

MEMETIC AESTHETICS: VALUE, VIRALITY, AND VIBEOLOGY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a theoretical account of what it terms *memetic aesthetics*, referring to the vast proliferation of niche stylistic categories circulating on social media platforms and saturating contemporary digital popular culture (e.g., *vaporwave*, *cottagecore*). It argues that while memetic aesthetic categories are highly niche, trivial, and often largely inconsequential by definition, their rapid proliferation in digital culture may be understood as a symptom of a greater shift at the level of aesthetic experience in Western society. More specifically, the book claims that this new wave of viral aesthetic categories is of a different ontological order from the more traditional definition of aesthetics as “the philosophy of the beautiful or of art,” and signifies a new logic whereby cultural objects are judged according to the virality of their circulation rather than by societal standards of beauty, quality, or authenticity, as in earlier aesthetic paradigms. Part I outlines a broad genealogy of Western aesthetics which I call the “Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline,” which tracks the gradual waning of a notion of authenticity upon which to make value judgments on the one hand, and the emergence of aesthetics as a logic of proliferating cultural categories on the other. Part II explores the notion of the *vibe* as a conceptual tool for making sense of how cultural categories are affectively curated, standardized, repeated, revised, and recognized through their circulation across digital social media. Part III discusses some of the political ramifications of the shift towards memetic aesthetics. Part IV concludes with a pair of case studies which offer insight into some of the aesthetic consequences of the memetic aesthetic turn, a summary of some of the key arguments put forth in the dissertation, and some of the potential directions for further research on memetic aesthetics.

Résumé

Cette thèse propose une théorie de ce qu'elle nomme les esthétiques mémétiques, se référant à la vaste prolifération de catégories stylistiques de nicheés circulant sur les plateformes de médias sociaux et saturant la culture populaire numérique contemporaine (par ex. *vaporwave*, *cottagecore*). Elle soutient que même si les catégories esthétiques mémétiques sont très spécialisées, triviales et souvent sans conséquence par définition, leur prolifération rapide dans la culture numérique peut être comprise comme le symptôme d'un changement plus important au niveau de l'expérience esthétique dans la société occidentale. Plus spécifiquement, la thèse avance que cette nouvelle vague de catégories esthétiques virales est d'un ordre ontologique différent de la définition plus traditionnelle de l'esthétique vue comme «la philosophie du beau ou de l'art» et signifie une nouvelle logique laquelle les objets culturels sont jugés selon à la viralité de leur circulation plutôt qu'aux normes sociétales de beauté, de qualité ou d'authenticité, comme dans les paradigmes esthétiques antérieurs. La première partie présente une large généalogie de l'esthétique occidentale que j'appelle la «pipeline Kant à *cottagecore*» qui suit le déclin progressif d'une notion d'authenticité sur laquelle il est possible de porter des jugements de valeur d'une part, et l'émergence de l'esthétique comme logique de catégories culturelles proliférantes d'autre part. La deuxième partie explore la notion d'ambiance en tant qu'outil conceptuel permettant de donner un sens à la manière dont les catégories culturelles sont affectivement organisées, standardisées, répétées, révisitées et comprises par leur circulation à travers les médias numériques. La troisième partie examine certaines des ramifications politiques du passage à une esthétique mémétique. La quatrième partie se termine par deux études de cas offrant un aperçu de certaines des conséquences esthétiques du tournant esthétique mémétique, un résumé de certains des arguments clés avancés dans la thèse et certaines des orientations potentielles pour des recherches ultérieures sur le sujet.

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Introduction: "What Aesthetic Is This?"

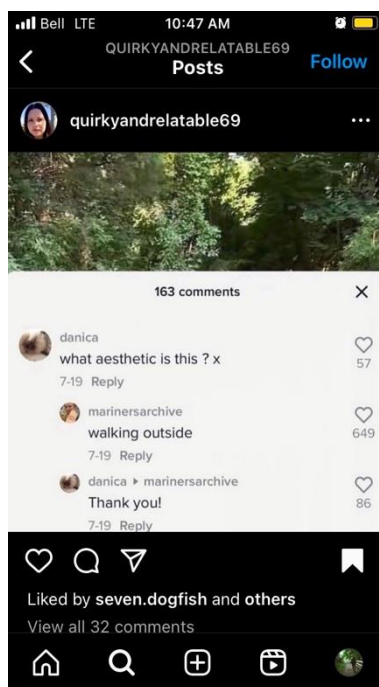


Figure 1: "what aesthetic is this ?"

Let's start with a meme. Posted by Instagram user *@quirkyandrelatable69* on August 14th, 2022, it's a screenshot of the comments section of a somewhat blurry-looking TikTok which seems to depict some sort of outdoor space with trees. "What aesthetic is this ? x" asks user *danica*, to which user *marinersarchive* dryly responds, "walking outside." "Thank you!" replies *danica* in turn. The joke here seems to be that *danica* has become so estranged from living IRL (i.e., "in real life," as opposed to online) that she can only make sense of the basic act of walking outside through its relation to a memetic cultural category. In the comments section of the post, multiple users reference the phrase "touch some grass," a popular meme and online insult synonymous with "go outside," implying

that someone has spent too much time online to the detriment of their general wellbeing. But *danica's* question is something of a Trojan Horse: beneath its seemingly naïve, internet-raised Gen Z exterior, it discloses a number of important unspoken assumptions regarding the state of the aesthetic in contemporary digital culture. Firstly, it suggests the rapid ascendance of a popular connotation of *aesthetics* distinct from the term's more traditional definition as "the philosophy of the beautiful or of art"—one which refers to the proliferation of niche aesthetic micro-categories emerging from and saturating digital popular culture.¹ Secondly, *danica's* assumption that the very act of walking outside may be situated within a given aesthetic, or may even comprise its own aesthetic suggests a type of aesthetics which might not be simply confined to art and culture, but open to all aspects of one's lifestyle. Finally, *@quirkyandrelatable69's* choice to use this meme on their page as an ostensibly relatable piece of content implies that *danica's* seemingly absurd question might be symptomatic of a broader generational shift, suggesting the existence of a whole generation of digital natives for whom *aesthetics* no longer refers to judgments of beauty or philosophies of art, but rather attempts to situate everyday objects and practices within an exponentially growing array of digital micro-categories.

@quirkyandrelatable69's meme feels particularly resonant in a historical moment in which digital media has become the motor of popular culture, resulting in an unforeseen proliferation of ephemeral stylistic categories saturating our day-to-day lives. These

¹ "aesthetics, n.1," *OED Online*, September 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/293508>.

categories seem to follow us everywhere today: saturating our screens, animating our conversations, and feeding back into a vast array of media practices. In the age of digital social media, these categories serve as the building blocks which make up the frameworks of our cultural understanding, orienting us through processes of encoding and decoding throughout everyday life, and allowing us to place the characteristics of people and objects within both emergent and established cognitive categories. We might find ourselves debating whether *indie sleaze* has really “returned;” fretting about the obsolescence of millennial aesthetics signified by the emergence of the ominous *cheugy* designation; trying to educate family members of the perils of acting like a *Kyle* or a *Karen*; or lying sleeplessly in bed at night wondering to ourselves just WTF *goblincore* might be.² These categories, which I refer to here as *memetic aesthetics*, are the focal point of this dissertation.

Why “Memetic Aesthetics?”

Memetic aesthetics is little more than another name I’ve coined for what are more commonly known in digital culture as *internet aesthetics*, or simply *aesthetics*, and have also been variously referred to as “namecore,” “TikTok couture,” “vibes culture,” and “TikTok core.”³ There are four main reasons I’ve chosen the term *memetic aesthetics* over

² The term “cheugy” is Gen Z’s derogatory term for somewhat “basic” millennial women whose aesthetic dispositions are seen as behind the times. The term made headlines in 2021 when it was brought to mainstream attention in a *New York Times* article by Taylor Lorenz. See: Taylor Lorenz, “What Is ‘Cheugy’? You Know It When You See It,” *The New York Times*, Apr. 29, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210501155619/https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/style/cheugy.html>.

³ See: Lily Alexandre, “Millions of Dead Vibes: How Aesthetics Hurt Art,” *YouTube*, Feb. 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMjxxzq88R0>; Rebecca Jennings, “Fashion Is Just TikTok Now,” *Vox*, Feb. 1, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22911116/tiktok-couture-fashion-trends>; Anna Mikhaylyants, “TikTok Core: The Fashion World of Today,” *The Harvard Crimson*, Mar. 9, 2023,

the more commonly used *internet aesthetics* or *aesthetics*. The first one is perhaps the most obvious, namely, its emphasis on the memetic nature of these aesthetics. My use of the term memetic aesthetics derives from the definition of “internet aesthetics” on *Aesthetics Wiki*—a site used to compile and describe memetic aesthetics—as “a visual-led theme reflected consistently and often memetically throughout a given subculture.”⁴ While the *meme* in memetic aesthetics famously derives from evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’ name for gene-like units of cultural transmission, my emphasis on the memetic nature of these aesthetics follows Ryan M. Milner, who uses memetics to examine the social practices involved in the production, circulation, and transformation of collective texts across participatory media.⁵ In this sense, memetic aesthetics can be understood as any style, type, trope, genre, scene, movement, or related category which is standardized, repeated, and revised through its circulation across digital social media.

In addition to the memetic mode through which new style categories emerge, the *memetic* in memetic aesthetics is also intended as a reference to internet memes, which are the primary form of media through which these categories circulate. As Milner writes,

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/3/9/tiktok-aesthetics-microtrends-fast-fashion-style/>; Olive Pometsey, “Namecore Is the Trend That Unifies All Trends,” *The Face*, Apr. 27, 2022, <https://theface.com/culture/namecore-goblin-mode-night-luxe-twee-feral-girl-internet-trends-subcultures-slang-language-coining-names>.

⁴ Anthony Cross, “Instagram Filters for the Self: Autonomy and Internet ‘Aesthetics,’” *Aesthetics for Birds*, September 3, 2020, <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2020/09/03/autonomy-and-internet-aesthetics/#more-9335>; emphasis added.

⁵ This is an effort on Milner’s part to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater in rejecting the Darwinian determinism that has come to characterize Dawkins’ work. Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016), 3 & 9; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

"Through their intense sociality, memes are folk media...premised on collective strands intertwining to create new tapestries of cultural production."⁶ In recent years, memes have become so important in the transmission of aesthetic categories that the recognizability of emergent categories is now predicated on their circulation via memes.⁷ Consider for example the case of the *Karen*—an entitled white middle-class woman typically depicted harassing service industry workers and people of colour—who, while only being formally named around 2017, began her memetic journey in 2014 when she was circulated as the "Can I Speak to a Manager Haircut" meme on Reddit forums.⁸



Figure 2: The proto-Karen: "Can I Speak to a Manager' Haircut."

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ The relationship between memes and memetic aesthetics is discussed in greater length in Chapter 7, which examines the centrality of the starter pack meme format to memetic aesthetics by focusing on the formalization of the fuccboi as a memetic aesthetic category on a Montreal-based Instagram meme page.

⁸ Adam, "Karen," *Know Your Meme*, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/karen>; KeeQue, "'Speak to the Manager' Haircut," *Know Your Meme*, 2016, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/speak-to-the-manager-haircut>.

The *Karen*, alongside others such as the *Kyle* and the *fuccboi* are noteworthy case studies from the perspective of memetic aesthetics because as pejorative stereotypes, they aren't included in *Aesthetics Wiki's* archive, and are never really discussed as being in the same ontological category as better-known aesthetics like *night luxe* or *French girl*. In order to understand why this is, we must revisit *Aesthetics Wiki's* definition of internet aesthetics as "a visual-led theme reflected consistently and often memetically *throughout a given subculture*."⁹ *Fuccbois* and *Karens* are certainly types, but because nobody willingly identifies with them, defining them as *subcultures* would be a misnomer. The notion of a memetic aesthetic on the other hand is slightly more capacious, referring to *any* cultural style or type which is propagated and formally standardized through its circulation across digital media. This brings us to another important distinction between memetic aesthetics, and what are otherwise referred to as internet aesthetics or aesthetics: while the latter have often been referred to as "internet subcultures," the theory of memetic aesthetics presented here specifically relies on a post-subcultural framework.¹⁰ This is to say that memetic aesthetics are of a different order than subcultures and must therefore be theorized using a different vocabulary. In Section I, we'll discuss how the exponential

⁹ Anthony Cross, "Instagram Filters for the Self: Autonomy and Internet 'Aesthetics'"; emphasis added.

