

Z Revival: the Aesthetic Potential of Nostalgia in Digital Capitalism



UNDER CONSTRUCTION



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Introduction & methods

z revival as a project arose out of our confusions and disappointments with digital spaces, but also our sense of wonder at the creative potential that lies within their ruins. In an attempt to reconnect with the lost future promised to us by the technology of our youth, young artists today are reviving the aesthetics of early 2000s techno-optimism in new media art and electronic music. These aesthetics reject high-definition pictures and minimalist layouts; instead, they embrace consciously mediated disruptions such as pixelation and file corruption, expressing a low-definition attitude. We believe that these disparate aesthetics show a common understanding of the systemic failures of digital capitalism. By conducting informal conversations with our contemporaries, examining and comparing our feeds, and curating examples of this burgeoning aesthetic movement, we hope to illustrate the extent to which lost futures animate current realities and future possibilities.

Can virtual aesthetics and histories transcend those of the physical world?

low poly depression



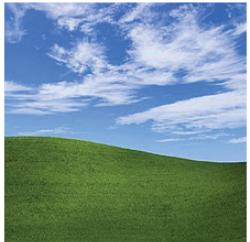
Low-poly depression, coined in a 2021 tweet by @PolyDepression, is a longing for the simpler geometries and former hope of digital childhood. The experience of viewing early CGI animation is uncanny to a generation accustomed to high-definition pictures. The rise of low-poly depression indicates a turn towards nostalgic attachment to this visual style and the time associated with it.



Does rejecting high definition allow us to escape or redefine modernity?



Acetantina, Blank Fashion Mystical (2019)



Pink Panthress, Passion (2021)



Kero Kero Bonito and Soccer Mommy, Rom Com 2021 (2021)



DJ Sabrina The Teenage DJ, Enchanted (2019)

Embedded in z revival is an understanding of the failure of social media to meaningfully connect us, of capitalism to fill the void it created, and of Silicon Valley to deliver on their promise of a utopian online agora. While this politics is one of the platform, it nevertheless maintains crucial resemblances to earlier political mobilizations surrounding the commons. Much like how early capitalists enclosed upon common pastures, digital capitalists have encroached upon the terra nullius that was the early internet. The promise of a digital commons has been completely thwarted by the rise of hegemonic social media corporations. As we increasingly reckon with the ramifications of digital life on the enclosed pasture, young digital media creators have begun to create and employ aesthetic modes of return to the internet's early utopian promise.

There is a growing effort to move away from mainstream social media platforms. Neocities, the distant relative of GeoCities (a web hosting service from the 90s), is a lively commons compared to the walled gardens of mainstream platforms. Users are actively involved in the creation and maintenance of their sites, and they must actively seek out other users without a content algorithm manufacturing those encounters. Rather than scrolling, users surf by clicking hyperlinks, opening a multiplicity of possible avenues. The user's experience leads them not to hypnotically trudge through a predetermined content stream, but to actively forge a unique path.



a saccharine desktop layout from cinni.net (cinni.net/dream/x/home.html) combines glitch art with early internet textures, motifs, and iconography

tracing z revival's aesthetic genealogy



dead malls

vaporwave's memory play

hauntology of liminal space

cultural trauma & catharsis

cottage core

z revival



moving forward

In the future, we would like to expand the scope of our research beyond this particular revival of late 2000s aesthetics into a broader conceptualization of the radical and reactionary potentials of nostalgia. Do the political subjectivities developed in digital spaces translate to "real world" mobilization? To investigate this question, we would employ new methods of analysis that go beyond curatorial and interpretive practices. Inspired by Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life*, our coming work will examine digital culture from the inside out by using ethnographic methods.

