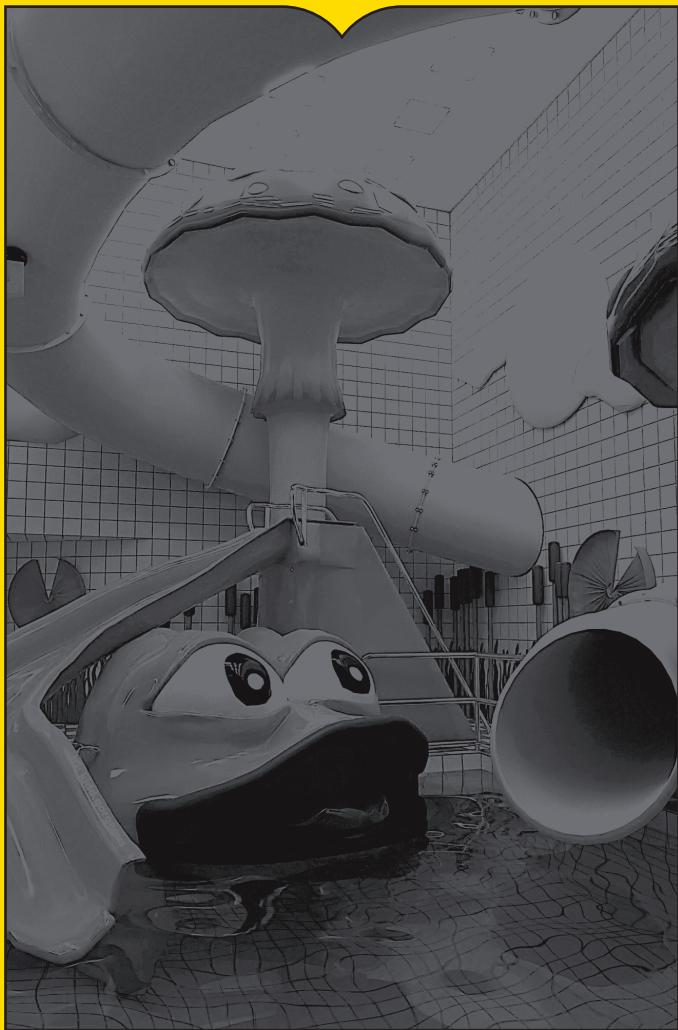


Valentina Tanni, Silvia Dal Dosso
Daydreams, Playable Nightmares
and Out-of-Body Journeys



“The internet is an alien life form,” declared David Bowie in 1999:¹ today, the prophecy has come true, and our digital tools have become magical portals with mysterious properties, windows into a universe that exists somewhere between dream and reality.

Beyond the reflective screens of the devices we carry in our pockets, we have discovered a region haunted by strange presences – sometimes threatening, sometimes surreal, sometimes fascinating, and other times nonsensical. These are the same presences that, over the past fifteen years, have shaped the so-called “internet aesthetics”, that ensemble of subcultures, popular narratives, and visual and auditory languages through which the alien entity has finally revealed itself to humanity. The net then reveals itself for what it truly is: a threshold as physical as it is mental, where bizarre things happen, time is warped and we find ourselves inhabiting an intermediate dimension, a territory that is “neither here nor there”.

Valentina Tanni’s book *Exit Reality*² is the first attempt to map a world imbued with disorienting hallucinatory qualities, a realm that appears to us as a parallel planet that has emerged from the galaxies of code-space. Starting from the advent of vaporwave, which infused the network’s native imagery with spectral properties in the

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- 1 BBC Newsnight. (2016, January 11). *David Bowie speaks to Jeremy Paxman on BBC Newsnight (1999)* [Video]. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiK7s_OtGsg
 - 2 Tanni, V. (2023). *Exit reality: Vaporwave, backrooms, weirdcore e altri paesaggi oltre la soglia*. NERO Editions.

early 2010s, the author takes us on a descent through the levels that traverse the silent horror of the backrooms, brushes against the obsession with sensory stimulation of ASMR, touches on the algorithmic surrealism of weird-core and arrives at the pseudomagical practices such as reality shifting and memetic rituals. All the while, we remain comfortably seated before our screen, inside a battlestation ready to take off for a one-way astral journey, eternally trapped in the liminal space born out of the now inseparable relationship between the visions of the human being and the dreams of the Machine.

