



# Wandering Ghosts - An Analysis of Subcultural Phenomena from the Perspective of the Gaze

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## Abstract

This research primarily uses Lacanian psychoanalysis as a central framework to explore the unique conditions under which the gaze emerges within contemporary subcultural art phenomena. The discussion begins with two representative cases, grounded in the fundamental condition of the object gaze formulated by Lacan from the perspective of the dialectics of desire—namely, the outbreak of the fundamental lack concealed by the subject's symbolic order. The analysis uses the Y2K and Retro-futurism art styles and the Otaku phenomenon as case studies, aiming to deepen and expand Lacan's interpretation within a contemporary context by examining its temporal and structural conditions. Additionally, this paper first establishes the ontological position of the gaze by comparing Sartre's notion of intersubjective gaze with Lacan's concept of the object gaze. This serves as the basis for a further epistemological analysis, employing the dialectics of desire and the role of the Real in driving perception, as outlined in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Subsequently, this study applies psychoanalytic theory alongside Derrida's concept of "hauntology" to analyze the manifestation of the object gaze in these contemporary cultural phenomena. Ultimately, the paper aims to clarify the distinct conditions under which the gaze operates within subcultural contexts today.

**Keywords:** object gaze, lack, Y2K Retro-futurism, Otaku

## 1. Introduction

In our daily lives, "looking" is not merely a sensory behavior but also a way through which the subject's consciousness connects with the world. In the context of philosophy and art, gazing is no longer a singular act of looking; it becomes an experience arising from the intersection of space and consciousness. The gaze, as a visual act, not only expresses the viewer's intention but also establishes a structural relationship between the subject who looks and the object being looked at. At times, gazing and following with the eyes may go beyond the subject's intention to grasp the object through vision. The transition from looking to gazing may empower the object to resist being passively perceived. If looking emphasizes the subject's direct perception of the external world, then gazing emphasizes a complex movement of reflection involving subject-object relations and positions of power. Therefore, the core issue this paper aims to explore is how the act of gazing, as a mode of behavior and a contextual framework, can reflect on the relationship between the individual and society within artistic practices. This discussion

will primarily draw upon aesthetic analyses of contemporary subcultures, specifically the Y2K and Retro-futurism artistic styles and the Otaku phenomena. It will focus on the psychoanalytic perspective to examine the unique conditions under which the concept of the gaze emerges in the context of contemporary art. This paper begins with a psychoanalytic review of the idea of the "gaze", distinguishing between the look and the gaze and focusing on the theoretical divergence between Sartre's notion of the gaze as subject-centered and Lacan's conception of the gaze as object-centered. While Sartre emphasizes a subject-to-subject objectifying relation, this paper primarily follows Lacan's perspective, in which the gaze originates from an omnipresent object constructed by the subject. Building on Lacan's interpretation of the gaze as rooted in the fundamental lack behind the subject's symbolic constitution, and its relation to the objet petit a within the structure of desire, this paper proceeds to analyze contemporary subcultural expressions—specifically the Y2K and retro-futurist artistic styles, as well as the Otaku phenomenon. The analysis first examines how the gaze emerges in the aesthetic practices of Y2K and Retro-futurism, focusing on the temporal tension between their visual representations of past-future imaginary and the symbolic grasp of a yet-to-come future. This temporal disjunction generates a productive misalignment through which the gaze manifests. Secondly, the paper turns to the Otaku phenomenon, exploring how the gaze arises through a conflictual dynamic between the viewing subject and the viewed object. Drawing on Lacan's dialectic of desire, the Otaku phenomenon is interpreted as constructing a narcissistic fantasy of possession—where the object of desire is a creation of the subject's lack. The analysis also considers how the "database pattern" operates as a specific fixation mechanism within this structure and how the figure of the "Beautiful fighting girl" reflects a reversal in the structure of desire. The paper explores how object-centered gazes are enacted through the structural conditions between the subject and the object.

## **2. Object Gaze**

The metaphor of vision is omnipresent in the fields of text and art. Throughout various historical periods, visual forms have been widely employed and referenced. It could even be said that "all Western metaphysics has been peephole metaphysics" (Theodor W. Adorno, 1973, p.139). This is evident from Descartes' claim that vision is the most comprehensive and noble of all the senses (Descartes, 1965, p.65), or even earlier, in Plato's assertion that the eye is capable of perceiving light because it shares similar properties with the source of light—the sun. He further draws an analogy between reason ("the eye of the soul") and the highest form, the Good (Plato, *Phaedo*, 99e; Plato, *The Republic*, 516b, as cited by Martin Jay, 1993, chapter 1, p.3). Similarly, the use of perspective in European painting since the Renaissance demonstrates how artists have arrested the flow of phenomena to construct a frozen, synchronic moment of vision (Bryson, 1983, p.94). This moment represents an illusion of ideality that grants the viewer's eye a privileged centrality, positioning it at the heart of the visible world shaped by the artwork. The notion of an "eye-centered" perspective or "the dominance of visual form over cognition" and the authority it confers upon vision permeates many texts and corners of Western culture. However, this paper will not delve into that discussion in detail.

