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Rodrigo Neiva Pereira

Digital Dreams: The American and Japanese Visions of the Internet through Visual Media (1995–2001) and Their Implications for International Relations

Trabalho de conclusão de curso

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Orientador: Thiago Alves Braz

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Abstract

Neiva, Rodrigo. **Digital Dreams: The American and Japanese Visions of the Internet through Visual Media (1995–2001) and Their Implications for International Relations**. Rio de Janeiro, ano. Trabalho de conclusão de curso – Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This study examines how the United States and Japan imagined the emerging Internet through visual media produced between 1995 and 2001. Using Roland Bleiker's frameworks in "Visual Global Politics" (2018) and "Aesthetics in International Relations" (2009), the analysis treats films, anime, television, and video games as active sites of political meaning-making. Works such as Johnny Mnemonic (1995), The Matrix (1999), Kairo (2001) and Metal Gear Solid 2 (2001) reveal contrasting cultural visions: while American media often depict the Internet as a space of both liberation and domination, Japanese media highlight themes of isolation and the fragility of identity in networked worlds. By comparing these imaginaries, the study shows how visual culture shaped early public understandings of digital technology and argues that these representations continue to influence contemporary debates in international relations and global digital politics.

Keywords

Culture; Internet; Japan; USA; Visual.

Resumo

Neiva, Rodrigo. **Sonhos Digitais: As Visões Americana e Japonesa da Internet por Meio das Mídias Visuais (1995–2001) e Suas Implicações para as Relações Internacionais**. Rio de Janeiro, ano. Trabalho de conclusão de curso – Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

Este estudo examina como os Estados Unidos e o Japão imaginaram a Internet emergente por meio de mídias visuais produzidas entre 1995 e 2001. Utilizando os referenciais teóricos de Roland Bleiker sobre "Visual Global Politics" (2018) e "Aesthetics in International Relations" (2009), a análise trata filmes, animes, televisão e videogames como espaços ativos de produção de significado político. Obras como Johnny Mnemonic (1995), The Matrix (1999), Kairo (2001) e Metal Gear Solid 2 (2001) revelam visões culturais contrastantes: enquanto a mídia americana frequentemente retrata a Internet como um espaço de dominação e resistência, a mídia japonesa destaca temas de isolamento e a fragilidade da identidade em mundos conectados. Ao comparar esses imaginários, o estudo demonstra como a cultura visual moldou as primeiras percepções públicas sobre a tecnologia digital e argumenta que essas representações continuam a influenciar debates contemporâneos nas relações internacionais e na política digital global.

Palavras-chave

Cultura; EUA; Internet; Japão; Visual.

Sumário

“Computers don't make errors. What they do, they do on purpose.”

JUDGE, M.; DANIELS, G. King of the Hill, 1998.

1. Introduction

The late twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented expansion of the audiovisual field, driven by the globalization of media industries and the digitization of everyday life (HERMAN; McCHESNEY, 1997). During this period, cinema, television and emerging forms of interactive media became key terrains for negotiating cultural identity, technological imagination and geopolitical influence. This audiovisual universe, particularly in the years surrounding the rise of the Internet, functioned as both an archive of collective desire and a laboratory of ideological formation. Its images did not simply reflect technological progress: they produced it symbolically, shaping how societies imagined power, freedom and connectivity in an increasingly networked world. Through the circulation of blockbusters, animation and video games, new aesthetic grammars emerged that mirrored and contested the expanding digital condition.

From an economic and geopolitical standpoint, this field represented not merely entertainment but a global apparatus of soft power and cultural investment. The audiovisual industries of the United States and Japan, among the most influential during the 1990s and early 2000s (IWABUCHI, 2002; MCKEVITT, 2018), became crucial agents in the construction of what might be called the "Internet imaginary." Their productions reached vast transnational audiences, generating billions in revenue while disseminating contrasting visions of technological modernity and human agency. In this sense, the media landscape operated as a site of cultural hegemony, where representations of the future—and of digital subjectivity itself—were contested through images, sounds and narratives. Understanding this terrain in a quantitative scale is essential for situating the aesthetic and political stakes that define how global societies continue to see and feel the digital world today.

During the 90s, the small publishing house White Wolf launched a new tabletop RPG system to compete with the famous Dungeons & Dragons. But, unlike its predecessor, instead of drawing inspiration from Tolkien's Middle Earth, the world of Vampire: The Masquerade brings the horrors of Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897) into the modern world. "The World of Darkness" eventually included more than eight different core settings—including lines focused on werewolves, mummies and even ghosts, all part of the same universe—but the main focus of the line was the books centered on the vampires of this world. The Kindred, as the bloodsuckers call themselves, are a diverse group with different clans inspired by the various representations of these monsters over the years. Do you want to create a vampire

inspired by Anne Rice's "Interview with the Vampire" (1976) ? Build a character from the Ventrue clan. Do you want to create a vampire inspired by Vlad the Impaler? Make a Tzimisce and build furniture from the bodies of your enemies. Among the diverse clans, certainly the one that least attempts to hide its inspiration is the Nosferatu, clearly inspired by the unauthorized 1922 adaptation of Bram Stoker's work. The members of this family are cursed with a disfigured appearance that resembles that of Count Orlok in the German classic, forcing them to live isolated in segregated communities even among other Kindred. I use the word "curse" due to the clan's practice of seeking out beautiful and vain people to transform as a way of teaching a lesson. Curiously, White Wolf chose this group of unsightly individuals, anti-social in every sense of the word, who mostly live in sewers or caves, to be the main user of the Internet among all the clans (DANSKY. et al., 1999).

It may be initially weird the need to address the Internet in a setting primarily used to roleplay as a famous monster but if we look into the timeframe of its creation, we will understand that it was something that needed to be addressed. The internet completely modified the way humans interact with others. Now, a person is capable of communicating instantly with someone on the other side of the ocean through forums and later, the social networks we know opened doors to a society where knowledge was easily accessible. You can see how important it would be for vampires to be on top of things in this information revolution, one little video gets posted and the whole world would be alerted of their existence. What is not answered is why the most anti-social type got the key to this new tool. Mechanically in the game it makes total sense, the Nosferatu are the class that focuses on sneaking so the knowledge of computer hacking and other things can be equated to a sort of electronic analog to skills like lockpicking, traditional in other similar classes in more medieval inspired RPGs. Nevertheless the association that those that use/know a lot about this tool are antisocial still remains.

This type of association was not at all unusual for the time. The cartoon "Animaniacs" in its segment "Please Please Please Get A Life Foundation"(1995), when mocking toxic cartoon fans, represented all of them as nerds with nothing better to do with their lives than pointing out mistakes or irrelevant facts about these shows on forums. This does not necessarily mean that these creators believed that all people using computers were trolls or idle nerds but this type of representation demonstrates a view on the Internet (even if unintentionally) and influences how the viewer sees the network. In addition to these representations of the time that simply insert the internet into their worlds, many other authors commented, through their works, their visions about the effects it would have on society. In

this exercise, many works demonstrated an understanding of the internet and its developments that only became widely discussed topics years later. In both cases, these works are not just representations, but also part of the battle where meanings are constructed and dispute supremacy over what the soul of the internet would be for the general public.

In the middle of this fray, two countries emerge as leading figures in this discussion. Both the United States and Japan were epicenters of the digital revolution and thus became leading figures in the debates surrounding this new engine of communication. Given this context, this research proposes a comparative analysis of visual media produced in the United States and Japan between 1995 and 2001, with the aim of mapping each nation's cultural vision of the Internet during a critical phase of global digitalization. By examining how artists in both contexts imagined, feared and mythologized networked technology, the study seeks to illuminate how these early aesthetic and ideological constructions continue to shape contemporary understandings of digital society and inform our ability to navigate the political and ethical challenges of the online world today.

1.1 Justification

As outlined above, the rise of global audiovisual industries in the 1990s transformed images into geopolitical instruments, shaping how societies in the world were influenced by the way the United States and Japan envisioned the promises and perils of a connected world. In this context, the need to study the Internet and its impact on society becomes self-evident, given the profound cultural and political transformations already set in motion during that period. Indeed, for someone born in the 21st century, it is almost impossible to think of living in a world without access to any kind information "24/7". The impact of this invention has fundamentally altered the reality of our world since it became accessible to the general public, totally rewriting not just the everyday life of normal people but also the development of modern technology and the running of evermore global integrated economy. But why is it important to study this field through the lens of international relations?