On the occasion of the release of *Exit Reality* in English, PostScript^{UM} presents this conversation between art historian and curator Valentina Tanni and the artist and researcher in web subcultures Silvia Dal Dosso.

SILVIA DAL DOSSO: To the tune of *A playlist to feel like you are playing marbles with Einstein, a moment before he discovered the theory of special relativity in 1905*, we find ourselves on the blanket of space and time, the familiar wireframe that is usually green on black, but sometimes also yellow or, why not, sky blue on purple. Behind us, the planet of vaporwave³ is so massive that it creates a very steep slope, from which we try to escape by hopping here and there, on the thousand little satellites that circulate around it: Frutiger Aero aesthetics, Y2K, backrooms,⁴ dream pools,⁵ weirdcore, traumacore, anything to keep us from approaching the apocalyptic vortex of corecore⁶ that imposes itself on our event horizon, eating everything, and that sits unquestioningly in front of us, right where we imagined the future should be.

That's kind of how I felt as I read your book *Exit Reality*, and all those moments in internet history were flowing again in front of my eyes: those things or waves or cores that one day just popped up to remain there forever and are now somehow reacting within our present timeline all at once. A feeling that might haunt us during

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- 3 Vaporwave. (2024). In *Aesthetics Wiki*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Vaporwave
 - 4 The Backrooms. (2024). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Backrooms
 - 5 Mensah, M. (2022, September 4). *Jared Pike: A Descent into the Dream Pools*. Loner. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from www.lonerofficial.com/post/jared-pike-a-descent-into-the-dream-pools
 - 6 For the definition of Frutiger Aero, Y2K, weirdcore, traumacore and corecore aesthetics, see aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki.

this conversation about what you called the “landscapes beyond the threshold”, the places that sprung from the collective digital unconscious of the West, as online multitudes sought to explore or express what was happening to culture, time, art and themselves. On the one hand, one gets the impression, as you tell in the book, that everything was already there, concentrated in the vaporwave’s primordial soup: nostalgia for the lost paradise, the reassuring climate of widespread wealth of the 1990s, the confidence about a future supported by a friendly new technology full of little surprises, amid the “bliss” landscapes and funny assistants of Windows interfaces that ambiguously begins to fail, to sound *out of pitch*, to show error messages, as we obsessively cling to the palm trees, water bubbles, waterfalls, clouds and neon colours of Frutiger Aero, while processing the trauma of all that we have lost as we entered the cursed 2010s. On the other hand, it is probably no coincidence that you found yourself writing this book at the height of a *vibe shift* that was heralded by eminent internet and trend forecasting figures (such as Angelicism01⁷ and Sean Monahan of the K-HOLE collective⁸) and is now on everyone’s lips; meanwhile, the economic and cultural system created by social and sharing economy platforms – as we had

7 cashedcobrazhousewriter.substack.com
8 khole.net

known it – seems to have reached its twilight and ended up dragging into the black hole even fundamental pieces of our education and basic knowledge, of our way of relating to the world, to others and thus to ourselves.

What happens in the “landscapes beyond the threshold”? Does the temporal dimension that used to define the beginning and end of #cores still exist? And what happened to space?



A vaporwave-style graphic, found image.

VALENTINA TANNI: When you are in front of a threshold, time stops, in a sense. Indeed, the boundary not only interrupts space, generating the existence of an *inside* and an *outside*, but also potentially marks a *before* and an *after*. The obsession that net users seem to have with liminal spaces stems precisely from this inseparable relationship between time and space: empty rooms, silent hallways and deserted shopping malls are nothing more than *containers of time now emptied*. When the threshold is a screen, this space-time node becomes incredibly

complex. We inhabit the internet mostly with our minds; as we explore the “landscapes beyond the threshold”, we leave our bodies behind, dealing with tingling sensations and back pain. We perceive the internet as a place (who remembers cyberspace?), but, in fact, our experience when we are connected is incorporeal, dislocated, dispersed. Time, on the other hand, tends to distort and contract, just as happens in all “absorbing” experiences: reading a book, watching a movie ...

To this we must add another factor, now clear to everyone: the fact that online, we can instantly retrieve any material from the past, from any era or culture, further changes our approach to temporality. As Daniel Lopatin said in a 2009 interview: “So it’s not surprising that a lot of us working in the field of arts during this information science age definitely feel like archivists or anthropologists or time travelers. We’ve literally been equipped with everything we need to informally time travel via the arts and sciences.”⁹ The internet user today is like this: a bit of an archivist (search, download, organise, save), a bit of an anthropologist (observe the infinitely diverse yet absurdly similar behaviours of millions of people around the world), a bit of a time traveller (go back and forth through history retrieving visual aesthetics, sound worlds, narratives and assorted vibes).

