Liminal Space and Ghost Time: on the Existence Anxiety and Cultural Metaphor of Dreamcore Art in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Based on Victor Turner's ritual liminality theory, this article combines the perspectives of digital anthropology and spatial politics to examine the generation logic of Dreamcore art as a contemporary accelerated social and cultural syndrome. Dreamcore art presents a cognitive paradox of interweaving space alienation and stagnation acceleration at both temporal and spatial levels through its unique visual style. By constructing the theory of liminal space, this paper explores how Dreamcore art reconstructs physical space and expands psychological boundaries, reflecting the unique spiritual experiences and existential dilemmas of the subject in the digital age. The stagnation and cycle of ghost time further deconstructs linear time narrative. Dreamcore art presents the "cancelled future" through low tech images and circular spatial visual representation, constructing metaphorical expressions of modern social psychology and cultural dilemmas, prompting viewers to reflect on the meaning of existence, and pointing to a profound criticism of the "unfinished state" of contemporary society.

1. Introduction: Visual Symptoms of Transitional States

When you use your fingers to continuously slide down and refresh the content, you are suddenly hit by a group of images: empty corridors, abandoned shopping malls, blurred end of corridors and familiar rooms. The word "core" in Dreamcore comes from the French word "coeur". In the 1930s, this word was used as a suffix to refer to "stubborn or indomitable minority groups"[1], so the suffix "core" added a layer of marginalization and subculture to Dreamcore art. This superficial aesthetic trend actually reflects deeper cultural contradictions, and the visual practice known as "Dreamcore Aesthetics" continues to trigger collective "déjà Vu" in the image works of empty classrooms, abandoned shopping malls and so on spontaneously uploaded by users. It presents an intertwined cognitive paradox at both the temporal and spatial levels: the alienation of space and the acceleration of stagnation. In the contemporary society dominated by technological capitalism, the linear view of time—a stable sequence of past present future—is being replaced by a more chaotic temporal fold, and the dream nucleus image is the visual symptom of this temporal misalignment. These paradoxes

collectively constitute the spatial representation of the crisis of subjectivity in the digital age, and users' spontaneous Dreamcore art practices point to a series of thought-provoking questions: when Victor Turner's study of human society's "transitional rituals" is mediated by digital technology, how does the liminal state transform from a brief stage of the life cycle to a sustained survival situation for contemporary subjects? Why do postmodern subjects prefer the aesthetic expression of "unfinished state" in space?

2. Spatial Topology: The Liminal Construction of Dreamcore art

The term Liminality originates from the Latin word "limen", meaning limit, referring to "a state of intermittency or ambiguity". Arnold van Geneep mentioned liminality in his book *Rites of Passage*, mainly expressing the meaning of edges. He summarized the complete mode of transitional etiquette as: pre-liminal etiquette (separation etiquette), liminal etiquette (edge etiquette), and post-liminal etiquette (aggregation etiquette). When discussing regional transition, various unique aspects of the concept of "door" were listed, stating that "crossing the boundary of this door is to combine oneself with the new world"[2]. Victor Turner pointed out in his book *Ritual Processes: Structure and Anti Structure* that the commonality of the liminal blending phenomenon is that it is located at the rupture, edge, and bottom of the social structure[3]. The concept of "liminality" in the field of psychology refers to the ambiguous state of psychology, which often appears at the junctions of spaces such as doors, corridors, and stairwells. Therefore, liminal space refers to these places. The core feature of liminal space is its ambiguity and transitional nature, which is not only reflected in physical space but also in psychological boundaries.

2.1. Material Liminality: Deformation and Alienation of Space

The representation of material space in Dreamcore art is always in a contradictory intermediate state—neither complete reality nor pure fiction, but a strange mixture of the two, which is particularly evident in architectural imagery. Anthony Vidler cited and analyzed Freud's paper *Das Unheimliche* in *The Architectural Uncanny*, introducing the concept of "uncanny" from psychology into the field of architecture. "The sensitivity of contemporary culture witnesses strangeness erupting in open parking lots or abandoned shopping centers, or appearing in the illusion paintings of space on the screen"[4]. "Uncanny" originates from the "estrangement reproduction of familiar things". Modern architecture creates the effect of strangeness through techniques such as proportional imbalance and infinite repetition, triggering the psychological uncanny of the subject.