Although classical international relations is primarily focused on the actions of states, the present-day often reject this simplistic narrative of how politics functions, showing the wide range of influences that move society. For example, we observe the case of Cambridge Analytica—where data from thousands of users were improperly acquired and consequently used to influence the political processes of one of the most powerful countries in the world (CADWALLADR; GRAHAM-HARRISON, 2018; WYLIE, 2019)—we can be certain that

the internet is one of the greatest of these influencing forces. This force is not only limited to the actions of “ordinary” political actors; events such as the Arab Spring, as well as other protests/political actions primarily organized through social networks, demonstrate how this tool can be used by the population for organization and active participation in politics (SALEM; MOURTADA, 2011). There is also another side, a more sinister side, exemplified by things like the spread of conspiracy theories originating from QAnon, a “political/cult movement” intrinsically tied to the internet in the way it transmits its ideas and reaches potential followers, which is believed by a significant portion of both the American electorate and even by certain actors within the government (GILBERT, 2025; JIPSON, 2025). Thus, it is apparent that the internet must be studied for international relations, but why study this valuable subject by analysing visual media from the United States and Japan.

A popular saying goes “the eyes are the windows of the soul” —through them we can understand how a person truly feels, much more than their words can show. Similarly, if we only study official speeches made by government representatives and tech moguls, we will never correctly understand the views that the people hold. We need to make eye contact with that feeling and also study the “windows of the soul” of that discourse, which are the artistic representations a country produces. The authors of "Pop Goes IR?" support this shift, noting that "popular culture as indivisible from politics" and is "an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised" (GRAYSON; DAVIES; PHILPOTT, 2009, p. 155-156), unlike a politician’s speech, a film, TV series and other visual media enjoy greater freedom and through artistic devices, can more honestly and vividly represent how a person truly feels about a given topic.

By investigating these artistic representations, we seek not only to determine whether American and Japanese visual artists anticipated central aspects of the modern internet but also to analyze how these works shaped social and cultural perceptions of computing and networks. Focused on works created in the 1990s and the early 2000s —a key moment in the internet’s popularization when social expectations and anxieties began to crystallize into artistic form— the study treats visual media as a locus where hopes, fears and imaginaries about machines and connectivity are made legible.

Studying the internet through the visual media of the United States and Japan is therefore especially valuable for international relations because these cultural products function as mirrors and engines of public sentiment and transnational influence. Comparative analysis reveals how distinct cultural contexts shaped early visions of the internet —the technological optimism, dystopian anxieties, modalities of sociality and narratives of threat

and opportunity— and how those visions in turn informed soft power, cross-border perceptions and political behavior. In short, these visual media give us access to the popular imaginaries that official texts obscure; by reading those “windows of the soul” side-by-side for the U.S. and Japan, we gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of how societies perceived and helped to shape the machines that now undergird global politics.

2. Theory:

The decade spanning from the 1990s to the early 2000s constituted an unprecedented reconfiguration of the way we see the world. This period witnessed the rapid ascent of ubiquitous computing and global networking, generating a moment of intense political and philosophical anxiety. The initial promise of the Internet as a utopian frontier for unbridled communication and democratic access quickly gave way to a critical reckoning with its potential for mass surveillance (ZUBOFF, 2019), algorithmic control (PASQUALE, 2015) and the radical isolation of the individual (TURKLE, 2011). This transformation was not merely a backdrop for popular entertainment, it was theorized by popular media itself. This article posits that American and Japanese media narratives of this era —including films, television programs and even video games— function as sophisticated vehicles for a critical political philosophy of the networked world, one composed entirely through their aesthetic forms and visual rhetoric.

The challenge for critical scholarship is to move beyond viewing these texts as mere cultural reflections and to engage them as active political agents. To rigorously analyze how these narratives intervene in the political field, we rely on the theoretical architecture of Roland Bleiker. His work on Visual Global Politics (2018) and Aesthetics in International Relations (2009) provides the essential epistemological grounding, allowing us to prioritize the autonomous political force of the image and the affective dimension of global politics. This framework allows the subsequent analysis to treat the media’s visual and formal characteristics as the very substance of political argument.

To further ground this inquiry within the discipline of International Relations, the category of Popular Culture must be acknowledged not as peripheral but as constitutive of world politics itself. As Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (2015) argue, popular culture provides a crucial bridge between the personal and the political, revealing how global power operates through everyday images, narratives, and emotions. By treating popular media as a

continuum with world politics rather than its mere reflection, we gain legitimacy to analyze aesthetic forms as political practices. This theoretical move situates films, anime, and video games within the same analytical field as diplomacy and conflict, allowing us to perceive how affect, identity, and ideology circulate through transnational media flows. In this sense, Popular Culture is not simply illustrative, it is a method of studying International Relations in a way that exposes how the global order is imagined, negotiated, and emotionally experienced.

2.1. Visual Global Politics:

Our primary theoretical lens is provided by Roland Bleiker's thesis on Visual Global Politics (VGP). This approach fundamentally repositions the analysis of global power by asserting that images are not passive reflections of reality but autonomous political forces capable of molding perceptions, inciting political action and actively redefining global narratives. This perspective is essential for studying the internet, as an infrastructure that made possible "the speedy and easy distribution of still and moving images across national boundaries" (BLEIKER, 2018, p.1), as well as various information streams.

VGP necessitates an understanding of spatial and temporal compression within the global political field. Bleiker's insights on the accelerated circulation of images are directly applicable to the narratives of the digital age. The media texts of the 90s and 2000s like Hackers (1995) and Serial Experiments Lain (1998) are, in an aesthetic sense, theorizing a political deterritorialization. They present a world where local events become global crises almost instantaneously, dissolving the clear boundaries between the domestic and the international, the private and the public, which once anchored traditional political theory. The viral spread of information and code becomes the new political medium, replacing the slow, deliberate discourse of diplomacy and national policy with an effective, immediate and borderless reality. The political struggle is aestheticized, occurring on the screen rather than the map. This echoes key Globalization Thinkers—especially those emphasizing deterritorialization and time–space compression (HARVEY, 1990; GIDDENS, 1990; APPADURAI, 1996)—by showing how networks collapse distance and reconfigure the very conditions under which global political life unfolds.

VGP argues that specific images acquire a narrative power that transcends their illustrative role, becoming "primary markers" (BLEIKER, 2018, p.8) that often substitute the political event itself for its visual representation. In the context of the digital rupture, this

concept helps explain the enduring cultural and political weight of the cyber-iconography developed during this period. The visual rhetoric surrounding the hacker archetype (often masked or cloaked in shadow), the abstract visualization of cyberspace (the neon grid, the vast digital stream) and the aesthetic rendering of the artificial intelligence as a visible, even corporeal, presence—these are not just stylistic choices. They are iconographic symbols that organize complex political anxieties, such as surveillance, anonymity, corporate ubiquity and the fate of humanity, into immediately recognizable, affective forms. These visual markers, in the Bleikerian sense, possess autonomous political agency, structuring the audience's emotional and political engagement with technology with greater force than a thousand-page policy treatise.

Crucially, Bleiker's framework forces a confrontation with the profound ambivalence inherent in the democratization of visual production and circulation that the Internet promised. VGP acknowledges that the increased visibility afforded by digital platforms can empower marginalized voices. Yet, it simultaneously highlights that this visual field is a contested space prone to manipulation and abuse. Some artists of the 90s and 2000s were keenly aware of this paradox, aesthetically exploring the dark side of digital visibility—the ease of identity fabrication, the potential for visual disinformation and the weaponization of user-generated content. The ambivalence of the visual itself—its capacity for both liberation and domination—is a central theoretical concern in this research.

2.2. Aesthetics and World Politics

The final component of the framework is drawn from Bleiker's broader theoretical perspective on "Aesthetics and World Politics". This critical approach is vital because it allows the analysis to move decisively beyond a functional or purely instrumental analysis of the image to directly address the profound epistemological and ethical transformation wrought by the internet and the encompassing digital culture. Bleiker insists that aesthetics is not merely relegated to a sphere of superficiality or decoration: rather, it functions as a profound philosophical tool for meticulously exploring the emotional, ethical and cultural dimensions of politics that are often obscured by purely rational or pragmatic accounts (BLEIKER, 2009, p.10-11). By concentrating on the sensory and the perceived, this lens provides the necessary critical distance and imaginative leverage to reimagine the world and to formulate new horizons for political thought and action. This specific aesthetic intervention

provides the indispensable depth required for understanding the true emotional and philosophical cost of the Digitalization process.

The aesthetic forms of the digital media landscape—the visual texture, the sonic landscape, the felt experience of interaction—are therefore central to exploring the affective reality of digital politics. Digital media, in this context, does not merely present a problem as a topic of rational debate; crucially, it delivers an effective, visceral experience of the problem itself. The study must, consequently, pay close, meticulous attention to the visual and auditory textures that inherently convey political meaning. This includes the subtle yet powerful soundscapes of static, glitching and disconnection; the strategic use of high or low-fidelity graphics, the prevalence of fragmented screens, visual noise and digital artifacts and significantly, the common portrayal of isolation amidst hyper-connectivity. These elements are not incidental: they are the language of digital power and effect.