¹⁰ Blogger *Chicandcultural* for example, defines aesthetics as "the visual identity of an online subculture," and a *Medium* article on aesthetics refers to them as "social media subcultures." Holly, "AESTHETICS: The Style of Internet Subcultures," *Chicandcultural*, Jan. 18, 2022, <https://www.chicandcultural.co.uk/post/aesthetics-the-style-of-internet-subcultures>; Psychedelics Are Medicine, "10 of the Weirdest and Most Fascinating Internet Aesthetics," *Medium*, Mar. 21, 2022, <https://medium.com/counterarts/10-of-the-weirdest-and-most-fascinating-internet-aesthetics-d7efa4719f36>.

growth of early memetic aesthetics such as *vaporwave* and *normcore* on platforms such as Tumblr in the late-aughts and early twenty-teens arose from the gradual dissolution of the hipster, a broad meta-subcultural structure of feeling which itself can be read as a response to challenges regarding the idea of subculture throughout the 1990s.¹¹

Despite dealing with different sets of historical circumstances, memetic aesthetics and classic youth subcultures (e.g., punks or mods) are also not entirely unlike, as both concepts emerge out of a common lineage as lifestyle-based responses to the problem of aesthetic autonomy within capitalist society. What sets them apart is that traditional subcultures still retain some influence from classical aesthetics through their investment in concepts such as authenticity. The notion of being a “lifer” within a particular scene for example, is a testament to the respect and cultural capital associated with one’s long-standing and authentic commitment to their respective subculture.¹² Memetic aesthetics on the other hand, represent a digital break from the investment in authenticity which informed subcultures of previous decades. As François Brunet observes, the exponential proliferation of processes of dissemination and dematerialization in the digital era has rendered concepts of originality, reality and authenticity associated with the “old” Benjaminian question of reproduction obsolete:

¹¹ Alexa Gould-Kavet, *The Demise of the Subcultural Identity: Towards a Postmodern Theory of The Hipster and Hipster Style*, 2.

¹² Thomas Slee for example, draws a hierarchy of categories in the skateboarding world, with “lifer” placed at the top, and “poser” at the bottom. Thomas Slee, *Skate For Life: An Analysis of the Skateboarding Subculture*, Honors Thesis (University of South Florida, 2011).

In the realm of the visual, the ‘lives of images,’...consist in endless mediations and re-mediations of ‘visibilities’ (and other modes of communicability) that need not retain any materiality or uniqueness to circulate virtually, and yet tend to lay claim to a strong link to reality—*the reality of their own circulation*, to begin with. Digital-native students expect images (if not objects) to move, multiply, and disseminate virtually and instantaneously; *they measure the worth of digital things by the statistics of their circulation*...they appraise virality before they observe form or content.¹³

Drawing on Brunet, we can say that memetic aesthetics’ primacy of virality over authenticity can be understood as a reconfiguration of the postmodern concept of *lifestyle* in the “post-authentic” digital age—one whose “life” no longer connotes the life-consuming commitment of a subcultural practitioner, but rather the “life” of a category’s own *thingness*, which is in turn defined by its viral circulation.¹⁴ Freed from the burdensome baggage of subcultural authenticity, memetic aesthetics are precisely the kind of ephemeral and expendable post-subcultural styles prophesized by David Muggleton, who describes the noncommittal “style surfing” of the postmodern post-subculturalist.¹⁵ In a YouTube video deconstructing the *French girl* aesthetic, style analyst Mina Le aptly captures the prevailing attitude toward memetic aesthetics amongst Gen Z youth as follows:

I don’t think anyone should feel trapped by an aesthetic. It’s a way of expression, not a form of social conformity. I see a lot of videos on TikTok and on YouTube of

¹³ François Brunet, “Introduction: No Representation Without Circulation,” *Circulation* (Chicago: Terra Foundation for American Art, 2017), 10-39, 12; emphases added.

¹⁴ Jay Owens, “Post Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture,” *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, edited by Alfie Brown and Dan Bristow (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2019), 77-113.

¹⁵ David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (New York: Berg, 2000), 47.

people being like, 'help me choose an aesthetic, I just like so many aesthetics,' and you don't have to choose.¹⁶

The third reason in my case for the term *memetic aesthetics* is that it situates the concept within the genealogy of aesthetic theory, while also periodizing it as a distinct stage in the development of Western aesthetics characterized by the memetic circulation of digital content on social media. The relationship between *memetic aesthetics* and *aesthetics* in the more traditional sense is an interesting and complicated one. Anthony Cross alludes to it in a blog post about *Aesthetics Wiki*, in which he points out a distinction between "aesthetics (a singular noun) in the more philosophical sense," and "'aesthetics'—a plural noun in the internet sense."¹⁷ Rather than treating these two uses of the aesthetic as antithetical, I argue in Section I that they can be understood as two historically distinct stages of a continuum which I call the *Kant to cottagecore pipeline*: the story of how a branch of philosophy concerned with sensation and beauty gradually ended up sharing a name with the TikTok generation's exponentially growing list of niche style-types.

According to Sianne Ngai, the erosion of a modernist conception of aesthetic autonomy amidst the hyperaestheticization of everyday life under late capitalism has led to a situation in aesthetic theory in which "neither art nor beautiful/sublime nature remains the obvious go-to model for reflecting on aesthetic experience as a whole."¹⁸ Paralleling

¹⁶ Mina Le, "American Girl unpacks the 'French Girl' Style," *YouTube*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ByPmnlIfymR0>.

¹⁷ Anthony Cross, "Instagram Filters for the Self: Autonomy and Internet 'Aesthetics.'"

¹⁸ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 20-21.

the development of the word "culture," from a word connoting the highest achievements of creative expression, to one referring to "whole ways of life," memetic aesthetics, like subcultures before them, represent a pluralization of the aesthetic, as it shifts its emphasis from questions of value to a seemingly limitless array of stylistic semiotic systems.¹⁹

Jean Baudrillard cites the Bauhaus as the start of a shift in the focus of Western aesthetics from beauty to signification, resulting in a "universal semantization of the environment in which everything becomes the object of a calculus of function and of signification."²⁰ Hal Foster traces these developments back even further, citing Art Nouveau as the point of origin for a "world of total design," but arguing that this has only been fully achieved in the digitized late capitalist present, in which "the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything."²¹ A telling sign of the association between aesthetics and late capitalist consumer culture is in the popular vernacular, where the words *brand* and *aesthetic* have become virtually synonymous with one another, allowing individuals to discuss their personal "brands," as well as which actions, attitudes, styles, tastes, and objects may be considered "on-brand" or "off-brand" for a given person or entity. Used in this sense, *aesthetics* refers to the seemingly limitless repertoire of personal or collective brands

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 17.

²⁰ Baudrillard: "The category of the aesthetic succeeds that of beauty (liquidating it) as the semiological order succeeds the symbolic order. Contemporary aesthetics, once the theory of the forms of beauty, has become a theory of a generalized compatibility of signs." Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (London & New York: Verso, 2019), 198 & 201.

²¹ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), 17 & 19.

cultivated through the semiotic coding of stylistic categories, which circulate within the “brandscape” of everyday life.²²

Of course, the use of the term *aesthetic* to refer to stylistic or subcultural categories as personal or collective “brands” is hardly a new development. Nor is minting categories of people as a form of “worldbuilding” or “thingification”—a tendency whose mainstream popularity blogger Suspended Reason attributes to the colourful social reporting of “types of guy” on *Sex and the City*.²³ However, this kind of classificatory *typing* has seen a dramatic rise in the age of social media, where the rapid speed of digital circulation is able to transform the most seemingly obscure cultural object into a global phenomenon, or *thing* virtually overnight. Hazard P. Spence argues that platforms such as Twitter have contributed to an acceleration in the minting of social types:

The key component of Thingness is knowing that everyone knows that everyone knows it’s a Thing (aka Common Knowledge). It’s not just that each individual knows it’s a Thing, but that you can count on the fact that others know it’s a Thing. That’s why I think twitter is a hotbed of Type creation. Twitter (and the internet in general) is a massive machine for ratifying discrete chunks of social reality and creating common knowledge. Digital word of mouth moves faster than irl [in real life] word of mouth. I feel like we’re in a moment of Type Accelerationsim [sic], where the speed at which new Types can be minted and ratified is increasing, and the max- specificity/complexity of a viable Type is increasing.²⁴

²² The term “brandscape” is coined by Toronto-based art digital collective, Tough Guy Mountain, whose new media approach to contemporary art and ethos of “focusing on the glories, trials, and absurdity of late capitalism” resonates nicely with the work of Baudrillard and Foster.
<http://toughguymountain.com/projects/Brandscape/>.

²³ While the types of “guy” taxonomized on *Sex and the City* are typically men within New York’s dating pool, its use in this dissertation is gender neutral. Suspended Reason, “On the Vibe Shift, Pt. 1: Worldbuilding,” *Suspended Reason*, Nov. 18, 2021, <https://suspendedreason.com/2021/11/18/on-party-reports-vibe-shift/>.

²⁴ Hazard P. Spence, “Intuitionistic Type (of guy) Theory,” *The Hazardous Times*, Jul. 14, 2021, <https://hazardoustimes.substack.com/p/tht-13?s=r>.

Suspended Reason and Spence's mentions of *thingification*, *things*, and *thingness* bring me to the fourth and final reason I insist on the concept of *memetic aesthetics*. In recent years, the concept of the *thing* has acquired a curious new connotation which has become central to memetic practices. In June of 2017, the *Oxford English Dictionary* posted about a new meaning of the word, referring to "a genuine or established phenomenon or practice."²⁵ Alexander Stern writes that this transformation in the use of the word "thing" corresponds to a need to formalize the being of cultural objects amidst an increasingly fragmented cultural sphere flooded with digital content:

'A *thing*,' then, corresponds to a real need we have, to catalog and group together the items of cultural experience, while keeping them at a sufficient distance so that we can at least feign unified consciousness in the face of a world gone to pieces.²⁶

Consider the way in which the question "is that even a *thing*?" has come to mean something like "have they made a meme of that too?" and the way in which the styles we come to know as *aesthetics*—be it the *cottagecore* aesthetic or the *e-girl/e-boy* aesthetic—almost always begin as a *thing* which we come to recognize through their memetic circulation. Used in this sense, a *thing* refers to a "basic unit of cultural ontology" intended to designate the emergence of new sets of cultural practice, which gradually materialize into memetic aesthetic categories.²⁷ Memetic aesthetics in turn, can be

²⁵ Katherine Connor Martin, "New words notes June 2017," *Oxford English Dictionary*, Jun. 16, 2017, <https://public.oed.com/blog/june-2017-update-new-words-notes/>.

²⁶ Alexander Stern, "Is That Even a Thing?" *The New York Times*, April 16, 2016, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/is-that-even-a-thing/>; emphasis added.

²⁷ Ibid.

understood as a digital shift in contemporary aesthetics in which the ontological takes precedence over the axiological: the question is no longer “is this beautiful?” or even “is this art?” but rather, “is this even a *thing*?”

I use the term *memetic aesthetics* in this dissertation precisely because the term is not yet an established concept, or *thing*. This project then, is at once an attempt to provide a general theory of memetic aesthetics, and a memetic experiment in itself. As such, it tries to replicate the logic of a starter meme, striving to make memetic aesthetics a *thing* by mapping it out, demonstrating what distinguishes it as a *thing*, and subsequently circulating it as a distinct *thing* of its own. The concept of memetic aesthetics is admittedly a quite broad one. Encompassing a host of different fashion styles (e.g., *indie sleaze* and *normcore*), syn-aesthetic music genres (e.g., *vaporwave* and *egg/chain punk*), atmospheric design motifs (e.g., *cottagecore* and *Danish pastel*), lifestyle categories (e.g., *night luxe* and *that girl*), and even pejorative stereotypes (e.g., *Karen* and *fuccboi*), the sheer capaciousness of the term runs the risk of arousing the mistaken suspicion that it is not an actual *thing*. Indeed, the bulkiness of the concept of memetic aesthetics itself runs counter to the decidedly fragmentary nature of the things it names, potentially rendering it something of a theoretical fashion faux pas in our age of digital micro-bubbles.²⁸

#goals

²⁸ As Jodi Dean writes, “communicative capitalism fragments thought into ever smaller bits, bits that can be distributed and sampled, even ingested and enjoyed, but that in the glut of multiple, circulating contributions tend to resist recombination into longer, more demanding theories.” Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 2.

In seeking to provide a general theory of memetic aesthetics, my aims in this dissertation are threefold. Firstly, I hope to quell any suspicions regarding the *thingness* of memetic aesthetics by making the case that memetic aesthetics are not only *a thing*, but also a valuable theoretical concept allowing us to make sense of how “things” become *things* in the first place. In other words, memetic aesthetics expose the mechanics of cultural ontological production in the age of networked social media, allowing us to make sense of how various styles, types, and tropes are created, disseminated, and transformed across a range of digital platforms. In a moment in which even legacy media outlets have begun clambering to define the TikTok generation’s rapid influx of new cultural categories like *indie sleaze* and *that girl*, I argue that understanding these categories as *memetic aesthetics* might allow us to understand what these *things* are, what they do, and where they come from.²⁹

Memetic aesthetics are highly niche, trivial, and often largely inconsequential by definition, and it would be virtually impossible to provide an exhaustive account of the hundreds (if not thousands) of categories currently circulating on the internet.³⁰ However, I suggest that as a broader concept, memetic aesthetics offers an opportunity to critically reflect on broader shifts in the relationships between aesthetics, technology, capitalism,

²⁹ See for example: Isabel Slone, “The Return of Indie Sleaze Style,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, Jan. 12, 2022, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a38746992/the-return-of-indie-sleaze/>; Jessica Singer, “TikTok’s That Girl Is Meant to Promote Wellness, but Some Say It Does the Opposite,” *CBC News*, Aug. 15, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/that-girl-tiktok-trend-wellness-1.6139284>.

