter away from, and strongly reminiscent of, the word ‘vaporware’, a derisory term for a software or hardware project undertaken by a tech company that is announced to the public but which, after much time passes, never actually comes to fruition. Such is the deferred and even tragic promise of fulfilment in vaporwave. But vaporware can also refer to the deliberate fabrication of future products, with no intention to eventually release them, so as to hold customers’ attention and appear to get to the next best thing before their rivals. Here the promises of capitalist advertising and PR become an outright fraud borne of the proclivities of the marketplace. Hence vaporwave as ‘selling smoke’.¹

To some extent, *vaporwave*’s very name already hints at its political connotations. Of course, as both a musical and aesthetic genre, it remains highly flexible in its expression—not all creators developing the style engage with its ideological themes. Nevertheless, whether or not *vaporwave* can be considered a critique of capitalism, its deep connection to consumer culture is undeniable. Rafał Sowiński summarizes this relationship as follows:

Vaporwave presents an interesting case for reflecting on the relationship between popular music, capitalism, and resistance to it. The glorification of consumption, standardization, and techno-

¹ Adam Harper, “Comment: Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza,” *Dummy*, July 12, 2012, <https://dmy.co/news/adam-harper-vaporwave>.

logical progress is taken to such an extreme in this genre that it ceases to be credible and instead becomes a pastiche of advertising messaging. At first glance, vaporwave appears to perfectly align with the characteristics of popular music as defined by Theodor W. Adorno (standardization, passive reception resulting from the representation of capitalist ideology, and the enforcement of conformity among audiences). In reality, however, it is more of a caricature—or perhaps even a negation—of these traits.²

2. LABORWAVE: THE IDEOLOGIZATION OF VAPORWAVE IN AN ANTI-CAPITALIST CONTEXT

Although *vaporwave* initially functioned as an ironic commentary on capitalist nostalgia, it eventually became susceptible to ideological reinterpretations. One of its most notable transformations is its leftist variant—*laborwave*.³ Like many other subgenres of *vaporwave*, the term *laborwave* lacks a definitive origin, instead emerging organically within online communities through a characteristic play on words typical of *vaporwave* nomenclature. In this form, *vaporwave* transcended mere critique of late capitalism and often adopts an anti-capitalist tone, incorporating references to socialist and Marxist propaganda—though these may be used in a satirical, ambiguous, or aestheticized manner. Samples of Karl Marx's and Vladimir Lenin's speeches began to appear in tracks as sampled audio elements, while the visual layer started to incorporate revolutionary worker symbolism.

Laborwave (from 'labor', referring to physical or manual work) is a subgenre of *vaporwave* that prominently features leftist themes, including communism, Marxism, and, less frequently, anarchism. It employs symbols associated with the labor movement—such as depictions of communist leaders and slogans calling for resistance against fascism—often replacing *vaporwave*'s classical motifs like Greco-Roman sculptures. However, this shift does not represent a complete break from *vaporwave*'s aesthetic. Anti-capitalist undertones have been present in *vaporwave* from the outset,

² Rafał Sowiński, "Vaporwave kapitalizm zremiksowany," *Kognitywistyka i Media w Edukacji*, no. 1 (2017): 41 (own translation).

³ This is sometimes considered part of the broader, so-called *politicalwave* category. However, *politicalwave* is more of a catch-all term used to describe politically charged derivatives of synthwave and vaporwave, rather than a clearly defined genre in itself. The term is used almost exclusively on platforms like the Aesthetics Wiki and as a tag on DeviantArt. There is no distinct genre known as *politicalwave*, nor are there artists explicitly identifying with it as their primary style. For this reason, I do not refer to it in this article as a genre of interest. My focus is on defined genres and the processes behind their use and development within cybersculture. In other words, *politicalwave* is not a widely adopted or coherent label; in my view, it functions more like a loose umbrella term—akin to a category header on Wikipedia—rather than a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

making *laborwave* less an entirely new movement and more a radicalized extension of the original genre.