By focusing the methodology on the aesthetic and the sensory rather than the content's rational argument or propositional claims, the analysis adheres strictly to Bleiker's fundamental call for a methodology sensitive to human emotions and perceptions. These feelings and perceptions are not considered mere byproducts but are treated as integral, constitutive components of the political field itself. This aesthetic language serves to validate the lived experience of political alienation, anxiety and disempowerment in the digital age. It formally treats the emotional fallout of technological saturation, including feelings of burnout and anxiety, as a significant political phenomenon in its own right. This phenomenon is directly related not only to the pervasive anxieties but also to the tenuous and often fleeting feelings of hope that characterize contemporary digital life, particularly as aesthetics can highlight potentials for digital resistance and collective action. This approach ensures the framework acknowledges the full human dimension of political life in a digital world, encompassing both its disillusionment and its aspirational possibilities.

At this juncture, the conceptual bridge offered by the literature on Popular Culture and International Relations becomes indispensable. As Davies, Grayson, and Philpott (2009) posit, popular culture and world politics form a continuous terrain rather than distinct domains—a dynamic field where affect, ideology, and representation coalesce into lived political experience. This continuum challenges the positivist impulse to separate culture from politics, inviting instead a methodological sensitivity to how aesthetic forms actively constitute political subjectivities. Within digital culture, the visual and affective languages of popular media not only mirror global anxieties but generate them, shaping perceptions of agency, vulnerability, and resistance. By situating Bleiker's aesthetics within this expanded

field, the analysis gains the authority to interpret this representation of the digital as sites of negotiation between individual emotion and global dynamic. The aesthetic, therefore, becomes both the medium and the battleground where the politics of the digital age are imagined, contested, and felt.

3. Methodology:

This research is anchored in a qualitative, interpretive methodology explicitly designed to bridge the macro-political stakes of the networked world, as established by Roland Bleiker's framework, with the micro-analysis of aesthetic form. The central objective is to treat the selected transmedia narratives not as passive cultural reflections about technology, but as active textual vehicles for political theorizing. The methodological deployment is three-fold: first, establishing the general scope and rigor for qualitative textual analysis, second, defining the specific analytical practice of compositional analysis and third, specifying the criteria for selecting Hackers (1995), The Simpsons (1989), Johnny Mnemonic (1995), The Matrix (1999), Kairo (2001), All About Lily Chou Chou (2001), Serial Experiments Lain (1998) and Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty (2001) as piece worthy of study.

3.1. Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide

The methodological foundation of this research is established by the principles of qualitative inquiry, drawing specifically from the guidance offered in Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash's edited volume, Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide (2008). This research choice is essential, as the political dynamics of media aesthetics —interwoven with meaning, interpretation and cultural context— necessitate the depth and nuance provided by qualitative methods, serving as a vital complement to traditional positivist approaches in the discipline.

Klotz and Prakash, along with their contributors, emphasize the necessity for the scope of "texts" in qualitative IR research to be both pluralistic and expansive. They argue that the field must look beyond conventional diplomatic documents or treaties to embrace a wide array of cultural products, recognizing their inherent political force in shaping collective understandings of global phenomena. Adhering to this principle, the present project treats the

media landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s —specifically encompassing cinema, animation, television and video games— as primary political texts. The inclusion of these highly aesthetic and technologically mediated forms, such as anime and video games, actively challenges conventional textual boundaries and enables an analysis of global politics that accounts for the sensory and affective experiences of the Digital Age. To ensure analytical rigor and scholarly integrity, the methodology is guided by specific qualitative practices drawn from the contributors to the Klotz/Prakash volume, centered on the analysis of discourse and historical representation.

The research primarily incorporates the analysis of discourse, as discussed by Iver B. Neumann, which is crucial for mapping how certain enunciations and practices become institutionalized over time. Neumann argues that representations are not merely reflections of reality but function as powerful mechanisms for organizing and structuring it (2008, p 62). In the context of this study, this methodology implies a rigorous examination of the visual representations of the internet within American and Japanese artistic contexts and how these representations articulate different discourses about technology, globalization and cultural identity. This approach mandates that the analysis must be explicitly transparent about its choices, using detailed aesthetic breakdowns of specific scenes to substantiate every conceptual claim, thereby maintaining the evidentiary rigor essential to qualitative IR scholarship.

Complementing this, the methodology integrates the analysis of historical representations, as emphasized by Kevin C. Dunn. Dunn argues that representations have concrete political implications because they actively structure reality and define what is possible or unthinkable in a given context (2008, p. 80). This approach is essential for understanding how meanings, identities and political practices are produced, contested and transformed over time. By adopting Dunn's focus, the research is enabled to trace the dominant and alternative narratives that emerged in specific cultural contexts during the digital rupture, examining how these narratives engage in dialogue with broader global political trends. Furthermore, this historical and contextual approach necessitates an emphasis on depth over breadth through intensive analysis, meaning the study deliberately prioritizes close readings of a limited, curated set of thematically coherent yet formally diverse texts to achieve thick description and nuanced interpretation. The ultimate goal is to produce an analysis that is retraceable, coherent and conceptually inventive.

3.2. The Cinematic Political: Film Composition as Political Theory

To translate the overarching qualitative mandates established by Neumann and Dunn, particularly the rigorous analysis of discourse and historical representations, into concrete analytical steps, the present research centrally implements the methodological framework developed by Michael J. Shapiro in his seminal monograph, The Cinematic Political: Film Composition as Political Theory (2019). Shapiro's approach is far more than a descriptive theory of media content; it is a dedicated methodology of reading that elevates the act of film textual analysis into a conceptual intervention, treating the aesthetic and formal composition of media texts as the primary engine for generating theoretical insight. This method provides the necessary operational tools to reveal how the digital media corpus functions as an autonomous, self-theorizing site of political commentary.

As the introductory chapter to The Cinematic Political clearly articulates, Shapiro's work stages a "series of pedagogical encounters between political theory, represented as a compositional challenge and cinematic texts."(2019, p. 1) The fundamental premise guiding this methodology is that effective political analysis and writing require the analyst to diligently heed the compositional strategies of films. This requires the researcher to move deliberately beyond the superficial summarization of plot or theme and engage rigorously with how the narrative is technically and aesthetically put together *(*2019, p. 17-18*)*. For the purposes of this study, the traditional "film" is formally and conceptually substituted by the broader media text, necessitating an expansion of the term "composition" to encompass the unique aesthetic grammars of the network age present not only in film and television but also in the world of video games. The core of this Shapiro-based methodology is to treat the unique compositional grammar of each selected work, its narrative assembly, visual syntax, editing rhythms, color palettes and emotional sequencing, as the textual vehicle for political theorizing. This is the method's most critical operational distinction. The critical edge of this approach, as Shapiro notes, lies in the emphasis on how to "intervene in cinematic texts with innovative conceptual frames in ways that challenge dominant understandings of life worlds." (2019, p. 1) The analysis is thus mandated not simply to summarize the plot's manifest politics (e.g., concluding that a film is "about surveillance"), but rather to articulate precisely how the aesthetic organization of the text itself constructs a specific philosophical argument. For example, the use of deliberately low-resolution graphics or static shots is read not as a technical limitation, but as a compositional strategy that theorizes the contingency of global power or the affective weight of network alienation.

This compositional perspective systematically directs the analyst's gaze toward the formal disruptions and heterogeneity within the texts—those moments that resist smooth narrative flow or introduce a visual anomaly (2019, p. 13). These aesthetic ruptures (e.g., the sudden chaotic visualization of code, the appearance of a digital ghost, the dissolution of the frame) are isolated and analyzed as explicit political commentary. The detailed breakdown of these aesthetic choices ensures that the analysis remains explicitly transparent, linking the observed compositional strategy directly to the conceptual claim. This process of isolating the formal mechanisms is what allows the research to move past the surface-level politics of the script and uncover the political concepts that are intrinsically embedded in the visual and sonic arrangement of the texts. By articulating how the affective and formal dimensions of the internet function as powerful, non-textual interventions in political thought, Shapiro's compositional lens provides the mechanism by which the research fulfills the rigorous interpretive and contextual requirements set forth by Neumann and Dunn.

3.2.1. Games

The expansion of Shapiro's compositional method to include video games necessitates particular analytical nuances to ensure the depth of the inquiry matches the complexity of the medium. Unlike a film, which presents a static, pre-determined compositional grammar, video games offer an interactive and performative text that are partially authored by the player's choices and actions. To treat these artifacts as genuine political theory requires engaging with the medium's unique formal properties, analysts must treat it as a complex system of rules, incentives and constraints that actively shapes player behavior and worldviews, rather than simply a passive narrative. Consequently, a rigorous methodology for studying digital games requires a holistic perspective that integrates the interactive elements with the presented content. As Nick Robbison puts it in his chapter in "Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies", "a constructive encounter with videogames relies on reflection on narrative, visual and aural elements and gameplay"(2015, p. 97). Only by dissecting this synergy between the game's story, sensory environment and its mechanics can researchers effectively uncover the subtle yet profound ways in which video games contribute to IR scholarship.

