

**The Future We Were Promised: 2000's  
Aesthetics & Lost Futures**

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# Introduction

Humanity is currently living through what is known as ‘the information age’ a period in history that has pushed us to technological advancements once thought to be impossible. The creation of the internet may just be one of the most important events in our history, a network of computers continuously interacting with each other, allowing us to be more connected than ever before.

The 2000s were the tipping point for this change, when home computers shifted from a commodity to a necessity. Consequently, this also marked the beginning of a new generation that would grow up alongside the internet, part of that first generation was the researcher of this very project. In time, we were able to discover the brilliant capabilities that the internet could offer us but as time marched on, our perception of the internet changed. As the beginning of the new millennia faded from recent history, we were left with an absence, a nothingness.

A decade of what felt like progress ceased to be, as if the very future we had been striving for suddenly disappeared with no time to mourn it. We now yearn for the past, the memory of the future we were once promised, unable to move on as if its ghost was haunting our current culture. The researcher aims for this project is to look at the visual identity of the 2000s, to understand its aesthetics and see how we portrayed the future and to determine what caused that vision to fade away.

*The researcher considers this project to be autobiographical; representing their upbringing during the 2000s and how they engaged with it. As such the contents of this project may not portray the same upbringing as someone else who grew up in this period.*

# Literature Review

The overall framework for this project began with the work of the Mark Fisher and his research into the concept of hauntology, a concept originating from French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The idea is that culture could be 'haunted' by its past. The 'ghost' of the past could be seen as a deep-rooted cultural memory, embedded deeply into our human consciousness, as long as we remain obsessed with out past, we will be always be haunted by it.

Because of this modern culture we have been unable to progress any further, constantly regurgitating past ideas. Furthermore, Fisher also discusses the idea of a 'lost future' in his article for film quarterly *'What is Hauntology?'*, due to our fixation on the past society has been unable to progress any further which has result in the 'death' of a possible future:

*'the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing'* (Fisher, 2012, p. 16)

The disappearance of the future and our reliance on the past has trigged a vicious cycle that were doomed to repeat. By lacking a future we instead look too our past and then try to extend it, preventing a new future from ever occurring. Nostalgia can be considered one of the key reasons for our cultures obsession with the past, Simon Reynolds is music journalist and close collaborator of Fisher's. In his book *'Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past'* Reynolds suggests that nostalgia is 'stopping our culture's ability to surge forward' and that we are nostalgic 'precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times?' (Reynolds, 2012 p.xiv).

Both Fisher and Reynolds were specifically looking at the 21<sup>st</sup> century in their respective work. The two previously cited works both were published in 2012, just over a decade since the new millennia, It's the researchers belief that this event was crucial in understanding our current state of mourning.

Due to the nature of this project and the time period it focused on, a large amount of the literature came from contemporary sources from the early 2000s. It was important to the researcher that the memory of the 2000s was preserved authentically and unaffected by any modern cynicism. The optimism of the time can be seen throughout the decade, especially regarding the rate in which technology was progressing, this ‘techno-optimism’ would later become synonymous with the decade.

One particular paper that greatly influenced the researcher was the *‘Future as fantasy: forgetting the flaws’* by Rakesh Kapoor and published in the 2001 as part of the *‘Futures: for the interdisciplinary study of futures, visioning, anticipation and foresight journal’* (Typically abbreviated to just *Futures*). Kapoor wrote about the importance of future studies from the perspective of improving conditions for humanity, particularly in regards to helping marginalized groups. Kapoor celebrated techno-optimism, firstly by talking about how technology had already been proven its worth ‘its [technology] demonstrable power is often miraculous. It is not difficult, therefore, to be carried away by the optimism that something so demonstrably powerful will be able to take us to the golden age of abundance and absolute power.’ (Kapoor, 2001, p. 164)

Kapoor continued that techno-optimism also acted as an insurance, that we could rely on technology to ensure a better future. Kapoor wrote this scenario:

*‘Techno-optimists tell us that tomorrow’s cars will run on hydrogen, derived from water. So the depleting reserves of fossil fuels as well as the pollution caused by their use are no longer a problem. At one stroke, the problem of responsible use of fossil fuels is avoided while simultaneously giving a great feeling of optimism for the future’* (Kapoor, 2001, p.165)

Techno-optimism wasn’t this farfetched belief, it was grounded in technologies achievements and the idea that we we’re all truly working towards making the world a better place for both the present and future. However, we weren’t able to fix the world’s problems, the 2008 global recession would have drastic impact on economies around the world. Environmentally, humanity is still trying to resolve the climate crisis all while fossil fuel emissions are on the rise (Carrington, 2024).