Just as *vaporwave* constructs a mental space through the nostalgic reprocessing of late capitalism's visual and sonic codes, *laborwave* appropriates these tools and infuses them with a new ideology. While *vaporwave* often employs imagery of the "faded glory of capitalism"—shopping malls, neon-lit skylines, or pre-9/11 images of the World Trade Center—*laborwave* repurposes these techniques toward imagery of the Eastern Bloc and worker-oriented propaganda, focusing on class struggle rather than technological optimism. This sets it apart from *sovietwave*, another subgenre focused on a retrofuturist fascination with USSR space exploration and Cold War aesthetics.⁴ In contrast, *laborwave* does not create an independent visual space but rather "colonizes" *vaporwave*, injecting it with new ideological content. This is done by mixing it with themed visuals (for example, as seen in *Polish Laborwave (Classic Edition/Edycja Klasyczna)* on the YouTube channel *Instytut Pamięci Ludowej*) or by incorporating *vaporwave*—or occasionally *synthwave*-inspired techniques—into "cult classics" like *The Internationale* or anthems of communist states.

Musically, *laborwave* retains the core production techniques of *vaporwave*—slowed-down audio, heavy reverb, and sample manipulation—without contributing fundamentally new sonic characteristics. Rather than creating novel sounds, it often operates as an ideological rebranding or intensification of existing tracks. Slowed-down versions of communist anthems, processed through *vaporwave*-style production, dominate the genre. This approach enables *laborwave* to function within streaming platform algorithms; for instance, on YouTube, these tracks are often recommended to *vaporwave* listeners, effectively serving as a bridge between *vaporwave* and *Sovietwave* audiences.

⁴ One of the most recognizable *sovietwave* mixes is *Our Dream*, known in part for its distinctive thumbnail. The mix is distributed through multiple channels, which may vary over time. As of this writing, identical versions can be found on both the *SoulOfTheReaver* and *Alexander Golubeff* YouTube channels.

3. *TRADWAVE*: A CHRISTIAN-CONSERVATIVE REINTERPRETATION OF *VAPORWAVE*⁵

The conservative counterpoint to laborwave is *tradwave*. Creators of this subgenre have reshaped vaporwave's aesthetic, imbuing it with a Christian-conservative message. The characteristic pastel gradients of *vaporwave* began to merge with religious iconography—depictions of the Madonna, Gothic architecture, and liturgical scenes.

Musically, *tradwave* retains the ambient nature of *vaporwave*, but its producers incorporate slowed-down choral recordings, distorted in a manner typical of *vaporwave* production. In some cases, elements of sacred music—such as fragments of the Catholic Mass or classical organ compositions—are also subjected to digital manipulation. The result is a nostalgic, almost mystical sonic space that contrasts with *vaporwave*'s ironic and deconstructive nature. The visual layer of *tradwave* undergoes a similar transformation—dominated by Gothic architecture, images of saints, and digitally processed religious art, often combined with glitch-art effects. Unlike other vaporwave variants, *tradwave* does not focus on critiquing consumerism or late capitalist nostalgia. Instead, it emphasizes the sacred and upholds conservative values.

While *tradwave* is largely centered around Catholicism, some works reference broader conservative themes. In these cases, rather than religious iconography, *tradwave* visuals may incorporate figures associated with contemporary critiques of modernity—such as Jordan B. Peterson. His speeches have even inspired a separate microgenre called *meaningwave*, created and developed by DJ Akira The Don,⁶ which combines Peterson's philosophical musings with atmospheric electronic arrangements and typically features animated visuals.⁷

One of the more experimental forms of *tradwave* can be found on YouTube in the form of *Compline* (monastic evening prayers) recordings by the user *Wafers*. These audiovisual productions blend Gregorian chants and ambient music with digitally processed religious imagery. Though highly niche, such projects demonstrate how *vaporwave* and its derivatives can be used in a spiritual context, creating new spaces for musical and aesthetic experimentation.

⁵ The lack of publications on this topic led me to conduct further research, during which I found only a single mention on the University of Florida's Department of Religion website regarding the text *TradWave 伝統的な少年: Expression of Traditional Catholic Cultural Identity through the Net-Based Aesthetic Genre of Vaporwave*, written by students of this department, Samantha Manausa and Andrew Salyer. However, this text is not available in any published form.