3.3. Criteria for Selection:

The primary media set was constructed based on four rigorous criteria, designed to support a methodologically grounded, qualitative analysis of how visual narratives anticipated and shaped cultural perceptions of the modern internet. The first and most foundational, is Temporal Specificity, focusing exclusively on works produced during the 1990s and the early 2000s (specifically 1995–2001). This period captures the precise historical moment when the Internet transitioned into a globally disruptive, mass-market phenomenon (HAFNER; LYON, 1996, p. 164). By isolating this narrow window, the analysis ensures that the chosen texts function as genuine attempts to theorize the unprecedented nature of the network and the initial crystallization of its utopian and dystopian imaginaries, rather than merely reflecting an established digital status quo.

The second and third criteria define the necessary breadth and scope of the collection. Geographical and cultural dualism requires a balanced representation from the United States –the biggest culture exporter in the world– and Japan –the biggest Asian culture exporter of the time (IWABUCHI, 2002; MCKEVITT, 2018). This comparative approach is essential for tracing the transnational flow of cyber-iconography and assessing how distinct national anxieties were aesthetically embedded and communicated globally. Furthermore, the selection prioritizes media and aesthetic diversity, spanning live-action cinema, television animation and video games. This recognition that the digital disruption manifested across the entire cultural landscape.

Finally, the texts were chosen based on thematic density. Each selected work acts as a sophisticated vehicle for political theorizing, collectively anticipating key operational mechanisms of the contemporary digital age. These themes include the crisis of reality and the simulated self, the critique of data commodification and corporate control and the startling foresight regarding modern social media dynamics like the spread of misinformation and the paradoxical isolation caused by hyper-connectivity. By combining high-concept technological spectacle with narratives that focus on the banal, everyday infiltration of the digital, the media set provides the necessary scope and thematic depth to fulfill the study's central aims. The eight primary texts included in this analysis are: Hackers (1995), The Simpsons (1989) —episodes released in 1995 and 2000—, Johnny Mnemonic (1995), The Matrix (1999), Kairo (2001), All About Lily Chou Chou (2001), Serial Experiments Lain (1998) and Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty (2001).

4 Analysis

4.1 Hackers (1995)

The film Hackers (1995) follows the story of Dade Murphy, better known by his hacker handle "Zero Cool," infamous for crashing the Wall Street computer systems when he was only 11 years old. On his 18th birthday, Dade moves to New York City with his mother for her new job, just as the court-ordered ban preventing him from owning or using a computer is finally lifted. Thrust into the chaos of the NYC public school system, he begins to reconnect with his hacker roots—only to discover that his new life and his old one are far more entangled than he ever expected.

Early in the film, Murphy's new hackers friends advise a newcomer that to be truly elite one must pull off a "righteous hack," a term that signals both technical skill and a moral imperative. This concept frames hacking as a form of digital activism—a way to fight injustice through technological ingenuity. Indeed, the first major hack we witness has Murphy interrupt a racist television broadcast to replace it with an episode of "The Outer Limits" (1963), a symbolic gesture that equates code manipulation with cultural resistance. The hacker community is depicted as a vibrant counterculture, defined as much by its ethics as by its aesthetics. The young protagonists sport punk-inspired fashion that mirror the virtuoso way they wield their chosen instrument of change: the personal computer. Their hacking is presented less as dry technical labor and more as a performance, a kind of digital art form that borders on magic. Visual sequences transform networks into luminous cityscapes and data streams into psychedelic tunnels, underscoring how the film deliberately detaches itself from the mundane reality of computer work in favor of a mythic, almost mystical representation of cyberspace.

In sharp contrast, film's primary antagonist, Eugene "The Plague" Belford, a former hacker turned corporate security officer for an oil conglomerate —who insists on being addressed by his handle even in real life—, appropriates the style and language of hacker culture but perverts its ideals for personal gain. His elaborate scheme involves framing the protagonists for a massive oil spill to cover up his own virus to steal company funds, an act of both ecological and economic sabotage. That his plan succeeds for much of the narrative is due not to technical genius alone, but to the willful ignorance of the authorities, who are too dazzled by his corporate credentials to recognize how thoroughly he is manipulating them. In this way, the film critiques not only the villain's betrayal of hacker ethics but also the

institutional incompetence of law enforcement, which mistakes hierarchy for truth while prosecuting something they don't really understand .

In the film's climax, Murphy and his friends confront The Plague's computer virus and right at the moment where everything seems lost, a worldwide network of hackers rallies to their side, overwhelming the villain's defenses in a spectacle of collective action. Their victory is capped by a defiant pirate television broadcast exposing The Plague's crimes and humiliating the authorities who enabled him. The final rallying cry —**"**Hack the Planet!"— encapsulates the film's ethos: information belongs to everyone and technological skill, when shared in solidarity, can confront even the most entrenched systems of power. Though wildly unrealistic in its depiction of computer intrusion, Hackers remains a seminal artifact of 1990s cyberculture. Its celebration of youthful ingenuity, social awareness and global cooperation frames hacking not as a criminal act but as a form of creative resistance. By fusing musical aesthetics with the language of digital networks, the film envisions the hacker not simply as a technician, but as an artist, a magician and ultimately, a political agent in a world increasingly defined by code.

4.2 Johnny Mnemonic (1995)

Based on the short story of the same name, Johnny Mnemonic (1995) is an adaptation written by its original author, William Gibson, famed for coining the term "cyberspace" (1982) and shaping the Cyberpunk genre with novels like Neuromancer (1984). The movie's story follows Johnny, a mnemonic courier that stores sensitive data on a hard drive inside his skull who desperately wants to quit his chosen profession. In what would be his final mission, Johnny accepts a dangerously large upload of stolen corporate information that exceeds his safe data capacity and makes him a target of the powerful yakuza and multinational conglomerates. As he races against time to extract the payload before it fatally degrades his mind, he confronts the moral and existential costs of a life spent trafficking in pure information.

Set in the then-futuristic year 2021, the film imagines an "information economy" where data has eclipsed traditional commodities as the ultimate source of wealth and power. Corporations hoard, steal and weaponize data, while individuals risk their lives to move it across borders. Gibson's original story anticipated this shift decades before the rise of Big Data and surveillance capitalism (ZUBOFF, 2019) and the film dramatizes a world in which information is not merely power but survival. Johnny's own body becomes a vessel for this

economy: he literally sells his neural capacity to the highest bidder, turning his mind into a storage device and transforming human consciousness into a marketplace commodity. Johnny's willingness to erase his own memories in order to increase his storage capacity underscores the psychological toll of such an economy. He has sacrificed his personal past to satiate the need of corporations for his mind, a trade that leaves him adrift and rootless. This inner conflict surfaces most poignantly in the infamous "I want room service" speech, in which Johnny erupts with a litany of consumer desires —"I want a club sandwich. I want cold Mexican beer…"— before collapsing into frustration. The speech reads as both parody and confession: Johnny recognizes the emptiness of his materialistic ambitions even as he clings to them. His craving for ordinary comforts highlights the absurdity of risking death to carry information he cannot even access, while his outburst reveals a deeper yearning for meaning in a world where human identity has been overwritten by corporate interests.

The film's social critique extends to its depiction of NAS (Nerve Attenuation Syndrome), a mysterious and deadly disease caused by the overuse of electronic devices. Gibson's invention of a "technology sickness" literalizes the anxiety that ubiquitous screens and networks might damage the human body, anticipating contemporary debates about digital addiction. More disturbingly, the film reveals that corporations possess a cure for NAS but suppress it to preserve their profits. This plotline illustrates how tech companies purposely create/cultivate unhealthy habits in its users for monetary gain (KATZENBERGER, 2025).

Against this bleak backdrop, the Lo-Teks embody a counterforce of resistance. Living in improvised structures suspended above the city, these "low technology" rebels reject the corporate order and embrace a bricolage of scavenged tools and grassroots networks. An important part of the movie's portrayal of this resident group is that even though they oppose the megacorp technology status-quo, they still use technology for good cases like in the climax of the film when they release the NAS cure out of Johnny's head and to the world. This makes it clear that the movie itself is not against technology but is against how the "Powers that be" use it to benefit themself in depriment of the rest of the world. Though their anarchic aesthetic verges on caricature, the Lo-Teks function as a symbolic alternative to both corporate and criminal power, representing the possibility of community-based knowledge sharing beyond the reach of profit-driven monopolies.

Visually, Johnny Mnemonic offers one of the earliest cinematic attempts to depict the internet as an immersive alternate reality. Cyberspace is accessed through special goggles and gloves, allowing users to navigate three-dimensional data landscapes that resemble abstract virtual cities. These sequences, with their polygonal graphics and neon grids, reflect the

mid-1990s struggle to visualize the intangible flow of information. While primitive by today's standards, these scenes capture the wonder and anxiety of an era when the internet was still an emerging frontier rather than a mundane utility.

