

From Zen for TV to "Dreamcore": Media Nostalgia, Technological Reflection, and Social Mentality in Experimental Video Art

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Abstract: This study systematically explores the genealogy, evolution, aesthetic mechanisms, and underlying social mentality of media nostalgia in experimental video art. Driven by the continuous advancement of technological accelerationism and the society of the spectacle, the media itself has shifted from a mere "techniques of memory" that records the past into a constructed, recollected "memory of techniques." Through a comparative analysis of Nam June Paik's classic video installations and contemporary digital aesthetics such as "Dreamcore" "Weirdcore", this paper delineates the transition of nostalgic objects from the analog signal era to the digital ruin era. Media nostalgia in experimental videos does not represent a simple retro-rebellion or escapism; rather, it functions as a distinctive form of "reflective nostalgia". Through the artistic resistance of "rematerialization", it reconstructs the subject's identity, assuages intergenerational anxiety induced by technological shifts, and projects the unique social mentality of contemporary youth confronting the shocks of modernization within a "heterotopia" where temporal linearity is deconstructed. This phenomenon holds profound technological-reflective value and sociological significance.

Keywords: Experimental Video Art; Media Nostalgia; Nam June Paik; Dreamcore; Media Reflection

1. Introduction

In the torrent of 21st-century technological accelerationism and global digitalization, we are experiencing an unprecedented "temporal alienation." While smartphones, algorithmic recommendations, and virtual reality have thoroughly "dematerialized" daily life,

individuals, while marveling at technological convenience, have simultaneously plummeted into pervasive temporal anxiety and existential displacement. Against this backdrop, a powerful wave of "media nostalgia" has quietly emerged in experimental video art, social media, and grassroots artistic creations.

As an artistic medium naturally endowed with reflectivity and rebelliousness, experimental video art has, since its inception, been intertwined with the critique of industrial media and the reconstruction of everyday technologies. From Nam June Paik converting discarded television sets into mirrors of Buddhist meditation, to the digital low-fidelity (lo-fi) visual images of "Dreamcore" and "Weirdcore" currently taking the youth by storm, the medium itself is no longer merely a conduit transporting memory, but has evolved into a spiritual incubator that is scrutinized, mourned, and invested with emotion. This phenomenon has transcended mere individual memory, evolving into a socialized, universal collective event and cultural landscape.

This paper takes media nostalgia as its entry point to explore the aesthetic logic of experimental video art as it evolves from the analog signal era to the digital ruin era. Through synchronic and diachronic comparisons between Paik's classic television installation art and contemporary "Dreamcore" visual aesthetics, this study analyzes the mechanism of media nostalgia—specifically, how the self-salvation of the media body is achieved through "rematerialization" in an era of dematerialization. Concurrently, this paper introduces a social-psychological perspective to uncover the social isolation of contemporary youth in the urbanization process, the social anxiety hidden behind modernization, the stagnant social mobility under slowed stratification, and the "renaissance" demands of seeking a cultural

breakthrough. Media nostalgia is not a simple negation of the past or an affected retro-escapism; rather, it represents a unique cultural practice, an emotional mode, and an evolutionary path toward constructing a shared future for humanity.

2. The Genealogy and Evolution of Media Nostalgia

2.1 The Shift in Media Memory Studies

To comprehend the concept of "technological nostalgia" in experimental video art, one must first untangle the theoretical connections among "media""memory" and "nostalgia". Early research in media memory studies predominantly focused on how mass media produced and represented major historical events, such as news coverage or commemorative documentaries. However, as media technology integrated into everyday life, nowadays, media is not only a carrier of memory, but the medium itself has also become an object of memory.

Scholar Wang Run, in *Media and Nostalgia: New Directions and Practical Approaches in Media Memory Studies*, pointed out that existing media memory research tends to exhibit a bias of "valuing text while neglecting materiality" [1]. By incorporating theories of materiality, the medium no longer merely refers to the content it hosts or the institution it represents, but functions as a form of "material infrastructure" and an "intermediary." For instance, an obsolete cathode-ray tube (CRT) television, a cracked polarizing sheet, a detached dial, or the Philips PM5544 test pattern displayed when there is no signal—along with their physical entities, modes of operation, humming sounds, and emitted warmth—collectively constitute a unique "media materiality" [1].