⁶ Meaningwave (website), accessed March 1, 2025, <https://www.meaningwave.com>.

⁷ Whole playlists of this specific microgenre of edits can be found under the name “JBPWAVE” on YouTube.

Tradwave thus serves as an example of how *vaporwave* can be adapted depending on ideological and cultural contexts. While its reach remains limited, it represents an intriguing attempt to fuse digital aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s with a sacred narrative.

4. FROM IRONIC DECONSTRUCTION TO IDEOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION

As we can see, *vaporwave*, which initially emerged as an ironic deconstruction of late capitalist nostalgia, has evolved into a flexible space susceptible to ideological reinterpretations. Its plasticity—stemming from the lack of rigid genre boundaries—and deep embedding in digital culture have enabled the emergence of subgenres such as *laborwave* and *tradwave*, which repurpose its audiovisual code to promote specific narratives. The key mechanism driving this process is nostalgia itself—*vaporwave* not only arises from nostalgia but actively amplifies it, making it a powerful vehicle for emotion and collective imagination. The strength of nostalgia makes *vaporwave* particularly adaptable to new ideological contexts.

However, *vaporwave* is just one of many genres that capitalize on digitally mediated nostalgia. Alongside it, there exists a genre which does not *decode* the past anew but instead *affirms* it fully—*synthwave*. While *vaporwave* frequently questions the authenticity of memories and their aesthetic representations, *synthwave* operates in the opposite manner: it reconstructs an idealized vision of the 1980s, emphasizing its futuristic optimism. This uncritical celebration of the past makes *synthwave* just as susceptible to ideological appropriation as *vaporwave*—except instead of deconstructing nostalgia, *synthwave* engages in its *hyper-reconstruction*.

5. SYNTHWAVE: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF 1980S MUSICAL IDIOMS IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Much like *vaporwave*, *synthwave* draws inspiration from the past, yet it approaches nostalgia in a fundamentally different manner. While *vaporwave* operates through deconstruction and pastiche—often emphasizing transience and critiquing consumerist excess—*synthwave* focuses on the restoration of memories and the creation of an idealized vision of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Emerging around the mid-2000s, the genre is rooted in an aesthetic inspired by the period spanning from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Its sound is shaped by the distinct synthesizer tones of that era, particularly those found in film music. Artists

such as Giorgio Moroder, Vangelis, and John Carpenter contributed a unique sonic identity to action and science fiction classics, including *Terminator 2*, *Escape from New York*, and *Scarface*. In the early 2000s, these signature sounds were embraced by the French house music scene—most notably by Daft Punk—and in their reinterpreted form, they served as an inspiration for the first *synthwave* artists. Over the span of a decade, the genre gained sufficient recognition for its elements to permeate mainstream culture.⁸ This rise was facilitated by the growing nostalgia for the 1980s, as well as by film and television productions such as *Stranger Things* and numerous remakes and sequels of classic movies from that period. These include films like *TRON: Legacy* (2010), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *RoboCop* (2014), and later instalments of the *Terminator* series. There are also examples of new original productions heavily inspired by the movement itself, probably best represented by the crowdfunded *Kung Fury* (2015). The most striking example of *synthwave*'s influence bleeding into the mainstream music industry is *Blinding Lights* by The Weeknd, which is unmistakably shaped by the musical aesthetics of the genre.

According to Nicholas Diak, author of *Uncovering Stranger Things: Essays on Eighties Nostalgia, Cynicism, and Innocence in the Series*, one of the pivotal moments in the popularization of *synthwave* was the release of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), a game that drew heavily from 1980s film culture both visually and thematically. Another key event in the genre's rise to prominence was the premiere of *Drive* (2011), directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Its *synthwave* soundtrack—composed by Kavinsky and Collage in collaboration with the duo Electric Youth—played a significant role in expanding interest in the style.

