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Hypotheticals / Visual Culture in 2049: Media & Authenticity

20 March 2024

As long as computers exist, synthetic (AI) and manipulated media will continue to dominate the worldwide creative sphere. Today, computers are central to almost everything: predicting data, managing vast financial transactions, displaying artwork, optimizing supply chains, connecting people, streaming music, and even spreading misinformation. Fast-forward to 2049, fifty years after synthetic media began reshaping visual culture, technology has significantly advanced, making systems more efficient and artificial intelligence more attuned to humans. Yet, one important aspect of media sharing and consumption has undergone a profound transformation: authenticity. Media now operates within a chain of authentic proof, a provenance chain, ensuring art and information trace back to their original creators. This shift towards authenticity has radically altered the visual culture landscape. Drawing on Roy Ascott's vision of the internet, digital networks do more than just distribute art beyond physical spaces; they bring in networked participation, connecting artists in a complex web of creativity and information. In 2049, the fusion of technology and artistic intent move into a digitally connected world that values authenticity. This era not only brings needed technological evolution but also brings the philosophical and conceptual blending of digital advancements with creative expression, redefining visual culture.

Ascott published *The Telematic Embrace* in 2003, a few years before humans vividly living on the internet took over. Telematic technologies enable synchronous, two-way, many-to-many connections within a distributed network. It is a blend of telecommunications and informatics, which is important for understanding how the internet is a powerful tool for humans

to create and share media without physical limitations.<sup>1</sup> The distributed network is important here, as this is an aspect of the theoretical provenance chain in all media in 2049. In a centralized network, there is too much power within a single entity, and in the future with AI-generated media, this will not be the answer. In a decentralized network, there is still a risk of a more powerful entity. In a distributed network, each entity is linked in some form, yet completely on its own simultaneously, posing little risk to media and its respective authentic ownership. In the real world, we have Foundation, a community-driven platform where artists mint their digital artworks into non-fungible tokens. It is a space for professional artists to put their work up on the Ethereum blockchain and does not feed into the once-popular mass NFT era of random collections that spiked in value. This is a glimpse into the future of democratized art, with true proof of ownership.

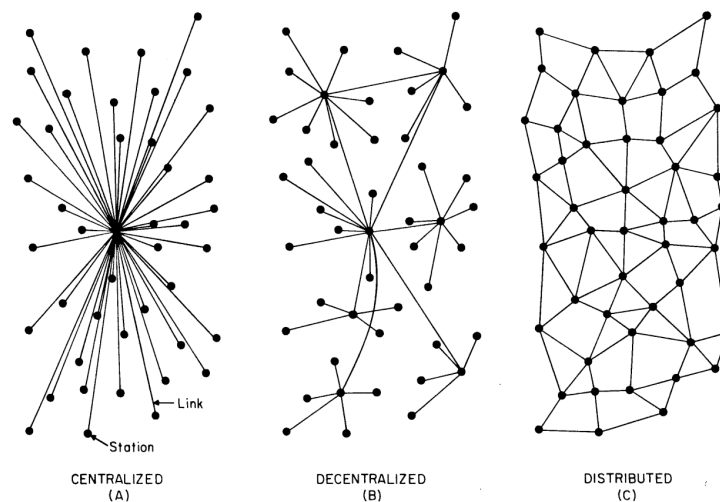


FIG. 1 — Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks

Baran, Paul. *On Distributed Communications Networks*. RAND Corporation, 1962

<sup>1</sup> Ascott, Roy, and Edward A. Shanken. *Telematic Embrace: Visionary theories of art, technology, and Consciousness*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

Visual culture will have to move in a direction closely related to this idea. As technology advances eternally and more media is produced at a higher rate, the theory of ephemeral media begins. This is a theory because media that exists on the internet is technically present on the internet forever unless somehow digitally destroyed. This media created, manipulated, and uploaded to the internet is usually quite short-lived and often disappears and becomes history. Humans store the world's knowledge in vast libraries in the physical world and a lot of the world's knowledge exists in the physical world on paper, but today, we heavily rely on the internet to store our new knowledge. This new knowledge needs proof of where it came from and needs to be stored properly. In 1970, Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote that "for the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves."<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the wide range of media available today is enabling a large number of people to actively engage in creating or producing content or ideas. This is made possible because the tools and platforms needed for such creation are widely accessible to the general public. This scenario implies a significant shift towards a more democratized approach to content creation.

