

Random Access Memories

“Longing in artworks, which aims at the reality of the non-existent, takes the form of remembrance.” - Theodor W. Adorno

One way to say it is to ask this question: have we ever, and can we ever, speak honestly of culture? And when I say “honestly,” I mean in some pure, unmediated way, one that doesn’t reflect our own social and historical position, and the language and knowledge that accompanies it. I thought a lot while researching and workshopping this written component about the various ideas we’ve talked about this semester, about the questions that media poses to us and that we pose to media, the ones that likely can’t ever really be resolved in one fell swoop, or easily. I also thought about some ideas and debates from other classes, and from other parts of my life. One thing that I keep coming back to through the course material for this class is the idea of “digital dualism”: what the relationship is between “online” and “irl,” and how those two spheres interact both socially and individually. I think talking about the internet has also become different under Covid, with all of our lives mediated by screens (there’s so much to be said about how the forms of our work and leisure mirror each other, but that’s different). The ways that lives are *differently* mediated has also become apparent, and the identification of the internet with advanced capitalist countries and culture is this whole other dilemma. There is a difference between zoom meetings all day, and the role the internet plays in an Amazon warehouse, or in places of economic extraction and exploitation across the globe, that are not comfortable for many Americans to think about. What I’m trying to say in so many words is that I believe it is important not to lose sight of the stakes of things. I’ve come to be incredibly critical of theories that treat the internet or personal computing technology as singular and irreversible rather than

particular, historical, and contingent. The internet structures many of our lives, but we should resist thinking of the ways we (what “we,” of course is even being spoken of?) experience life structured by the internet and personal computing as universal. But what they are always of course, is political, due to the very way they are situated within the course of capitalist development and Western society. The same goes for the responses they provoke about what the relationship should be between humans and technology. My video is composed of archived .gifs from geocities websites, which I sourced by using search terms that are often used in relationship to the internet: “power,” “sex,” “politics,” “technology,” and so forth. I explore a moment where these aesthetics that we look back on as “web 1.0” proliferated, and hope to reveal something about what looking back and mythologizing does. At the same time you could say that my real goal is this: to explore how a technology has been used in ways that are downright absurd compared to its original uses. Maybe looking towards the absurd, banal, and uncanny can help us right now to recover the hopes that the internet once brought, or that we think it did.

In order to place my video, I offer this necessarily polemical series of notes on the internet, life, and art. It contains hyperlinks throughout to try to highlight the fluid and relational nature that the internet as medium often takes.

20 NOTES ON POST-INTERNET LIFE AND POLITICS INSPIRED BY GEOCITIES

1. In 1974, the Eastern-European exile Amos Vogel publishes his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, which contains the following apologia: “A still is not a film. It lacks the dimensions of time and movement-- indispensable components of film

art-- and represents only a small fraction of a single second of a motion picture.

Words are not the best way to deal with a visual medium.” In response I offer this apologia: neither images nor words are not the best way to deal with the experiential and relational medium of the internet. Still we find it appropriate to make an attempt at conversion across form, and across time, to try and make sense.

2. But some things do not “make” sense, even as they might evoke it. The video artist Ryan Trecartin¹ remarks on the break that mediated culture brings: “I think lots of people born at the same time, or anytime after the birth of the home computer, see “-isms” as applications rather than truths and see definitions as filters rather than containers. It’s an exciting privilege to be chunked into the [culture flow](#) after so many people have made it possible to be fluid in practice, instead of merely in theory.” However, in practice, the culture flow does not necessarily escape the pre-existing culture that it flows from and between. Who is to say that we cannot be filtered into new containers, ones that simultaneously reinscribe power while abstracting it?
3. Modernity was the shock of the new; if we are something more or other than “modern” now, then are we lacking for newness? Or is it that we experience things repeating themselves in equally tragic and farcical terms? We restage culture and history at every turn: a mythic American greatness, a return to “normalcy,” reboots of every show you can think of, renewed culture wars following the same patterns of power. Yet we are also thrust into dizzying and nauseating social change, uncharted territory.

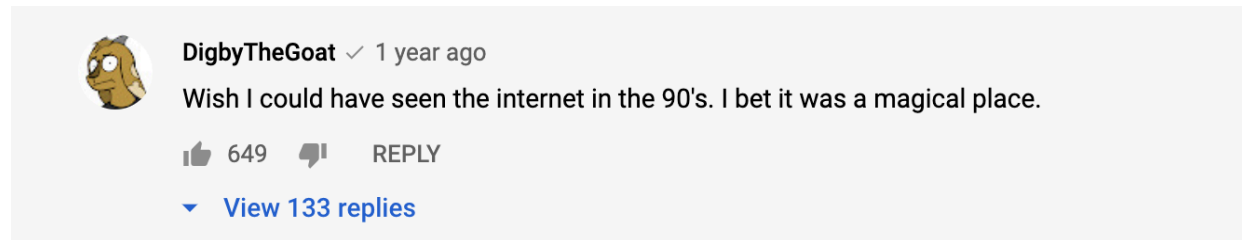
4. In the 2007 movie *Southland Tales*, Sarah Michelle Gellar's character says "Scientists are now saying that the future will be more futuristic than previously imagined." She plays an adult film star working on a reality TV show.¹ At what point does [reality](#) become pornographic, or pornography become "real" ?
5. If all that is solid does not melt into air, it does something worse; we extract [natural resources](#) just to build "the cloud," social language that we map onto infrastructure.
6. Michel Foucault thought that practicing "technologies of the self" could offer resistance, or liberation. It is possible that the self merely becomes another [technology of control](#).
7. The internet is textual, but traditionally thought to be more informational than poetic. Yet [information becomes poetry](#), in a way that is equally novel and archaic: intelligibility is not the point, but every shitpost reveals more about our epoch than what is taught in MFA classrooms.
8. Benjamin Bratton defines the internet as an architecture of ["planetary-scale computation."](#) What this means is that the internet is embedded into our world in a host of accidental ways, just as it also appears to be nowhere, or immaterial.
9. Let's pause for a moment to consider the link between the rise of the internet and the dominance of global neoliberalism. "Neoliberalism," is a term that has been criticized by some in recent years for coming to mean so much that it doesn't mean anything, but it is easy to make clear that it is more than a buzzword; it is simultaneously an economic order (where deregulation, privatization, and the introduction of market logics into every sphere of life reigns supreme), as well as