The term *synthwave* emerged in the mid-2000s, coined by online music communities to describe a retro-futuristic electronic music style inspired by 1980s film scores. It gained broader recognition through platforms like Bandcamp and Last.fm, with artists like Kavinsky and Perturbator as early flag-bearers. It is worth mentioning that the term *retrowave* was also applied to this style. In some sources, the two are distinguished—*retrowave* being given a broader meaning that includes visual art styles as well.⁹ However, the term *synthwave* has generally overtaken *retrowave* and is now used more commonly as the default label for the genre. *Retrowave*, in turn, has become more narrowly associated with the visual aesthetic rooted in the genre's origins.

⁸ The genre grew large enough to even inspire a crowdfunded documentary about itself—*The Rise of the Synths* (2019), directed by Iván Castell.

⁹ Preston Cram, "What Is Synthwave?" Electrozombies, 2021, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://electrozombies.com/magazine/article/what-is-synthwave>.

Both musically and visually, *synthwave* relies on an idealized version of the 1980s. The key elements of its aesthetic include references to film posters of the era, VHS effects, and distinctive neon color schemes. Common motifs encompass lightning bolts, characteristic retro fonts, and neon-hued 3D grid patterns that optically suggest depth. As a cultural phenomenon, *synthwave* has become increasingly recognizable, thriving alongside the resurgence of 1980s nostalgia. The revival of productions like *Stranger Things* and the reimagining of many iconic brands from that era have further solidified its standing. In the following section, I will examine a far darker and potentially dangerous trend that uses *synthwave* as its foundation—one that extends beyond mere aesthetics or musical experimentation and instead involves its ideological appropriation for the dissemination of specific beliefs.

6. *FASHWAVE*: THE AESTHETIC COLONIZATION OF *SYNTHWAVE* AS A FAR-RIGHT PROPAGANDA TOOL

Unlike the organic evolutions within *synthwave*, *fashwave* represents a deliberate and forceful intervention in the genre's aesthetics. Its creators appropriate the visual and musical elements of *synthwave*—such as neon grids, retro-futuristic typography, and 1980s-inspired soundscapes—and transform them into a vehicle for far-right propaganda. Visually, *fashwave* borrows heavily from both the glossy aesthetics of the 1980s and the iconography of the 1940s, embedding fascist motifs—such as Roman statues, nationalist slogans, and militaristic imagery—within a synthetic, futuristic framework.

The term *fashwave* was not coined by a single individual but rather emerged organically within far-right online communities around 2015. According to alt-right figures Andrew Aurenheimer (known as “Weev”) and Gabriel Sohier-Chaput (“Zieger”), the aesthetic originated on the now-defunct Ironmarch forum, where it was pioneered by Benjamin Raymond, the founder of the British neo-Nazi group National Action.¹⁰ The genre and the term gained broader visibility in 2016, when Andrew Anglin, editor of the extremist website The Daily Stormer, began actively promoting *fashwave* as part of the alt-right’s memetic strategy and digital propaganda efforts¹¹.

¹⁰ Johan Enkvist, *Comfy: Fashwave’s Role in Building and Maintaining Community in Far-Right Online Spaces* (Bachelor’s thesis, Uppsala University, 2024), 9–11, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-535681>.

¹¹ Jip Lemmens, “Putting the Neon in Neo-Nazi,” *Eidolon*, October 19, 2017, <https://eidolon.pub/putting-the-neon-in-neo-nazi-4cea7c471a66>.

On a visual level, *fashwave* relies on three main components: a *synthwave*-inspired background, a propagandistic slogan, and a centrally placed object symbolizing the ideology of its creators. A key aspect of this movement is aesthetic colonization—the introduction of elements previously foreign to *synthwave*. This is particularly evident in the incorporation of fascist and Nazi symbols into a previously neutral or nostalgic space.