Taking the typical work *Backrooms* as an example, as shown in Figure 1, its visual features include both the authenticity brought by the hyper realistic texture generated by photogrammetry technology and the cognitive dissonance created by non-Euclidean spatial topology structure, thus bringing viewers a threshold experience of "uncanny". The infinitely extending yellow corridor in space dissolves any possible concept of an endpoint, and the boundlessness of space directly challenges the basic cognitive framework of human beings regarding the finite nature of space. What is even more unsettling is its implicit topological anomaly: when explorers find themselves constantly returning to the starting point, space reveals its Möbian closure, as described by Vidler, the psychological oppression brought by the "involuntary repetition" of the subject in modern architecture. "I hastily left the narrow street at the corner. But after wandering aimlessly for a while, I suddenly found myself back on the same street. My appearance caught the attention of passersby. I quickly left again, but eventually returned to the same street. At this moment, only strangeness could express my feelings"[4]. The "uncanny" at this moment is similar to the experience of being lost in the deep mountains, although every time I search for signs or familiar paths, it always leads people back to their original place, or is like groping in a dark unfamiliar room, looking for exits or light switches,

but always bumping into the same piece of furniture [4]. In the interpretation of visual images of dream nuclei, the infinite repetition space is interpreted as a series of psychological spaces merged by confinement places[4]. Through Freud's theory, "uncanny" is closely related to "the return of the repressed", where "uncanny" is the "emergence of familiar things hidden but suppressed from repression"[5], thus recognizing the terrifying characteristic of "involuntary repetition". In Vidler's theory of architectural uncanny, the disharmony between the body and space is the core mechanism of the psychological production of uncanny.
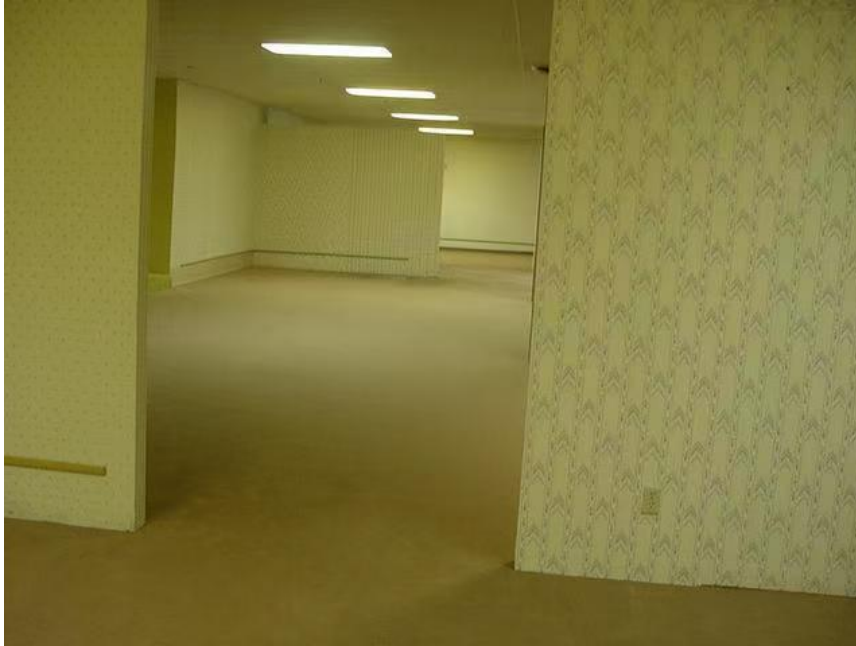

Figure 1: Backrooms[6]

2.2. Spiritual Liminality: Exploration of Cognitive Boundaries

"The prominent feature of the aesthetic of liminal space is to judge whether this space can bring a disturbing emotion to the viewer"[7]. Dreamcore art presents a threshold, which is a transitional space that constantly generates edges. The subject in the liminal space, due to criticality and marginalization, will gradually evolve from the intermediary nature of identity to psychological hybridity, heterogeneity, and contradiction, resulting in the marginalization, betweenness, and uncertainty of their identity[8]. If the material liminality is reflected in the alienation of space, then the spiritual liminality is manifested in the transformation of cognitive patterns. The reason why the images of Dreamcore art can trigger a strong sense of unease is precisely because they shake our accustomed perceptual framework. The tilted horizon, unreasonable shadow casting, and spatial organization that violates perspective rules are not simply technical defects, but intentional cognitive interference strategies. Jonathan Crary analyzed in *The Observer's Technology* that "the means of creating realistic effects, such as stereoscopes, are actually based on the thorough abstraction and reconstruction of visual experience"[9].Therefore, the innovation of visual devices is always accompanied by the reconstruction of sensory patterns.