Once again the researcher found himself returning to the work of Mark Fisher, particularly his book '*Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*'. Fisher further unpacks his view on hauntology and how the modern world 'is oppressed by a crushing scene of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet.' (Fisher, 2014, p. 17). More importantly, Fisher begins to describe what he refers to as the 'slow *cancellation*' of the future, proposing the following thought experiment:

*Imagine any record released in the past couple of years being beamed back in time to, say, 1995 and played on the radio. It's hard to think that it will produce any jolt in the listeners. On the contrary, what would be likely to shock our 1995 audience would be the very recognisability of the sounds: would music really have changed so little in the next 17 years? (Fisher, 2014, p. 17).*

In this scenario, the lack of any massive development in the music overall sounds is an example of slow cancellation can occur, its prevented a genre of music from evolving. Fisher continues to elaborate on this, comparing it to past musical genres:

*'Contrast this with the rapid turnover of styles between the 1960s and the 90s: play a jungle record from 1993 to someone in 1989 and it would have sounded like something so new that it would have challenged them to rethink what music was, or could be.'* (Fisher, 2014, p. 17).

What Fisher is implying is that the lack of any *recent* developments in music suggests that not only is this a modern issue but it also may potentially be happening for the first time in history. Could this thought experiment be applied to the 2000s overall, If someone living in 2000 was shown what the world would look like in 2024, how would they feel? Would they feel that the world has hardly changed over 20 years into the future and if that is the case then what did they expect the future to look like?

# Visual Review

The report focuses on two popular aesthetic trends that occurred throughout 2000-2010, the Y2K aesthetic and Frutiger Aero. The Y2K aesthetic first appeared in the late 90s and lasted until around 2004. It captured the zeitgeist of the new millennia, its imagery was futuristic portraying abstract technology all enveloped in a layer of shiny chrome. It showed us a future that seemed almost too alien for us to grasp, something utopian.



*Double-Life: Music for PlayStation (1999) an example of the Y2K Aesthetic*

The aesthetic encompassed multiple mediums: music, film, fashion and even architecture were all covered under this umbrella. The uncertainty of what the 21<sup>st</sup> century had in store for us provided unlimited possibilities for what the future could look like, allowing a generation to get carried away with the optimism of the time. The concept of techno-optimism was deeply embedded within the aesthetic, the idea that we could create a perfect world through our technological achievements.

Frutiger Aero followed on from the Y2K aesthetic, adopted around 2004 and maintained popularity until the early 2010s. Frutiger Aero was used almost exclusively as a design aesthetic in the tech industry, with perhaps its most iconic use being the graphical interfaces for multiple Windows operating systems. Unlike the futuristic techno-optimism of Y2K, Frutiger Aero was more grounded in conveying an 'Ecotopia' a place where humanity and nature both co-existed and evolved together.



*Asadal Fish Wallpaper (2009) an example of Frutiger Aero*

Both aesthetics captured the optimism of the 2000s despite portraying two different visions for the future. While the Y2K aesthetic viewed the future as a time and place vastly different from their own, Frutiger Aero portrayed it as something more much realistic. The shift from a future of technological prowess into something much more grounded in reality, perhaps the idea of an ecotopia appeared more feasible.

It's here where we start to understand that the perception of the future in the 2000s was inherently utopian. Creating a utopia isn't exclusive to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however perhaps the idea of achieving utopia was invigorated by the optimism of the time? The book *Visions of Utopia* provides contemporary insight into what the idea of utopia represented:

*'Some utopias are also often critical rather than affirmative, invoking the earthly elements of greed and envy and inequality, only to suggest that if the correct strategies are followed, they might be overcome or avoided. But utopias, properly interpreted, are of what should be, even if they show what shouldn't be' (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty, 2003 p. 3)*



Issey Miyake Men: Wearing Tools, an example of contemporary Y2K fashion featured in MR High Fashion No.97 (2000)

Depictions of utopia are reactionary to the current state of the world, acting as a set of guidelines to show how it could be obtained. Maybe 2000s aesthetics attempted to portray a possible utopia that could have been achieved. Frutiger Aero especially strived towards showing a world where we had reached an equilibrium with nature, a form of ecological utopia (Ecotopia).

Looking at the broader Y2K aesthetic, portrayals of utopia are far more vast. The philosophy of transhumanism is seen in Y2K, it's the belief that technology can be used to enhance humanity into something post-human. Another example of the 2000s mindset that technology was the answer to all of our problems.

