

Looking Back to Look Forward: The Evolution of Nostalgia-Based Sounds

The relationship between the past and the present is complicated. Memories fade as time passes, and what once filled the senses becomes refracted, hazy, and pushed to the back of the mind. Yet, even if gone from consciousness, the past always persists. This imprecision is the root of nostalgia. Evoked by many artists, it is the driving force behind hypnagogic pop.

Hypnagogic pop uses nostalgia as an approach rather than a feeling. It takes root in 'hauntology,' which mashes sounds from the past to form crowded, muddled atmospheres. The result is lo-fi and indistinct, falling between comfort and unease, familiarity and the unknown. It is an audible manifestation of its deeper ideas. British philosopher Jacques Derrida defines hauntology as the persistence of cultural and social elements from the past. Through the lens of the future, forks in the road become clearer, with the results of alternate choices hovering like a ghost. Think of an old friend's necklace found stashed in the drawer of a childhood bedroom. When found, the necklace transcends its tangibility as a representation of what was and what could have been, leaving its holder stuck between both worlds.

The detached, unsettling nature of hauntology provides an appeal, but an

unpalatable listening experience. Using the same lo-fi aesthetic and combining it with pop structures, artists like John Maus and Ariel Pink developed what is now termed 'hypnagogic pop,' or 'h-pop.' Hypnagogic pop revitalizes but never replicates the pop culture and analog production techniques from the '80s and early '90s. It does so through filters of reverb and grain, taking recognizable new wave and psychedelia influences and manipulating them to create something new. Like its influences, h-pop is dominated by synths. Bold and blown-out, these synths ground h-pop's otherwise washed-out mixes, making familiarity the centerpiece of an uncanny genre. H-pop's intention is not to bring these styles back, but to trace their effect on collective memory.

Ariel Pink especially popularized h-pop by way of his commitment to the DIY aesthetic and nonchalant, stream-of-consciousness lyrical style. Pink uses nostalgia to enhance the mundaneness of everyday life. On "Interesting Results" off his 2005 album *House Arrest*, Pink sings "Every time I pick up the pen / I get interesting results." His lyrics are routinely this straightforward, but his 'pop-y,' breathy cadence, warped ambiance, and interjections of vocal whooshes, 'ooh's, and 'yea's work to create sounds so erratic they feel dreamlike.

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Refracted through memory, the mall lights brighten, the radio crackles comfortingly, and the TV's light enhances the room. Instead of sharpening these memories, Pink revels in their haziness. Combined with the texture and obscurity of his production, Pink brings the past into the present, using upbeat pop structures and nostalgia's distortion to augment its normalcy.

Where Pink's pop-centric approach was a highlight reel of the past, other artists used h-pop's nostalgic base to take a more holistic view. Most notably, James Ferraro and his album *Far Side Virtual*. Reminiscent of elevator music, shopping mall ambiance, and video game loading screens, *Far Side Virtual* taps into a different aspect of the collective unconscious. Ferraro examines the sounds that guide the transitory; those that fill paths but are never found at destinations. His heavy sampling creates an entirely familiar yet unidentifiable atmosphere, satirizing how little people are present in their lives. In modern society, commercialization guides attention, linking memory to fleeting trends and styles. By drawing it towards how much lies barely outside of recognition, Ferraro shows consumerism's grasp on society, ever-changing from his references but just as pervasive decades later.

Hypnagogic pop primarily brought the atmosphere of the '80s and '90s to the new century, but as the 2010s approached, the Internet's evolution and rapid technological innovation pushed artists to reflect on the century's turn. Artists combined the hauntological approach with early Internet aesthetics to form the retro futuristic styles of vaporwave and chillwave. The Internet's vastness fueled a shared vision of many

futures, allowing artists to anticipate what a future hypnagogic pop might sound like. Both styles are more electronic and sample-heavy than hypnagogic pop, keeping the same lo-fi charm but adapting it to look ahead rather than behind. Where hauntology ruminates on the pervasiveness of the past in the present, vaporwave, and chillwave go a step further, projecting that pervasiveness forward.

With the influx of DIY music and new 'waves' facilitated through the Internet, tracing the artists and sounds in these genres around 2010 proved difficult. Jumping on their popularity and anticipating their growth, Pitchfork launched *Altered Zones*, a group of blogs showcasing the best of the underground DIY scene. The spotlight on these nostalgia-centered sounds made words like 'cassette,' 'tape,' and 'analog' common in artists' names and songs, dulling their novelty. *Altered Zones* lasted a little over a year, ending in 2011. Hypnagogic pop largely fell into obscurity alongside it, with chillwave and vaporwave's futuristic, hyperrealistic appeals taking place.

Hypnagogic pop's lifespan is just as enigmatic as its sound. Marked by its approach, h-pop evaded limitations as a genre, constrained only by reminiscence on the past. Though a source of interest, h-pop's loose definition and strong sense of satire evaded any strong connection or understanding outside of its shtick. Yet, maybe remaining just out of reach was the point. Its inability to grapple with the past is what gives it its power after all.

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