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym distinguishes nostalgia into two types: "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia" [2]. Restorative nostalgia emphasizes rebuilding the lost home and pursuing the absolute truth of historical origins, which often lapses into conservative nationalism or commodified nostalgic consumption. Conversely, reflective nostalgia centers on lost time; it does not seek to reconstruct the past but acknowledges the fragmentation and regrets of history, unfolding aesthetic meditation and critique amid the ruins of memory [2]. Media nostalgia in experimental video art is a classic form of reflective nostalgia.

Rather than offering a tender, sentimental placebo, it engages in resistance against the present by juxtaposing media ruins [2].

2.2 The Techniques of Memory and the Memory of Techniques

Through this lens, media nostalgia reveals a dual logic: on the one hand, it functions as mediated nostalgic production, reconstructing the narrative of a "golden age" through moving images; on the other hand, it manifests as the recollection and reinterpretation of the media objects themselves. Liu Yusi, in *From the "Techniques of Memory" to the "Memory of Techniques"*, profoundly expounded this transition: in traditional memory paradigms, humans rely on media technology to store information (i.e., the "techniques of memory"); technological nostalgia, however, inverts this relationship, reintroducing sensory experiences, physical operations, and emotional dependencies associated with past technologies into artistic expression (i.e., the "memory of techniques") [3].

Technological nostalgia is not merely a bodily performance of the nostalgic subject; it is accompanied by complex psychological and aesthetic mechanisms. In anthropology, this reliance on obsolete technological objects even bears a touch of fetishism. When old technological artifacts are re-invoked, reconstructed, and reset in physical forms, they escape their destined fate of being discarded and obsolete in capitalist commodity production, achieving aesthetic immortality within the pantheon of experimental art.

3. Literature Review

With the rapid iteration of digital technology, the phenomenon of media nostalgia in experimental video art has garnered extensive attention from domestic arts and communication scholars. Regarding the genealogical origins of media memory and technological nostalgia, scholar Zhao Jingrong, in *Nostalgia: Eternal Cultural Homesickness*, explores from a cultural-sociological perspective the self-healing emotional function of nostalgia as a response to modernist ruptures and cultural anxieties [4]. Media ecologist Neil Postman, in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, reveals how electronic media like television reshape human sensory modes, emphasizing the deep molding of subjective cognitive styles by the

technological environment itself [5]. Chen Xuguang further analyzes the autobiographical, grassroots memory writing of internet subcultures, regarding it as a process of netizens reclaiming memory discourse power and achieving power symbiosis in digital spaces through micro-digital practices [6].

Regarding the profound alienation and psychological defense mechanisms induced by digital technologies, social accelerationism provides an essential critical analytical perspective. Hartmut Rosa, in *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Systematic Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, systematically critiques the "accelerative cycle" comprising technological acceleration, rapid social change, and the quickened pace of life, arguing that this extreme state deprives humanity of the ability to establish "resonance" with the everyday world, causing deep temporal alienation and subjective nihilism [7]. Zhou Haiyan likens nostalgic exhibitions on social media to a "digital time museum," exploring the interaction of intergenerational memories and the self-verification of cohort identities within the "connectivity turn" [8].

Finally, scholars deeply focus on the conditions and structural social mentalities of contemporary Chinese youth in a transitional society. Ye Hu launches a sharp cultural critique against the alienation of digital media subjectivity under the horizon of an accelerated society, pointing out that relentless technological "dematerialization" strips away the sensory depth of the human body, whereas retro-nostalgic images constitute an aesthetic self-salvation against this alienation [9]. These rich, cross-disciplinary studies provide multi-dimensional theoretical support for our systematic examination of the media-theoretical shift of experimental video art from classic installations to internet "Dreamcore" aesthetics.