Whether it was through aspiring technology or ecological harmony, utopia played a significant part in the design for these aesthetics. Combined with the optimism of the 2000s, Y2K and Frutiger Aero gave a generation hope that the future would be a much better place.

Both of these aesthetics have seen a resurgence in popularity ever since 2020, which would put them in accordance with what is known as the '20-year cycle. This rule of thumb suggests that trends will repeat themselves every 20 years, evoking a sense of nostalgia for the past. This cycle can be applied to fashion, music and in this case visuals. Given the resurgences timing alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not illogical to suggest that it may have been responsible for kickstarting the trend. A research study conducted in 2021, determined that digital communities were crucial to supporting a person's wellbeing during lockdown by providing people a place to share memories of the past. (Todorova and Padareva-Ilieva, 2021).

Since the pandemic, both aesthetics have remained popular with Gen Z through social media, particularly Frutiger Aero which garnered lots of attention through the platform TikTok. It was this trend where the phrase '*the future we were promised*' first became associated with the aesthetic, in an article by *The Guardian* J'Nae Philips, author of the *Fashion Tingz* newsletter describes it as 'the gap between tech utopia and dystopia' further saying 'it's the sense of relatability and friendliness that makes this aesthetic feel like a welcome respite from the chaos of the outside world' (Philips cited in Bramley 2023).

We start to understand that it's not just about the nostalgia of the 2000s but also escaping from our current world. A similar meaning can be found in the return of the Y2K aesthetic, while it wasn't as widespread as the modern Frutiger Aero trend, it made a noticeable comeback in the fashion industry. Being coined as Y2K 2.0, it emphasised the angst of the time, with oversized jackets and jeans combined with exuberant colours. Vogue wrote an article regarding the revival and how it was more than just nostalgia, Hess writes:

*'Revivalism isn't necessarily about creating a perfect facsimile of a look from a specific moment in time, but about pulling together a pastiche that reflects our needs and wants in the present day.'*  
(Hess, 2021)

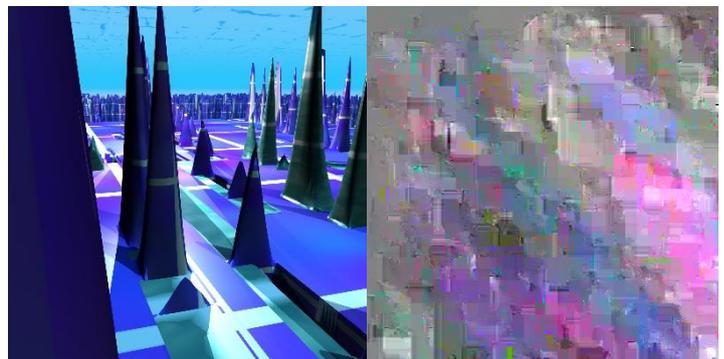
The aim wasn't to reproduce a perfect copy of 2000s fashion, it was about recapturing the cultural memory of what 2000s fashion, by doing this we were able to bring a part of our past into the present. It's clear that escapism is an important aspect of the both of these aesthetics, what were both once visions into possible futures have now become a glimpse into a what-if scenario for what our current world could have been like.

# Methodology

The research for this project was predominantly carried out by the practitioner revisiting their childhood and the media they grew up with during the 2000s. As noted in the introduction of this report, the content discussed here and in the associated visual journal are autobiographical to the researcher, reflecting their own memories and upbringing rather than accumulation of multiple peoples experiences. For the researcher, much of their most important memories from this time are centred around music, video games and technology.

Since the original proposal, the desire to maintain authenticity to the 2000s has been an important part of this project. The idea that everything the researcher carried out could of existed over 24 years ago was partially influenced by Mark Fishers cancellation of the future thought experiment but also the researchers personal interest in 2000s tech. To capture the concept of lost futures, the works produced are portrayed through the medium known as 'Glitch Art'.

Glitch art is the act of distorting computer files to deliberately trigger errors within its code, triggering a visual glitch. A files format determines how a computer will read a specific file, these formats can easily be altered to allow files to be unread in unnatural ways. For example, a PNG file is used to display an image, if the PNG was converted into a WAV file then a computer will start to display it as an audio file. The implications for this is that a photo could be transformed into audio, edited as audio and finally converted back into a photo, triggering a visual glitch in the process.