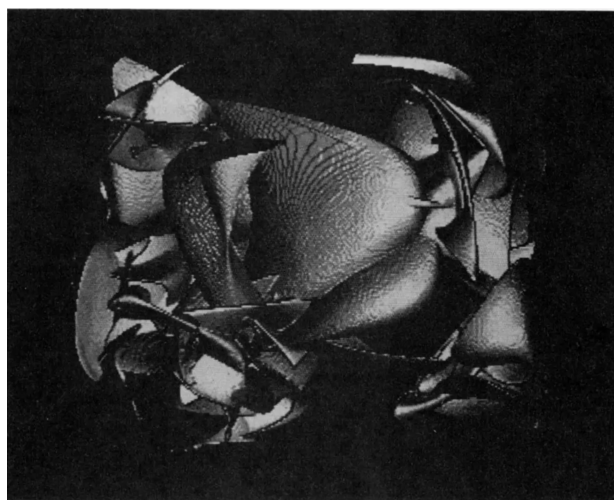
The true source of media is sucked into the endless void of information on the internet. *TV Buddha* by Nam June Paik from 1974, is a piece that can go both ways in terms of ephemeral media or eternal media. Ephemeral media is a better perspective regarding this piece as it emphasizes the fleeting moments of content consumption, which is so prominent today. *TV Buddha* parallels this by existing in a live, never-repeating interaction. The Buddha, a symbol of

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<sup>2</sup>Hanhardt, John G., ed. Video Culture - A Critical Investigation. 1986. Text corrected. <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/51/>

always being in the moment, confronts its image, showing the transient nature of both media and our perceptions. This work can say a lot about our viewing habits while we mindlessly stare down at a phone, taking in too much information at once. *TV Buddha* is a closed-circuit piece and that is not indifferent to our relationship with ephemeral content on the internet today. This closed circuit we operate within with our various devices creates perpetual moments of interaction, which shows the cyclical nature of media consumption today. There is hope though. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA).

C2PA is “an open technical standard providing publishers, creators, and consumers the ability to trace the origin of different types of media.”<sup>3</sup> This new approach to categorizing media and providing ownership could be the answer in 2049. C2PA relies on a technology called a provenance chain, which tracks the origin, history, and ownership of an item or piece of content. This would involve metadata that details the creation process, the context, and its journey through the internet. By 2049, visual culture could be characterized by an even more saturated and transient media landscape, and provenance chains could serve as an important tool in



navigating this. Viewers would see behind the layers and make sure what they are seeing is straight from the source. This would be vital in combating misinformation and would encourage a more mindful consumption of digital content.

Below is a digital art piece by Miles Visman for

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<sup>3</sup> The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity, C2PA. Joint Development Foundation. 2024 <https://c2pa.org/>.

a Roy Ascott project, the very beginning of computer-generated art, before it was ever considered to have a high valuation. This is the catalyst of digital artwork.<sup>4</sup> For early digital art like this, using contemporary methods of documentation and ownership verification would protect the rights of the original creator, and let viewers see the source. This is important for both the creator and the consumer. Marshall McLuhan said “The medium is the message.”<sup>5</sup> The medium through which information is communicated can have an impact on society, sometimes even more than the content being communicated. People are deeply influenced by the media and forms of media we engage with. They can shape our beliefs, ways of thinking, or behaviors. However, this is not entirely true for everyone. While mass media like Instagram or TikTok can and does shape a lot of people’s beliefs, there is still a large population of people who consume media differently, with a more critical point of view. What can be taken from McLuhan’s idea here is that it may not be the content itself that changed society, but the way the medium is used for exchanging knowledge. The future needs authentic proof.