³⁰ See Appendix I for a list of the memetic aesthetics archived on *Aesthetics Wiki*.

affect, politics, and culture in the smartphone-saturated present. This is the second central aim of this dissertation. My efforts to historicize the contemporary moment here are inspired by Lauren Berlant's notion of the present, which they describe as "a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did 'the present' begin?) are also always there for debate."³¹ In making big claims about the "now" on the backs of a number of small aesthetics, this project also shares with Berlant a deep interest in generalization, seeking to make sense of "how the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone's story or some locale's irreducibly local history and circulated as evidence of something shared."³² In the chapters that follow, I examine the emergence and development of memetic aesthetics in the context of a number of both long-standing and relatively new theoretical issues including but not limited to: the problem of aesthetic autonomy under capitalism; the decline of modernist aesthetics; the postmodern fluidization of identity; the emergence of lifestyles and atmospheres as marketing concepts; the waning influence of youth subcultures; the fragmentation and hybridization of genre; the digital death of authenticity; the digital/aesthetic impasse in cultural and media studies; the hyperacceleration of cultural transmission via digital technology; the emergence of the *vibe* as a means of theorizing affective experience within

³¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

digital culture; the debates over mediation in affect theory; and the millennial/Gen Z generation gap.

As one might hopefully have gathered by now, this is a research project about the internet. Yet, it is also a product *of* the internet. By this, I mean that the internet not only serves as the principal object of study of this dissertation, but also guides its methodology and formal structure. In other words, this dissertation is as much about digital culture as it is about how to read and write about digital culture. The third and final aim of this dissertation is thus to offer an approach which resonates with the perpetual on-going temporality, the pre-emergent indeterminacy, and the fragmentary nature of memetic aesthetics. There are two crucial concepts to this approach which correspond respectively to the methodology and the form of this dissertation: *vibes* and *constellations*.

As a result of their emergent status within popular culture and accordingly, the indeterminate nature of their *thingness*, or actualization, memetic aesthetic categories are characterized by a uniquely elusive ontological quality. In other words, because memetic aesthetics only begin to materialize as *things* through their viral circulation and subsequent recognition, they exist in a somewhat awkward liminal space within the cultural imaginary—they are both subjective and objective, both virtual and actual. It should seem entirely unsurprising then, that much of the vocabulary used to describe digital culture is phrased in terms of collective affective resonance. The popular “vibe check” meme of 2019

for example, invited users to express their present affective/emotional states.³³ Similarly, the phrase “big mood” is commonly used in digital culture, in which it is synonymous with *relatable*.³⁴ Note the emphasis in both of these examples—and most prominently in the word *meme* itself, which derives from the French word for *same*—on feeling as an innately collective and social phenomenon. Collective modes of affective experience such as *vibes*, *moods*, and *feels* may thus be understood as the forces which structure the nebulous constellations of *things* which are memetic aesthetic categories.

In recent years, the concept of the *vibe* has gained centrality in contemporary digital culture as a useful theoretical tool for making sense of the affective means through which pre-emergent cultural categories come into being. Robin James for example, refers to vibes as a “phenomenological horizon,” and describes the way they function as a standard against which phenomena are evaluated for purposiveness and in/exclusion within a given category.³⁵ For Kyle Chayka, the pre-linguistic quality of vibes makes them particularly well-suited to social media’s prioritization of audio, video, and images over text.³⁶ Chayka argues that digital media has made it easier to curate specific vibes, leading to what he calls a “vibe revival,” referring to the proliferation of increasingly more niche

³³ Adam, “Vibe Check,” *Know Your Meme*, 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/vibe-check>.

³⁴ Adam, “Big Mood,” *Know Your Meme*, 2016, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/big-mood>.

³⁵ Robin James, “What Is a Vibe?” *its her factory*, Jan. 29, 2021, <https://itsherfactory.substack.com/p/what-is-a-vibe>.

³⁶ Kyle Chayka, “TikTok and the Vibes Revival,” *The New Yorker*, Apr. 26, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/tiktok-and-the-vibes-revival>.

memetic aesthetics such as *cottagecore* and *dark academia* on platforms like TikTok.³⁷ For Peli Grietzer, the vibe of an aesthetic work or category is what he calls its “internal space of possibilities,” referring to the collection of objects and phenomena which embodies the internal logic of the category’s world and imbues it with a sense of aesthetic unity.³⁸ Grietzer likens the “logic of formal affinity” of vibes to the input-space manifold of an autoencoding algorithm, arguing that both entities render collections of objects and phenomena as examples of the logic of a world of aesthetic experience opened up by a given aesthetic category, genre, or artwork.³⁹

If the vibe of a memetic aesthetic category refers to the space of possibilities within its world, its atmosphere refers to the phenomenological qualities of the world itself. Gernot Böhme describes atmospheres as “something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations,” which are neither objective nor subjective, yet both thinglike and subjectlike.⁴⁰ Böhme argues that aesthetic atmospheres are one of the most important tools for marketing commodities in the contemporary moment which he describes as the stage of “aesthetic capitalism.”⁴¹ Arguing that atmospheric production is not simply limited to art, Böhme calls for a “new aesthetics” which accounts for the full

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, PhD diss. (Harvard University, 2017), 134.

³⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰ Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2017), 19.

⁴¹ Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism* (Berlin: Mimesis International, 2017).

range of “aesthetic work”—from hairstyling, to design, to filmmaking.⁴² This resonates with the descriptions of memetic aesthetic categories on *Aesthetics Wiki*, each of which feature long lists of dispositions in fashion, lifestyle, activities, careers, movies, television, hairstyles, speech, quirks, and more. As Katie Freeman writes, “It doesn’t just have to be clothes... [It can be] how you decorate your room, how you do things on the internet, [it is] kind of an every day, every facet of life type of thing.”⁴³ Each minute detail of one’s life thus serves as a potential affective signifier, evoking the *vibe* or *atmosphere* associated with a given memetic aesthetic category, and the various constellations and networks it might find itself embedded in.

The concept of the *vibe* guides my methodology in this dissertation because the concept of memetic aesthetics, like the seemingly limitless array of categories that it names, is only yet coming into being. As Raymond Williams writes, “social forms are evidently more recognizable when they are articulate and explicit.”⁴⁴ In their hazy, raw, and pre-emergent states however, memetic aesthetic categories and the concept that binds them are first perceived affectively—we might have a general sense of their *vibe*, but do not yet know where they will go or what they will become. Rather than trying to offer any kind of totalizing account of memetic aesthetics then, this dissertation relies on a broad, interpretive, and relational framework it terms *vibeology* (explored further in Part II), which

⁴² Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 22.

⁴³ Katie Freeman, “Your guide to internet aesthetics in 2021,” *The Butler Collegian*, Feb. 16, 2021, <https://thebutlercollegian.com/2021/02/your-guide-to-internet-aesthetics-in-2021/>.

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 130.

tracks their formal, contextual, and affective affinities across a wide array of networks, platforms, media, and historical trajectories. Grietzer's parallel between vibes and AI is useful here because of the loose algorithmic logic with which this dissertation brings together its objects, case studies, and concepts. Like the content fed to us by algorithms, some parts of this dissertation may resonate strongly with its reader while other parts might feel more tangential. The reasons for this could be personal—Luis-Manuel Garcia writes that “bodies respond differently to vibration, according to their own ‘resonant frequencies’”—or it could very well be that they represent early stages of thinking about memetic aesthetics which may get filtered out as the term gains more formal consistency over time.⁴⁵

The concept of the vibe is also crucial to this dissertation because it informs the data sampling method used in its research process. While the expansiveness of digital culture—or even meme culture more specifically—makes it nearly impossible to create an established canon of prominent online phenomena, this dissertation offers a wide assortment of Instagram memes, Tweets, YouTube videos, TikToks, Substack entries, podcasts, pop songs, and blog posts which seeks to approximate at least some of what a “terminally online” person may have scrolled through somewhere between the late aughts

⁴⁵ Luis-Manuel Garcia, “Feeling the Vibe: Sound, Vibration, and Affective Attunement in Electronic Dance Music Scenes,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 29, no. 1 (2020): 21-39, 31.

and early twenty-teens.⁴⁶ There's an important autobiographical element to this as well which ought to be mentioned. As a late millennial who came of age during the golden era of MySpace and Facebook and entered the DIY punk scene toward the end of the hipster era, I witnessed firsthand a number of important "vibe shifts" in the culture, beginning with the emergence of a new generation of Tumblr-raised youth whose attitudes to identity and subculture were of an entirely different nature to those of myself and my late millennial cohort. This dissertation serves as an effort to document and historicize some of these shifts and very much reflects the perspective of the millennial subculturalist by which it was written. An alternate subtitle for this dissertation could have been something like: "Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Hyperpop."

As aggregates of seemingly unrelated objects and characteristics brought together under a particular vibe, memetic aesthetic categories can be understood as *constellations*. This concept is particularly useful when thinking about starter pack memes (explored further in Chapter 7), which allow viewers to conceptualize a given memetic aesthetic category by presenting a visual map of "its constellation of signifiers."⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin was the first to liken ideas to constellations, writing that "ideas present themselves not in themselves but solely in a correlation of the elements of things in the concept—indeed, as the configuration of these elements" which "determines the way these elements belong to

⁴⁶ William Hawes, "The Rise of the Terminally Online: Digital Subjectivity and Simulation of the Social," *Medium*, Jun. 27, 2021, <https://wilhawes.medium.com/the-rise-of-the-terminally-online-digital-subjectivity-and-simulation-of-the-social-465545aa59eb>.

⁴⁷ Suspended Reason, "On the Vibe Shift, Pt. 1: Worldbuilding."

one another."⁴⁸ Borrowing the concept from Benjamin, Theodor Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*:

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by knowledge mindful of the historical positional value of the object in its relation to other objects—by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object.⁴⁹

In addition to its roots in the dialectical thought of the Frankfurt School, the constellation concept is also crucial to memetic aesthetics because of the ways in which it has informed thinking in genre theory and scene studies. In one of the key works of genre criticism, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson describe genres as "constellations of elements" which share an internal dynamic rather than sets of specific features.⁵⁰ Similarly, Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth describe how in addition to characteristic sonic properties, music genres can be understood as "a constellation of distinctive non-sonic mediations," and Daniel Yacavone writes that films worlds can be "grouped together in constellations or galaxies...in the ever-expanding universe of cinematic history, with other 'satellite' worlds clustered around them."⁵¹ In the preface of

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 10.

⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2005), 163.

⁵⁰ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, edited by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: The Speech Communication Association, 1978), 9-32, 21; Eric S. Jenkins, "The Modes of Visual Rhetoric: Circulating Memes as Expressions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 4 (2014): 442-466, 454.

⁵¹ Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music & Letters* 98, no. 4 (2018): 601-647, 641; Daniel Yacavone, "Towards a Theory of Film Worlds," *Film-Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (September 2008): 83-108, 90.

Dissonant Identities, Barry Shank, one of the originators of scene studies, also refers to the Austin music scene as a “constellation of divergent interests and forces.”⁵²

The concept of constellations is useful to thinking about memetic aesthetics because it allows for a materialist discourse on the *thingification* of various objects, phenomena, and concepts as they are arranged into categories which are determined by their parts, yet always exceed them.⁵³ On their own, a pair of Birkenstock sandals or a can of Monster energy drink are merely ordinary commodities. Yet, combined with other objects within their constellations—hydroflask water bottles and Kånken backpacks, or Limp Bizkit albums and Tapout tee-shirts respectively—they acquire a sense of cultural coherence as signifiers of the *VSCO girl* or the *Kyle*. The concept of memetic aesthetics developed in this dissertation follows a similar logic, building its constellation out of a wide array of divergent objects, examples, and bodies of literature. Seeking to formally reproduce the emergent, relational, and fragmentary nature of these aesthetics, this dissertation is broken up into four separate sections, each dealing with a particular problematic.

The dissertation is organized as follows: Part I offers a trajectory through aesthetic theory it terms the “Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline,” which seeks to make sense of how a field of philosophy dealing with sensation and taste from the mid-eighteenth century

⁵² Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock ‘n’ Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), x.

⁵³ Suspended Reason, “On the Vibe Shift, Pt. 1: Worldbuilding.”

ended up sharing a name with an umbrella term for a vast expanse of niche digital “namecore” styles in the twenty-teens and twenties. Chapter 1, “Beware of the Pipeline,” offers a general outline of the pipeline, and its relationship to pipelines as a meme genre. The Pipeline spans Chapters 2, 3, and 4, (“Bad and Boujee,” “Our Brand Could Be Your Life,” and “All the Small Things”) which respectively focus on modern, postmodern, and “digital” moments within this history. Chapter 2 begins by outlining the development of an aesthetic of *artistic authenticity* within bourgeois thought between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries and goes on to describe the transition into modernist avant-gardes into the early twentieth century. Chapter 3 describes the development of fashion, subculture, and personal branding in the postwar period, highlighting the development of a new conception of *subcultural authenticity*, and its subsequent crisis between the 1980s and the 1990s. Last but not least, Chapter 4 begins by examining the boiling point of this crisis of authenticity around the turn of the millennium and goes on to describe how this led to the rapid spread of memetic aesthetic categories in the *post-authentic* climate of the early to mid-2010s.