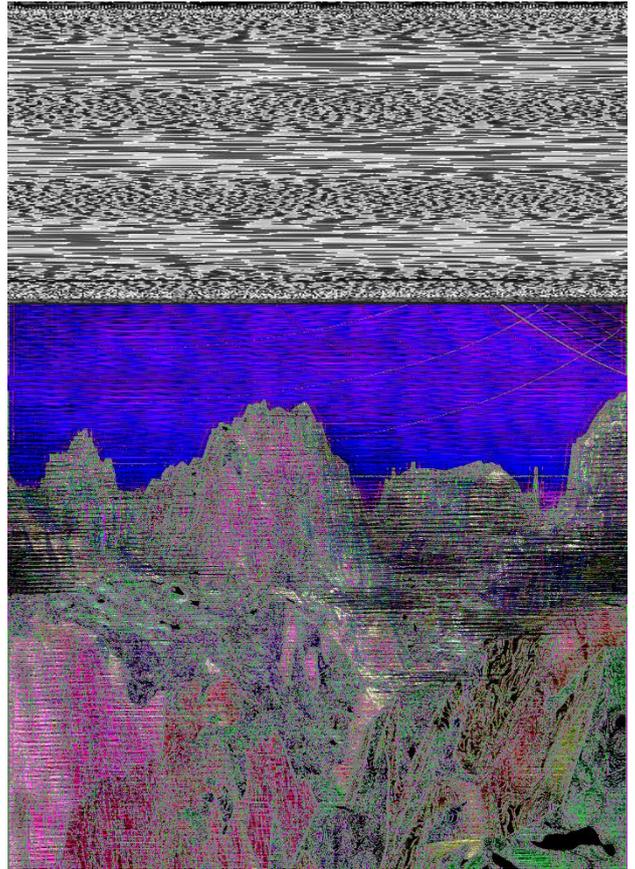


*An image file before and after being edited as audio, this form of glitch art is known as databending.*

Glitches are unpredictable in nature, while they can be intentionally triggered, the end results can vary. Sometimes they'll completely corrupt a file beyond repair and other times they may be hardly noticeable. But occasionally, a glitch will occur that both distorts the file but also preserves just enough detail to make it legible enough for us to understand. This middleground is what the researcher truly wants to achieve with this project.

The ability to transmogrify any computer file into an image allows for near unlimited possibilities. By importing an audio file into photoshop, an image of the raw data will be produced. The researcher then converted it from a 2D image into a 3D digital model. It was then imported into a software called Bryce3D, an early 2000s modelling program. Using Bryce, the researcher produced several pieces portraying digital landscapes, created entirely out of data from 2000s media.

The researchers intent was to have these digital landscapes act as windows into a lost future, exhibited alongside other glitched visuals. The way these pieces are showcased are through a video which rapidly jumps from image to image. This was done to simulate the practice of 'channel surfing' in which TV viewers would hop between channels in quick succession until they found something interesting to watch.



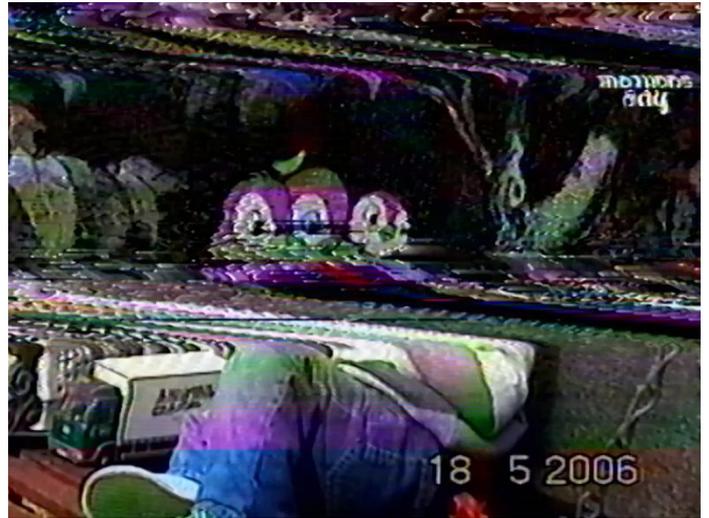
*An audio file viewed through photoshop and the digital landscape it was used to create.*

The artefact resembles a VHS tape recording with footage of the researcher as a child but quickly cuts to a TV show, as if it had been tapped over. Its apparent the tape is from the early 2000s, adverts, music and even video games appear. While still identifiable, they are heavily distorted, with both the visuals and audio glitching out. The corruption only grows stronger as the tape continues, rapidly surfing through different channels. Suddenly, pictures of digital landscapes, the visions of a lost future start to appear, flickering in and out of each other. These digital landscapes are an anomaly, spliced over sections of the tape rather than as part of the recording itself. The supernatural aspect of tape remains subliminal, more adverts start to make more mentions of the future and what it holds. However, the tape abruptly cuts back to family videos, whatever the tape was trying to tell us would remain a mystery.