The primary concern here is the distinction between gaze and the look. James Gibson once proposed a differentiation between two modes of visual practice: "the visual world" and the "visual field" (James Gibson, 1950). The former refers to a perceptual experience in which vision is ecologically intertwined with other senses, producing a sense of "depth shapes". At the same time, the latter, sight is detached by fixating the eyes to create "projected shapes". For instance, a plate in "the visual world" would be perceived as round, whereas in the "visual field", it would appear elliptical (Martin Jay, 1993, chapter 1, p.24). This distinction in modes

of seeing seems to imply a more profound, subject-oriented differentiation between gaze and the look, rooted in the structural relationship between subject and object. Generally, it is believed that through Descartes's "cogito" (translated into English as "I think"), we solidify the self as a subject through the process of reflection. At the same time, the reflecting self becomes its object. This marks a kind of Cartesian self-objectification (Martin Jay, 1993, chapter 5, p.14). However, from Sartre's perspective, the self is constituted by the gaze of the Other, or more precisely, through the subject's reflection on being scrutinized by the Other. This can be seen as a deepening of Descartes' "cogito". Sartre illustrates the revealing power of the Other's gaze on the subject's sense of self through a well-known example: when one is caught peeping through a keyhole, the sudden reversal of vision, the realization of being seen, provokes a feeling of shame. Before being caught, the observer is a pure, acting consciousness, unconsciously immersed in their experience (such as jealousy). However, the moment they are seen, they are transformed into an object captured by the Other. This can be understood as: "I see myself because someone sees me" (Sartre, 2018, p.319). Only when one becomes aware of being the object of another's gaze does one truly become conscious of one's subjectivity. From Sartre's point of view, the gaze is between subjects, one that arises between equals. However, the person who initiates the gaze occupies the subject's position, while the one who becomes its target—the "I" who perceives the look of the Other through the look, is transformed into an object. This dynamic establishes a fundamental asymmetry in the power relationship between the gaze and the look (Martin Jay, 1993, chapter 5, p.13).

Lacan expresses a similar idea: when I am under the gaze, I no longer see the eye that is looking at me; if I do see that eye, the gaze disappears (Lacan, 1977, p.84). However, Lacan argues that the gaze discussed by Sartre between one subject and another is not a true gaze but rather an imagined one within the realm of the Other (Lacan, 1977, p.84). This kind of gaze does not involve visual organs, just as Sartre described: "rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain" (Sartre, 2018, p.257). In these phenomena, the moment the gaze occurs is when the subject becomes aware of the presence of the Other. Lacan agrees with Sartre that the gaze belongs to the Other. Still, he does not believe that the emergence of the gaze causes the viewing subject to be entirely reduced to an object, thereby losing subjectivity. On the contrary, Lacan points out that, on the one hand, the gaze sustains itself through the very disappearance of subjectivity, just as the subject sustains itself through the function of desire (Lacan, 1977, p.85); on the other hand, the gaze no longer takes the side of the subject, but rather that of the object. In other words, the cause of the gaze arises from the way particular real objects, while looking, reveal the void in the subject's position, making the subject aware of being the one who is looked at. This is what is meant by "the gaze is no longer the gaze of the subject, but that of the Other" (Dylan Evans 1996, p.73), or in other terms, the gaze of the object. Although the gaze belongs to the Other, this Other does not exist.

Similarly, many contemporary scholars have continued to explore the gaze through the lens of the binary opposition between subject and object, offering case studies that push the concept in new directions. For example, some employ a dialectical framework to analyze the tension between subject and object positions in the performance of exotic dancers. In this context, the dancer may be seen, on one hand, as a passive victim of exploitation, but on the other, as an active agent engaging in transactional performance for her benefit. This duality complicates the subject-object relationship, positioning the exotic dancer simultaneously as subject and object, thus providing a ground for analyzing the gaze through their opposition (Alexandra G. Murphy, 2003). Other studies, from the perspective of perceptual psychology, examine the effects of gaze on mismatches between objects and their surrounding scenes, highlighting how

such inconsistencies influence visual attention and perception (Melissa L.-H.Võ & John M.Henderson, 2011). These analyses suggest that interpretations of the gaze are often rooted in the subject's misalignment within the reflective structure of a given phenomenon. However, the precise causes of this misalignment, or the triggers behind moments of perceptual dissonance in experiences of the gaze, remain complex and multifaceted.

Therefore, in this study, the discussion of the gaze from the perspective of the object is primarily grounded in psychoanalytic theory, extending Lacan's distinction between the gaze and the look. There is a dialectical tension between the gaze and the eye: the "look" originates from the subject's eye, whereas the gaze comes from the object; it is a form of scrutiny that resists the subject's symbolic grasp of the seen. What the viewer perceives is not the actual object but its representation. As Lacan famously put it, "You never look at me from the place at which I see you" (Lacan, 1977, p.103) until the outburst of the object gaze. It becomes evident that although Lacan considers the gaze to be an action of the object, it nevertheless takes place within the subject's internal process of perceiving the world. The object's gaze is, in fact, the gaze of the unfamiliar Other within the subject—what Lacan calls "extimacy", the external within the internal (Lacan, 1992, p.139). It marks the point in the external field of vision where the self is absent. The gaze belongs to the dimension of being rather than seeing; it signifies a symbolic lack, something fundamentally missing, unrelated to the vision (Lacan, 1977, p.88). The distinction between Sartre and Lacan becomes apparent here. In Sartre's text, the eruption of the gaze threatens the subject's position, as if the awareness of being seen destabilizes the subject. In contrast, for Lacan, the gaze emerges only after the objectification process is complete. As he illustrates: "I am a picture", a picture constantly observed by the object (Lacan, 1977, p.106). In this case, my subjectivity is merely a stain within the image (Lacan, 1977, p.97), a point through which the viewer becomes aware of the look. An account of the mirror stage suggests that by placing the gaze at the center of self-formation, the infant learns to differentiate between itself and the (mother's) image by becoming aware of gender differences (Nicholas Mirzoeff, 1999, p.164). Thus, the subject is split by the gaze into the one who is seen and the internal Other who gazes within the self. In this sense, the subject is constituted through a lack—"the subject is something that is divided from itself to constitute itself as an organ" (Lacan, 1977, p.103). This is also equivalent to the *objet petit a*, a signifier of lack, occupying the place of what is missing within the subject and simultaneously functioning as the object-cause of desire.