Part II: “Vibeology and Thingification” offers a rudimentary theory of the *vibe* concept, focusing specifically on how it can be used to read and write about emergent digital phenomena. Chapter 5, “What Vibe Do I Give Off?” begins by discussing the centrality of vibes to both meme culture and theories of affect in the digital age. Chapter 6, “How (Not) to Read the Internet” advocates for an interpretive and relational theory of the

vibe by tying the debates around sociality and signification in affect theory to a number of prominent critiques which surfaced during the “vibe shift” controversy of 2022. Chapter 7: “The Shape of ‘Things’ to Come” focuses on a Montreal-based meme page to examine the use of the starter pack meme in the formalization (*thingification*) of the *fuccboi* trope as an illustration of how aesthetic categories become standardized through their memetic circulation. Chapter 8: “‘Is the Scene Still Alive?’” focuses on a broad structure of feeling within digital popular culture it terms *post-hipster affect*, citing it as an affective residue of the transition between subcultural and memetic aesthetics in the early twenty-teens.

Part III: “The Memetic Aestheticization of Politics” examines some of the political implications of memetic aesthetic categorization. Chapter 9: “Neon-Nazis” uses the failed attempt of the online far-right at appropriating *vaporwave* aesthetics into a new aesthetic called *fashwave* as a case study for how online extremists manipulate the affective signifiers which inform the synaesthetic feeling-worlds of particular genres or aesthetics in order to transform them into tools of propaganda. Chapter 10: “Wide Awake Woke” examines the transformation of wokeness from a black radical practice of political consciousness-raising to a (mostly) white liberal memetic aesthetic category.

Last but not least, Part IV: “Two Case Studies and a Conclusion” brings this thesis to a close in a manner faithful to its name. Chapter 11 examines a pair of memetic aesthetic categories which offer insight into the current state of subculture and aesthetic judgement in the memetic aesthetic moment. The first half of it, “What Came First, the Chain or the

Egg?" details the *chain punk/egg punk* meme as an example of the memetic aestheticization of subculture, while the second half, "Elevation, Don't Go to My Head" focuses on the coinage of the *elevated horror* film genre as a case study for the problem of aesthetic judgment as it has been dealt with in various memetic aesthetic categories. The dissertation's conclusion: "Meme Machine Go Brrrrr" closes with a summary of the main arguments made in this dissertation and a discussion of some potential directions for future work on memetic aesthetics.

Part I: The Kant to Cottagecore Pipeline

Chapter 1: Beware of the Pipeline

In the introduction to her video “The Philosophy of Internet Aesthetics,” YouTuber *Armchair Alchemy* asks the viewer, “So, when I say aesthetics, is your first thought *cottagecore*, or is it Immanuel Kant?”⁵⁴ Good question. As mentioned earlier, there’s an important distinction between aesthetics in the more traditional sense of the term—which refers to a branch of philosophy concerned with the judgment of beauty, taste, art, nature, and sensation—and its more contemporary usage—which is used broadly to refer to a given “look,” and in recent years has come to connote this growing archive of style-type categories emerging from the internet. While the two connotations of the term are quite distinct from one another, I argue in this chapter that they share a common lineage: what I refer to here as the “Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline.”

Before we go any further, some clarification is needed regarding the seemingly grandiose, tongue-in-cheek name given to the genealogy outlined in this chapter. I should mention right off the bat that the “Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline” is a bit of a misnomer for several reasons. The first one is a technical one, namely that it was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten rather than Kant who first brought the concept of aesthetics within the scope of modern Western philosophy. I’ve chosen to stick with Kant here because as the better-known philosopher, his name is more synonymous with eighteenth century aesthetics. More importantly however, the “Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline” is a misnomer because the genealogy that it traces isn’t particularly concerned with the work of Kant, Baumgarten, nor

⁵⁴ Armchair Alchemy, “The Philosophy of Internet Aesthetics,” *YouTube*, Dec. 19, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNaXZJuGpE&list=WL&index=10>.

any of the other major figures in the development of the philosophy of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, just as it doesn't assign any kind of special priority to *cottagecore* as a memetic aesthetic category. Rather than trying to trace a direct genealogy between Kantian thought and the *cottagecore* aesthetic, I evoke these names as familiar signifiers of two historically mediated modes of thinking about the aesthetic. If relatively recent concepts like *fuccboi* are difficult to make sense of because of the multitude of meanings that have stuck to them within less than a decade in the public vernacular, the aesthetic arrives on the scene as a sticky mass plastered with volumes of discourse that date back to the mid-eighteenth century. Rather than treating the disparate definitions of the aesthetic as unrelated to one another, this section seeks to describe a particular continuum in aesthetic theory, which it suggests might be the link connecting early bourgeois aesthetics to the *namecore* designations of the digital age.

By drawing a processual link between two seemingly distinct uses of the aesthetic, this chapter also seeks to illuminate a different side of memetic aesthetic ontology from that which will be examined in the following section, thereby reproducing the dialectical tension between being and becoming which lies at the heart of memetic aesthetics.⁵⁵ The starter pack memes we'll discuss in Chapter 7 are concerned with questions of being: how to turn a package of cultural practices into a *thing* by presenting a map of its constellation of signifiers. Serving both as a representation of an already-existing *thing*, as well as a

⁵⁵ This tension will be discussed in greater length in the following section.

popular meme template through which an emergent cultural practice can become recognizable as a *thing*, the starter pack meme operates according to a logic which can be likened to the old catch phrase “fake it ‘till you make it.” In other words, starter packs validate the existence of the category that they represent by circulating it as an already-existing *thing*. What falls outside the scope of starter pack memes, however, is the question of becoming—how these categories came to be in the first place, how they might shift, and where they might go. This is precisely where the pipeline meme comes into the mix. Like the starter pack, the pipeline meme originated on Twitter where in May of 2020, user *@plant_momther* Tweeted “the gifted child to depressed adult pipeline.”⁵⁶



Figure 3: The original pipeline meme: *@plant_momther's "gifted child to depressed adult pipeline."*

Like the starter pack before it, the pipeline meme template is concerned with the cognitive and affective links between different entities. Yet rather than trying to produce an ideal snapshot of a given type, pipeline memes emphasize shift, process, and flux by interrogating the process by which one thing may turn into another. In the case of “the gifted child to depressed adult pipeline” for example, a pair of affectively and temporally

⁵⁶ Adam, “The Gifted Child To Depressed Adult Pipeline,” *Know Your Meme*, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-gifted-child-to-depressed-adult-pipeline>.

distinct subject positions are brought together into a processual relation, emphasizing an ostensibly relatable transition from one into the other.

Another common type of pipeline meme is the “Beware of the Pipeline” format, which was posted on Twitter by artist *@melanpsycholia* less than a year after *@plant_momther*'s original Tweet.⁵⁷



Figure 4: *@melanpsycholia*'s "Beware of the Pipeline" meme.

@melanpsycholia's "Beware of the Pipeline" meme depicts the transition of their character Miles over a five-year period from 2017 to 2021 from a geeky dude into a cute trans girl. The meme's cautionary caption mocks the hysterical fearmongering tone of the political right over gender queer youth, but it also draws our attention to a particular process—in this case, the very real way in which the adoption of gender-neutral pronouns can often be an important first step in gender transitioning. There's a teleological quality to the "Beware

⁵⁷ Philipp, "Beware of the Pipeline," *Know Your Meme*, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/beware-of-the-pipeline>.

of the Pipeline” format, as if one subtle gesture will set off a chain of events which will inevitably culminate in its natural conclusion. Consider for example these music genre-based adaptations of the meme:

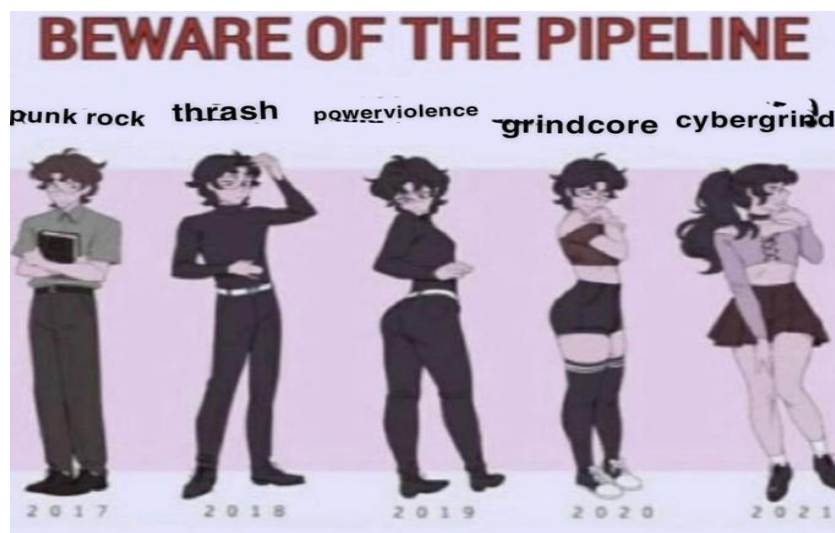


Figure 5: A punk variant of the “Beware of the Pipeline” meme.

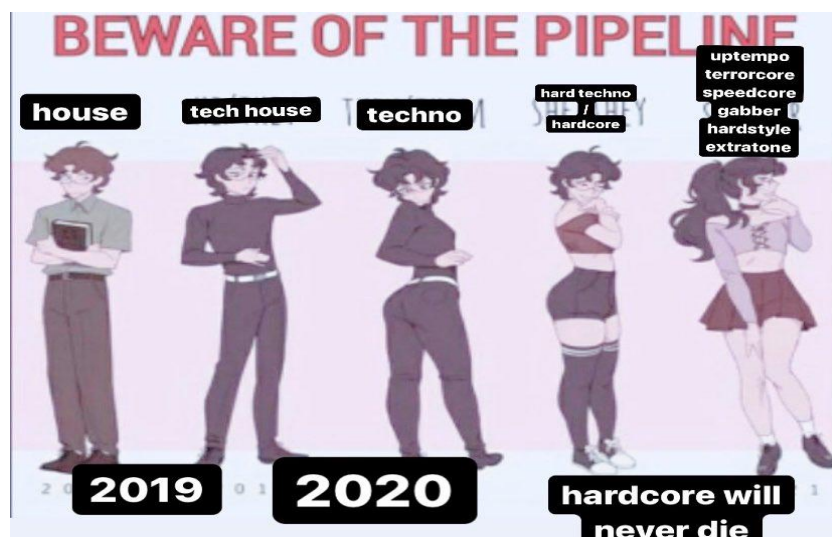


Figure 6: A dance music variant of the “Beware of the Pipeline” meme.

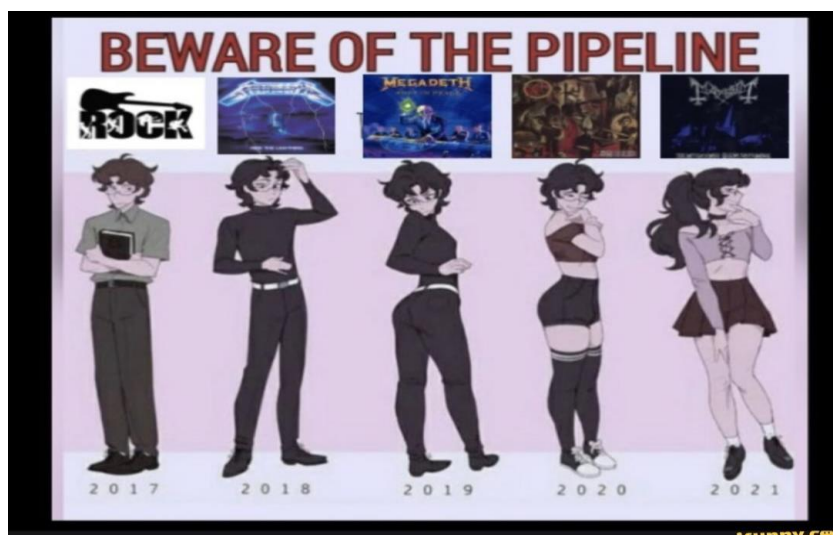


Figure 7: A metal variant of the “Beware of the Pipeline” meme.

In each of the memes above, the pursuit of a sense of subcultural authenticity in underground music leads its listener down the rabbit hole of its respective genre. At each step down the hole, the listener becomes increasingly more accustomed to the sonic extremities of their genre of choice, prompting them to descend even deeper to satisfy their cravings, until they find themselves in the cacophonous subterranean nether regions of cybergrind, gabber, and Norwegian black metal.

I’ve highlighted these music genre variants of the “Beware of the Pipeline” meme format here for two important reasons. Firstly, as we will see in this section, the (d)evolution of increasingly more niche and extreme musical sub-genres throughout the 1980s and 1990s—particularly within the worlds of punk and metal—was a key moment in the early development of memetic aesthetics. In Chapter 3, I discuss a moment in the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline which I call the *subcultural arms race*, referring to a response to the growing commodification of punk and metal subcultures characterized by a

proliferation of fragmented, niche-driven musical sub-genres, as well as an escalation in the extremity of their sonic, lyrical, and visual aesthetics. I suggest that the fact that most memetic aesthetic categories are named with “-core” and “-wave” suffixes (e.g., *normcore*, *vaporwave*, etc.)—in reference to two of the punk genre’s earliest stylistic offshoots: hardcore and new wave—seems far from coincidental.

