*From Boylife to Hurt, with Love*



Jonatan Aron Leandoer Håstad a.k.a. Yung Lean, is a Swedish hip-hop artist who first came to prominence in 2013, gaining traction within the music industry through his breakout single *Ginseng Strip 2002*, and subsequently cemented his style later that year through *Hurt*. Joining a force of thousands, the early part of the 2010s saw a voluminous amount of globally recognised hip-hop; LONG.LIVE.A$AP by A$AP Rocky (2013) and Kendrick Lamar's good kid, m.A.A.d city (2012), all the way to Die Antwoord's Ten$ion (2012), to scratch the surface with a few names.

However Yung Lean, even though amassing millions of views, remained in the shade of the limelight - relatively - in part due to his obscure online presence and his alternative aesthetics and style. However, with the release of his first studio album, *Unknown Death 2002* (2013), he would solidify himself in the minds of many critics and artists alike as unique and innovative, and more than willing to push his craft further and further without conforming to more traditional, American hip-hop.

To begin to understand the importance of Yung Lean on contemporary hip-hop and more broadly culture, a retrospective investigation into some of Leandoer's creative practises must be undertaken, and this search will attempt to pick out and hopefully

analyse some of the stylistic and affectual aesthetics present in his work which often relate to the haunted culture of a present so entangled with its past...

*Boylife in EU*, Yung Lean's opening track of 2020, was released in the early stages of the year as a single to his upcoming album *Starz* (and world tour which was cancelled by the insurgence of Covid-19). *Boylife*, regardless of the affairs of quarantine and social distancing, is an emphatic summary of the past decade, highlighted by Lean himself in 2013 with his rise to stardom, and now it seems only right that he should return to close it off. The title hints at an overall perspective of the world: the world of rehashing, rediscovering, and re-understanding the cultures of old, so wrapped up in histories of European culture, and so Lean's experience as a young adolescent in the European Union has been defined by his own choices and success, which evidently he himself is aware of, whispering in *Starz's* opening track *Violence* "you're a product of your environment, my environment's a product of me" (2020). It seems that Lean is describing a Europe that is no different from any other globalised culture of commodity, and this



culture is one he himself helped in the forging of. The 2010's were tumultuous, like any ten year span, and his impact was both monumental and affectless, all in one flashy bouquet of blooming, withering flowers. There is one stark understanding to be taken, it seems, from this decade so full of political upheaval and ecological change, of Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg; that while cultural agency can

continue to be continuously regurgitated, it must in some form or other look to be progressive, or developmental.

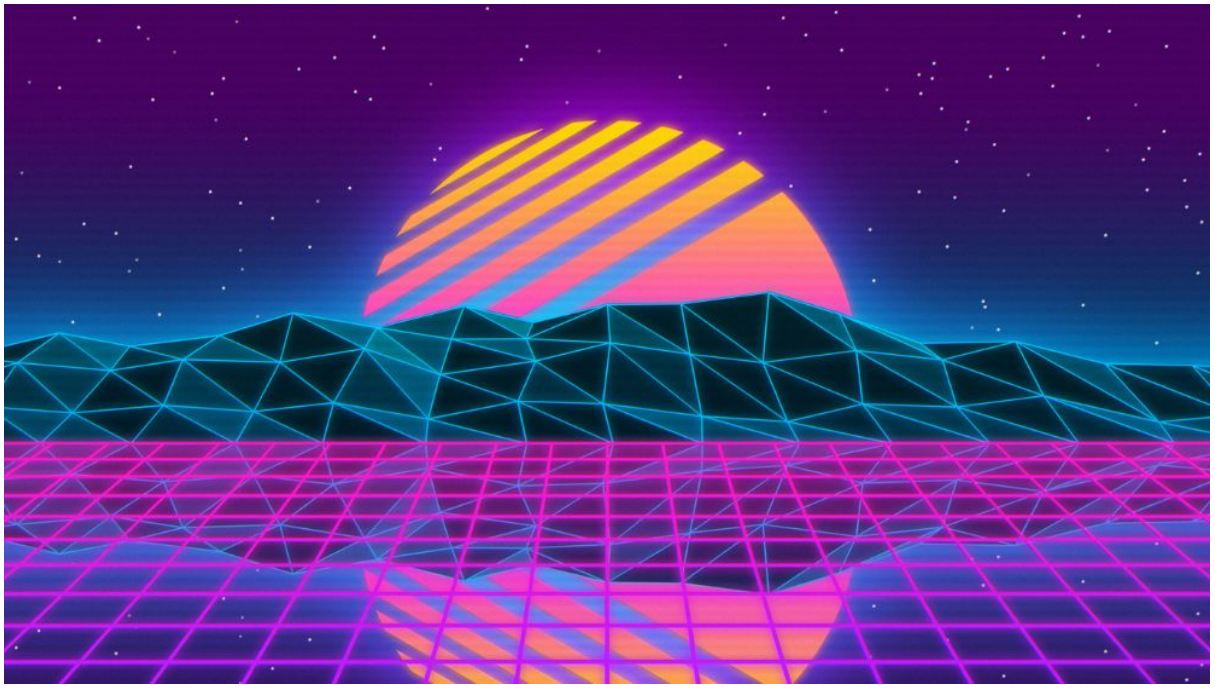
To illustrate the requirement of change or progression, we must retreat back to 2013, wherein we find the initial signs of the success and influence Yung Lean was to accumulate. While *Ginseng Strip 2002* was Lean's introduction to the world stage, *Hurt*, arriving soon after, would display for all to see the intricate, DIY elements inherent in so much of his colourful, 'unfinished' look.