The concept of "liminality" described the transitional state of participants in the ritual process who are neither this nor that. Dreamcore art visualizes this liminal experience, creating an aesthetic space suspended between reality and virtuality, wakefulness and dreams. The imagery that often appears in Dreamcore art, such as endless corridors, countless forks, uncertain doors, etc., all belong to transitional spaces. The psychological experience brought by traveling from one place to another is a

sense of marginalization and loneliness that does not belong to any group. Liminal space is essentially a transitional space, which means a transitional zone from one location to another, and it does not belong to any space, that is, "neither... nor..."[10]. It is an independent intermediate state, and this liminal space has a strong sense of uncertainty. The anxiety and unease caused by the loosening of cognitive boundaries can also be verified at the level of neuroscience. Brain imaging studies have shown that when humans face conflicting spatial information, there is a significant disruption in the neural coupling between the prefrontal cortex (responsible for logical judgment) and the hippocampus (responsible for spatial memory). The impossible spaces commonly seen in Dreamcore art, such as infinite corridors and Klein bottle structures, are deliberately created to trigger special psychological states through neural conflicts. While in Dreamcore art, space often breaks this correspondence and creates an environment where the body cannot be inhabited. This kind of fracture is particularly sharp in virtual reality: when users can "pass through walls" or "hover in the air", the Cartesian spatial coordinate system becomes completely ineffective. This kind of rupture challenges the traditional understanding of physical space and brings hidden anxiety and unease to viewers on a psychological level.

3. The Acceleration of Stagnation: Dreamcore Art as the Ghost of the "Cancelled Future"

As a digital aesthetic phenomenon, Dreamcore art mainly focuses on the retro cyber style. It simulates the Internet image style from the 1990s to the early 21st century. Its distinctive visual characteristics—rough and fuzzy image style, dreamy nostalgic scenes, and nonlinear space-time narrative, echo the suspended state of "the past has not yet passed, and the future has not yet arrived" discussed by hauntology. In the contemporary society dominated by technological capitalism, the linear view of time—a stable sequence of past present future, is being replaced by a more chaotic temporal fold, and the Dreamcore image is the visual symptom of this temporal misalignment.

3.1. Low-tech Images: the Future of the Past and the Wrinkles of Time

Jacques Derrida mentioned in *Spectres de Marx* that "what is a ghost? What is the reality or presence of a ghost, or what is the reality or presence of something that still seems unreal, illusory, or intangible like a ghost?"[11] This question implies the ghostly characteristics of simulacra. Dreamcore art creates a "ghostly" atmosphere through visual effects such as blurring, distortion, and semi transparent lighting, creating an empty scene and nostalgic atmosphere. "Simulacrum" can be traced back to Plato's mimesis. In Plato's philosophy, simulacrum is an imitation of the prototype, at the lowest level of truth. For example, in Plato's' metaphor of the "bed", the bed of ideas is higher than the bed of reality and higher than the bed of art. Derrida deconstructed Plato's theory of imitation and redefined the status of simulacra. In *The Double Scene*, Derrida analyzed Mallarmé's *Mimique* inspiring people to think about "a theory of imitation full of 'spectre', reactivating the phantoms, illusions, shadows, and ghosts that exist between life and death, presence and absence, reality and non reality[12]. In the nostalgic practice of Dreamcore art, "the inherent technical flaws and production traces in obsolete media—such as film grain, scratches, flickering lights, torn borders, and faded colors—are not only reintroduced into people's living environments but also acquire aesthetic significance"[13]. Through the reenactment of past scenes, it "recreates and reimagines the imagery, sounds, and aesthetics of bygone eras, offering practitioners a sense of tranquil and comforting nostalgic experience"[13], thereby creating a "simulacrum" visual effect.

The construction of ghostly simulacra in Dreamcore art often relies on referencing and reconstructing the past. As shown in the Figure 2, creators create a sense of "deja vu" by reassembling retro elements, childhood memories, old photos, and other elements to evoke the collective memory of the viewer's past. One of the most prominent features of Dreamcore imagery is

its fascination with early digital aesthetics, such as Windows pop ups, rough 3D modeling, pixel interfaces of old-fashioned electronic games, etc. These images together form a kind of "stagnant time", neither reproducing a retro nostalgia of a specific era nor depicting the future like cyberpunk, but rather a suspended and immovable present. When criticizing late capitalist culture, Mark Fisher asked, "How long can culture last without new things?"[14] Capital's cultural production constantly devours the future, and memories of the past return in the form of ghosts. This low tech visual style is the embodiment of the "cancellation of the future"[14]. Derrida's hauntology also emphasize that the past will not truly disappear. Through the low tech symbols in Dreamcore images, it is evidence that past technology is still hovering in the present. The narrative of Dreamcore art breaks the linear time series and thus becomes an example of the "cancellation of the future"[14] in visual culture—people no longer believe in the future and can only constantly dream of a non-existent past.