The second reason I’ve included these genre-based variants of the “Beware of the Pipeline” meme is because the logic they depict, of being sucked deeper and deeper down the pipeline in a pursuit of authenticity and rejection of commodification, is intimately tied to the continuum described in this section. I argue in this chapter that if the popular definition of “aesthetics” has in recent years become split between the philosophy of taste and judgment and the multitude of niche styles circulating on social media, this has to do with a fundamental duality which has been engrained at the heart of the aesthetic since its inception in the public imaginary. What makes the aesthetic so tricky to define is its Janus-faced nature: the way it simultaneously names the engine of cultural innovation under a rapidly commodifying capitalist economy, and an ethico-political doctrine intended to preserve civilization from precisely this impulse. Thus, what was described as the primacy of the ontological over the axiological in the introduction of this dissertation is actually two separate movements. On the one hand, it’s a waning in the power of authenticity-based aesthetic judgment in a rapidly atomizing capitalist society. On the other, it’s way in which the deterritorializing impulses of capitalism merge so seamlessly with the thirst for

newness which drives the aesthetic, resulting in a dramatic rise of what Émilie Carrière terms *identity fetishism*: “a system in which relations between commodities form the basis of a relation between humans.”⁵⁸ In other words, the weakening power of aesthetic judgment correlates with the aesthetization—and subsequently, the aesthetic categorization—of everyday life.

What follows over the next three chapters is an attempt to present a *longue durée* perspective on an aesthetics of authenticity in Western capitalist society between the mid-eighteenth century and the present.⁵⁹ For the purpose of periodization, I’ve broken this history up into three distinct moments—that of *artistic authenticity*, *subcultural authenticity*, and *post-authenticity*—which loosely correspond to the modern, postmodern, and digital. It should be noted here that this periodization, which expands on the work of Sarah Thornton, is only one (largely white, male, bourgeois, etc.) way of breaking down the aesthetics of authenticity in Western thought and makes no claim to universality.⁶⁰ Each chapter is divided into two sections, respectively dealing with the rise of a particular mode of thinking, and its eventual fall. The overarching theme here is a

⁵⁸ Émilie Carrière, “Vandalizing the Subject,” *Ill Will*, Mar. 8, 2022, <https://illwill.com/vandalizing-the-subject>.

⁵⁹ Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

⁶⁰ For other examples of approaches to the aesthetics of authenticity, see: Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory & Late Modernity* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1995); Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (London: Routledge, 1992); Alan Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (May, 2002): 209–223; Steve Redhead and John Street, “Have I the Right? Legitimacy, Authenticity and Community in Folk’s Politics,” *Popular Music* 8, no. 2 (May, 1989): 177–184.

gradual decline of an aesthetics predicated on the value of authenticity, and the rise of a logic of cultural proliferation tied to the commodification of culture.

Chapter 2: Bad and Boujee: The Rise and Fall of Artistic Authenticity

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What I refer to in this chapter as *artistic authenticity* sits at the core of early bourgeois ideology and encompasses many of the ideas and questions we typically associate with the aesthetic in its classical sense. It's the emphasis on what now feel like rather dated aesthetic categories like the beautiful and the sublime; the effort to reach objectivity through subjective judgments of taste; the distinction between "high" art and "lower" aspects of culture such as artisan goods or mass culture; the idea that art has an ethical obligation to "further" the culture, and subsequently that taste has a moral dimension to it. My use of this term follows Sarah Thornton's distinction between *artistic authenticity*—which pertains to issues of originality and aura and is informed by the more

Romantic definition of culture as a cultivation of oneself through fine art—and *subcultural authenticity*—which concerns one's organic relationship to their subculture and community, and is informed by the more anthropological definition of culture as a "whole way of life."⁶¹ Both the aesthetic and the authentic are born in the early modern period and share a deeply interwoven history. Both concepts are tied to the development of the modern bourgeois subject and the intricate matrix of cultural dispositions they must navigate to distinguish themselves from both the aristocracy and the working class. In Romantic thought, authenticity ultimately becomes both one of the central criteria of aesthetic judgment, as well as a kind of safeguard over the aesthetic, serving to protect it from the corrupting influence of industrial consumer society. This sense of faith in the authenticity of "true" art and literature, and its alleged ability to preserve civilization from the ravages of industrial society then, comprise some of the core values of the doctrine of artistic authenticity I discuss in this chapter.

According to Terry Eagleton, it is in the mid-eighteenth century that the aesthetic is born as a realm distinct from the cognitive and the ethico-political.⁶² In his book *Homo Aestheticus*, Luc Ferry argues that while aesthetic pleasure had been conceived of in the ancient world as an order external to both the work and its viewer, it is only within a modern context that aesthetic judgment becomes subjectified, imbued with a sense of

⁶¹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 55.

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 366.

autonomy, and distinguished from other types of thought.⁶³ This break from ancient aesthetics can be traced back to a “revolution of taste” which ignites in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century after Descartes raises the problem of knowing how it is possible to establish objectivity through the subjective in his *Discourse on Method*.⁶⁴ There is an important moral dimension to these questions, for while the classical aesthetic tradition, following Aristotle, conceived the purpose of art as providing both aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction, modern aesthetics treats aesthetic pleasure as the link between goodness and beauty.⁶⁵

Seeking to solve a growing rift between rationalism and empiricism over how to discover the universal laws of beauty and taste, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten publishes *Aesthetica* in 1750, presenting an embodied conception of beauty and an idea of human sensibility as distinct from that of God’s point of view.⁶⁶ In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten appropriates the term “aesthetic” from the Greek *aisthesis*, which had formerly been synonymous with “sensation,” giving it its modern definition by using it to refer to a sense of beauty, or taste.⁶⁷ Kant initially protests Baumgarten’s change in the use of the term, writing in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the idea of establishing rational rules, laws, or

⁶³ Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 14-16.

⁶⁵ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), 148-149.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 21 & 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

principles of beauty is futile, and suggesting a movement back to the earlier use of the term.⁶⁸ In the *Critique of Judgment* however, Kant begins to conform to Baumgarten's usage, using the term *aesthetics* to refer to judgments of taste and estimations of beauty. While Baumgarten's project is still too rooted in the frameworks of Platonism and Leibnizian rationalism to fully establish the autonomy of the sensible from the intelligible and treat beauty with the same status as the good and the true, Kant is finally able to sever the sensible from the intelligible and treat the aesthetic with pure autonomy.⁶⁹ Distinguishing between the categories of the likeable and the beautiful, Kant argues that "interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's existence," while the beautiful refers to a "means of a liking or disliking devoid of all interest."⁷⁰ Kant defines taste as "the ability to judge something that makes our feeling in a given presentation *universally communicable* without mediation by a concept."⁷¹ This affirmation of the autonomy of sensibility is unprecedented in its separation of the human

⁶⁸ Kant: "The Germans are the only people who at present have come to use this word [aesthetic] to indicate what others call the critique of taste. At the foundation of this term lies the disappointed hope, which the eminent analyst, Baumgarten, conceived, of subjecting the criticism of the beautiful to principles of reason, and so of elevating its rules into a science. But his endeavours were in vain. For the said rules or criteria are, in respect to their chief sources, merely empirical, consequently never can serve as determinate laws a priori, by which our judgment in matters of taste can be directed. It is rather our judgment which forms the proper test as to the correctness of the principles. On this account it is advisable to give up the use of the term as designating the critique of taste, and to apply it solely to that doctrine, which is true science—the science of the laws of sensibility—and thus come nearer to the language and the sense of the ancients in their well-known division of the objects of cognition into *aisthētá kai noētá* [sensed or thought], or to share it with speculative philosophy, and employ it partly in a transcendental, partly in a psychological signification." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: The Guernsey Press Co., Ltd., 1991), 42.

⁶⁹ Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, 27–28.

⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 45 & 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

from the divine, as it treats human subjects both as contemplators of beauty and aesthetic value, but also as artistic “geniuses,” whose production of radical new forms are no longer seen as discoveries of God’s truths.⁷² For Kant, the ability of artists to produce works of beauty is not the reflection of truth via human experience, but rather a result of genius, which he sees as a natural capability of realizing the abstract universal principle of beauty that gives the rule to art. He writes, “Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: Genius is the innate mental predisposition through which nature gives the rule to art.”⁷³

Baumgarten and Kant’s reappraisal of aesthetics can be understood in the context of the emergence and cultural ascendance of the bourgeois class during this period. Having recently developed as a commercial enterprise, art gains a sense of autonomy from its traditional social functions, leaving open the question of how good and bad works are to be distinguished. These questions become particularly salient in the class struggle for cultural hegemony between the English middle classes and the aristocracy in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁷⁴ Alienated from the subject-matter of the neo-classical aesthetic tradition of the aristocrats and fearing accusations of cultural vulgarity, it becomes increasingly necessary for the nascent bourgeois class to develop their own distinct aesthetics and norms of conduct and to tout them above aristocratic neo-

⁷² Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, 28-29.

⁷³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 174.

⁷⁴ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 149.

classicism as popular representations of “good taste.”⁷⁵ The centrality of aesthetics in the formation of the bourgeois subject serves as a progressive gesture within absolutist feudal states between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, seeking to organize an otherwise atomized social order by turning to the habits, sentiments, and affections of the body.⁷⁶ The aesthetic thus evolves into a central ideology to the development of the bourgeois class, which assigns a political, ethical, and cognitive value to judgments of taste, and uses it to justify the hegemony of the nascent bourgeois class.⁷⁷

In *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, Williams cites aesthetics as one of several important keywords—alongside *culture*, *art*, and *class*—whose dramatic shifts in meanings in the last decades of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century are tied to the Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of modern capitalist society. Inspired by the autonomist hedonism of Romanticism, a consumer revolution begins to spread amongst the middle class in the nineteenth century, resulting in a gradual movement away from the puritanical asceticism of the Protestant ethic theorized by Max Weber, and toward the pleasure-seeking ethos which informs contemporary consumerism.⁷⁸ The development of modern fashion in London between the mid-to-late eighteenth century—characterized by a rapid pace of change in shapes, materials, colours, and styles, and the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 149-150.

⁷⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 19-20 & 23.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁸ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 200-201.

emergence of a fiction-reading public and subsequent growth of the publishing industry are just two of the many important outcomes of this Romantic leisure revolution.⁷⁹

Just as they were used to distinguish the dispositions of the bourgeois class against those of the aristocracy, these new discourses of judgment, taste, and quality become instrumental in distinguishing the bourgeoisie from working classes. Williams discusses how the shift from a system of patronage for writers to a subscription-based publishing industry in the early to mid-eighteenth century results in a frustration on the part of writers with having to pander to the tastes of the general public.⁸⁰ By the early nineteenth century, the expansion of the commercial publishing industry transforms the novel into a commodity, resulting in a discursive distinction between the trade goods of the market, and the true cultural works appreciated by a cultivated elite.⁸¹ This bourgeois impetus to distinguish between true art and mass culture is only furthered by moral panics regarding the potential consequences of industrial civilization on human values and the necessity to preserve such values through art.⁸² As John Seabrook writes:

It became necessary to devise a way to distinguish the real artists from the hacks, and the legitimate art of the old aristocracy from the commercial art that the cultural capitalists produced for the newly urbanized masses. The Romantic notion of 'culture' evolved to fill that need. The meaning of the word as Wordsworth and Coleridge used it derived from two sources: from the French word *civilisation*, which means the process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, and from the German word *Kultur*, which describes any characteristic way of life. The French sense was more orthodox and singular, and it included a moral dimension;

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1958), 22 & 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 36.

the German sense was relativistic and was not explicitly concerned with morality. The English word culture was a hybrid of the two, although the nineteenth-century usage favored its more outwardly strict French father over its more licentious German mother. As culture came to America from England and France, the French emphasis was ascendant. The Romantic concept of culture held that what real artists and writers produced was a superior reality—a kind of work that, being imaginative, transcended the workaday world of ordinary cultural production. The artists themselves were thought to be exceptional, gifted beings whose talents were extraordinary—impassioned geniuses who created not for the market but some higher ideal.⁸³

The emergence of the concept of authenticity around the same time as the aesthetic is crucial to the impulse to distinguish real art from the emergent force of mass culture within this early modern context. Like the aesthetic, the notion of authenticity is tied to the modern subjectivization of the individual. It is first articulated by Jean Jacques Rousseau, through his claims that salvation is to be achieved through the recovery of authentic moral conduct with oneself, and that freedom is determined by the individual, rather than by external forces, and further popularized by Johann Gottfried Herder's idea that each individual has their own unique way of being human.⁸⁴ While Rousseau and Herder are both writing about authenticity in the context of individual conduct rather than artistic practice, the aesthetic quickly becomes the dominant site for thinking about authenticity by the early nineteenth century in a paradigm in which the singularity and

⁸³ John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing + the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 67-68.

⁸⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 27-28.

originality of fine art and culture come to connote authenticity, which is distinguished from the conformity and ubiquity of mass culture.⁸⁵

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The great journey from Kant to *cottagecore* really begins somewhere between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Threatened by the rapid industrialization of mass culture, the notion of aesthetic autonomy gains a heightened salience during this time, as art increasingly began to be viewed as one of the only available sites for resistance against commodification. While aesthetic autonomy had long been one of the central tenets of bourgeois ideology, it is paradoxically at the very moment that the aesthetic realizes true autonomy in the modernist avant-gardes that its once harmonious relationship with the bourgeoisie begins to crumble apart. Breaking away from the bourgeois class into a rapidly expanding network of bohemian enclaves, art begins to transform its apartness from society (which constitutes its institutional status within bourgeois society) into the content of the works.⁸⁶ Yet, as Peter Bürger argues, this kind of formalist avant-gardism quickly reveals art's lack of social impact, giving way to a revolutionary avant-garde which problematizes the institution of art and aesthetics itself. This politicization of art also gives way to several competing theories on the relationship between politics and aesthetics. On the one hand, the kind of Romantic bourgeois investment in formalism, originality, and aesthetic autonomy lives on in the thought of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 62-64.