Memories are finite and as such are subject to decay, the researcher aimed to capture this in his artefact. The persistence of memory is the last way we can revisit the 2000s but as time marches on those memories fade, details become murky until they finally fade away.

# Analysis

The glitch artist Rosa Menkman describes glitches as ‘a glimpse into normally obfuscated machine language [...] the machine revealing itself’ (Menkman, 2011, p. 29-30). It was important for the authenticity of this project that the glitches were presented with barely any human interference. While some glitches were triggered by deliberately tinkering with a files codes, all the analog glitches were created purely by the passing of time over the last 20 years.



*An example of an analog glitch from the artefact*

Glitch art will always be associated with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as technology became more widespread, the more likely it became for someone to encounter a glitch by complete accident. In a way, glitches capture a moment in time, buried under layers of memory and distortion like a fossil in permafrost. Glitches can allow us revisit our past and tap into our memories, however they aren't the perfect medium for us to clearly reminisce, perhaps it would be better to say that glitches are a method for us to engage with personal nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a powerful feeling and despite the concerns from theorists such as Simon Reynolds, is something we are all still engrossed with. In our current world, things seem to be on a continuous downward spiral and as such we feel compelled to look back at times we deemed to be safer. For many children of the 2000s, their earliest memories still exist on VHS tapes that are likely rotting away in an attic as this report is being written.

Much like the tapes used in the artefact, they've likely been effected by decades of neglect, while the memories stored on them may still be salvageable they'll likely be corrupted by glitches that have become embedded in the tapes. These glitches have now become a part of the memories and will remain that way forever, the persistence of the original memory is all that is left.

The artefact made heavy use of the researchers own VHS tape collection, particularly ones that their own parents recorded throughout the early 2000s. This made the experience of revisiting their childhood more visceral than they expected, providing themselves with a thirdhand experience of what their life was like. The researcher wasn't just watching viewing the 2000s, they we're viewing *their* own personal version of the 2000s.

The idea of the artefact being a family home video that had been taped over with a TV recording originated while the researcher was digitising their tape collection, occasionally they would find tapes that began with family videos only for it to distort and change to a random TV show. The fragility of these recordings effected the researcher greatly, making them realise that their own memory was the only thing they had left of certain events in their life. This was especially difficult when realising that tapes that included video of their late Nan had been corrupted beyond repair.

While assembling the artefact, it also became immediately apparent how the Y2K aesthetic got its namesake. Music videos heavily leaned into the tech style, either being set in a Matrix-esque futuristic world or being made entirely as CGI, capturing the future was an important part of the 2000s image. This also extends outside of music videos, while viewing their own TV tape recordings, the researcher identified that adverts also captured the aesthetic. They all used a cool colour palette of blues and greys, once again leaning into the Matrix-esque style. Due to also being tools for marketing, technology would appear throughout them, whether it was for a camera or a new DVD player, it was clear that they were showcasing items for the future.

On the other hand, the researcher was unable to find many contemporary examples of the Frutiger Aero aesthetic in their recordings. While this is likely due to it largely only seeing use in the tech industry, it was still surprising to them that it didn't appear in any adverts. This could perhaps suggest that Frutiger Aero gained a majority of its popularity through its 2020 resurgence and not from a fondness from when it first appeared.

Overall, the researcher is satisfied with the results of this project, they always intended to research the obsession the modern world has with the 2000s and have achieved this. In what seems to be one part nostalgia and another part yearning for a better life.

# Conclusion

To summarise, the concept of hauntology is inseparable from the 2000s, a period in time that promised the world so much only to have its flame irreparably snuffed out. As time marches on, we return to the past seeking healing, away from pandemics and threats of war to a place that offered us a future where these concepts would cease to exist.

As the researcher is concluding this report, they ponder how many others are out there who share their experience of the 2000s and how do they may differentiate from their own. Perhaps this will allow for an opportunity in the future for this topic to be reevaluated on a larger scale. Furthermore, he begins to ask himself 'what exactly is next for us then?' and at this point the answer may be 'we'll be in the exact same position'.

The political scholar Francis Fukuyama once said that the end of history would be a 'very sad time [...] just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history'. (Fukuyama, 1989, p.18). While we can always revisit the 2000s through nostalgia, we can never go back to our own personal 2000s. While we may have photos and videos, they are finite and will eventually succumb to time. With no past to return too and a future many of us are dreading approaching, we're currently stuck in a form of purgatory, all we have left is our own fixations. The artefact and its accompanying visual journal represents the determination of one individual in an attempt to preserve their own human history.

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