Johnny Mnemonic endures as a fascinating artifact of 1990s cyberculture. It captures the excitement and dread of a society on the brink of the digital age, when the internet was still mysterious and its future was still uncertain if it would be a tool for community building or just a new weapon for corporations. Its prescient concerns—data as currency, technology-induced illness, the erosion of the personal —remain strikingly relevant in an era of cloud computing and algorithmic surveillance. While not the definitive Gibson adaptation, the film stands as an imperfect yet compelling visualization of cyberpunk's central warning: that in a world where information is everything, the human mind itself becomes the ultimate contested territory.

4.3 The Simpsons (1989)

The Simpsons family and the town of Springfield have become so well known since its creation in The Tracey Ullman Show (1987) that one has difficulty summarizing its impact in modern popular culture. For more than four decades Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and little Maggie have been satirizing every aspect of the ever changing modern American society, so much so that similar programs have even commented that they can't find original ideas that the Simpsons hadn't already done (PARKER, T; STONE, M. 2002). Outside of creating a bunch of conspiracy theories that the show is supposedly made by the illuminate, this abundance also makes the program a treasure trove to any person looking for a TV representation of any topic. We will be looking at two specific episodes ("King-Size Homer" and "The Computer Wore Menace Shoes") to learn what they say about computers, the internet and related things.

In "King-Size Homer" (S7E07) Homer resists a new exercise program at the nuclear plant and after failing to injure himself deliberately, decides to gain weight until he qualifies as disabled so he can work from home. With his new stay at home workstation, Homer quickly became complacent with only needing to click the "yes" key to appearing prompts and decide to goof around, nearly causing a meltdown with his negligence. The episode funnily exposes how systems that are designed to help can sometimes cause/feed user laziness and how sometimes the screen can actually work to distance the user to what's actually happening. Homer treats the workstation as a benign convenience that lets him skip actually

going to work, not as an active safety device and can't fathom that his failure to click the right keys would cause any type of emergency.

In "The Computer Wore Menace Shoes" (S12E06), Homer buys a computer after missing an email about the plant closing for an inspection and with Lisa's help, creates his own webpage. After his website fails to gain a single visitor, he decides to start posting gossip under the name "Mr X" and quickly gain traction after posting about a rumor that Mayor Quimby has a secret swimming pool built with public money that turns out to be true. "Mr X" continues to post even more rumors gaining notoriety in the town and even winning a Pulitzer Prize but when Homer decides to accept the award (and its cash prize) he quickly becomes alienated from Springfield. To regain fame he fabricates outlandish stories and is abducted to a surreal prison called the Island where people who know too much are held. The episode shifts into a pastiche of The Prisoner (1967) before Homer escapes, then returns home.

The episode satirizes early internet dynamics—anonymity, virality and the slow collapse of journalistic gatekeeping—by showing how Homer's homemade website (built with laughably little technical know-how) lets an amateur publish sensational content that spreads faster than anyone bothers to verify. The show lays out the feedback loops plainly: attention rewards the outrageous, which incentivizes fabrication (Homer as "Mr. X" is the neat, ridiculous case in point), while pseudonymous identities do double duty—they can enable genuine whistleblowing and at the same time foster trolling and abuse. It also skewers the illusion of transparency: yes, digital traces create visibility, but that visibility can distort authority when platforms prioritize clicks over facts. By mixing broad slapstick with pointed satire, the episode reads like an early commentary on what we now call online misinformation, echo chambers and the political power of unchecked digital gossip—especially relevant in today's world of "fake news."

4.4 Matrix (1999)

The Matrix (1999) plot hook is quite simple: what if the world that you and I learned to call home was fake. The film follows the seemingly ordinary programmer, Thomas Anderson, better known for his Hacker nickname "Neo", who with the help of an eclectic band of freed humans, discover that he and the rest of humanity live in a simulation of reality created to keep humans docile while we are harvested by machines and that somehow he is the one who will save them all. Behind all the action scenes and one liners, the movie can be read as a meditation on what it is to be human in a world that, in the time of its creation, was

quickly becoming more and more machine-centric, a modernization Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave to the age of the computer (MARINOFF, 2022).

At the heart of the film is the philosophical question of what is real in a world where simulated realities compete with and sometimes eclipse first hand experience. In The Matrix, simulation is the primary way most humans live their lives, this idea has become a cornerstone of our modern digital age. We now interact with the world through screens and simulated realities, from social media feeds to virtual reality experiences. These digital spaces are not just reflections of our world; they are curated, constructed narratives with specific purposes. They are often designed to shape our perceptions, influence our behavior and serve a particular agenda, whether it's commercial, political, or social. This constant flow of information and experiences, carefully filtered and presented, blurs the line between what is authentic and what is fabricated.

The film's concern with simulation has a physical correlation in the persistent depiction of embodied degeneration caused by long-term connection to the Matrix. When Neo is first ejected from his pod, he looks less like a messiah than a premature infant—hairless, pale and trembling as he gasps for the first real air of his life. His muscles have atrophied from a lifetime spent in suspension and the Nebuchadnezzar's crew must literally rebuild his strength through acupuncture-like treatments and grueling physical drills. "Why do my eyes hurt?" Neo asks. "Because you've never used them," Morpheus replies, a line that doubles as a physiological fact and philosophical rebuke. The body the Matrix neglects is weak, pliable and easy to exploit, a perfect metaphor for citizens lulled by digital comfort into political passivity. This literalizes a fear that a prolonged shift away from hands-on experience in favour of technology will produce a dependence on these machines.Yet the same sequences show that the body can be re-educated. Ironically enough the rehab process is aided by machines.

The Matrix also depicts an unsettling psychology of complicity. Cypher's clandestine dinner with Agent Smith crystallizes this dynamic. As he savors a perfectly marbled steak, he admits, "I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss." His betrayal of the crew is not a failure of knowledge, he knows that the matrix is a ruse but his desire for this fantasy is bigger than his desire for truth. Screens, simulations and fancy code become instruments of consent, offering a dream that makes reality seem unbearable. Morpheus's earlier training exercise with the woman in the red dress illustrates the same mechanism: Neo's gaze is captured by spectacle just long enough for a

gun to be pointed at his head. Distraction is not merely an accidental side effect of technology; it is the operating logic of domination. The Matrix thus anticipates a politics of self-enslavement in which citizens defend the very system that exploits them, because the fantasy it provides tastes better. One is not mistaken on feeling a little like Cypher every time they use apps like Instagram or TikTok.

And yet the film refuses to end in despair. Against the bleak backdrop of machine domination, Neo's final transformation recasts technology as a field of possibility rather than pure oppression. By the climax he no longer dodges bullets; he stops them mid-air, bends code with a casual wave and even flies. His closing phone-booth monologue, addressed not to the machines but to us, promises to "show these people what you don't want them to see…a world without rules and controls…" The invitation is clear: spectators are meant to leave the theater not merely awed but activated, ready to treat every interface as a contested space and every device as a potential tool of resistance.

4.5 Kairo (2001)

Kairo (2001), directed by acclaimed Japanese director, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, tells the story of two distinct groups of young adults in Tokyo as they independently investigate a series of of suicides and disturbing phenomena linked to a mysterious and macabre website that promise users a way to meet the dead. Those who come into contact with these apparitions fall into a deep and lethal depression. Their deaths are not made a spectacle of. It feels more like an inevitable conclusion, as if they were already dead the minute they open those webpages. One by one, they begin to be affected by this strange phenomena as they slowly discover the truth: ghosts are using the internet to invade the world of the living.

The film thesis can be summarized by a single line told by Koyuki Kato's character Harue, the story's primary technological authority: "People don't really connect… we all live totally separately." The film rejects the optimistic myth that more channels of communication automatically mean more connection. Instead it stages the Internet as a medium that amplifies the worst tendencies of modern life like solitude, disengagement, a willingness to substitute fake intimacy for actual intimacy. The website in the core of film mystery, is populated by images of people — "obscured and alone in their rooms" — is not just a plot device but also a great metaphor for the reality of the individual "plugged" inside this system that supposedly connect us to each other but in reality just masks our loneliness. The characters' encounters with the site raise an important, ironic question: are the people alone in those rooms different

from ghosts? The film's answer is that they have already been ghosted, by their societies, by technology, by their own choices and so they are easily taken.

A large part of Kairo's power comes from what it doesn't do. The film leans into long takes, sparse dialogue and an auditory palette dominated by static, hums and low-frequency sound that suggest a world already tuned to an absence. Rather than piling on jump scares, it cultivates a slow suffocation: minor domestic spaces, empty corridors and small gestures accumulate into a sense of systemic failure. The ghosts' presence is more often implied than shown; when they appear, their lack of clear form makes them more terrifying —they are not individualized monsters to be defeated, but symptoms of a social condition.