4. From Zen for TV to "Dreamcore": The Media-Theoretical Shift of Nostalgic Objects in Experimental Video

4.1 Nam June Paik: Zen for TV, TV Buddha, and TV Garden

As a pioneering experimental video artist, Nam June Paik's core artistic concept was to initiate a "bodily resistance" against media in an era characterized by the postwar proliferation of television and the consolidation of the capitalist cultural industry's monopoly.

In the exhibition *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* held at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1963, Paik exhibited his seminal work *Zen for TV*. He purposefully kept a secondhand television set whose picture tube had been damaged during transit, placing it horizontally (rotated ninety degrees). The screen, which originally broadcast mass entertainment, was reduced to a single vertical white line of light suspended in deep darkness. Under the influence of Eastern Zen philosophy, this television was no longer a one-way mass communication medium; instead, it was condensed into a philosophical contemplation of light, electricity, and time. In this work, Paik not only shattered the brainwashing "information monopoly" of commercial television but also emphasized the non-functionalist aesthetics of the media's material entity through its self-destruction.

Another milestone piece by Paik is *TV Buddha* (1974). In this closed-circuit television installation, an ancient bronze Buddha statue sits silently before a modern television monitor. A video camera placed behind the Buddha records its face in real time and projects it onto the screen in front of it. The Buddha gazes at its own screen reflection, engaging in an endless "mirror reflection". Here, a state of binary opposition and a wondrously harmonious tension are established between the Buddha, representing ancient Eastern spiritual tradition, and the television, symbolizing Western high-tech media. The Buddha's contemplation of its own digital mirror image is both an inner Nirvana and a thorough deconstruction of the boundaries between technological virtuality and physical reality. In the Buddhist cosmology, all phenomena are illusions; in the media spectacle, the flickering image generated on the screen is likewise a phantasm. This overlap forms a profound metaphor uniting technology and religion [10].

In Paik's *TV Garden* (1974—1977/2002), this media materiality further integrates with nature. In this work, over thirty color television sets are scattered and juxtaposed amidst dense tropical foliage, fallen leaves, and soil, their screens continuously looping dazzling, avant-garde images where light and shadows interweave with leaves. Paik does not simply advocate a pastoral idyll here; instead, he creates a "third space" where ecology and media technology coexist harmoniously. This represents an active

remediation of technological alienation, utilizing the tactile vitality of nature to soften and temper the cold machinery born from industrial assembly lines, thus offering a highly visionary artistic prophecy for humanity's technological utopia.

4.2 Contemporary "Dreamcore" Aesthetics: Digital Ruins and the "Online Nostalgia" of Digital Natives

Half a century later, as the mobile internet has thoroughly swallowed physical media, humanity has entered a so-called "dematerialized" digital black hole. However, among digital natives—predominantly the Post-90s and Post-00s generations—a brand new visual aesthetic known as "Dreamcore""Weirdcore" has been born.

The "Dreamcore" aesthetic typically displays highly recognizable visual characteristics: images often feature low resolution, high noise, harsh camera flash effects, or simulate archaic personal computer operating interfaces. The depicted scenes are frequently vacant, abandoned indoor playgrounds, empty hotel corridors in the dead of night, yellowed childhood living rooms, or children's amusement facilities with intense exposure. These scenes are often accompanied by text carrying religious or surrealist metaphors, such as "Are you lost?" or "This place looks familiar."

Wu Zhiyuan and Ma Yikun, in *Digital Nostalgia: Research on Social Mentality Behind Internet Memory Performance*, pointed out that the essence of "Dreamcore" is a landscape reconstruction of "digital ruins". For Gen Z, their childhood experiences are fragmented by rapid technological leaps (e.g., from bulky CRT televisions to iPads, and from dial-up internet to 5G). Dreamcore imagery artificially manufactures a form of "technological damage" by simulating the imperfect imaging quality, harsh exposure, and pixel grain of early digital cameras [11].

This damage is no longer a manual, physical struggle of smashing television sets like Paik's; instead, it is a "technological simulacrum" completed within virtual software. These vacant liminal spaces are precisely the ruins of "material presence" from contemporary youth's childhoods that have now degenerated into technological relics. What the Dreamcore aesthetic delineates is not a warm, cozy nostalgia, but an "uncanny familiarity"—those childhood

everyday locales that were once the safest and harbored the most domestic warmth have, through the passage of time and technological abandonment, turned into alien and desolate spiritual shells.