I agree with what you say about the specific timing of this book. It is no coincidence that I found myself writing it right at the turn of 2023. The concept of *vibe shift*

9 Impose Magazine. (n. d.). *Daniel Lopatin of Oneohtrix Point Never*. Impose Magazine. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from www.imposemagazine.com/features/daniel-lopatin-of-oneohtrix-poi

is vague and evanescent, but if you think about it, *it is itself a vibe*. It is the vibe of these years, and that is why we are so drawn to it: the vibe of perpetual change, of uncertainty as an existential condition, of apocalypse as a permanent horizon. We sense, on an almost subliminal level, the imminence of something, but none of us can trace the contours of this change precisely. Even the internet has suddenly become an uncomfortable, strange, difficult place; even for those of us who have been inhabiting it permanently for decades. The symbolic images of this historical moment that moves between distraction and despair are the labyrinths of backrooms, the endless corridors of liminal spaces and the wide-open doors to the deep space of weirdcore and dreamcore. Daydreams, playable nightmares and out-of-body journeys.



A weirdcore-style picture. _Ajil_, *Come in...*, 2021.

SDD: While reading *Exit Reality*, I must confess that I experienced an aggressive stream of “autosopic” moments – no worries, I feel fine. Several times, while in a hammock or on a beach towel, I fell victim to involuntary out-of-body experiences in which you forced me

to scan the darkness of my behaviour and that of so many other millennial and Gen Z users. Throughout the book, we realise how – forced to communicate via limited media that do not allow us to hear each other’s breath or look into each other’s eyes – we have evolved a kind of specialisation in “feels”, trying to describe hypercomplex feelings with words (as in John Koenig’s *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* you cite), sounds (“A playlist to feel like you etc.”), images (core, aesthetics) and memes (reaction, character).

It is easy to see that the arrival of forums and then social media in our lives has had immeasurable consequences, but you also made me notice how this constant sharing leads us to discover deeply hidden parts of our individuality. It is exemplary that a “strange, hard-to-define” feeling like ASMR, never “identified or studied by official science”, as you say, has “in just a few years become a topic of conversation – and often an obsession – for millions of people around the world”. A similar process of discovery causing collective and compulsive sharing is what fomented tulpamancy,¹⁰ the art of creating fictional characters; and then – as you recount – *reality shifting*,¹¹ the spiritual practice of migrating into other fictional reali-

10 Tulpamancy. (2022). In *Tulpa Wiki*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from tulpa.fandom.com/wiki/Tulpamancy

11 Reality Shifting. (2022). In *Rational Wiki*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from rationalwiki.org/wiki/Reality_shifting

ties, whose manuals can be found all over the internet. All these experiences previously had no name, were strictly personal and were rarely spoken about.

Until a few years ago, I was very careful not to tell anyone that I get a very pleasant tingling sensation down my spine when a postal worker explains something mildly useful to me, or that until I was thirteen years old, I spent several hours after school staring at the ceiling, shifting into invented worlds in which I was a jungle heroine or the one and only true protagonist of *The Truman Show*. Millennials like me were silent for a long time, like so many humans before us, until they found themselves online; just as you recount when you talk about poolcore,¹² we realised that our experiences were very, all too similar: “in a way, we all went to *the same pool*”. The thrill of being part of a *hivemind* that can and does know everything was beautiful; but to find out that so many strangers had lived the same intimate life as us and to realise that the sacred temples in which our individuality was formed were actually the result of serial production, globalisation and mass society, disturbed us, made us feel like a non-player character in a cold algorithm. For Gen Z, who somehow always knew that the intimate was shared, the situation is quite different: could it

12 Poolcore. (2024). In *Aesthetics Wiki*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Poolcore

be that today it is easier for them to create art, culture and fictional experiences through collective processes?



A typical example of the poolcore aesthetic, found image.