Figure 2: Dreamcore-style images[15]

3.2. Circular Space: Stagnation Acceleration and Eternal Return

At the intersection of Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration and Mark Fisher's critique of capitalist realism, there exists a profound temporal paradox: modern society creates the illusion of "dynamic stabilization" through constantly accelerating technological iterations and information flow—the system must continue to accelerate in order to maintain the status quo, while real change is always absent. This "stagnant acceleration" has been most accurately visually manifested in the aesthetic of circular space in Dreamcore art. When viewers gaze at endless corridors, eternal rotating fans, or constantly resetting virtual scenes, they encounter not only the wonders of digital aesthetics, but also the topological models of late capitalist time politics. These images deconstruct the ideology of linear time through circular space, revealing a more cruel truth: we are living in an eternal return where the future is infinitely postponed and the past refuses to disappear.

From a theoretical perspective, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche's concept of "eternal cycle" has gained new interpretive dimensions in contemporary digital culture. When late capitalism divided

time into computable and exchangeable units, the cyclical space in the Dreamcore images precisely constituted a rebellion against this quantified time. The most critical contribution of Dreamcore art lies in its revelation of the hidden truth of accelerating society: on the surface, the rapid development of society actually brings about deep cultural stagnation. In the yellow corridor sequence of his typical work Backrooms, the monotonous wallpaper pattern repeats infinitely with mathematical precision, and the fluorescent lights on the ceiling extend at completely equal intervals. This deliberate design of spatial homogeneity is not a simple horror aesthetic strategy, but a metaphor for the experience of modernity time - as Rosa pointed out, social acceleration leads individuals to fall into "time alienation", and the faster the pace of life, the more empty time becomes. The recurring images in Dreamcore art, such as clocks that always stop at a certain moment, infinitely looping animations, and constantly repeating actions, thus constitute a special time structure. This structure is different from both traditional linear time and postmodern fragmented time, but rather a 'frozen cycle'. When the spinning top in Inception never falls, and the bookshelf space in Interstellar repeats itself, these Dreamcore moments in popular culture actually expose the time dilemma of late capitalism: technological acceleration does not bring about a qualitatively changing future, but rather makes the status quo eternal.

4. Conclusion: The Liberation Potential of Dreamcore art

Charles Baudelaire described modernity in *The Painter in Modern Life* as "Modernity is transitional, fleeting, and accidental, it is half of art, the other half is eternal and unchanging"[16]. Dreamcore art, as a symptom record of modern time pathology, presents a profound contradiction. It is both a product of accelerating society and a critic of it. As a product of accelerating society, it is shaped by contemporary time systems, while at the same time, it continues to create moments of malfunction in mainstream time systems, temporarily suspending the temporal regime of accelerating society by locking time in eternal repetition. As Zygmunt Bauman said, liquid modernity refers to a state of contemporary society characterized by eternal flow and uncertainty, and Dreamcore art precisely captures the fractures and accumulations in this flow. The infinitely extending corridors, stagnant elevators, and circulating rooms are not only visual representations of time anxiety, but also constitute implicit resistance to the mainstream time order. The particularity of this resistance lies in that it is not through external confrontation, but through internal dissolution. The *Theater* series by Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto provides a key methodological insight: when a film is compressed into a blank screen by prolonged exposure, the accumulation of time actually leads to the self destruction of the image. In mainstream narratives, stagnation is often seen as an obstacle that needs to be overcome. But Dreamcore art reminds us that in certain situations, stagnation can become a strategy to resist accelerationism. When everything demands immediacy, efficiency, and computability, images that refuse to flow instead create critical distance. This is not a passive pause, but an active interruption—as Walter Benjamin said, "pressing the brake" creates a moment of pause on the high-speed historical train. The liberating potential of Dreamcore art is hidden in this contradictory posture. It is both inherent in the visual production system of digital capitalism and constantly creating short circuits in this system. Nowadays, pure external resistance is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Dreamcore art showcases the possibility of internal disintegration. True resistance may lie in embracing this contradiction. In this dialectical perspective, stagnation is not the end point, but another starting point.

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