⁸⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 27.

writers such as Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, who translate these ideas into Marxist terms by treating the aesthetic as a kind of negative politics against commodification or fascism. On the other hand, this period also sees the emergence of avant-gardists like Walter Benjamin, who insist upon a radical break with the institution of art by seeking to destroy the singularity of aesthetic experience and open art up to politicization. What we increasingly start to see around this period then, is a movement away from a more individualized conception of aesthetic authenticity (the artist as a genius communicator of personal truth, the subjective judgment as universal), and towards the more collectivist ethos of *subcultural authenticity* which develops more fully in the postwar period (artistic practice *towards* a particular political cause, aesthetic judgment as political statement).

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a rift begins to emerge between the bourgeoisie and the artistic avant-gardes, effectively terminating what had long been a symbiotic relationship between the two. In their early years together, the bourgeoisie was still in its progressive phase and the early artistic avant-gardes were economically reliant on the bourgeoisie and not necessarily politically opposed to them, allowing the avant-gardes to function as cultural brokers for the bourgeoisie, exchanging cultural capital derived from authentic glimpses into the shadowy worlds of subclasses and subcultures for income.⁸⁷ Hal Foster argues that from its inception in the eighteenth

⁸⁷ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), 34.

century, the bourgeoisie had been a culturally coherent class distinguished by inherited aristocratic traits and its own distinctive practices.⁸⁸ In this context, the aesthetic, like other supposedly universalist facets of bourgeois culture conceived in opposition to the ancien régime such as the public sphere, largely served as “an ideological cover for ‘free enterprise.’”⁸⁹ Once the class-specific nature of the public sphere is exposed by proletarian interests seeking representation however, the bourgeoisie begins a “counterrevolution” to forego its own status as a culturally coherent class and give full reign to capital.⁹⁰

According to Peter Bürger, it's once art frees itself of its ethico-political obligations to the bourgeois class with Aestheticism in the late nineteenth century that it breaks free of its confinement to the permissible procedures of its historical moment and opens itself up to all artistic practices of past periods, resulting in an increasing preoccupation with form over content.⁹¹ It is in this context that Adorno writes that “the quintessence of all elements of logicity, or...coherence in artworks, is form.”⁹² In one of his many letters to Benjamin, Adorno famously describes modernism and mass culture as “torn halves of a freedom to which however they do not add up.” As Hal Foster notes, these two entities perform dialectically different functions in Adorno's system: “the one preserves a semblance of value (perhaps even its avant-gardist negation does this), the other culturally

⁸⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 161.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 17-19.

⁹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 140.

controls the masses; the one 'purifies' the language of the tribe (or, again, disrupts or opacifies it), the other 'debases' it."⁹³ In his famous essay from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with Max Horkheimer, Adorno bemoans the demise of art into the "assembly-line character of the culture industry," writing:

Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through...Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth is that they are just business is made into an ideology to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors' incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed.⁹⁴

For Adorno, the political art of figures such as Bertolt Brecht doesn't fare much better than the commodities of the culture industry, as they both rid art of its most revolutionary asset: its autonomy. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory* that "Nothing social in art is immediately social, not even when this is its aim...What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions."⁹⁵ In Adorno's negative dialectics, autonomous art both defies Enlightenment's "instrumental reason" through its non-reproducibility and opens possibilities of a better future through the elusive gaps and contradictions within the present. For Adorno, aesthetic experience thus offers what is denied both in the world and within spirit: "it is possibility promised by its impossibility."⁹⁶

⁹³ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 165.

⁹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 120-167 (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1972), 121 & 163.

⁹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 226-227.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

While never explicitly referring to aesthetic autonomy in his writing nor engaging with an arcane dialectical system, Clement Greenberg has much in common with Adorno. As Ian McLean writes, both thinkers have in common “the odd distinction of offering a Marxist-derived interpretation of culture which favours an esoteric and elitist modernism, emphasises the disparity between avant-garde and kitsch, and opposes the Dadaist fascination with popular culture.”⁹⁷ In his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg warns of grave political consequences resulting from the displacement of the avant-garde with mass culture kitsch amongst the rich and cultivated:

The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level...As a matter of fact, the main trouble with avant-garde art and literature, from the point of view of fascists and Stalinists, is not that they are too critical, but that they are too ‘innocent,’ that it is too difficult to inject effective propaganda into them, that kitsch is more pliable to this end. Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.⁹⁸

Both Adorno and Greenberg cling to a kind of aestheticist avant-gardism informed by the need to preserve such key concepts to bourgeois aesthetics as “quality” and “value”—a classical and conservative standard of excellence represented by Matthew Arnold’s famous phrase: “the best that has been thought and said in the world.”⁹⁹ Yet, the key difference

⁹⁷ Ian McLean, “Modernism and Marxism, Greenberg and Adorno,” *Australian Journal of Art* 7, no. 1 (1988): 97–111, 97.

⁹⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 19.

⁹⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1979), 6.

between the two thinkers is how they go about putting this into Marxist language.¹⁰⁰

Where for Adorno the power of autonomous avant-garde art is defined by its criticality, resistance, and ability to produce a “negative utopia” against the instrumental reason of Enlightened society, Greenberg’s investment relies on a teleological view of history in which aesthetic innovation allows culture and subsequently politics to keep moving forward.¹⁰¹

The culture industry also serves as a target in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” where Walter Benjamin critiques the “illusion-producing spectacles” of the film industry, and describes the star system as a response to the withering of the aura preserved by “the phony spell of a commodity.”¹⁰² Yet while Benjamin and Adorno are largely on the same page regarding artificiality of mass-produced art, what sets them apart is the sense of populist enthusiasm which colours the former’s vision of a defetishized and accessible approach to artistic production in a classless society. Benjamin sees revolutionary potential in the increasing extension of the press turning readers into writers and in the production of Soviet films featuring ordinary people as actors, demanding a revolutionary dissolution between the artist and the public. For Adorno—whose deep disappointment in Benjamin’s essay is well-documented, “this is unmitigated catastrophe.”¹⁰³ For not only does Benjamin uncritically affirm film, “the medium of mass

¹⁰⁰ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 164.

¹⁰¹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 8.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 231.

¹⁰³ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 371.

culture which had taken the place of traditional, 'autonomous' art," but he associates the *l'art pour art* doctrine—which Adorno sees as the remedy for mass culture—with fascism.¹⁰⁴

More so than the culture industry, Benjamin's main target in "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is the institution of art itself. Benjamin kicks things off in the essay's preface by denouncing bourgeois aesthetic concepts like creativity, beauty, and genius as conducive to fascist thinking, and stating his intent to create a revolutionary theory of art.¹⁰⁵ Benjamin argues that the mechanical reproduction of art through technologies such as cinema and photography opens up a new space of potentiality for proletarian art. By substituting a plurality of copies of the work of art for its singularity, mechanical reproduction radically shatters tradition by destroying the work's aura.¹⁰⁶ Benjamin traces the latter back to cultic and religious ritual, claiming that the "theology of art" continued to live on over the years through the bourgeois "cult of beauty" despite the secularization of art since during the Renaissance.¹⁰⁷ For Benjamin, the issue with bourgeois aesthetics is that it denies the social function of art by relegating art to a separate realm autonomous from the rest of social life.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the mystification of

¹⁰⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 148.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 217-242, 218.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

artistic production through discourses of the creative genius and the eternal value of particular works threatens to reproduce the sort of hierarchies and divisions of labour that fascism relies on, subsequently alienating the proletariat class from taking control of their own means of production.¹⁰⁹ Liberated from the aura, art thus takes on a new function for Benjamin: responding to fascism's aestheticization of politics, communism mobilizes the masses by politicizing aesthetics.¹¹⁰

Despite the differences in their respective approaches, Adorno, Greenberg, and Benjamin's efforts to repurpose the values of bourgeois ethics into political considerations is indicative of an important shift in aesthetic thought which begins around the turn of the nineteenth century. Hal Foster argues that although the avant-garde "did not destroy art as an institution, it did effectively ruin 'the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones.'"¹¹¹ Thus, while bourgeois judgment still carries some weight within the cultural landscape, we begin to see a shift away from beauty and quality, and towards newness, defiance, and criticality as central concepts in aesthetic theory, as art is increasingly judged according to its subversive or transgressive power.

Just as the influence of value judgments begin to wane, we also begin to see the early onset of what is to be a long proliferation of stylistic categories beginning to emerge from the cultural space of consumer capitalism. As Foster writes:

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 218.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 242.

¹¹¹ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 164.

One could think of it in this way: perhaps the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature—its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms—foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole. Supposing that modern art and modernism—far from being a kind of specialized aesthetic curiosity—actually anticipated social developments along these lines; supposing that in the decades since the emergence of the great modern styles society has itself begun to fragment in this way, each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else? But then in that case, the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles would vanish, and we would have nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.¹¹²

This fragmentation into distinct styles and mannerisms which Foster cites as a feature of modern literature also takes place in the art world, where the increased salience of formal innovation within the nineteenth and twentieth century avant-garde movements flood the art world with a multitude of new *-isms* such as Constructivism, Cubism, Dadaism, De Stijl, Expressionism, Fauvism, Futurism, Impressionism, Orphism, Post-Impressionism, Suprematism, Surrealism, Symbolism, Synchronism, and Vorticism. The fragmentation of modernist art into various styles also evokes Zygmunt Bauman's characterization of modernity as an effort to exterminate ambivalence through classification and naming.¹¹³ Bauman describes a love-hate relationship between modern existence and modern culture, arguing that the modernist struggle for artificial order relies upon a disorderly culture which continuously tests its limits.¹¹⁴ Thus, each time a new aesthetic practice threatens the order of the modern world with chaos, it is quelled by institutionalization and canonization,

¹¹² Ibid., 130-131.

¹¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 2 & 7-8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

effectively rendering it to little but another new stylistic coinage in a gradually developing “supermarket of style.”¹¹⁵

The period between late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is also the moment in which stylistic categories begin to spill over from the world of art into everyday life. In *Critique for a Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard cites the Bauhaus as the starting point of a “universal semantization of the environment” in which aesthetics transforms from a theory of forms of beauty to a theory of the generalized compatibility of signs.¹¹⁶ Hal Foster cites Art Nouveau as the beginning of a *Gestamkunstwerk* or “total work” of arts and crafts “in which the designer struggled to impress his subjectivity on all works of objects” from architecture to ashtrays.¹¹⁷ Similar to the avant-gardes of this period, Foster notes a critical impulse animating Art Nouveau’s aestheticization of everyday life: “as if to inhabit the thing in this crafted way was to resist the advance of industrial reification somehow.”¹¹⁸ What this aestheticization of the everyday shares in common with the avant-garde in this early stage of the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline then, is a utopian promise at the heart of the ideology of the aesthetic—the belief that art and aesthetics can act as tools of liberation and spaces of sanctuary from the drudgery of capitalist society.

¹¹⁵ See: Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

¹¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 198 & 201.

¹¹⁷ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*, 13.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Our Brand Could Be Your Life: The Struggle of Subcultural Authenticity

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The notion of authenticity and its relationship to the aesthetic begins to undergo a significant transformation in the postwar period. Daniel Bell mentions a shift away from the aesthetics of the classical tradition, which he argues had identified authenticity with authority, mastery of craft, formal knowledge, and aesthetic or moral perfectionism.¹¹⁹ Following Sarah Thornton, we begin to see the emergence of an aesthetics of authenticity which is no longer premised on the quality, the aura, or the originality of individual works of art or artists, but rather upon an organic relationship to a rapidly emerging body of subcultural communities which are increasingly being relied upon to provide lifestyle-based alternatives to mass culture.¹²⁰ Alessandro Gerosa similarly refers to a “hip aesthetic regime of consumption” rooted in a distinct postwar conception of authenticity as being

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 132-133.

¹²⁰ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, 55.

'alternative to the mainstream,' which he argues culminated with the growth of the hipster economy following the turn of the millennium.¹²¹ Gerosa's emphasis on consumption is important here, as this increasingly becomes the central means through which a resistance to the mainstream is semiotically enacted in an increasingly commodifying society. The notion of subcultural authenticity thus preserves Western modernity's deep investment in culture to provide protect individuals from the dehumanization of mass society. Where it differs however, is in its break from the *l'art pour l'art* doctrine, both in the explicitly political function it assigns to culture following the Frankfurt School's critiques of the culture industry, and in its openness to all aspects of one's lifestyle (rather than merely art and literature) as sites of resistance against mass culture.

There are several interrelated factors at play in the transition from a doctrine of artistic authenticity to one of subcultural authenticity, but the primary root seems to be the transition between a Fordist and a post-Fordist economy, coupled with the aestheticization of everyday life. David Muggleton premises his analysis of postmodern culture on a conceptualization of modernism as a symbiotic relationship between two cultural traditions: an orderly, rational and ascetic "Enlightenment modernity," and a disorderly, Romantic and hedonistic "Aesthetic modernity."¹²² Muggleton argues that the "purity, functionality, and utilitarianism" of Enlightenment modernity defined modern fashion

¹²¹ Alessandro Gerosa, *The Hipster Economy: Taste and Authenticity in Late Modern Capitalism* (London: UCL Press, 2024), 50.