In the video, pictured above, Lean flaunts arrogantly, surrounded by a rich array of different props such as Pokemon cards, old Gameboys, and Arizona Iced Tea, decking himself out with 80s brands, sunglasses and bucket hats. The open desire for possession and wealth is apparent, and quite refreshing, as at the same time, he portrays a contentedness with whatever he can make of his environment.

He appears complacent, relaxed in the settings he has created for himself, immersed in neon pinks and blues and greens. Ethereal landscapes, demolished through pixelation and repetitive animation give his style a gritty, GIF-like substance. The convoluted, trashy imagery is evidence of Leandoer's childhood in the expansive age of youthful integration with the digital environment of the Internet, and this experience leaks explicitly into his artistic endeavours. Where does such a

passionate eye for a flashy, retro-ish aesthetic steeped in lonely, haunted cultures find its roots? One factor, forming outside of the mainstream and any commodified industry is ‘Vaporwave’, “an Internet-born electronic-music microgenre that consistently divides critics and listeners alike with its singularly strange aesthetic and guerrilla methods of production” (Tanner, 2016, pp. 11-12), and this culture is certainly not limited to the realms of music making, with its own standard set of imagery, involving bright, computer-generated landscapes and colourings including everything ‘nostalgic’ from old PCs to Californian palm trees. *Hurt*, to its core, is a cinematic interpretation of haunted cultures mashed together with the aesthetics of vaporwave.



Vaporwave intends to be critical in its brittle superficiality, in love with a past that many of its contributors have no living memory of, the clearest example being Macintosh Plus’ *Floral Shoppe* (2011), sampling and editing the likes of Dancing Fantasy and Diana Ross, artists active largely before the artist, Ramona Xavier, was even born. Through the artists producing this low quality, remixed plethora of samples and sounds, “we are confronted by ideological ghosts that refer to nothing but themselves, and what we think of as the past, is an idea that is only present now” (Zero Books, 2016). This transparency, this obviousness so brutally honest in its

desire to replicate and rework well known tracks is laid palms up by Yung Lean, and he goes a step further by simply taking Suicideyear's *CCCXXV* (2013), recording lyrics over it, and releasing it to YouTube as *Hurt*.

To be vaporwave, a subsection of culture in love with the past, is to be in love with what Hito Steyerl would call the 'Poor Image' (2009), as a redevelopment of the past entails an interest in a culture not currently as developed as the present, and this redevelopment goes for any sort of cultural phenomena. Leandoer embodies the Poor Image, as the production in his music or the accompanying video work, while often backed by large budgets, is scrappy, jumpy - elegantly inelegant - and "this is precisely why it ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings" (p.7).