VT: This extremely intimate sharing experience you talk about, which the internet allows despite its limitations (the exclusion of the body and physical contact), is in my opinion the most fascinating, and at the same time terrifying, aspect of the internet. In the early 1990s, Pierre Lévy spoke of *collective intelligence*, envisioning a future in which this continuous global interconnectedness would give birth to a new form of intelligence capable of “augmenting” skills and intellectual resources. This idea has come to fruition, but in unforeseen forms: unable to select what to share, what kind of ideas to convey, what skills to enhance and for what purposes, we have seen brains and souls connect at every level, for any conceivable end and goal, in any conceivable way.

Although we keep comparing processors to human brains, our minds are definitely not calculators; sharing human resources is not the same as sharing datasets and computational power. By interconnecting human intelligence, we connect not only expertise and informa-

tion but also emotions, feelings, intuitions, obsessions, dreams and visions. This kind of *extended hivemind* is exactly the “alien life form” that David Bowie talked about in his 1999 interview with the BBC,¹³ where in a moment of extreme lucidity and prescience he told journalist Jeremy Paxman: “The potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable. I don’t think we’ve even seen the tip of the iceberg ... I think we’re actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.”

As you suggest, the contact with this dynamic certainly has had different consequences in different generations. For Generation X and the millennials, it was a mutation process, at once exhilarating and painful, something we had to process, understand, learn. For Gen Z, I think the awareness of being part of this “whole” was acquired more quickly and instinctively. I cannot say whether this is good or bad, and it is still hard to imagine the consequences. I hope that what you say is true, namely that collective creation will become something increasingly natural and that we will “shift” to a model of cultural production focused less on individuality and more on community.

SDD: Another cross-cutting theme of the book, which could resonate closely with many readers, is that of the “chronically online brain” and the myriad of digital artefacts that are created in order to process the trauma of being constantly ex-

13 See note #1.

posed to a myriad of other digital artefacts. You talk about *sludge content* videos, the art of compiling multiple videos within the same screen so as to cater to the numerous needs of viewers and users now suffering from ADHD and desperately seeking multitasking, and about *chaos edits*, Dadaist montages of other videos and images found online. Last summer, during my dives into popular science on YouTube, I noticed how these attempts at random juxtaposition are reminiscent of the dreamlike activity our brains perform in the non-REM phase. When we are deeply asleep, the memories of the day appear to us juxtaposed in a speeded-up manner, disregarding the linear sequence of time. Our brain, completely uninhibited and free from the so-called bias of reason, tries to make sense of its memories in order to understand how the world works.

This dreamlike activity returns in the game design of Harper Shen's *Therapy* (2023),¹⁴ "a walking simulator that allows you to wander in your dreams and illusions", which you rightly compare to Osamu Sato's *LSD: Dream Emulator* (1998),¹⁵ one of the first walking simulators, games that unfold in a juxtaposition of scenarios without an end goal. The weird adventure games that have come out in the past 20 years are stupendous (you cite *Yume Nikki* from 2004, and I

14 harpershen.itch.io/therapy

15 LSD: Dream Emulator. (2024). In Wikipedia. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LSD:_Dream_Emulator

would add *Undertale* from 2015 and *Hypnospace Outlaw* from 2019), but while in many it is still possible to experience an adventure as a player character, in *Therapy* interaction is denied. The player can only move through space and watch, as in a dream or on Tumblr: the users find themselves exploring another person's memories, which again uncannily match their own. If *Therapy*, an expression of traumacore, looks a lot like *Let's Play*, videos in which one watches others play, then perhaps chaos edits are the Let's Play of the internet, and corecore is the Let's Play of life during our extinction. What is happening to the ability to choose and the agency of the mind online? Has interactivity turned into zapping, or have we reached the stillness of Nirvana, where the four noble truths are now revealed, and we are in a new state of "transcendental consciousness of content as a whole" (lol)?

VT: Corecore is the point at which the very concept of core collapses in on itself and reveals itself for what it really is. Its emergence was inevitable. When I first saw the hashtag on TikTok, I thought: "Yeah, of course." Because in the end, if you think about it, in internet aesthetics it is the suffix that matters, not the prefix. The prefix is interchangeable, you can put anything there, whereas the suffix determines the approach, the intention, the attitude. *Core* as the will to extract the *core of things*, searching for their primal energy; but also *core* as *obsession*, *repetition*, *exaggeration*. I like this idea of

chaos edits as the Let's Play of the internet: maybe it's a way to imagine yourself inside someone else's mind, "passively" surfing through their eyes, only to realise, while doing so, that after all, other people's browsing is not so different from your own.