¹²² David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, 35.

between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s, after which the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist techniques of production lead to a stylistic shift towards the hedonism, spectacle, and hyperindividualism of Aesthetic modernity.¹²³ With the production of more specialized products for the market and an acceleration in the emergence of new fashion styles to match the turnaround time in consumption, Muggleton argues that modernist styles transform into a limitless array of aesthetic codes available for pleasure-driven postmodern consumers to construct their own identities.

Daniel Bell similarly paints a moralistic picture of a gradual shift from the ascetic Protestant work ethic to a compulsively hedonistic attitude in the United States between the 1910s and 1950s which ultimately culminates in the “sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll” ethos of the 1960s counterculture.¹²⁴ Bell argues that by the 1960s, the autonomy of culture and proliferation of styles which had been achieved in the art world begin to spill over into the arena of everyday life, thereby erasing the distinction between art and life, and transforming fashion into a new domain of stylistic innovation.¹²⁵

Gernot Böhme cites the cultural shifts of the 1950s and 1960s as the birth of what he terms the period of “aesthetic capitalism.” For Böhme, this refers to a stage of development achieved by Western capitalist countries in the postwar period characterized by an economy dependent on aesthetic values and lifestyle desires to sell commodities.¹²⁶

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 53-54, 125 & 135.

¹²⁶ Gernot Böhme, *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, 27-28.

A key feature of aesthetic economies for Böhme is the emphasis on “aesthetic work,” a term which “refers to the totality of activities aimed at giving things, human beings, towns and landscapes an appearance or look, endowing them with a radiance or glow, an atmosphere, or producing an atmosphere” which ranges from “from the house painter to the artist from the designer of products or stage sets to the producer of muzak.”¹²⁷

Major advances in marketing also play a crucial role in the shifts in consumption in the postwar period. *In The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank contests both the standard narrative of the 60s, in which a bold, youth-driven counterculture square up against the dull suits of Fordist capitalism, and the notion that this supposedly authentic counterculture is co-opted by big business in an effort to thwart its revolutionary potential.¹²⁸ Instead, Frank suggests that the real cultural revolution of the 1960s takes place in the ad agencies of Madison Avenue, where hordes of young admen respond to a growing sense of frustration with uniformity of middle-brow 1950s mass culture by welcoming a youth-led cultural revolution in order to revitalize American business.¹²⁹ Frank writes:

Apart from certain obvious exceptions at either end of the spectrum of commodification (represented, say, by the MC-5 [sic] at one end and the Monkees at the other) it was and remains difficult to distinguish precisely between authentic counterculture and fake: by almost every account the counterculture, as a mass movement distinct from the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹²⁸ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 15-16.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 9.

bohemia that preceded it, was triggered at least as much by developments in mass culture (particularly the arrival of The Beatles in 1964) as changes at the grass roots.¹³⁰

Coupled with the youth cultural revolt against the square suits of the old Fordist guard is the gradual dissolution of the “universal” (read: white bourgeois male) subject of Western aesthetics in the face of the anti-colonial, feminist, and civil rights movements of the 1960s. As Marcia Eaton aptly notes, the decentering of an authoritative subject of aesthetic experience results in a shift from a “Kantian” sense of beauty—in which said subject may seek to establish the universality of a subjective estimation of aesthetic value—to a “contextual” sense—in which the very possibility of such universality disappears, and aesthetic judgment is instead treated as a reflection of one’s social standpoint.¹³¹ As a number of critics have aptly pointed out, this has to do with the fact that this modern subject has almost exclusively been represented as a white European man. In her critique of Marshall Berman’s reading of *Faust* for example, Rita Felski writes:

Woman is aligned with the dead weight of tradition and conservatism that the active, newly autonomous, and self-defining subject must seek to transcend. Thus she functions as a sacrificial victim exemplifying the losses which underpin the ambiguous, but ultimately exhilarating and seductive logic of the modern.¹³²

Andreas Huyssen notes a similar gendered divide in the autonomous art/mass culture distinction, whereby the former has been lionized as masculine and the latter derided as

¹³⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹³¹ Marcia Eaton, “Kantian and Contextual Beauty,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 1 (Winter, 1999), 11-15, 12.

¹³² Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.

feminine.¹³³ As Huyssen subsequently notes, “The postmodern crisis of high modernism and its classical accounts has to be seen as a crisis both of capitalist modernization itself and of the deeply patriarchal structures that support it.”¹³⁴ As exemplified by Adorno’s notorious dismissal of jazz (in spite of his deep reverence for formally challenging music, such as that of Arnold Schoenberg,) it’s also important to note the racist structures at play in defining a modernist fantasy of aesthetic autonomy.

The shift in the use of the word “culture” around this period is crucial to understanding the movement from the Kantian to the contextual described by Eaton. For while in a modernist context, “culture,” derived from the notion of “cultivation,” was synonymous with “high culture” and subsequently distinguished from “low” or mass culture, in the anarchic logic of late capitalism, culture, redefined by Raymond Williams in a more anthropological sense, comes to refer to “whole ways of life.”¹³⁵ In other words, everything is now cultural—from the abstract formalism of modernist paintings, to the cans of Campbell’s soup that adorn the pop art of Andy Warhol; and the question of culture is no longer left to the authority of white male tastemakers of the bourgeois class, but to the almighty power of the market. John Seabrook, who refers to this shift as one from the modernist “town house” to the postmodernist “megastore,” writes:

Questions that the old arbiters had concerned themselves with like, ‘Is this good?’ and ‘Is it art?’ became questions like ‘Whose good?’ ‘Whose art?’ Selecting ‘the best that is

¹³³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), 47.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 17.

known and thought in the world,' in Matthew Arnold's phrase, which had been considered the duty, privilege, and moral enterprise of the arbiters *elegantiae*, became instead an immoral enterprise: an elitist attempt to ramrod a narrow set of interests onto the masses. A whole generation of tastemakers, whose authority in one way or another rested on maintaining the distinction between elite and commercial culture, was gradually swept away, and in their place arose a new generation, whose skill was knowing how a certain piece of content could be tweaked to fit a demographic or 'psychographic' niche. A subtle, but all-significant shift in the tastemakers' authority had been made, away from the individual's taste and toward the authority of the market.¹³⁶

Late capitalism thus proves to be far more transgressive and permissive than any of the cultural experiments of modernism combined. It demonstrates that the biggest threat to the hierarchical structure of traditional culture isn't the political left so much as it is the logic of the commodity— "an anarchic, iconoclastic force which mocks the obsessive rankings of traditional culture even as it in some sense depends on them to secure the stable conditions for its own operations."¹³⁷ Freed from the confines of bourgeois society, the commodity smashes the boundaries between high and low in a gesture that seems progressive, but is in actuality "radically ambiguous."¹³⁸ As Hal Foster writes:

It was possible not so long ago to believe that art, once freed of 'its parasitical dependence on ritual,' would be based on political practice, indeed that a 'tremendous shattering of tradition' might assist in a revolutionary 'renewal of mankind.' (I echo here Walter Benjamin in his famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,') In the west, however, this 'shattering' —which capital, not art, executed —has opened the way not to an active transformation of cultural institutions and social relations but to a passive consumption of the spectacles of mass culture. In this transformation the consensual guarantee of traditional culture is no longer so crucial to social order, for today we are socialized less through an indoctrination into tradition than through a consumption of the cultural." Culture is no longer simply a realm of value set apart from the instrumental world of capitalist logic, no longer entirely a

¹³⁶ John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing + the Marketing of Culture*, 69-70.

¹³⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 374.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

compensation for our renunciation of certain instinctual drives or a reprieve from our otherwise commodified existence—it too is commodified.¹³⁹

This change in the use of the word “culture” also results in the genesis of a more pluralistic use of the aesthetic which fully comes to fruition in the digital age: a version of the *aesthetic* which no longer refers to universal and disinterested judgments made by a refined few, but begins referring to consumer groups built around shared dispositions amidst the vast proliferation of styles which are surging their way through the infinite expanse of the marketplace.

According to Fredric Jameson, postmodern culture is no longer oppositional in the same way that high modernism was.¹⁴⁰ While it continues to use many of the same tactics of formal and thematic transgression, these tactics now constitute “the very dominant or hegemonic aesthetic of consumer society itself,” and serve late capitalist commodity production “as a virtual laboratory of new forms and fashions.”¹⁴¹ While the collapse of the revolutionary avant-gardist movements of the early twentieth century may have served as a painful reminder that superstructural solutions might not be the cure-all for structural problems, the notion of subcultural authenticity which develops in postmodern culture stills clings dearly to this investment, albeit in a somewhat different way. What Mike Featherstone describes as “significant line of continuity in Romanticism, the artistic bohémias and avant-gardes, modernism and postmodernism with an emphasis upon

¹³⁹ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 159; emphasis added.

¹⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* no. 9/10 (Spring/Summer 1984): 178-209, 196.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

transgression, the popular and the quest for newness and innovation" still continues to persist, but the aim is not so much to overthrow the system—a task that seems to grow ever more futile by the day—so much as to resist it.¹⁴² This resistance is achieved by pushing culture to its natural limits with a progressively mounting attack on middle-class mores and values. An examination of popular music between popularization of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s leading up to the explosion of punk in the mid-1970s alone is enough to examine a significant progression in the Pipeline around this period.¹⁴³ Consider how angelically benign Elvis Presley (who generated mass hysteria in 1956 after gyrating his hips on the Milton Berle Show) or Portland garage rockers The Kingsmen (who were investigated by the FBI in 1963 after rumours began to circulate that their hit single "Louie Louie" contained indecent lyrics) seem from the perspective of 1967 (when the Velvet Underground releases their 1967 debut album *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, featuring songs about buying and using heroin, and contains lyrics like "taste the whip of shiny, shiny leather"), or 1975 (when The Ramones release their blisteringly distorted eponymous debut album with songs about sniffing glue, living as a rent boy, Nazis, and beating people up with baseball bats).¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 1991), 141.

¹⁴³ Punk rock becomes a focal point in this stage in the pipeline, as it represents the apex of transgression in the name of authenticity. As Dick Hebdige writes, "No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval." Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ See: "Louie Louie," track #1 on The Kingsmen, *The Kingsmen In Person*, Wand WDM 657, 1964; "Venus in Furs," track #4 on The Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Verve Records V6-5008, 1966; Ramones, *Ramones*, Sire SASD-7520, 1976.

Thomas Frank cites Norman Mailer as the poster boy of the rebellious revival of authenticity in the postwar period. In his infamous 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," Mailer proposes hipness as the answer to the stifling conformity of postwar America, describing the figure of the Hipster as "the American existentialist"—a "frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life" who staged his rebellion against Square society by adopting a taste for sex, grass, and jazz from Black culture.¹⁴⁵ What's striking about Mailer's writing is that aside from the pungent stench of racism which permeates his fetishistic fantasy of Blackness as a cultural zone of unrestrained libidinal freedom, the essay aptly captures the basic dialectical tensions (e.g., between Hip and Square, existentialist and conformist, young and old) which come to inform the ideology of Western youth subcultures for decades to come, from Roger Daltrey's brattily stuttered ranting on The Who's 1965 single "My Generation," to Vice Magazine's taste-making "Dos and Don'ts" lists of the mid-aughts. Drawing on Daniel Bell's reading of the 1960s counterculture, Frank argues that Mailer's thinking represents a postmodern "democratization of the modernist impulse" which had animated the bohemian quest for authentic experience a century prior, and "the extension of highbrow disaffection with over civilization...and elite concerns with individual fulfillment to the widest possible audience."¹⁴⁶ What Mailer articulates in "The White Negro" is a cultural

¹⁴⁵ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* (Fall 1957): 276-293, 277 & 278.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 13.

politics which, in the words of the French Situationists of the '60s, is more fearful of dying from boredom than of dying from starvation. It brings together the cultural snobbery of bourgeois mannerisms, the avant-gardist appetite for transgression and innovation, and the Romantic notion of authenticity to oneself, and launches this strange new creation into the realm of everyday culture to produce the doctrine of subcultural authenticity. In other words, a presentist form of hipness replaces the old bourgeois preoccupation with timeless universal quality, and the sphere of aesthetic judgment is no longer confined to the realm of the arts, but the totality of one's lifestyle choices.¹⁴⁷ "Authentic culture" in this context, comes to refer to that which is ostensibly produced *for the kids* and *by the kids* in opposition to "the man," or "the establishment," whoever that may be.