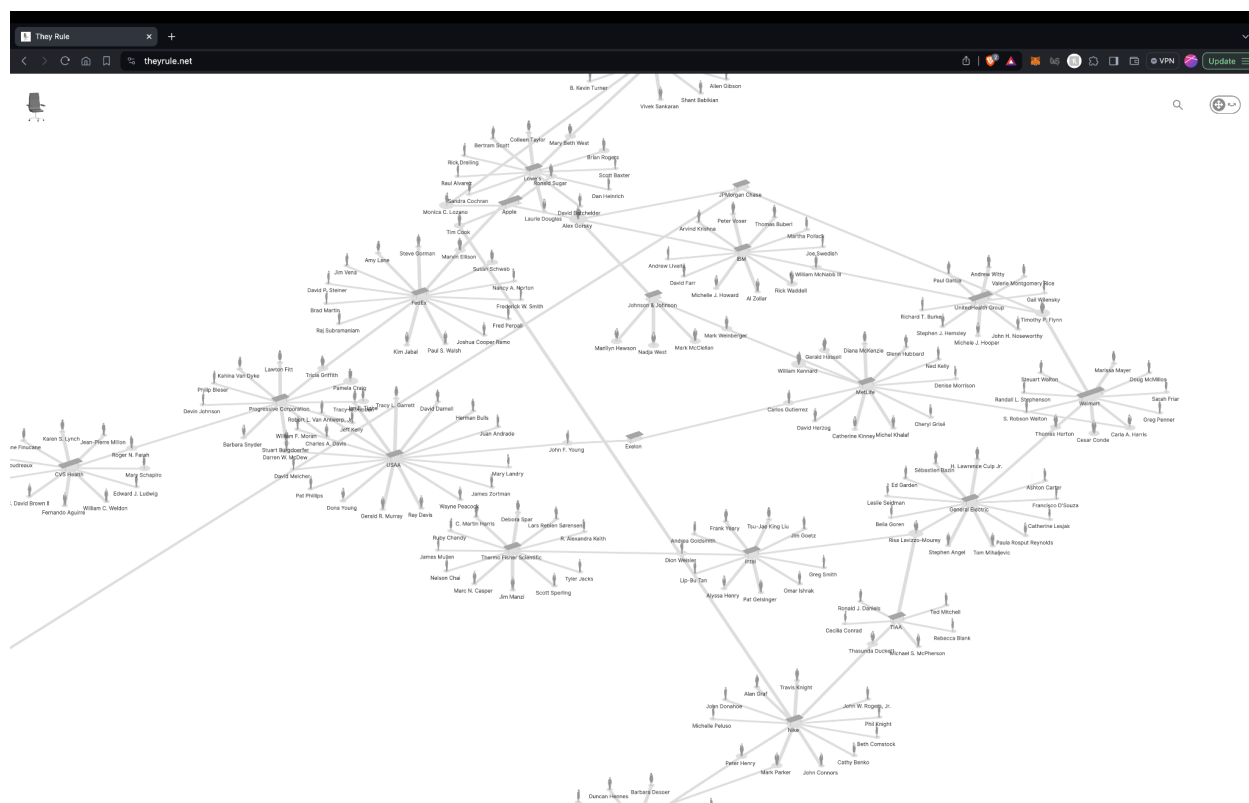
Artist Josh On created a website artwork called *They Rule* in 2004, where a user can interact with icons of board members and see what other companies they are on the board for as well. This is a form of activism showing a direct line to a source. It’s a way to show who is behind all these companies and how everyone is connected at these levels. His diagrams are very much related to following a piece of data from the source up to where it is today, creating a simplified provenance chain. Through these chains that link how a piece of media or a bit of

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<sup>4</sup> Visman, Miles. *Computer-generated image for the Aspects of Gaia project by Roy Ascott*. Ars Electronica exhibition, Linz, Austria, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, and W. Terrence Gordon. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

information has moved through the internet, people in the future will be able to see exactly who created it, who transferred it, and who owns the work, and this is incredibly important for a future where media is easy to manipulate. In the image below, the source chosen was Apple, and from Apple stemmed all these other companies' board members to show how all are connected. If there was a way to visualize where media came from on the internet like this, misinformation, AI work, and harsher deepfakes would be much easier to catch and track.



On, Josh. *They Rule*, 2004. <https://www.theyrule.net/>

Technology advances quickly and Roy Ascott's ideas can help solidify this idea in the theoretical world. While Ascott writes more about emotional depth rather than technical utility in technology, this is an important factor to consider to see where humans may be heading with

technology. In many ways, he has predicted what could be the future of human-technology relationships. His work was ahead of its time. As humans progressively become more accustomed to interacting with technology for all purposes, including art, there is going to be emotional depth included in this relationship, not just utility. Ascott's concept of a telematic embrace emphasizes emotional and intellectual connections through digital networks. Provenance chains create a new form of interconnectedness among artists, and consumers, and therefore, may create a new world within the digital world. Ascott predicted that technology would transform how humans interacted with art and so would proof of ownership through these chains as the dynamics changed. The artwork's ownership and its journey through different hands become part of the artwork's narrative and value.



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