Here, *objet petit a* is something that the subject separates from itself as an organ to constitute itself, and the *objet petit a* serves as a symbol of a lack (Lacan, 1977, p. 103), a position that the subject creates for itself to fill in the lack by looking at it. For example, when we see the presence of a black shadow, we may fantasize that this black shadow is the stay of some excellent maiden. The presence of this black shadow, i.e., as *objet petit a*, which is not actual a lack, but it is precisely as a masked refusal that drives us to explore the truth behind it. On the one hand, the *objet petit a* drives the generation of our desires with a refusal of the truth behind it, and on the other hand, it keeps its distance from us. The closer we get to the *objet petit a*, the more we slowly discover that gap in the position of the self, just as we recognize our lack after encountering the gaze as a fundamental lack, similar to the reasons that drive the generation of desires. It is because of this basic lack that the subject's appropriation of the object is never complete and that the understanding of things requires the help of symbolization so that the remainder of the object, which cannot enter the system of symbolization, becomes the missing part of the subject's process of appropriation of the object. The lack motivates the subject to keep getting closer to the object. The Lack drives us to construct the world and threatens the world we create, and it could be argued that our symbolic grasp of all material

things has as its root the filling of the core Lack, but that any real material object can never fill this Lack. Just as in the process of desire, we can never fully merge with the object of desire. Instead, we approach it through a continuous chain of metonymic substitutions and symbolic displacements, and it is within this very process of deferral and refusal that *jouissance* is realized. This, therefore, leads to two results: at the moment when the material entity has not yet been grasped, the lack drives the desire to create energetic references to fill it constantly but never really fills it, whereas when the material entity has already been grasped in the part of the symbolic order, the lack gives life to the grasped entity, thus demonstrating its existence. The Lack exists as a vacancy in the realm of the Real, not being anchored in some entity but as a logical structure that drives the subject to desire arbitrary goals. As Lacan mentions about the only conceivable idea of an object, the object is the cause of desire, something in scarcity, and this scarcity creates the Real (Lacan, 1977, p. ix).

In other words, the function of lack operates as the result of *das Ding* within human cognition. *das Ding* resistance to symbolization makes it the foundation for constructing "the Real". To a certain extent, the lack can be understood as the effect exerted by *das Ding*; on the one hand, *das Ding* serves as the primal coordinate and driving force behind the symbolic order and signifying operations; on the other hand, it represents stubborn negativity that the symbolic can never fully internalize or grasp. In Žižek's words, it is "the Thing that is within the subject but is also beyond the subject", an object internal to the subject (Slavoj Žižek, 2008, p.235), which aligns with the function of lack. Lacan's reflection on *das Ding* is elaborated through Freud's notion of the split within the concept of "Nebenmensch", a German term that can be translated as "the fellow human" or more literally as "the one beside man". Lacan describes it as "the first apprehension of reality by the subject" and points out that the "Nebenmensch" is intimate with the subject, as this initial apprehension forms the most primal experience of distinguishing self from the Other. The "Nebenmensch" complex is divided into two parts, one of which confirms itself through a constant mechanism and remains together as a thing—this is *das Ding*. The element is first separated in the subject's experience of the "Nebenmensch" because its essence is one of otherness (Lacan, 1992, pp.51–52). It results from "an original splitting of the experience of reality", around which the entire world of the subject's desire is oriented, as the subject's absolute Other, the thing it seeks throughout its life but can never truly find. The subject "establishes a relationship characterized by a primordial effect about it, a relationship that precedes any repression" (Lacan, cited by Elvio Fachinelli, 2021). Thus, when the subject experiences desire toward an object, the process involves continuous fantasy production, while at the same time, the object exerts a specific effect on the subject. This dynamic drives the subject closer to the unsymbolizable core within the Real, and this movement is essentially an ongoing approach toward *das Ding*. Since *das Ding* or the Real is ultimately insurmountable, all substitutes created by humans are, in essence, attempts to confront the Real that lies behind lack.

To summarize, the exploration of the object gaze in this study is done through a continuation of Lacan's reading of the gaze, which states that the eruption of the object gaze stems from the subject's revelation of a vacancy in their essence, while the subject's constant proximity to the object petit a inspired by the lack shatters the screen of illusion it provides, resulting in the exposure of the *das Ding*. This will be followed by a specific analysis of Y2K and Retro-futurism art styles in subcultures and the presentation of the object gaze under different conditions in the Otaku phenomenon.

### 3. The Occurrence of Object Gaze in Y2K and Retro-Futurism Art Styles

When mentioning Y2K, what first comes to mind is the wave of retro trends that has surged in recent years. The Y2K aesthetic, originating from the turn of the millennium, is closely tied to the global panic caused by the infamous "Millennium Bug" incident. The very name of this aesthetic reflects its historical context—"Y" stands for "year", and "2K" stands for "2000". The "Millennium Bug" emerged from concerns among computer experts who realized that the programming convention of recording years using only two digits instead of four could have serious consequences in the year 2000. Experts predicted that computers might misinterpret date information and that the resulting malfunctions could cause widespread disruptions to finance, air travel, and nuclear power plants. This apocalyptic anxiety prompted a broad reflection on and skepticism toward technological culture. The resulting doomsday discourse contributed to a sense of nihilism that pervaded many subcultural movements at the end of the century. As 1999 came to a close, the public's reaction to the uncertainty of what lay ahead seemed capable of triggering significant consequences (David Tewksbury, Patricia Moy, Deborah S. Weis, 2004, p.141). However, as we know, January 1st, 2000, arrived without a major disaster. In the aftermath of the panic induced by the internet crisis, a sense of post-crisis relief emerged, accompanied by a renewed optimism for the new millennium. Alongside continued reflections on technology and nihilism, and against the backdrop of a flourishing global economy at the turn of the century, people began envisioning a futuristic utopia filled with technological and metallic visual elements. This vision came to define what is now known as the Y2K aesthetic, a visual style that would later be named after the era itself.

