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VIRAL CHAOS, MECHANICAL AWAKENING

In one of the most iconic sequences of 1980s cinema (*Back to the Future II*, 1989), Marty sets out to see the future from an alley adjacent to downtown Hill Valley. The year 2015 depicted in the movie displays a world where people dress extravagantly, drive flying-cars, and massive holograms attempt to grab the attention of passersby. It is a world full of color but tinged with a certain nostalgia, especially when Marty stands in front of the antique shop or shortly enters the Cafe 80's. The film's success was so significant that it catapulted many elements of pop culture from that era, such as the laid-back aesthetic of Marty, the DMC DeLorean he drove, and even the soundtrack with its reimagined California 1980s sound, which evokes an exciting vision of the future.

This bright and colorful vision of the future contrasts sharply with the views offered by equally iconic films of the last quarter of the previous century such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Mad Max* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Matrix* (1999). In these films, the future is depicted as its antithesis: a gloomy, dystopian backdrop where technology has evolved into an oppressive weapon, subjugating and menacing humanity. More than thirty years later, with a new millennium in between, this latter vision has come to dominate the collective imagination. As the visions presented in these films gradually took up more space in the pop culture of the ensuing years, an aesthetic dominated by neo-noir and somber tones, accompanied by electronic and synthetic music that created a melancholic and unsettling atmosphere, became prominent.

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if prefacing a horror story, enigmatic images (originally posted on *4chan's /x/ board*) began circulating through some of the Internet's most hidden corners. These images depicted 'backrooms', sterile, amorphous, seemingly infinite indoor spaces dimly lit in an unsettling manner. These spaces appeared somewhat recognizable, sharing resemblances with the offices where we labor, the bars we visit, or the parking lots where we leave our cars. However, in contrast to these familiar settings, these images displayed no indications of life or

activity. To our eyes, all these backrooms formed an expansive labyrinth of unsettling familiarity and disturbing desolation, where viewers found themselves ensnared by a disconcerting yellow hue, the smell of musty old carpet, and a pervasive feeling of being lost and disoriented.

Yet, the purpose and meaning behind these images remained unknown. While some saw them as a digital manifestation of the existential fear inherent in humans, others speculated about a more ominous origin –possibly a cryptic message from an unknown entity. Nevertheless, the enigma remained unsolved and continued to torment us. The backrooms evolved into a "*creepypasta*", a genre of online horror legends, prompting an increasing number of internet users to embark on a quest to unravel the mystery behind them.

AGAIN, COVID-19

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic just a few months later provided a grim resolution to the enigma. Suddenly, humanity was forced into isolation, and our social lives were abruptly interrupted. All those vibrant spaces of yesteryears – our offices, bars, and parking lots– suddenly emptied, mirroring those mysterious images. As if prophetic, our external world became the real projection of these backrooms.

The unfolding narrative on the Internet revealed that the backrooms were more than just vacant spaces. An impactful video (*The Backrooms. Found Footage*, 2022) injected life into this emptiness, portraying an individual who seemed bewildered and disoriented as they navigated an endless sequence of backrooms. Suddenly, an indistinct and mechanical creature with unsettling movements and appearance emerged, giving chase to the protagonist who fled in desperation. Without a discernible face and exuding an unsettling presence, the creature moved with an insect-like, erratic gait, presenting a looming danger to the protagonist's existence in this barren liminal space. This recent revelation further deepened the mystery, compelling us to contemplate the true nature of this enigmatic being.

The impact of the pandemic imposed profound sociological changes upon humanity for many months. Our social interactions shifted to a purely digital environment, entirely replacing our physical world. Suddenly, all work meetings, classes, social gatherings, and even dates took place online. This is precisely when generative AI agents came onto the scene. These digital entities, capable of learning, adapting, and even creating, have become essential parts of our daily lives. They accompanied us throughout the pandemic and helped us with tasks ranging from text editing to digital art creation. Immune to the virus, these agents found the perfect scenario for their large-scale development, facilitated by the massive training we provided during COVID-19. Indeed, as we became more dependent on the digital world, our existence became increasingly linked to these new agents.

I AM LIFE, YOU FOOL

A retrospective perspective now allows us to decode what was previously elusive. While one might initially assume that the enigmatic and monstrous creature concealed within the backrooms could symbolize human subjugation by a superior AI, which has already surpassed the pandemic as the most significant threat to humanity, this is not the case. Instead, this disconcerting monstrosity mirrors our individual fears and anxieties about a future governed by machines that dictate human lives, guiding us through an infinite labyrinth of backrooms. This creature foreshadows a mechanical purgatory, one that is repetitive and seemingly never-ending, potentially leading to a stagnation of human creativity in a matter of years. Faced with this, we can assert that we are stepping into a new era of obscurantism and mystery, where this cryptic creature embodies the prevailing pessimism of our time as we confront the impending AI revolution.

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With their evocative portrayal of isolation and dread, the empty backrooms and their enigmatic, faceless monsters have risen as the quintessential cultural symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Their power lies in the fusion of our anxieties about isolation, human obsolescence, and technology exceeding our control –themes that dominated the pandemic's spirit. As we step into a world reshaped by COVID-19, these lifeless spaces serve as a chilling visual symbol for this era, much like punk fashion symbolized disaffection in the 1970s.

These vacant rooms, haunted by faceless entities, embody the nightmares of our time.

Escaping when unsure of our entry requires us to maintain hope. Just as in dark future movies, we can avoid succumbing to that fate. Human ingenuity and hope empower us to craft a vibrant alternative future. As we navigate the vast digital realm, we must remember we are not alone. The glossy era of retro-futurism has transitioned into a sober postmodern malaise, and the concept of the backrooms could shape the contemporary pop culture we require in a post-COVID and post-AI world, serving as a reflection of our shared sentiments today. <



Where fashion meets the infinite: Welcome to the Backroom pop-up shop!



Campbell's Soup Cans in the backrooms – hope it's not endless!

This essay was crafted with editorial support from Anthropic's Claude 2, while the accompanying image was generated using Stability AI's Dream-study and OpenAI's DALL·E3.

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