5. Media Nostalgia in Experimental Video: Rematerialization and Temporal Dislocation

5.1 The Artistic Struggle of "Rematerialization" under the Crisis of Dematerialization

In the era of digital capitalism, all physical touch and operation are simplified to the sliding of fingertips on a smooth glass screen. Media culture theorist Jean Baudrillard, in *The Consumer Society*, acutely pointed out that the sign value of commodities is overwhelming their use value. Wrapped under the excessive packaging of digital screens, people lose real "pain" and "the presence of a tangible reality". This is the crisis of "dematerialization" [12].

The primary mechanism of media-nostalgic experimental video is "rematerialization" [10]. Visually, artists are keen on employing the physical traits and imperfections of obsolete machines as their primary artistic language. For instance, they deliberately inject signal noise, color distortion, and tape-dragging jitter into digital videos. On a physical level, this manifests as the juxtaposition of physical entities like old televisions and everyday items piled with second-hand objects [10].

This pursuit of the media object's imperfection is an active rebellion against the "high-definition, perfect, and high-frequency" media spectacle manufactured by commercial assembly lines. As a refraction of technology, when a television breaks down and produces static, its "intermediary" function (broadcasting programs) ceases, while its existence as a "material entity" is highlighted like never before. By reawakening the audience's experience of media friction, resistance, and physical texture, rematerialization rouses the viewer from the smooth, seamless, and unconscious "individual feeding" of algorithmic recommendations, prompting a re-perception of the media's physical existence.

5.2 The Media "Heterotopia"

In terms of temporal and spatial reconstruction, media-nostalgic imagery frequently draws upon the anthropological concept of "liminal space."

In anthropology, liminality denotes an "intermediate state" or a "gray area" transitioning from an old state to a new one. Nostalgic imagery produces a powerful temporal dislocation by juxtaposing dated, everyday symbols with surreal and absurd non-everyday contexts.

In such imagery, time is no longer a unidirectional linear vector extending infinitely toward the future; instead, it is folded, cycled, or even halted. In these frozen digital ruins, the audience experiences a non-linear, anti-accelerated perception. The French philosopher Michel Foucault proposed the concept of "heterotopia" to describe physical spaces that actually exist in reality yet escape everyday norms, maintaining a marginal and reflective quality. Through the visual juxtaposition of liminal spaces within shifting light and shadow, media-nostalgic experimental video carves out a media "heterotopia" where viewers, exhausted by real-world acceleration, can temporarily rest their souls and freeze time. In this heterotopia, the "past" and the "present" collide intensely, thereby sparking a profound reflection on the contemporary condition.

6. Technological Reflection and Youth Social Mentality Behind Media Nostalgia

6.1 An Antidote to Technological Accelerationism

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, in *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Systematic Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*, pointed out that the core dynamics of modernization consist of "technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life"[13]. Yet, this absolute pursuit of speed has failed to secure free time for humanity; instead, it has dragged mankind into a "time famine" and a total alienation from the everyday world.

In an era dominated by algorithms that fragment all attention into short-form video revelry, the video art of media nostalgia constitutes an active "decelerator" and a form of resistance against commercial enslavement. Paik originally modified the television into a static Zen for TV to counter the capitalist commercial television's brainwashing of public attention. Today, when youth seek out analog empty corridors with almost no narrative and only static long takes in "Dreamcore" imagery, they are similarly resisting the infinitely scrolling, constantly

stimulating, and hyper-iterative information stream. By returning to the old media operational experience characterized by "slowness, dullness, lack of freedom, and boundaries", media nostalgia breaks the commercial media's comprehensive control over individual life tempos, helping individuals reclaim their own reflection and focus in suspended time.