This artistic style has had a profound influence across various cultural domains. The realm of fashion is often characterized by high-saturation colors, glossy and futuristic materials, and reflective fabrics that create a visually striking and avant-garde aesthetic. Elements such as sequins and low-rise jeans are commonly featured, projecting a digitalized identity onto individuals through appearance. This artistic and aesthetic style continues to influence contemporary culture. For example, one of the most iconic figures representing the Y2K style is pop singer Britney Spears. In the music video for her song *Oops!... I Did It Again*, she wears a glossy red jumpsuit set against a space-themed backdrop, fully embodying the aesthetics and atmosphere of the millennial era. She appeared not merely as a pop singer but as a symbol of popular culture, embodying the image of a once-imagined girl from the future presented to the public. The contemporary use of "filter aesthetics" also vividly expresses the Y2K aesthetic. Images are often processed with soft light, blurry atmospheres evoking a sense of "memories" or through high-contrast color schemes that draw viewers into a surreal state between dream and reality. The filter is a digital means of constructing a filter that constructs a false reality that can be desired. This kind of image generated by the illusion of alternative reality plays a role in covering up people's questioning of technology and reality after the Y2K incident, and nihilistic tendencies left behind the empty role. The digital "filter" constitutes a false reality that continuously drives desire above and beyond real life. It also conceals what Lacan describes as our condition as subjects of the gaze. In both technological and social terms, Y2K had a lasting impact on society and many of its subcultures. These subcultures constructed the framework of Y2K and engaged with it in distinctive ways. This offers a valuable opportunity for sociological inquiry at the subcultural level, operating independently of the actual technical disaster (Andrea H. Tapia, 2003, p.484).

The resurgence of Y2K aesthetics in the contemporary context bears a subtle but significant distinction from the original Y2K artistic movement at the turn of the millennium. Both share the same essence at their core, but this essence is realized in opposite ways under different

historical conditions. Both the original and the contemporary Y2K aesthetics construct a utopian, transcendent illusion to escape the chaos and emptiness of real life. Through the beautiful screen of illusion, individuals attempt to resist the dissonance between the optimistic promises of technological progress and the anxiety and emptiness experienced by individuals under late capitalism. The subject of desire in the Y2K movement around 2000 was the optimistic subject who stood in the present of scarcity and projected his gaze into the future. In contemporary Y2K aesthetics, the subject of desire becomes a past that cannot be returned to, i.e., the subject desires a bright vision of the future circa 2000, and thus, the subject of desire is transformed into a melancholic subject standing in the present of scarcity and projecting a nostalgic gaze into the past. The subject of desire in the Y2K movement around 2000 was the optimistic subject who stood in the present of scarcity and projected his gaze into the future. In contrast, the desiring subject of contemporary Y2K aesthetics longs for a past that can no longer be returned. The subject desires a bright vision of the future circa 2000. Thus, the subject of desire is transformed into a melancholic subject standing in the present of scarcity and projecting a nostalgic gaze into the past. In other words, contemporary Y2K presents a different temporal path from that of millennial Y2K; it is a retrospection of temporality, a future envisioned by the subject through the present looking at the past (the past as it happened), and the process of temporal retrospection produced also carries the emotional structure of the present for people due to the nihilism. The panic caused by the "Millennium Bug" introduced a new mode of nihilistic fear. The Y2K crisis represented, in its most apocalyptic form, the contradictions between technology, reality, and desire; it became a disruptor of modern life. Given the intensity of public opinion and emotion surrounding technology, particularly within the millenarian context, it is no surprise that Y2K evoked a spectrum of emotional responses across different populations, especially hope and fear (Andrea H. Tapia, 2003, p.488). The fantasies about the future and the anxieties of technology that Y2K carries embody a sense of loss about unrealized visions; nostalgia is an expression of retrospection through temporality, which also affects the subconscious as a visual experience.

Retro-futurism, which also carries a temporal dimension of retrospection, differs in specific ways from the previously discussed Y2K aesthetic. In the popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s, a shift occurred in which nostalgia was transformed into a reduced form of the retro. Significantly, the previous generation's optimistic visions of the future faded, replaced by a collective longing for "the tomorrow of yesterday". Retro nostalgia was fascinated with a world of flying cars and plastic houses. In the 1970s, the oxymoron of Retro-futurism, the discrepancy between what the future once stood for and what the future does not stand for, seeped into both popular and academic cultures (Elizabeth E. Guffey, 2006, p.152). Retro-futurism emerged from the tradition of futurism, functioning as a stylistic imitation of early futuristic aesthetics. It is an artistic style that combines retro sensibilities with the technological imagination of futurism. The prefix "retro" originated in the 1970s, conveying a nostalgic and somewhat ironic view of the past. However, the term Retro-futurism also reflects a more profound shift, a move away from the practices of tinkering, amateur invention, and other forms of hands-on futurist production (Elizabeth Guffey, 2014, p.255). Retro-futurism manifests in many aspects of life. One notable example is the artist Syd Mead, often called "the designer of future worlds". His work on science fiction films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Aliens* (1986) exemplifies the retro-futuristic style. The future depicted in *Blade Runner* is not a literal projection of what came to pass but rather a fantasy of the future as imagined in the 1980s. When we watch the film today, what we see is not a future world but a world saturated with a past vision of the future, a cinematic space filled with the futurity of the past. This slippage between a past-oriented vision and a never-materialized future is precisely what defines the unique aesthetic of retro-futurism.