Kairo is convincing because it treats computers and the internet ambivalently: not merely as evil machines but as accelerants of existing social malaise. The film doesn't require a villainous hacker or a supernatural schema with tidy rules; instead the horror grows organically from ordinary inertia. Accessing the site is banal, only a few clicks aways, a late-night curiosity, yet that everydayness is what makes the threat frightening. The ghosts are not grotesque, individualized antagonists; they are an epidemic of absence. In this way Kairo suggests that the Internet doesn't create isolation so much as make visible, standardised and contagious loneliness that was already there. Kairo also probes the paradox that more "communication" can equal less mutuality. The network enables endless notifications, images and intermediated contacts, but those forms of communication can be superficial and crowd out the harder and riskier work of true relation. The film's characters are surrounded by signals (emails, webpages, static) yet are starved of intimacy. The result is an uncanny inversion: connectivity exists in technical terms, but meaningful connection is precisely what dies.

The film's climax —the invasion of Tokyo and by implication the wider world— reads as an escalation of the central metaphor to a truly apocalyptic scale. The ghosts don't merely haunt rooms, they overwhelm civic life. Urban spaces become deserted with apocalypto visuals, reframing the supernatural threat as social collapse. The ending, with the sole surviving character aboard a boat bound for South America accompanied by an older man, leaves the viewer with an unresolved ethical question: is resisting the call the right thing? The protagonist promises to seek other survivors, yet the film refuses a triumphant resolution.

Kairo's rejection of absolute explanations —of the ghosts, of the origin of the site, of an absolute cure is precisely what makes it feel like a cultural mirror. It dramatizes what happens when human beings outsource intimacy and fail to build institutions or practices that sustain meaningful belonging. The ghosts are less villains than accumulations of neglect. The

film's bleakness is not nihilistic for the sake of shock; it is a warning that a technologically mediated society that does not reckon with loneliness creates conditions in which human life can be extinguished by a loss of meaning rather than by physical violence. The final image, the pair on a boat leaving for South America, encapsulates this ambivalence. Flight here is not triumph but survival with contingency: the protagonist's commitment to continue searching for others is hopeful, but fragile. It's a small, stubborn endurance rather than a heroic victory.

4.6 "All About Lilly Chou-Chou" (2001)

Shunji Iwai's All About Lily Chou-Chou (2001) is a haunting portrait of adolescence fractured by violence, alienation and the illusion of digital connection. The film follows Yuichi Hasumi, a shy and sensitive teenager who becomes the victim of relentless bullying led by his former friend Hoshino. Hasumi's only refuge from the cruelty of the real world is the ethereal music of Lily Chou-Chou, a fictional pop singer whose melancholic songs and mystical aura provide solace to her devoted fans. Isolated in his daily life, Hasumi retreats into an online forum he created to discuss Lily's music, where he takes on the pseudonym "Philia". Within this virtual space, he becomes a respected figure, admired for his poetic reflections on the "ether", a spiritual force that Lily's music is said to channel. There, he forms a deep connection with another user, "Blue Cat," who once even dissuades him from committing suicide. However, when they finally agree to meet at one of Lily's concerts, Hasumi discovers that "Blue Cat" is none other than Hoshino, his tormentor and the very person who first introduced him to Lily's music. This revelation redefines their entire relationship and exposes the film's core tension between the purity of the virtual world and the corruption of real life.

The origins of All About Lily Chou-Chou are deeply intertwined with the early internet. Before becoming a film, it was an interactive online novel written and published by Iwai in the form of a fan site for the fictional singer, where users could post comments and contribute to the unfolding story. This experimental form blurred the line between author and audience, between fiction and lived experience. Some of the users' contributions were later incorporated into the film's script, creating a hybrid work born from both individual and collective imagination. In the documentary "All About "All About Lily Chou-Chou"(2002)", readers describe how they could no longer discern what was real or virtual, as the narrator notes, "it was a virtual world, yet real. Real world yet virtual." This sense of ambiguity seeps into the film's aesthetic and structure. The fragmented, nonlinear narrative mirrors the

experience of navigating online forums —scattered memories, half-heard voices, disjointed posts. The stylized text of chat messages floating across the screen was remarkably ahead of its time, anticipating the visual grammar of modern digital communication —fast, abbreviated, emotionally loaded, much like today's tweets, yet visually consistent with the forum culture of the early 2000s.

Thematically, Iwai presents the internet as a purgatorial space, a liminal realm between salvation and damnation. For Hasumi, the online forum represents an escape from a hostile physical world, a sanctuary where he can express his truest self. In contrast, Hoshino uses the same anonymity to manipulate and reinvent himself. Online, he becomes thoughtful and empathetic —the opposite of his cruel real-life persona. The duality of "Philia" and "Blue Cat" reflects the fragmented identities fostered by the web: one can perform idealized versions of the self online, yet remain powerless to transform reality. This dynamic mirrors Japan's social context at the turn of the millennium, a nation emerging from the "lost decade" after the economic bubble burst, where young people faced disillusionment, social pressure and the erosion of innocence (YODA; HAROOTUNIAN, 2006). The internet becomes both a coping mechanism and a mirror, showing not liberation but the inability to escape one's circumstances.

The film's final sequence —Hasumi and other characters listening to Lily's music in a vast green field— evokes a vision of purgatory. The field, bathed in soft light, is neither heaven nor earth; it is a liminal space suspended between pain and peace. Here, the ether of Lily's voice envelops the characters, suggesting both transcendence and resignation. The field can be seen as a metaphor for the digital ether itself: an open, infinite space where lost souls gather, connected by invisible frequencies of desire and despair.

Ultimately, All About Lily Chou-Chou portrays the internet not as a place of freedom, but as an echo chamber of longing, a modern purgatory where fragile identities drift between reality and illusion. The revelation that "Blue Cat" and "Philia" are two sides of the same fractured friendship encapsulates the tragedy of the digital age: even within the boundless ether, one cannot escape the weight of the real world. Through its poetic blend of early internet aesthetics, emotional rawness and visionary storytelling, Iwai's film remains a profound meditation on the search for connection in an era defined by isolation.

4.7 Serial Experiments Lain (1995)

The story of “Serial Experiment Lain” (1995) start with a suicide, not anyone close the our protagonist, just a girl (Chisa) from a neighboring class but when students, including our protagonist Lain Iwakura, start receiving email from said dead girl where they claim to still be alive inside the wired (the stoy’s version of the internet) and that god is their with her. This causes a growing obsession in Lain, a shy, socially awkward girl who previously showed little interest in technology. As she begins to explore the Wired, her world and identity starts to unravel. Lain's once modest room begins to devolve into a sort of dungeon, with no lights outside those that are emitted by the many monitors or computer consoles. The simple Navi (The story version of a computer) she started with gave way to an ever evolving “blob” of wires and terminals that threat to colonize every ounce of space not yet part of the system. Not even Lain is safe from ever expansion, by the end of the series even she begins to be consumed by it, with wires connecting her to the machine. Her friend Arisu (the japanese version of the name Alice and a node to Carroll’s book) is the only one who actually tries to move Lain out of this destructive path.

The Wired is portrayed as an endless void of information, an abstract, shifting landscape where users can lose themselves in a sea of data and disembodied voices. The Anime visualizes the internet not as a simple network but as a metaphysical space where you figuratively go inside, reminiscent of Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole. When Lain connects to her Navi, she does not merely browse information she descends into it, her consciousness slipping deeper into an ocean of signals, whispers and fragmented messages.The Wired lacks structure or boundaries instead, it consists of disconnected nodes of simulated spaces, chatrooms and conspiratorial fragments. People gossip about shootings, extort each other for intimate photos and spread rumors without consequence, a prophetic depiction of today’s social media culture. The internet for some people is almost like a religion, a place of transcendence where information replaces faith and the promise of immortality is found in digital persistence. The dead, like Chisa, continue living in the Wired, their data surviving as echoes, memories without bodies. This idea that information is eternal yet detached from human meaning mirrors a key quote from the series: “Information isn’t free, not in the Wired or in the real world.” Information carries a cost: the loss of privacy, of individuality and eventually, of reality itself. In Lain, the web is not merely a tool for communication but a collective unconscious, a growing organism that absorbs human minds and erodes the boundary between subject and system.

Inside the Wired, people are free to reinvent themselves. The internet becomes a mirror where users can project who they wish to be—or who they fear they might become. For Lain, this multiplicity takes literal form with her two Tulpa-like manifestations. The "Wired Lain" is confident, assertive and popular, embodying the self-assured persona that her timid, real-world self could never express. Conversely, "Laughing Lain", who spreads malicious rumors and chaos, represents the darker impulses that the anonymity of the internet can unleash. This fragmentation of identity captures the psychological reality of online existence: behind screens, people can experiment with personas, ethics and boundaries. The digital world becomes a psychological sandbox, where identity is fluid and mutable.