6.2 From "The Shared Bonfire" to "The Lonely Screen"

Scholars such as Wu Zhiyuan have deeply analyzed the shifts in youth social mentality reflected in digital nostalgia, which primarily manifest across four dimensions:

First, the symbiosis of a "socially lonely mentality" and "online nostalgia". Along with the drastic urbanization process since the Reform and Opening-up, vast numbers of young people have poured into the modernized "society of strangers". Departing from the intimate interpersonal ties of acquaintance-based societies, they have degenerated into "atomized" individuals within cold high-rises and office cubicles. The recollection of scenes such as "old childhood homes" "intergenerational interaction", and "the family gathered around to watch TV" in media-nostalgic videos essentially represents the youth's intense longing for the lost "domestic emotional glue". Television was once the "shared bonfire"—where the entire family shared emotions and established the most rustic resonance at the same time and space. Today, however, smartphones isolate people behind their respective "lonely screens". Although we possess the information of the entire world, we have lost the most authentic, physically present communication beside us. The "performance of nostalgia" in media nostalgia is a call to re-bond emotions in digital space [11].

Second, a "spiritual refuge" for the imagination of traditional life. Under the weight of rapid social transformation and modernization, the loss of control over the tempo of life has provoked a widespread "socially anxious mentality" among youth. The low-fidelity spaces in Dreamcore, full of peace yet tinged with a touch of the uncanny, provide young people with a spiritual refuge to escape social performance evaluations, involution (intense competition), and existential struggles. In these non-linear, lukewarm visual ruins, the passage of time is no longer accompanied by the prompting of ticking

clocks, allowing people to receive temporary spiritual solace within a near-static dreamscape. Third, the "stagnant social mentality" mapped by the recollection of the internet's "golden age". Today's internet ecosystem is heavily platformed, monopolized, and dominated by ubiquitous marketing and big-data algorithms, suppressing early grassroots creativity and wild, diverse subcultures [14]. Netizens who reminisce about early internet bastions in the early 2000s, such as the "Tianyuan Forum" or "Baidu Tieba", are actually mourning the "golden age of the internet" that was teeming with wild imagination and possibilities. This remembrance precisely reflects the strong desire of the youth for a loosening of rules and a resurgence of fluid vitality in an era when internet classes and rules are highly rigidified [14].

Finally, the youth group's "cultural expectations and renaissance". The infinite high-definition resolution of technology (4K, 8K) and the homogenization of aesthetics (homogenous influencer filters) have filled cultural products with a false, plastic-like coldness. The youth's shift toward purchasing CCD cameras, collecting typewriters, shooting grainy film, and pursuing imperfect Lo-Fi and Dreamcore is a rebellion against refined egoism and consumerist aesthetics. They hope to rediscover the humanistic warmth of media art and the untamed expression of individuality within "old media" that are fragmented, carry a warm touch, and are full of imperfections and mottled traces of passing years. This represents a "renaissance" scientific re-presentation of the media's material aura tailored to the digital age.

7. Conclusion

The prosperity of media nostalgia in experimental video art does not imply that the train of human history is running in reverse, nor is it a passive, self-indulgent narcissism wallowing in the bygone days. On the contrary, it represents a profound "subjective self-salvation" and "media resistance" staged upon spiritual ruins after humanity has undergone comprehensive encirclement and dispossession by media technology and the logic of modern capital.

From Paik's Zen for TV, which shattered the myth of mass media, to the online nostalgic redemption accomplished by contemporary youth in the digital age through "Dreamcore"

nostalgia in moving-image art—with its distinctive temporal-spatial folding, media rematerialization, and aesthetic resistance—has countered the temporal alienation and interpersonal estrangement induced by technological accelerationism. Like the warm afterglow of a CRT tube, in the crevices between algorithms and cold digital codes, it preserves the last glimmer of aura for human depth, historical continuity, and the warm physical presence of life.

We ought to recognize that every twilight of a medium is also the dawn of human awakening. By reclaiming these forgotten signal frequencies and fragmented physical media, our aesthetic reflections do not aim to completely reject the conveniences offered by emerging technologies. Rather, we seek to maintain a sense of introspection and focus on humanity amidst the infinitely segmented torrent of algorithms.

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