Similarly, for many critics, Disney's decision to redesign *Tomorrowland* in 1997 marked how retro-futurism had solidified into a definitive ideology. The new theme park was not designed to articulate the world of the future but presented a vision of the future as imagined in the 1950s. The Disney theme parks became devoted to "a future that never was" (Elizabeth Guffey, 2014, p.256). Thus, retro-futurism, as an artistic style grounded in a temporal entanglement of past and future, is the subject who looks at the future from the past by assuming a false subject who is at a past point in time. However, unlike the Y2K aesthetic, the "future" depicted in Retro-futurism never actually occurred. The "future" is a hypothetical temporal existence, and since this hypothetical existence is constantly changing with time, the corresponding future point cannot be genuinely grasped as a "future" symbol. This kind of "future" is envisioned in the present, and looking back at the past to imagine a "future" that has never happened is a kind of nostalgia for a future that has never happened, a kind of "false nostalgia". This kind of "false nostalgia" is more like nostalgia and outlook for the dislocation of space and time, a fusion of hope and disappointment, looking for the past under the fragmentation of spatial meaning. Retro-futurism may be tinged with exaggeration and virtuosity but still tinged with sadness. In contrast to the visionary optimism of futurism, Retro-futurism is typically dismissive of futurist dreams and often pessimistic (Elizabeth Guffey, 2014, p. 256).

Whether in the Y2K or Retro-futurism style, the illusion of the future constructed from the past is ultimately a fantasy created by the viewer for themselves; this fantasy conceals the viewer's internal lack. Through the symbolic representation of objects in reality, these objects are endowed with fantasy references. But the substitution involved in the process of symbolization is inherently incomplete, and it is this very incompleteness that drives our continual attempts to fill the gap, thus constituting the primordial drive of desire (Lacan, 2017, pp.8–10; Lacan, 2013, p.167). Similarly, looking through the surface of a work of art and inadvertently discovering the ever-amplified reality hidden behind it is also the process of revealing the hidden truth behind desire. Generally, our understanding of an artwork's surface is grounded in an illusion subjectively constructed by the viewer. Within this illusion, the artwork as an object of the gaze assumes a function equivalent to the *objet petit a*—the object-cause of desire, which operates as a representation of lack rather than a representation of any specific thing. Nonetheless, within the structure of the viewer's desire, the artwork onto which desire is projected still operates as a structural signifier. Yet unlike ordinary signifiers, its function is not to obscure or replace an eliminated entity, but rather to veil and substitute for the maintenance of the lack that constitutes the very essence of desire (Lacan, 2004, p.180). Thus, when the signifier that drives the viewer's desire becomes dislodged from its position within the chain of signifiers, its alienating effect renders the entire symbolic system uncanny and unreliable (Slavoj Žižek, 1992, p.57; p.20). At that moment, it assumes the function of the phallus within the symbolic order, and through its sudden exposure, the object of the gaze and desire slips from the grasp of the viewing subject. It thereby acquires a form of "silent" subjectivity, ultimately triggering the occurrence of the object gaze. Similarly, when the viewer is in the whole dimension of the work of art symbolism, the phallus appearance breaks the constructed relationship of possession between the subject and the object of desire. This strange sensation causes the viewer to withdraw into the world of illusion quickly. However, before the eruption of the relationship, the subject mistakes the illusion provided by the symbolism for reality; when the relationship is transformed, the subject immediately realizes the falsity of the illusion, and the moment of the eruption of the object gaze is the moment when the solid symbolic order is destroyed. We can understand that the appearance of phallus breaks the comfort and familiarity provided by the symbolic cover through a failure of symbolization, a discordant identity, i.e., the destructive role of phallus as a meaningless symbol. The

destructive role of the phallus as a meaningless symbol. The following section analyzes the occurrence of the object gaze triggered by the temporality of Shanghai, China, as an example.

Shanghai is a city marked by numerous futurist architectural forms. The Oriental Pearl Tower is an iconic structure, an architectural synthesis of urban tourism and historical-cultural functions. Its design adopts the spherical form favored in Eastern aesthetics, constructed with a hollow tube and diagonal bracing system, with the spheres spiraling upwards along the tower's body. Visually, the enormous gem-like spheres and retro-shimmering colors fuse elements of traditional Chinese culture with high-tech modernity, projecting a surreal vision of the future. Many other buildings in Shanghai similarly embody retro-futuristic aesthetics, harmoniously blending Western classical architecture with Eastern stylistic nuances. To a certain extent, Shanghai's developmental tempo defies earlier predictions of what Shanghai's futurism might become. Its essence is oriented toward the future, pointing both temporally and spatially forward, pushing time into the future, as if the city were constructed through a fusion of future and present times. This distinctive sense of futurity embedded in Shanghai's architecture produces an experience of breaking away from traditional, linear temporality. The notion of a real future is no longer understood as a predetermined completion based on linear time. Instead, it becomes a solidified presentation, detached from the logic of temporal progression, no longer a destination defined by relational coordinates but rather a completed impossibility. The vision of the contemporary city is thus divorced from any specific time or place. It arises as an abstract premise, and this very abstraction continually generates a sense of futurity in modern metropolises. As Anna Greenspan notes, the future no longer needs to be defined relationally as a temporal moment; rather, it can be understood as a qualitative condition of time, which is, at least in practice, accessible (Greenspan, 2014, p.27). Because this notion of the impossible is detached from linear temporal positioning, multiple temporal landscapes can coexist and overlap; both the future and the past appear as isolated temporal images layered across a diversity of architectural forms. It can be said that Shanghai's many temporal fragments exist in isolation. Still, at the same time, these isolated images are constantly overlapped by the developing city, so Shanghai's modern architecture has become a kind of urban embodiment of futurism, from the classical to the contemporary, as if it were a contrast between the future and nostalgia in architecture. As the financial capital of Shanghai, Pudong's representative skyscraper cityscape embodies the initial realization of people's "future city" in the past. The collision of nostalgia and the futuristic sense presented in the present creates people's illusion of constant change and obsession with traditional vintage, a product of the intersection of past, present, and future. It is a product of past, present, and future intersections.