[a cultural shift](#) that values economic utility and individualism in ways that break from earlier periods of capitalism. In this way it actually requires ideological facilitation and is not just a guaranteed stage of objective economic progress. Another pithy definition: neoliberalism is capitalism saving itself from democracy. Markets do not exist naturally; they must be *constructed*.

10. What do you see when people accrue data as part of their identity. Is this the reduction of life to metrics? If it is, does this constitute an intensification of biopolitics, or a shift to some other mode of regulation?
11. Everybody wants to make metaphors out of the internet. [Language cannibalizes and regurgitates itself](#) historically, and now is no different. “The internet is like urban sprawl,” is meant as an insult, but many of us find a lot of promise in urban sprawl. And maybe like urban sprawl, there’s hope of drifting towards some horizon. But like cities, the commons of the internet are increasingly enclosed. Unlike cities, such commons may never have existed to begin with.
12. The internet is a military technology that has essentially been altered to give more subversive, abject, and absurd meanings. DARPA did not intend to make a landscape where the president could broadcast their thoughts at any moment, or where people could upload furry porn, or where both of those activities are just as achievable as the other.
13. Christian Bok uses the term [“conceptualism in the wild”](#) to think about how avant-garde strategies are employed by people who don’t aim to do so. Much has been made of the similar logics between the art movement of dadaism and the logic that governs internet memes today. What makes the web ‘the wild’?

14. But if the future is more futuristic, does that make the past more past (or distant, or historical, or precarious: a sampling of the language that might be considered)?
15. This is one of the problems with memory, as with many phenomena which we can be said to experience: we may think about it, but that doesn't let us escape from feeling about it as well.
16. The internet presents itself to us as a kind of utopia: a place that is radically separate, or *not here*. This is why we have a different set of words, ideas, and images that we use to deal with it. This is why we think of digitality as performance-- we put it in terms that oppose the corporeal. Those lines get blurred, and they continue to do so. But this requires imagining utopia not so much as ideal or desirable, but as radically *different*.
17. But the internet is not utopia in this sense either. It is shaped by our world, and reproduces it just as much as it reflects it. In my video, it's clear how much the visual culture of Geocities was colored by the same misogyny that is rife in our world, and it's also true that there's a long history of [cyberfeminism](#). I turn to Geocities because of how central it has become in the way we remember a different type of web, an amateur one with democratic aspirations. It is true that the potential of that web was wider in many ways than the one we have today, but it's also true that it was never meant to be a radical alternative. This in turn raises the question of what the line between cultural memory and history is, and how something like Geocities, which was initially only preserved by accident, crosses it. It is because of this "netstalgia" that I have chosen to put under my video a song by the musical project *Windows 96*, which belongs to the vaporwave genre.

There was never a Windows 96. The first comment on the youtube video for their song is this:



18. What is at stake now is what has always been at stake, culture and social life as the wrestling grounds for the web of life in its entirety. You can't trade options or futures on networked life or relations (yet), but you can trade them on every mineral you can think of. In Indonesia, there is an Island called Bangka, where most of the tin used in Iphones is mined. There is also an island in the South Pacific called [Tuvalu](#), which was granted the country code top-level domain ".tv" with the advent of the internet. The similarity of the domain name to the abbreviation for television has made it much-coveted; 10% of the government's revenue came from royalties in 2010. Meanwhile the country struggles against the effects of climate change year-by-year: it may be that a day will soon come where Tuvalu exists on the internet, but not on the earth.

19. It is tempting to speak in terms of totality, to say that everything can be mapped spatially or ideologically. This was the contention of philosophy in the 19th century, technology in the 20th, and perhaps of conspiracy theory in the 21st. But there are always gaps in systems, whether that system is ideal or material or even hybrid

20. In order to imagine what might be, we imagine what was, or what we imagine. Lauren Berlant says that "Discussions about the contours and contents of the

shared historical present are therefore always profoundly political ones, insofar as they are about what forces should be considered responsible and what crises urgent...” Following her, I leave you with this: discussions about the past are always about the future; discussions about the future are always about the past. We find ourselves in the thick, messy in-between.

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