This is not to say that there is no depth or meaningful ideologies behind the conception of his practise, but rather that to tackle the contemporary world and late capitalism, he chooses to comment on the dominance of the spectacle, and of vibrant reminiscence by displaying his own forms of it. Likewise, vaporwave enthusiasts, whether professing manic love for post-Kerouac road trips or the glorious days spent on the likes of Sonic the Hedgehog or R-Type, share one common obsession as "an entire community of artists, musicians, remixers, and critics listening to and creating strange and exciting sounds that grapple with nostalgia, consumerism, and the uncanny in a digital age" (Tanner, 2016, p. 12). By its very nature then, vaporwave dreams of being different, and seperate, and Mark Fisher would argue that this dream results in a direct opposition to its desires; that there is an "establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time", and that "they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream" (2009, p. 9). Anyhow, the vaporwave populace share a fascinating determination to remain outside of the mainstream, whether the music produced is recognised or not, which results in a separation of the artist from their music. This is where Vaporwave and Sad Boy culture decidedly split off from one another, and the Sad Boy's decision to leave Suicideyear's instrumental track on *Hurt* recognisably untouched is the first

telling sign of the desire to discover superstar status; doing this would open up the track to an audience already established via the discography of Suicideyear, an artist well known for his remixes of mainstream hip-hop artists.
Leandoer displays a clear inspiration taken from nostalgic cultures such as seen in vaporwave, however to blame his success on this alone would be too simple, as any teenager with a laptop camera and the basic, pre-installed image processors and editors could employ the previously discussed aesthetics if only they have the eye to spot them. Defining the success of the Sad Boys is a multitude of variables such as their 'other' exoticness; accents, references, fashions, rounded up to be all of their 'look' that does not conform to confirmed American-Western culture. While aspects such as their online networking and marketing, or the utilisation of their deep understanding of dominant cultures are important, I believe that how they became recognised globally is not as imperative a discussion as why they could discover the space for themselves to succeed.

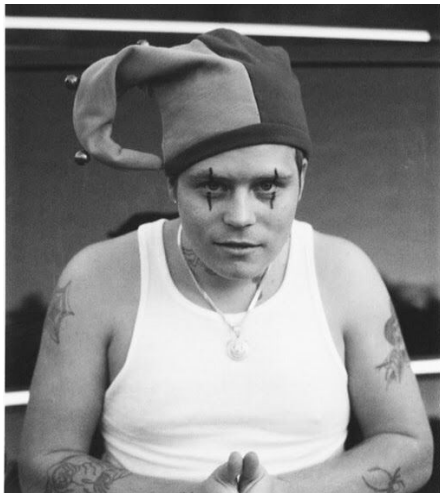
In an era of limitless accessibility to all ranges of content in which the variance of does not reach too far, determined by Western trends and algorithms, what aspects of any musical practise enables an artist to stand out from the crowds full of adlibs, punchlines, and easy metaphors? To be apart, one must appear to be 'alternative', and who in the hip-hop industry does this better than Yung Lean? Throughout his prolific career, consisting of troops of tracks with highly developed music videos accompanying, Lean displays the ability to constantly change and experiment. His videos, ranging from the colourful, epileptic staticity of *Hurt*, to the black and white short film narrative of 2018's *friday the 13th*, allude to a broader range of interests than that of online forums and history.
The very nature of celebrity has shifted in the past decade, with the proliferation of influencers and online personalities, and this shift has allowed for projects such as Yung Lean to attract the limelight much more easily. "Celebrity is traditionally thought of as an innate quality gifted to extraordinary people, contemporary celebrity culture has shifted to focus on people and things that are usually constructed, can be transient, are usually sensational, and often visually based" (Abidin, 2018, p. 4), which implies simply that the initiation of any individual or group to the global hall of

fame requires less inherent qualities or talents, but rather a process involving a certain perceived level of authenticity, and must of course be entertaining. Leandoer does not however have an enormous or prolific online presence, and yet he remains relevant, and more importantly, recognisable. Due to a career spawning in his and his friends' bedrooms as teenagers, progressing into his life as an accomplished young adult, we have seen many different ideas and tastes being explored.