Regarding zapping and Nirvana (lol): interactivity has been naively celebrated for decades, to the point where we experience participation as an obligation (yet another one). Perhaps it is one of the many things we should rethink at this moment in history.



Two frames from @heksensabbat's TikTok, the first to post a corecore edit and coin the term, on 16 July 2022.¹⁶

SDD: In the book, you talk about strategies for adapting to an impermanent reality, ranging from reality shifting to the *Everything is a Cake* meme,¹⁷ and hint at the *dead internet theory*,¹⁸ which suggests that humans ceased to exist on the internet in 2016, giving way to bots and arti-

16 fey [@heksensabbat]. (2022, July 16). #corecore explanation ... [Video]. TikTok. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from www.tiktok.com/@heksensabbat/video/7183177879759408426

17 Watts, M. (2020, July 13). The "Everything Is a Cake" Meme, Explained Through Jokes. *Newsweek*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from www.newsweek.com/everything-is-a-cake-meme-explained-through-jokes-1517441

18 Dead Internet theory. (2024). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Internet_theory

ficial entities. After years of emotional targeting and *fake news*, troll farms, shapeshifting and mediatic coups de théâtre,¹⁹ *deepfakes* and conspiracies exploited by propaganda, not only do we find ourselves in a permanent state of suspicion, but adaptation has led us to move from one fictional universe to another as if the online world were a giant LARP that is spreading into our daily lives. We have welcomed the fake into our homes as we would an ugly souvenir given by grandma or a calendar from a Chinese deli. But the online fake is viscous, and if we want to keep it at bay, the passive mode of Let's Play might be a trap; for now, internet creators seem to have reacted in other ways, often exploiting the memetic, weird and cursed aspect of early rudimentary generative AI (I refer to *The Deep Mellow Valley*²⁰ and the video essay *The Future Ahead Will Be Weird AF*²¹). In your online journeys – you still know how to surf as they used to in the splendid 1.0 – what have you seen happening to those who create or chronically inhabit a world where everything might be fake? And what role do gen AIs take in this scrum?

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- 19 Hains, T. (2016, October 12). *BBC's Adam Curtis: How Propaganda Turned Russian Politics Into Theater*. Real Clear Politics. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/10/12/bbcs_adam_curtis_how_propaganda_turned_russian_politics_into_a_circus.html
- 20 Dal Dosso, S. (2024, January 11). *The Deep Mellow Valley*. Institute of Network Cultures. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from networkcultures.org/longform/2024/01/11/the-deep-mellow-valley
- 21 Parts 1 and 2 available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhZ058-Il6g and www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpNRfzwnXJc.

VT: It is increasingly difficult “to surf as they used to in the splendid 1.0” because the internet is no longer what it was in 1998, or even 2006. The ocean is much larger and more tumultuous; messages are difficult to decipher; finding safe harbours is a remote possibility. The more one tries to avoid predetermined routes, the more one feels the power of the mainstream current. Social platforms, targeted advertising, algorithmic content selection: everything tends to bring us back into the mainstream, the one that numbs and homogenises us. Despite everything, I always try; it is my form of resistance.

To answer your question: creating – but also just existing – in a world where everything could be fake (but also bot generated) is a new existential condition. The responses to this situation could not be more diverse: I see people who are not at all aware of the change and continue to take (more or less) everything at face value; I see people who have converted to scepticism and practise it as a religion; I also see people who have a lot of fun playing with the realms of the true, the false and the verisimilar, inventing aesthetics and modes of expression. Like grandma’s ugly souvenir, in the end we kind of like it, even if we are ashamed to say so.

Generative AIs are like a bottomless pit; when we use them, an infinite space opens up before us: the combinatorial vertigo, the potentially unstoppable paths of automatic generation. Even there, we are on a threshold; beyond is the unknown and sticky substance of latent space.

Valentina Tanni, Silvia Dal Dosso
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Can thought aka theory be as fast and up-to-date as reality itself? Perhaps not, but this conversation between Valentina Tanni and Silvia Dal Dosso about internet aesthetics (and, inevitably, ethics) comes as close to it as possible. What are “landscapes beyond the threshold”, why a suffix is more #core than a prefix and how dark has hivemind become in the meantime? Hell, let’s just call it Applied Post-Ballardianism – “we all went to the same pool”, after all.

Valentina Tanni is an art historian and curator. She is interested in the relationship between art and technology, with a special focus on internet cultures.

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