Fashwave is often associated with the alt-right movement and, unlike other sub-genres of *synthwave*, does not evolve the existing aesthetic but rather rewrites it for its own purposes. Although some publications mention it in the context of *vaporwave*, in practice, its aesthetics draw primarily from *synthwave*, making this the most relevant area of focus. In *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?*, the authors emphasize that *fashwave* is a highly formalized genre of visual and musical propaganda:

Autonomous alt-right graphic artists and musicians have honed *fashwave* into a deeply formulaic genre of visual and audio propaganda. Visually, *fashwave* art simply overlays neon filters and digital visuals over some combination of classical motifs, sci-fi imagery, photographs of historical fascists, white supremacist symbols, and simple right-wing slogans. War is a common focus, sometimes depicted as glorious and heroic, sometimes as tragic, or celebrated with a death-worshipping nihilism.

An analysis of *fashwave* graphics reveals two primary stylistic approaches. The first involves the use of classical sculptures and monumental architecture—particularly references to ancient Rome—as symbols of an imperialist vision of the world. While *vaporwave* also employs similar imagery, it does so in a completely different context. In *vaporwave*, ancient statues are often depicted as decayed ruins, emphasizing nostalgia and transience. In *fashwave*, however, Rome is presented as an aspirational model, a vision of order and hierarchy that aligns with the utopian ideals of the alt-right. The second, far more direct motif is the incorporation of fascist and neo-Nazi symbols: the Black Sun, swastikas, fascist eagles, and historical figures associated with these ideologies. A defining feature of *fashwave* is the placement of these symbols within a *synthwave* aesthetic, allowing creators to reframe them and make them appear as an integral part of that world.

On a musical level, *fashwave* often incorporates elements associated with fascist and Nazi music, such as march-like rhythms, audio clips from fascist rallies, or recordings of speeches by historical leaders. It is this forceful interference with *synthwave*'s aesthetics that fundamentally distinguishes *fashwave* from the natural evolution of the genre. Rather than an organic stylistic progression, it represents a deliberate attempt to appropriate a popular aesthetic and repurpose it as a tool of propaganda. A clear example of this process can be seen in two primary forms of

fashwave graphics: propaganda posters set within a *synthwave* world but containing explicitly fascist symbolism, and photomontages of historical images edited with neon aesthetics. These visuals not only attract audiences with the appeal of *synthwave*'s aesthetic but also attempt to legitimize fascist content by presenting it in a more accessible, stylized form.

A characteristic tactic of *fashwave* is the replacement of traditional *synthwave* icons with new, fascist symbols. One notable example is the substitution of the classic neon sun—a recognizable feature of *synthwave* aesthetics—with the Black Sun, a symbol historically linked to Nazism and contemporary neo-Nazi movements. At this point, it is worth noting two additional phenomena related to *fashwave*: its connection to the former (and now current) president of the United States, who was at the time campaigning for reelection, and its presence in Poland.

Donald Trump aligns well with the aesthetic and nostalgic framework of *synthwave* as a media personality who rose to financial prominence in the 1980s and was associated with opulence (Trump was a fixture in virtually all available media at the time as an icon of wealth). Some commentators connects this name with *fashwave* as well: “At the center of it all is Trump, a living time-capsule of 80s capitalist excess and garishness, and thus the ideal subject for *fashwave*. In ‘Trumpwave’, a track by the synthwave artist iamMANOLIS is annexed to play over footage of a younger Trump wrestling at WWE, hitting on women, and eating stuffed-crust for a Pizza Hut commercial”—as noted by Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry in *Vice* magazine.¹²

This thematic connection almost perfectly fulfils the conditions for *fashwave* creators to link Trump's persona as an icon to nostalgia for the 1980s, further expanding their colonization of *synthwave*. “Trumpwave”—a term that, aside from the aforementioned (now-removed) YouTube track, also refers to the entire subgenre—shares an audience with *fashwave* and even some of the same artists. While it can be considered a *fashwave* subgenre that extends its reach into *synthwave*, it also partially overlaps with *vaporwave*, as some of its productions incorporate techniques associated with that genre.