From the above analysis, it becomes evident that the desire for the future has never ceased, whether in the past or the present; these desires continue to serve as sources of inspiration. As Anna Greenspan mentions, what is sensed in contemporary Shanghai is a radically different possibility of the future, not relative but real and absolute. The absolute future exists entirely in the present as a non-temporal existence, a virtual realm that "injects its influence into the present". This kind of futurism remains as unpredictable today as it was in the past (Greenspan, 2014, pp.xvi-xvii). Shanghai seems to be a city of fictional complexes with elements of the future, growing rapidly beyond absolute temporality, adding the future and the fantasies of the past to the visions of the future life, creating a fictional utopian world, where in the future, people may still be nostalgic about the urban development of Shanghai in the present, and at what speed it will continue to evolve.

At its core, the sentiment of retro operates through a temporal regression by revisiting the past's "beautiful fantasies of the future" to fill the present's absence of the idealized and unrealized future. This act of "retrospection" can be understood as a perceptual operation of the gaze that stems from the symbolic order attempt to anticipate and grasp the future. Whether it is the subject's "nostalgic vision of the future that happened in the past", as revealed by the Y2K style, or the subject's "nostalgic vision of the future in the false past," as shown by the Retro-futurism style, Both of these visions are a symbolic grasp by the present viewing subject of the past "subject" (whether real or fictional) of the work. This symbolic grasp provides an illusion for its desires, even if it is a fictional illusion, an uncertainty about the grasp of the self, to cover up the fact that the present is incapable of grasping reality and exists as an impossible object. This never-attainable purpose makes the subject's desire possible; as Lacan mentions, the illusion designates the subject's relation to the object-cause of desire as "impossible" (Slavoj Žižek, 1992, p.6).

The present envisions a "future" that exists in the past as if it were an absence that never existed; it persists in the dimensions of time and space like a "ghost," as a wandering apparition that crosses over time, from past to present and crosses over existence as a shadow that does not exist. And this "ghost" like existence is like Mark Fisher's description of "hauntology", which refers to (actually) something that does not exist but which remains valid as a kind of virtuality (Mark Fisher, 2014, p.27). It generates an illusion of presence and absence, continuously exerting its influence through a temporally unfolding process. There are two kinds of relationships: the no longer and the no yet. From the past-to-present perspective, where it has passed but we can still feel its presence; and From the future-to-present perspective, where it lingers as an unfulfilled promise with a certain impact in the present and a feeling formed in the present through repetition and anticipation. Similarly, the process of desire and retrospection is like a "ghost" that hovers between the past and the future, between reality and fiction, creating a memory of the past that belongs to modern anxieties. The absence that occurs in memory is a beautiful vision of the past within; the return in the form of "ghosts" removes the anxiety of the nothingness faced.

Comparing Y2K and Retro-futurism, whether it is "the I (subject) who envisions the future in the present that has happened in the past (Y2K)" or "the future that has been envisioned in the present that has been envisioned in the false past (Retro-futurism)", Regardless of whether or not this future imagination has occurred in reality, the viewer is in the midst of a point in time between "the future that was set up in the past" and the point in time between "the setting up of the future in the false past that is envisioned in the present". This object gaze in the nostalgic mode is a kind of gaze of the past self to the present self. For the present subject, the symbolic grasp of the successful future envisioned by the past self and the present's inability to symbolize itself, i.e., people's symbolic grasp of the future, is an "illusion of perfection" that can never be realized. Like the mirror imaging in Lacan's mirror stage, for the viewing subject, the discrepancy between the mirror and the illusory self and the real self creates an outburst of object gaze. In this context, the object gaze derives from the subject's symbolic conception of the future in the present, looking back at what happened in the past, and the subject's presupposition of a false subject in the past in the present to realize a symbolic conception of the future through a pretended looking back. Both symbolic visions of the "future" operate in the symbolic order. The following section will examine another subcultural phenomenon, how the gaze emerges through the structural dynamics of the Otaku phenomenon.

#### 4. The Occurrence of Object Gaze in the Otaku Phenomenon

Otaku is known to the general public as a very iconic phenomenon in Japan. The word "Otaku", which means "your house" in Japanese, was initially used as a term of respect for anime fans and was first popularized by Akio Nakamori in the 1980s to refer to a group of young people who refused to get in touch with reality, such as those who were passionate about anime and manga, video games, etc., and refused to engage with reality, video games, etc., and refuses to get in touch with reality. In Japan, Otaku is connoted by an insult. It refers to individuals intensely, even obsessively, devoted to a specific type of fan subculture. One way Otaku has been translated into English is with a pejorative meaning of 'fanboy'. In the United States, fans of Japanese anime often proudly refer to themselves as Otaku. Although they are quick to point out that the lyrics are insulting. Otaku is attached to any fan subculture category to indicate a person's allegiance to them (Annalee Newitz, 1994, p.1). The reason behind the formation of this group is the impact and influence of the Second World War on Japan, which shaped the country's special cultural patterns and the alienated social relationships generated by the enormous social pressure. They avoid communicating with others in reality and enjoy the fictional two-dimensional world by pursuing the beautiful things of fantasy, which significantly satisfies their happiness that cannot be obtained in reality, and as a group of people who rely on the Internet to survive, "otaku" has gradually become their way of life. Most men, because of the long-term life in cultural repression, in the reality of sexual desire can not be satisfied, will not be able to satisfy a particular desire to transfer to the virtual world to obtain a hint of spiritual satisfaction. However, Otaku who remain closed for an extended period without communicating with the outside world are derailed from society, become self-absorbed, and may even develop certain extreme behaviors. One of the most influential cases is that of an Otaku called Miyazaki Tsutomu, who raped and killed several young girls in 1989 (Hiroki Azuma, 2009, pp. 4-5).