The show anticipates what modern digital culture now takes for granted—the ability to curate one's identity online. Yet this flexibility comes at a cost. Lain's "selves" begin acting independently, no longer under her conscious control. The line between performance and reality blurs until Lain herself asks her Navi: "I… I'm me, right?" Her question encapsulates the series' central anxiety: when identity is infinitely editable, does the "real self" still exist? In this way, Serial Experiments Lain explores the seductive but dangerous freedom of digital spaces. They allow for empowerment and reinvention but also create the conditions for alienation, self-deception and the loss of psychological cohesion.

In the center of its narrative, a giant conspiracy about the mysterious Protocol 7, which intends to "allow seamless sharing of information between the Wired and the real world." effectively merging the two realms into one is made possible by Lain, who we discover is a computer program-human hybrid. Lain's home, her mind and even her family turn out to be constructs—fabrications within the digital system. Her father admits that her family was "made to play the part of a normal family," revealing the terrifying extent of her unreality. The collapse of these boundaries symbolizes a broader cultural condition: the loss of stable reality in the age of information. The internet offers infinite connection, yet Lain shows how this hyper-connectivity breeds isolation. Lain's immersion leads her to retreat entirely from the real world, her human relationships replaced by artificial ones. Her friend Arisu, is the only one who reminds her of her humanity, touching her and saying, "You are not a program, you have a heart." This confrontation anchors Lain's final act of self-sacrifice, removes herself from people's memories, effectively excising the node that enabled Protocol 7's full fruition, restoring a boundary between the real and artificial world of Wired preserves the characters ability to live without being overshadowed by an omnipresent informational architecture.

The unsettling journey of Lain Iwakura is a profound meditation on the self, society and technology. By dissolving the boundaries of reality, identity and information, Serial Experiments Lain didn't just tell a story about the internet; it crafted a disturbing prophecy. The anime's vision of the Wired, a collective unconscious where data grants a kind of immortality and anonymity breeds chaos, has been stunningly validated by the digital landscape of the decades that followed its release. From the rise of curated online personas and the ensuing fragmentation of identity to the conspiratorial echo chambers and the insidious cost of "free" information, Lain foresaw the central psychological and social anxieties of the 21st century. Lain's final act of self-erasure is a desperate plea for humanity in the face of absolute digital transcendence. By excising herself, Lain restored a vital, if fragile, boundary between the real world and the Wired, ultimately affirming the irreplaceable value of embodied human experience, of touch, memory and presence, over the seductive, eternal, but ultimately hollow promise of digital persistence.

4.8 Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty (2001)

Hideo Kojima’s fourth entry into his Metal Gear saga, seems to be a straightforward sequel to the stealth-action series that made him a household name. The Game starts with a prologue section where Solid Snake infiltrates Marine, a tanker ship housing a new design of metal gear —the new type of nuclear weapon for the new age of war that plagued the last 3 games— in midst of an invasion of the ship by russian operatives led by Ocelot, an old enemy of Snake from the last game. Ocelot double crosses the russians and steals the mech destroying the tanker in the process, leaving the player to think that Snake died inside the sinking vessel. Two years later, the story shifts to a massive offshore cleanup facility called the Big Shell, built to contain the ecological disaster caused by the tanker’s destruction. The main narrative places the player in the boots of Raiden, an agent with the codename "Snake" (briefly, before it is changed) trained by the counter-terrorist unit Foxhound. Raiden is guided by his commander, Colonel Roy Campbell and his girlfriend, Rose, via codec calls. His immediate goal at the Big Shell is to rescue the President and neutralize the group of highly-skilled terrorists, the Dead Cell unit. This mission, however, is quickly subverted by the appearance of the presumed-dead Solid Snake, now under the alias Iroquois Pliskin. This early substitution of the player's expected hero is replaced by a novice, who is then further confronted by the real hero—immediately signals a conspiracy far deeper

As the mission progresses, Raiden discovers that the Big Shell is merely a façade for the enormous mobile fortress, Arsenal Gear, which houses a new, revolutionary Metal Gear. The terrorist leader is none other than Solidus Snake, the "third" clone of the legendary Big Boss, who is attempting to stage a revolt against the shadowy organization known as The Patriots. The President is merely a figurehead, a pawn manipulated by this deep state apparatus and the Dead Cell unit was used as a patsy for the Patriots' own crimes. Raiden realizes his training, drawn from virtual reality simulations of missions once undertaken by Solid Snake (including the Tanker Incident the player experienced), has left him with the skills of a veteran but no true war experience, causing Snake to question if they intend to make him feel like war was some kind of video game,a form of mind control, foreshadowing of things to come later in game.

Metal Gear Solid 2 predicted with astonishing accuracy the digital age's ability to construct convincing false realities through technology. The central reveal is that the entire Big Shell incident is a massive, orchestrated experiment: the S3 Plan, or Selection for Societal Sanity. The Patriots sought to test whether they could influence individuals into being whatever they desire them to be. In the case of Raiden to replicate the legendary soldier's Solid Snake through controlled, digital means, effectively creating an artificial copy of the hero the player once controlled. This concept is mirrored in the game's engineered narrative imitation: to cultivate their pliable hero, The Patriots tricked both Raiden and the player into reliving a detailed version of the Shadow Moses Incident from the first game. The parallels are extensive: the Antagonists were copied (Solidus Snake and Dead Cell mirroring Liquid Snake's Foxhound unit); the Mission Goal involved rescuing a high-ranking government official (the DARPA [Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] chief in MGS1 and the President in MGS2), Both are aided by a scientist from the Emmerich family after they are found hiding in a locker and even the appearance of a mysterious cyborg ninja mid mission was replicated. By forcing the player to experience these familiar beats—the ultimate form of predictable narrative programming—The Patriots believed they could successfully cultivate a pliable, controllable hero.

The Patriots' overarching goal is to exert control over the very essence of human identity and consciousness by managing the flow of information on the internet. Their most powerful tool is the GW AI (George Washington), located within Arsenal Gear. As detailed by Emma Emmerich, the problem facing The Patriots is the "explosion of information" caused by the internet, which creates unpredictable social consensus and challenges their hierarchical control. GW has the capability to manage and filter this data in real time, deleting

information that challenges their narrative and prioritizing "truths" that benefit their designs—"making it possible to shape the reality to their own purposes.” In effect making it possible to replicate the same condition that Raiden went through on a global level.

The simulation theme transcends the narrative and breaks the fourth wall, making the player complicit in the Patriot’s design. The revelation that the entire mission is the Selection for Societal Sanity—designed by the GW AI—is accompanied by a complete collapse of Raiden’s reality. The final stages of the game inside Arsenal Gear are marked by highly unsettling meta-events. The codec calls from the Colonel and Rose begin to glitch and feed Raiden (and the player) randomized, irrelevant and often highly self-referential dialogue. We are bombarded with non-contextual phrases, references to past MGS games and demands like, “turn the console off, it’s a game,” and "You have played the game for a long time. Don't you have anything else to do with your time?".

The Colonel is eventually revealed to be an AI construct, a virtual figure generated by the GW AI based on Raiden's expectations and psychological needs. This AI directly co-opts the rules of the video game—the user interface, the objectives and the emotional support provided by the codec—to enforce the simulation's script. Raiden, a former child soldier, who admits "Somewhere inside I’m enjoying this game," is forced to confront the fact that his actions, his trauma and even his relationship with Rose (who was initially a spy for The Patriots) were all scripted parts of the experiment. The game even simulates a Game Over screen while the action continues, demonstrating that the AI has assumed control over the medium itself. This self-reflexive moment is crucial: the AI, in its attempt to control humanity by controlling information, is attempting to control the player by controlling their expectations of what a Metal Gear Solid game should be. It is a stunning, early exploration of how algorithmic systems leverage familiar patterns and nostalgia to dictate behavior and consensus.

The final conflict resolves into a profound philosophical debate about legacy and what we pass on to future generations in the digital age. Both Snake and his partner Otacon try to convince both Raiden and the player that the individual should find for themself what is important to them. That we can’t let algorithms like GW or people like Solidus dictate the legacy will leave the coming generations. Raiden’s symbolic act of removing the dog tag (engraved with the player’s chosen name) represents his emancipation from digital identity and from both the player’s and the Patriots’ control. He chooses to live as himself, not as a simulation or a projection. This gesture encapsulates the game’s central warning: in an age of

infinite information, authenticity and choice are acts of resistance. The internet can either liberate by giving voice to many, or enslave by drowning truth in noise or manipulation.