Fashwave has also found a presence in Poland, including on Polish-language YouTube channels. Content labeled as “nacjowave” (often stylized with spaces between each letter, e.g., “n a c j o w a v e”), or sometimes simply as *fashwave*, appears to be a straightforward replication of Anglo-American *fashwave* productions due to the genre's simple production methods. One example is the video *NacjoWave*,

¹² Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry, “Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music,” *Vice*, January 27, 2017.

published on April 1, 2020, on the YouTube channel “Nacjo Farmer”.¹³ This video is essentially a montage of footage from various nationalist marches and rallies. While the exact events from which these recordings originate are not specified, the footage prominently features ONR flags, Roman-style banners with the phrase “DEFEND EUROPE,” and, toward the end, the burning of an EU flag alongside footage of the burning rainbow installation at Plac Zbawiciela in Warsaw. The visuals are overlaid with graphic effects and set to a soundtrack by Svhgar and Yurikart titled *So Far Away* (the chanting-like sounds in the video originate from this track rather than the rally itself). This suggests that the Polish version of *fashwave* largely imitates existing patterns without significant reinterpretation.

As seen in this analysis, *synthwave*, as an aesthetic reconstruction of the 1980s, operates with a specific type of nostalgia—one that is neither deconstructive nor ironic but rather affirmative and escapist. In this world, the past is stripped of historical complexities and presented as a coherent vision of (retro)futuristic aesthetics. This idealization makes *synthwave*, like *vaporwave*, susceptible to ideological reinterpretations. The *fashwave* movement represents a radical example of such an appropriation—one that utilizes *synthwave* aesthetics but embeds them within an extreme-right narrative. While *synthwave* celebrates a vision of a (retro)futuristic world, *fashwave* overwrites this vision with new meanings, transforming it into a tool of propaganda. This shift is not merely a stylistic experiment but a deliberate attempt to harness the emotional power of nostalgia to construct specific political narratives.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH PROSPECTS

While the fusion of musical trends with specific aesthetics—manifesting in fashion, fan visual identity, or distinctive artistic motifs—has been evident in the past, the development of the internet and its unique culture has allowed these connections to evolve into an entirely new category of music-aesthetic trends.

The examples of *vaporwave* and *synthwave* illustrate how nostalgia-based creative movements have become arenas for ideological appropriation and reinterpretation. Initially neutral aesthetics, focused on reprocessing the past and its audiovisual traces, have been repurposed as vehicles for politically charged narratives. Movements such as *laborwave*, *tradwave*, and *fashwave* demonstrate how the remix culture inherent to the internet and the evolution of trends can be leveraged as tools for propaganda. By capitalizing on the emotional connotations already embedded in

¹³ “Nacjo Farmer”, “NacjoWave”, YouTube, April 1, 2020, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9vpTBIIUSw>.

a given aesthetic, groups can subtly reshape its symbolism and visual language to serve new ideological purposes.

A particularly noteworthy example of a similar mechanism in action is the growing trend of Rhodesia-related content on TikTok. Posts tagged with #Rhodesia romanticize the now-defunct state through archival footage and hauntological sound design. Music from the 1970s, altered with reverb and slowed-down effects, is layered over historical footage—employing the same nostalgia-amplifying techniques found in *vaporwave* and *synthwave*. A notable example is one of the most recognizable of such videos on TikTok, posted by the user @imenglandtillidie.¹⁴ It features a quote from a character played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the film *Blood Diamond* (2006), expressing identification as Rhodesian, followed by historical footage edited with retro-style filters and set to *The Days* by Chrystal, specifically in its Notion remix, which is widely recognized on TikTok. Although niche, this phenomenon highlights how aesthetic appropriation continues to adapt to new digital platforms. The short-form nature of TikTok encourages simplified narratives, seemingly making it an effective medium for delivering ideological messaging.

While it is impossible to predict with certainty whether such cycles will repeat on future internet platforms, the emergence of “Rhodesiawave” on TikTok provides a strong indication of the resilience and adaptability of these mechanisms. It signals that the colonization of music-aesthetic trends by ideological movements is not a singular occurrence but an ongoing process, continuously evolving alongside changes in the media landscape. This makes the study of these trends a particularly compelling field of research—not only for cultural theorists but also for sociologists, political scientists, media scholars, and musicologists. Examining their development offers valuable insights into contemporary digital phenomena and sheds light on how audiovisual culture can be strategically employed as a tool of political and ideological influence.

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