As the culture of repression has evolved, it has become a unique cultural phenomenon in Japan. Since the 1990s, the advent of the digital age has meant that Otaku culture has diversified, and Otaku have lost the cohesion they once had as a 'tribe'. Sociologist Osawa Masachi argues that, from the late 2000s onward, Otaku traits have increasingly been perceived as common characteristics among young people (Takeshi Okamoto, 2015, p.18). It can also be said that it has gradually become mainstream while diversifying. As we have observed, the scale and nature of Otaku culture have transformed over time. Azuma divides the development of Otaku culture into three generational waves. The first generation consists of those born around 1960 who grew up watching *Space Battleship Yamato* and *Mobile Suit Gundam* during their teenage years. The second generation, born around 1970, consumed the cultural products of the previous generation during their adolescence when first-generation Otaku culture had already matured and splintered into a variety of subcultures. The third generation, born around 1980, came of age during the rise of the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* boom in the late 1990s, reaching high school age around 1997 (Takeshi Okamoto, 2015, p.19). The Otaku is an isolated and individuated subject who seeks to possess the anime object. At the same time, anime itself, produced with commercial intentions, acts as an object that actively caters to the desires of the viewing subject. Anime works construct idealized fantasies that align with the viewer's desire, attempting to fill the inner void of the subject.

In Japan, Akihabara is regarded as the holy land of Otaku, in Akihabara, we can see a space created specifically for Otaku, where the two-dimensional world overlaps with the real world, allowing more people to resonate between the fictional and the real, attracting visitors from all

over the world to come and watch. Through the output of many anime images, it can be found that most anime images have similarities, the endless but similar images produced under the fixed collocation pattern. The presentation of these anime image works can be integrated into Japanese philosopher Hiroki Azuma's database pattern analysis, which means that the world can be viewed as a two-layer structure of "small narrative" and "a grand non-narrative", i.e., simulacra and database. The deep inner layer of the world is regarded as an invisible existence, i.e., a database, and the surface outer layer is considered a visible existence and a simulacra (Hiroki Azuma, 2009, p.134). He explains this in terms of "*chara-moe*" (*chara* means character, and *moe* refers to empathy or adoration) (Takeshi Okamoto, 2015, p.20).

Thus, many of the anime characters we encounter exist as visible simulacra, supported by a vast and invisible database; many anime characters are created by reorganizing different *moe* elements in a database pattern. As a result, there are many similarities between anime characters, but there are slight differences in hair color, clothing, colors, etc. These individual *moe* elements have no meaning on their own when taken apart. However, when reorganized differently, they form anime images with different meanings for other viewers and continue filling consumer needs. Many female characters have been given strong storytelling and are dressed in iconic outfits (short skirts, stockings, etc.), and the *loli* image has largely fulfilled men's spiritual longing for women. For Otaku, it is not a particular image or character that is passionate about, but rather the whole symbolic illusion constructed by the storytelling given by the anime image, which fills the lack of the spiritual world through the imaginary fictionalized world of beauty. Third-generation Otaku's second key characteristic is their behavior exhibiting distinct postmodern traits. Azuma argues that 'database consumption' constitutes a form of postmodern consumer behavior, and the feature of 'animalization' (*dōbutsuka*) is particularly evident within this model (Takeshi Okamoto, 2015, p.20). Due to the drive of desire, which drives the continuous consumption and reproduction of social resources, the output of anime images has also formed a specific fixed consumption pattern. In the face of unlimited desire and unlimited consumption at the same time, to satisfy consumer demand, anime images continue to fill in the gaps through constant recreation in the database pattern, which can be regarded as a kind of consumer culture phenomenon, and the Otaku group can be the dominant group of consumption. At the same time, there are also certain drawbacks to social relationships. For Azuma, individuals establish social connections because they are driven by inter-subjective desire (Hiroki Azuma, 2009, p.118). However, as independent individuals, Otaku lacks communication with society and external others. They are missing the structural relationships between subjects, and instead, as isolated individuals, they attempt to fill their inner void through the ever-updating anime images in a fictional world. To a certain extent, this can be seen as a failure of symbolic castration.

A different type of anime character presents a reversal in the structure of desire; this is the fictional figure known as the "Beautiful Fighting Girl", a concept proposed by Japanese philosopher Saitō Tamaki. The most representative example of the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" is Ayanami Rei from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. As depicted in the case of Ayanami Rei, the battles of the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" can be understood as a way of compensating for the trauma of maternal loss in childhood. The "Beautiful Fighting Girl" appears as an empty shell; within the fictional world, people can project a wide range of sexual fantasies onto her. She is a symbolic extension or continuation of the "mother" symbol. The "mother" functions like a ghostly presence imbued with spatiality, connecting trauma and battle through its spectral nature. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Ayanami Rei continually engages in fighting as a means of fulfilling the ideals projected onto her by others. For Saitō, the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" is

an unattainable yet irresistible sexual object (Saitō Tamaki, 2011, p.xi). He argues that Otaku may even fall in love with these characters due to a particular erotic fantasy, and the appeal of the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" lies precisely in the virtuality of her image. However, behind "Beautiful Fighting Girl" is the existence of trauma, the image of the beautiful fighting girl that attracts the viewer's desire to look at it with the premise of *moe* elements, and covers up the trauma through symbolic simulacra, whose existence is the refusal of the subject to understand.