Ultimately, Metal Gear Solid 2 stands as one of the first works of fiction to predict the social, psychological and political implications of a world governed by computers and data networks. It foresaw an era of deepfakes, misinformation, AI-driven governance and the erosion of trust in institutions—all filtered through the lens of a video game that uses its own medium to simulate those very conditions. Kojima's work challenges players to interrogate not only the systems in the game but also the systems in which we live: the digital architectures that shape our perception of truth, our sense of history and our capacity to think freely. Through Raiden's journey from simulation to self-awareness, the game urges us to reclaim our role as interpreters, not consumers, of the information that defines our world. Its prophetic final message resonates: in an age where everything can be faked, filtered, or forgotten, the most radical act is to decide for ourselves what truths are worth passing on.

5. USA v Japan

The American vision of the internet, as expressed across films and television such as Hackers, Johnny Mnemonic, The Simpsons and The Matrix, is a double-edged instrument that could be used both as a vehicle for domination and emancipation. These works clearly show how this new technology could be used by "the powers that be" for surveillance, manipulation, profit and many other forms of oppression. In Johnny Mnemonic, data is more important for megacorporations than the human that carries it. In "The Matrix", humanity is literally farmed by machine while being locked inside a simulation designed to pacify it. Yet, none of these visions end in pure fatalism. By the end of both movies, whether it's Neo gaining the power to manipulate the Matrix or the Lo-Teks transmitting the cure for Nas, these works still have faith that with action the people still profit from this technology. No other project makes this dynamic as obvious as "Hackers", where the youth use their computer console as a weapon to fight against injustice in a new type of counter-culture. Even "The Simpsons", in its satire, echoes this ambivalence: Homer's "Mr. X" website begins with genuine whistleblowing (even if it was by happenstance) before devolving into sensationalism, illustrates this dynamic that depending on how they are used, the internet/computers can be a force for good or for evil.

The Japanese narrative in media such as “All About Lily Chou-Chou”, Kairo, “Serial Experiments Lain” and “Metal Gear Solid 2” conceive of the internet not as a revolution that creates new possibilities, but as an amplifier of social phenomena that already plague modern society. “Lily Chou-Chou” portrays online forums as sanctuaries that offer only a fleeting escape but no real healing. Nevertheless many characters in these stories try to use the internet as tool for projecting a persona they wish they could be, this is the case for Hoshino in “Lily Cho-Chou” but as “Serial Experiment Lain” point out, this act of retreat into the computer can just worsen the situation, with the individual becoming more and more isolated and at worse scenarios twist its personality. It is no mistake that “Kairo” in its horror set up transforms the web into a portal for the spread of loneliness, a “virus” that has been incubated by modern society for many years. In Metal Gear Solid 2, a story more grounded in global politics rather than the mundane of the other three, inserts its evil A.I algorithm in only as the next stage of already occurring manipulation by its elites. Only an evolution of dynamics that has plagued humans for many years.

Both American and Japanese depictions of the internet in this selection converge on a fundamental recognition: that digital technology is not neutral. Whether in the youth rebellion of Hackers or the melancholic quiet of Lily Chou-Chou, the network is shown as a force that extends the logics of the world that built it—corporate greed, social alienation, surveillance and desire. Both traditions sense that the internet’s promise of connection masks a deeper continuity of control. In the American imagination, the net often appears as a contested arena between freedom and domination, where human creativity can still reclaim agency from the systems that seek to commodify it. In the Japanese imagination, by contrast, the internet’s expansion is less a battle than a slow absorption—an inescapable seepage of digital mediation into all forms of life.

Yet the two imaginations diverge sharply in the location of the threat and in the shape of the response. American narratives externalize danger: the enemy is systemic and institutional—corporations that commodify attention, states that surveil citizens, algorithms that shape consent. Consequently, the appropriate narrative energy is outward: spectacle, confrontation and strategic resistance. Heroes hack, expose, or overthrow systems. The plot resolves when agency is reclaimed from a corrupt infrastructure. Japanese narratives internalize the problem: the threat is psychological and social, fragmentation of self, loneliness and the slow atrophy of human relations. Solutions, when they appear, are intimate and ambiguous: gestures of touch, small acts of care, or renunciations that reinstate fragile boundaries between the virtual and the real. Aesthetically, American texts often deploy a

quicker visual language and moral binary to mobilize viewers toward collective action, whereas Japanese texts deploy stillness, repetition and unresolved endings to draw attention to interior collapse.

Reading this works together illuminates a dynamic that helps confirm the previous statement in this section. Both Matrix and Metal Gear Solid 2 are clearly the projects in each section more influenced by the other country and also are the works that fit less neatly in the dynamics of its country. Outside of the influence of Hong Kong cinema for its action scene, matrix is clearly heavily influenced by the anime classics like “Ghost in The Shell” and “Akira”(JENNINGS, 2025)(two projects that could have easily been selected for this discussion) and one only need to see the name of Kojima most famous character to see his influences. Solid Snake is obviously based on the action hero portrayed by Kurt Russel in 1981 Escape From New York, Snake Plissken. It’s no mistake that when Solid Snake has to use a fake name that he chooses “Iroquois Pliskin”.

Following these threads we can find other similarities between the two. Both have main characters that with the help of others are liberated from a simulation and both climaxes deal with the death of the main antagonist while the simulation apparatus still remains active. These two have as much if not more in common with each other than with their compatriots, clearly deriving from the fact that they both draw from this mix of the two cultures. But a single notable difference between the two helps make it clear the different approaches of each country. In the end of the Matrix, Neo is again inside the simulation but now with powers to manipulate for his own purpose and he makes it clear in the last monologue that he is declaring war on the machine. By contrast, After Raiden kills Solidus, he totally abandons the Patriots simulation as well the game’s, he renounces the players control and decides to reconnect with girlfriend following Snake's advice of trying to find something he would like to pass on to future generations. He lets Snake deal with the threat of the Patriots in the future. The American urges the viewer to take action against the means of computer domination by taking control of them and the Japanese tells the player that the only way to break out of it is through real connections outside of it.

6. Conclusion

This research proposed a comparative analysis of visual media produced in the United States and Japan between 1995 and 2001, with the aim of mapping each nation's cultural vision of the Internet during a critical phase of global digitalization. Building on Roland Bleiker's insistence that images operate as autonomous political forces and on Shapiro's compositional reading of film (extended here to add video games), the study mobilized a focused qualitative methodology to treat eight emblematic texts—Hackers, Johnny Mnemonic, The Matrix, selected episodes of The Simpsons, Kairo, All About Lily Chou-Chou, Serial Experiments Lain and Metal Gear Solid 2—as site-specific political theories about the internet. The analyses show two complementary imaginaries: U.S. texts stage the net as a contested arena where surveillance, commodification and corporate power confront collective resistance. Japanese texts depict networks as amplifiers of preexisting social maladies, isolation, fragmented identity and affective erosion, rendered through slow, ambiguous aesthetics that privilege interior themes over spectacle. Yet both traditions converge in recognizing that the internet is not neutral, it extends and intensifies existing social logics, reshaping authority, memory and bodily experience. Methodologically, close compositional readings and attention to affect demonstrate how aesthetic form does political work, anticipating phenomena that later became central to public life like data as commodity, algorithmic mediation, digital loneliness. The paper therefore argues that these early cultural constructions continue to shape contemporary understandings of digital society and offer critical tools for navigating the political and ethical challenges of the online world today.

The impact of this research lies in its ability to affect media theory and international relations by revealing how early representations of the Internet continue to inform today's global digital imagination. By analyzing aesthetic responses from both the United States and Japan, the study highlights how different societies negotiated the promises and dangers of technological change, offering a framework to understand the roots of current digital anxieties and utopias. It expands existing scholarship by treating visual media not merely as reflections of technological history but as active participants in shaping digital ideology. This approach encourages contemporary researchers, artists and policymakers to recognize the cultural underpinnings of technological discourse and to question the narratives that still govern our perception of connectivity, surveillance and digital identity, fostering more historically informed and ethically aware approaches to the digital environments we inhabit today.

While the study provides valuable insights,the project remains aware of its own methodological boundaries. First of all is the fact that the eight pieces selected are only a tiny fraction of works produced during the timeframe observed in the research. Obviously they were selected in the attempt of representing the large landscape they were a part of but it's impossible to say they represent the totality of thoughts around these issues in their designated area. Likewise the choice to focus only on the media production of the United States and Japan aimed to illuminate the principal nexuses of the early Internet revolution, yet this choice inevitably excludes other national or regional perspectives—particularly those from Latin America and Africa—that might have articulated distinct relationships between technology, power and subjectivity. Furthermore, the study's reliance on visual and narrative media leaves aside other artistic forms, such as books and music, that also contributed to the collective imagination of digital life. A natural continuation of this research would involve examining the visual cultures of the internet after 2001, mapping how the optimism and anxieties identified here evolved through the rise of social media, algorithmic governance and the platform economy. In parallel, attention might be shifted to less sci-fi centric, focusing on more mundane/secondary depictions of the internet or in early internet art and how it uses this new tool to articulate the topics discussed in this paper as well as the communities built around them.

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