Aesthetics of the circus, the big suits of David Byrne, side projects Jonatan Leandoer127 and Död Mark; Yung Lean is an individual taken by everything, from Japanese anime such as Dragonball-Z to the novels of J.D. Salinger.





Following on from years of artistic growth, Lean finds himself in 2020 solidified as a global cultural influencer, whether blatant and up front, or shadowing the mainstream; “I pull strings, Gepetto” (2020). He has experimented with many of the materials available to him, including vocals, video work, fashion, drugs, and love. His fanbase is loyal, and he can assuredly continue in the same vein, but Jonathan Leandoer is well renowned for his abrasiveness; his willingness to subvert, and now it seems he has begun to apply this to Yung Lean. The medium he is beginning to pick apart and toy with is his own presence, his celebrity and aesthetics, and this shift has been made visible in the video for *Boylife in EU*.



The video, presented originally by Spazio Maoicchi during the Milan Women’s Fashion Week, was shot in a set made of cheap materials plastered with opposing, vibrant colours. The video alludes to a progression, time spent growing up with beginnings enmeshed in the internet; the products of leaking out into the physical world as Leandoer himself does. *Hurt* displayed for all to see the clear references to all kinds of pop culture, and now after the years spent developing and experiencing stardom, ultimately becoming embedded in those same cultures, the references and interpretations are much less blatant. The stylistic features so prevalent cannot be ignored; vibrant surroundings, unorthodox dancing more akin to psychedelic

movement, and dull facial expressions have crawled out of the Final Cut Pro interface, and into a set constructed by technicians and shot by filmographers.
At heart, Yung Lean has remained the same: he does not try to ignore his past, or cover it with roses, but rather wishes to work with it and learn from it, and *Boylife in EU* remembers this past, and through this remembrance a sense of closure is provoked. The lyrics do not refer to any one specific experience of the EU or adolescence, and with no clear references the track and accompanying video convey predominantly bodily reaction; a track which induces sentimentality, nostalgia, a past in which no one experience is relevant, and thus a sense of what is to come is captured.

From *Boylife* to *Hurt*, with love and all the best wishes, Yung Lean has returned in 2020 to redevelop the very way we perceive him. No longer is he a sweaty, boyish trickster tempting his viewers into his precarious lifestyle, instead he has embodied the lifestyle he so adored and now looks out from it, no longer able to imagine himself inside the world of Pokémon or Yu-Gi-Oh, with false jewelry and cheap teas. With an already impressive career behind him, the point has come where Jonatan Aron Leandoer Håstad and Yung Lean can't pretend to be person and project, a feat that even Donna Harraway would be proud of.
Leandoer has become "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid between machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1991, p. 150); a cyborg in the most comprehensible sense. While he may not hold 'superhuman' capabilities, he has indeed subverted the ideas of the differences between the physical and the digital.
The 'real' and the 'unreal' are inseparable, for to exist in either provides similar opportunities for equal agency, presence, and power. So to embody and accommodate for both entails a more complete merging, an emergence of a literal cyborg who holds the social influence of a myth; the power of fiction enforced by the shadow or 'ghost' of the original organism.
Put otherwise, his online celebrity and his private sociality have become hard to distinguish between, and with the help of his insistence of the sincerity of his

intentions, we are persuaded to conclude that Leandoer is truly who he says he is: Yung Lean.

"The truth, that you're so scared of hearing is that in fact reality, and fantasy, are exactly the same thing!"
- Jeremy Usborne (2005) *Peep Show*

The formulation of a new era of Yung Lean's artistry has begun, through the combination of his music, aesthetics and celebrity persona, all into one coherent structure present in both the physical world and the digital. Fittingly then, this essay has been founded just prior to the release of Yung Lean's highly anticipated new album, *Starz*, heralding a new journey, a new direction, into an environment so dependant on the collaging of the dominant cultural landscapes; the aforementioned digital world, and the physical, 'real' world we are all so well versed in. For the highly devout followers of Jonathan Leandoer, there has never been a more exciting time for the shape the world of music will begin to take.

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