Trauma as a memory hidden in the subconscious that does not want to be recalled, as having happened, is simultaneously considered a fantasy, constructed retroactively based on the symptoms of hysteria, whose authenticity, its sublimity, is located in the fantasy dimension. It can be understood that the existence of the virtual image of the "Beautiful fighting girl" is like a shell without a soul, as Saitō mentioned that the virtual image of the "Beautiful fighting girl" is usually described as a "phallic girl" in "Japanese-style" (Saitō Tamaki, 2011, p8). As a nodal point of desire, the "phallic girl" appears to embody the failure of symbolic castration. In Lacanian terms, the hysteric becomes anxious upon witnessing the castrated Other and, in response to this anxiety, identifies with the imaginary object that the Other is lacking—the phallus (Saitō Tamaki, 2011, p.163). But when the phallus appears in the subject's symbolic order, one cannot access its corresponding counterpart in the referent. Thus, the subject's otherwise functioning symbolic order is disturbed by the substitution for the Real (lack) that intrudes into it when it is directly confronted with the phallus, leading to the eruption of the object's gaze in confrontation with the Real. As mentioned earlier, the essence of the Real is the kernel *das Ding* that causes the object to refuse to be entirely signified. As Žižek puts it, the Real, in its very positivity, is nothing but the embodiment of a void, a lack, a form of radical negativity (Zhang, Yibing, 2020, p.343). Similarly, the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" figure represents a lack; it marks a reversal in the structure of desire, transformed through the appearance of the phallus. Characters such as Ayanami Rei exemplify this logic insofar as the virtual figure of the "Beautiful Fighting Girl" functions as the phallus itself.

Through the above analysis, it can be understood that for the Otaku community, anime images as their aesthetic objects exist in a patterned state of existence, as the act of filling an inner void through the illusion of symbolic grasp shaped by the consumerist model. Here, the operation of desire parallels the symbolic structure; it originates from the consciousness structure we construct ourselves. This is akin to the process in which the viewing subject experiences an immediate sensation from observing an object and then creates a signifier to substitute for it. In other words, our pursuit of the object of desire is a pursuit of our fantasy. As Žižek puts it, "Through fantasy, we learn how to desire" (Slavoj Žižek, 1992, p.6), ensuring the illusion's continuity. It was mentioned in the previous section that behind every object that is an object of desire corresponds to its emptiness, *objet petit a*. The object of desire is not the object to which the entity corresponds but is formed from its vacancy. The emptiness created by the subject due to internal trauma under the influence of historical factors as well as social relations, but in the present context, it is a confrontation between the subject and the emptiness of its own failed positioning, the emptiness of the conflict between desire and the rejection of desire that arises through the relationship between the individual subject and the anime character.

The gaze toward the object, arising from the gap between the self and the Real revealed within the illusory world generated by the lack in the symbolic order, reflects a fundamental disharmony within the subject. The Otaku attempts to fill the internal void with numerous "perfect" images. Thus, anime characters exist through the allure generated by the *objet petit*

a, functioning as screens of desire that attempt to fill the emptiness born of trauma. But this filling is not destined to completely cover the trauma, to allow its realization with the grasp of the object cause of desire. As lack drives the desire to operate in the space of illusion, there are certain appropriation relations between the viewing subject in the process of desiring an object, and as the viewing subject symbolically grasps the work of anime, lack continually drives the viewing subject to construct an illusory substitute to fill it in, where the relation of substitution, i.e., the substitution of the object itself, constitutes the structural relation between the subject and the object. In Otaku aesthetics, the phantasmagoria (imaginative appropriation, often presented as a "sexual" appropriation) that the subject projects onto the object in its desirous activity clashes with the object (the rejection of symbolic grasp, the property of nothingness in itself). Thus, the gaze is formed through the relationship between the viewing subject and the many anime images, and the object gaze takes place in the symbolic intention derived from the viewed object's bearing of itself.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explores different conditions arising from different phenomena as the core issues through the gaze perspective. Initially, by comparing the difference between subject gaze and object gaze, and then analyzing the cause behind the gaze based on the premise of the subject's vacuity, and by comparing the temporality presented by Y2K and Retro-futurism art styles in different subcultures, based on the relationship of temporality by wandering between the past and the future interlaced and superimposed, the dislocation and deviation between the two lead to the occurrence of disharmony, It is through this dissonance that the object-gaze concealed beneath the surface appearance is revealed. The otaku phenomenon is also based on the premise of the subject's absence, projecting the subject in the activity of desire into the illusion of the object (the anime work), which for the subject is an imaginative possession, a symbolic grasp, while for the anime work (the object) itself, the conflict between the two occurs based on the attribute of nothingness, which is based on the world of illusion generated by the absence of the symbolic order. The object gaze generated by the discrepancy between the subject's revealed self and the real is a disharmony within the subject. Therefore, this disharmony leads to the generation of the gaze through a structural relationship.

This paper analyzes different subcultural phenomena to analyze the unique conditions under which the gaze occurs in various cultural phenomena, namely, the temporal conditions under which the gaze occurs in the Y2K and Retro-futurism art styles and the structural conditions under which the gaze occurs in the Otaku cultural phenomenon.

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