The notion of resistance also becomes crucial to the academic theorization of subcultural groups in the 1970s. In *Resistance Through Rituals*, John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts distinguish working-class subcultures such as teddy boys, rockers, mods, skinheads, and punks from the middle-class counterculture of the 1960s, citing the former as more clearly articulated, collectivist structures with a clearer dichotomy

¹⁴⁷ As Dick Hebdige writes, "Subcultures are not 'cultural' in this sense, and the styles with which they are identified cannot be adequately or usefully described as 'art of a high degree'. Rather they manifest culture in the broader sense, as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation. They conform to the structural anthropologists' definition of culture as 'coded exchanges of reciprocal messages'. In the same way, subcultural styles do indeed qualify as art but as art in (and out of) particular contexts; not as timeless objects, judged by the immutable criteria of traditional aesthetics, but as 'appropriations', 'thefts', subversive transformations, as movement." Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 129.

between work and leisure in relation to the latter.¹⁴⁸ The Birmingham boys argue that while counterculture is more overtly political in its antagonism toward the middle-class values of its "parent" culture, its libertarian aspirations begin to look more and more like "a looney caricature of petit-bourgeois individualism," accidentally paving the way for a more flexible "post-protestant capitalism."¹⁴⁹ In other words, because middle-class countercultures come from within the dominant class structure, their critique of that culture prefigures, anticipates, and foreshadows emergent social forms in the greater system.¹⁵⁰ Despite not being ideological in the same sense, working-class subcultures are read as expressing their ideological dimension in a highly ritualized and stylized form, by "solving" unresolved contradictions within the society in an "imaginary" way.¹⁵¹ The main theoretical influence on the scholars of the Birmingham School is Louis Althusser, who discusses how ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."¹⁵² Yet, one might also detect the influence of Adorno's negative dialectics, in

¹⁴⁸ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 3-60, 45.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 51-35. Here they quote Erwin Silber, who writes in his book *The Cultural Revolution: A Marxist Analysis*: "the working class understands on some gut level that the 'cultural revolution' is no revolution at all. Far from freeing the worker from the reality of capitalist exploitation, it will only leave him defenceless against the class enemy. The worker recognises . . . that this 'cultural revolution' is only a thinly-disguised middle class elitism, a philosophy engendered by those elements in society who can still find partial individual solutions to the realities of class oppression. The worker's tenuous hold on economic security does not permit those individual acts of self-liberation which reflect themselves in 'groovy' life styles..." Erwin Silber, *The Cultural Revolution: A Marxist Analysis* (San Francisco: Bolerium Books, Inc., 1970), 26.

¹⁵⁰ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, 55.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁵² Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 122-176, 155.

which radical critique is achieved via exposing the contradictions within society rather than through overtly political content.

Dick Hebdige examines subculture in a similar light in his seminal 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, a book inspired by Barthes' application of semiotics to discursive systems outside of language.¹⁵³ Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of bricolage, Hebdige discusses how everyday objects such as safety pins and vaseline were transformed into sites of discursive struggle by subcultural practitioners, who subvert their meanings through intricate stylistic codes, engaging in "semiotic guerilla warfare" against the dominant system.¹⁵⁴ Hebdige focuses predominantly on the recent popularization of the punk subculture in England, which he argues reproduced "the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in 'cut up' form," thereby giving an almost tangible quality to the feeling of alienation, joblessness, poverty, and changing moral standards in Britain.¹⁵⁵

What's notable about both the attitudes of the subcultural practitioners—as well as the scholars who study them—at this stage in the pipeline, is a particular sense of optimism towards new styles and modes of expression which still betray the dying flame of modernism's utopian idealism. Despite not being as radically oppositional as high modernism, both the subculturalists of this period and the scholars who study them still

¹⁵³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 17-18 & 105.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 26, 28 & 87.

express a flicker of hope in creating a kind of culturally autonomous space from the humdrum of Square society and the sinister encroachment of the market into every nook and cranny of culture. Hebdige for example, talks about how all youth sub- and countercultures engage in a quest for autonomy, trying to “negotiate a meaningful intermediate space somewhere between the parent culture and the dominant ideology: a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed.”¹⁵⁶ One can even sense the desire for a culturally autonomous space in the most abject spaces of punk nihilism, which carries a glimmering sense that something better may lie at the end of an anarchic destruction of the current world. Discussing the persona of Darby Crash, the self-destructive frontman of the Los Angeles punk band The Germs—who killed himself with an intentional heroin overdose at the age of twenty-two—José Muñoz cites Crash’s constant demands for more (“gimme gimme this, gimme gimme that”) as a darkly utopian “semiarticulate demand for a world that is not the world of California in the late 1970s or the burgeoning reality of Ronald Reagan’s America.”¹⁵⁷ Yet, this faith in subculture’s potential is also not a naïve one—Hebdige notes that “it would be mistaken to insist on the absolute autonomy of ‘cultural’ and commercial processes.”¹⁵⁸ Hebdige prophesizes a looming crisis in subculture when he discusses how the incorporation of subcultures back into dominant culture hinges on the commodity form, and the symbolic challenges of

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵⁷ José Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This...Gimme Gimme That’: Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” *Social Text* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 95-110, 98.

¹⁵⁸ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 95.

transgressive stylistic practices inevitably produce new sets of conventions by creating new commodities and new industries which are then produced on a mass scale.¹⁵⁹

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Yeah, welcome to 1987.
New York City DeäthRok – OUT
FRENCH KULTUR – Dead
POST MODERNISM – WHO CARES?
So now what, a film about Elvis Presley?
Yeah.¹⁶⁰

Mumbled by an almost comically apathetic narrator with subtitles placed underneath for emphasis, the opening lines to an early short film called *Der Elvis* by Jon Moritsugu, the self-proclaimed “king of cult cinema” sets the tone for the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline in the 1980s and 1990s perfectly. Taken on its own, this introduction reflects the critical theory-damaged trash punk aesthetics of Moritsugu’s films more so than it adds up to anything particularly meaningful. The narrator never takes the time to explain for example, what he means by “French kultur” or why it’s dead, and a subgenre-savvy viewer of the film might point out that *death rock* (or “DeäthRok,” as it’s referred to in the film) was pioneered by bands from Southern California long before it emerged in the Big Apple. Yet, taking Moritsugu’s words too literally would be doing a disservice to his sly sense of wit and biting sarcasm. As a graduate of semiotics and critical theory at Brown, Moritsugu is clearly being facetious when he suggests that nobody cares about

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁶⁰ *Der Elvis*, directed by Jon Moritsugu (self-released, 1988).

postmodernism. In fact, considering that the film's production in 1987 and release in 1988 fall right in between Fredric Jameson's influential 1984 article "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in *New Left Review* and its publication as a book in 1991, we might even go so far as to claim that Moritsugu's act of brushing off postmodernism with a blasé "WHO CARES?" and of redirecting these concerns into a campy fan flick about Elvis might be an attempt to respond to the incessant buzz around this hot new keyword with the waned affect and retro pastiche which Jameson describes as cultural symptoms of the shift into late capitalism.¹⁶¹ What Moritsugu really seems to be getting at then, is an awkward moment for the aesthetic in the apex of the postmodern moment. Not only has high modernism—signified here as "French kultur"—exhausted itself as an aesthetic mode of opposition against the totalizing grasp of "the system," but the prospects of postwar youth subcultures—signified as "New York City DeäthRok"—are also increasingly beginning to wither as a viable substitute for resistance. All that's left in the picture is Elvis Presley, a martyr of youthful rebellion who represents a nostalgic longing for a period in which a little wiggle of the hips was enough to throw the establishment into hysterics, and perhaps also cultural studies' burgeoning preoccupation with pop culture fandom as a site of resistance.¹⁶² This section highlights two separate but distantly related movements which

¹⁶¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁶² See Meaghan Morris' critique of the derivative "pop-theory article" of cultural studies, which she summarizes as "people in modern mediatized societies are complex and contradictory, mass cultural texts are complex and contradictory, therefore people using them produce complex and contradictory culture." Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Discourse* 2, no. 2 (1988): 3-29, 15 & 19.

mark a decided turn against modernism's legacy of oppositional aesthetics both within academic scholarship and in popular culture: anti-aesthetics and the subcultural arms race. Let's begin with the former.

The notion of the anti-aesthetic is typically attributed to Hal Foster and other writers on postmodernity in the journal *October*, such as Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens, as well as other well-known philosophers and cultural critics who contributed to Foster's influential 1983 edited volume, *Anti-Aesthetics: Essays on Postmodern Culture* such as Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said.¹⁶³ What unites these figures is a Marxist historicization and subsequent critique of fundamental concepts to modernist aesthetics such as beauty, autonomy, art, literature, and culture. Anti-aesthetics begins by noting modernism's simultaneous victory and defeat in the postmodern moment—the former because of the hegemonic status it has achieved, and the latter because this hegemonic status is premised on its whole absorption into the late capitalist system.¹⁶⁴ Seeking to make sense of how to “progress beyond the era of Progress (modernity) or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism),” anti-aesthetics attempts a “postmodernism of resistance” by opening modernist aesthetics up to deconstruction, seeking to explore its social and political affiliations and interrogate whether its categories are still valid.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998).

¹⁶⁴ Hal Foster, “Introduction,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ix-x.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, x, xii & xvi.

The anti-aestheticists may share a set of problematics with which to critique the legacy of modernist aesthetics, but their strategies on how to exceed the modern (if they have them at all) are often vague and far from unified. In *Recodings*, Hal Foster notes how capital itself has become the agent of transgression and shock in the late capitalist system, rendering the modernist strategy of transgression effectively useless as an attack on hegemonic culture.¹⁶⁶ In suggesting the need for a new critical strategy of resistance, Foster distinguishes between modern avant-gardism and postmodern resistance, writing that the former connotes “revolutionary transgression of social and cultural lines” while the latter “implies no such limit or liberated position—only a deconstructive strategy based on our positioning here and now as subjects within cultural significations and social disciplines.”¹⁶⁷ The great challenge for Foster is making sense of how to formulate practices of resistance against a system which has no rigid ideology or formal limits to transgress.¹⁶⁸ Drawing on Hebdige, Foster discusses how subcultures are recuperated by being transformed into recognizable signs and circulated as commodities.¹⁶⁹ In such a context, difference ultimately becomes productive for the system: others on the margins of the social field can be controlled through their recognition, while their stylistic experimentation serves commodity innovation.¹⁷⁰ Here, Foster turns to Baudrillard, who argues that

¹⁶⁶ Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 147 & 152.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

difference serves as the object of consumption in the consummative phase of capital.¹⁷¹ To manipulate differences then, “hardly constitutes resistance, as is commonly believed: it simply means that you are a good player, a good consumer.”¹⁷² Seeking a strategy for disrupting or decoding late capitalism’s monopoly of the code, Foster brings together Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the minor and Fredric Jameson’s concept of cultural revolution, arguing rather vaguely for a criticism which opens up the revolutionary conflicts between sign-systems resolved or otherwise engaged by a work of art, and an artistic practice which exposes these contradictions.¹⁷³

Like Foster, Fredric Jameson proposes a somewhat esoteric theoretical solution to the daunting question of how to formulate an aesthetics of resistance under late capitalism. Noting how the kind of critical distance required for ideological critique has been abolished in the cultural space of postmodernism, Jameson laments that “it is precisely this whole extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space which is the ‘moment of truth’ of postmodernism.”¹⁷⁴ Drawing on Kevin Lynch’s idea of disalienating urban space through one’s own mental mapping of the city, and Louis Althusser’s notion of ideology as “the representation of the subject’s Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence,” Jameson calls for a radical practice he refers to

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 171.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 176 & 179.

¹⁷⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 48-49.

as an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping."¹⁷⁵ For Jameson, cognitive mapping can be understood as a tool for postmodern subjects to represent the totality of the global late capitalist system, allowing them to situate their subject position within it, and to re-enact the critique of capitalism which has been neutralized in the schizophrenic haze of postmodernity.¹⁷⁶ Having come under fire by a number of poststructuralist scholars for the totalizing nature of his schema and the obvious representational problems it poses, Jameson responds in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* by noting the re-emergence of allegory in the postmodern era.¹⁷⁷ As Jameson writes, "On the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall."¹⁷⁸

Even outside the world of theory, the contradiction at the heart of the aesthetic, between its liberative capacities and its embeddedness within the capitalist system is becoming increasingly apparent around this time, and the development of punk and metal-related subcultures throughout the 1980s serves as an excellent case study of this. Angela McRobbie thus hits the nail on the head when she writes that "things were never the same after punk."¹⁷⁹ As Caroline Evans writes:

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity," *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 155-176, 159.

It is arguable that punk in the 1970s was the last subculture that was, however briefly, oppositional. In the 1980s it seemed as if the time-lag between a youth culture's appearing and its co-option by the dominant culture got shorter and shorter until there was no gap at all. Many critics have argued that youth styles in the late 1980s and early 1990s had more in common with lifestyle marketing employed by the fashion industry than with a counter-cultural, or oppositional, space outside consumerism.¹⁸⁰

While popular music in the late 1960s "was governed by an ideology of affirmation, creativity, and novelty," the death of the '60s was immediately followed by a rationalization of the music business and monopolization of the industry.¹⁸¹ In *Lipstick Traces: The Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Greil Marcus notes a shift from avant-gardist discourses of "adventure" and "risk" in the 1960s to discourses of "survival" tied to market rationalism in the 1970s as indicative of this process:

'survival' and its twin, 'survivor,' wrote the 1960s out of history as a mistake and translated the 1970s performance of any act of personal or professional stability (holding a job, remaining married, staying out of a mental hospital, or simply not dying) into heroism. First corrupted as a reference to those 'survivors' of 'the sixties' who were now engaged in 'real life,' the word contained an implacable equation: survival was real life.¹⁸²

According to the standard account of the story, punk emerged from the bleak cultural wasteland of the mid-1970s as a protest against the superficiality, conformity, and staleness of mainstream rock during the early to mid-1970s. While authenticity had long been a preoccupation of bohemianism from the avant-gardes through Norman Mailer, the

¹⁸⁰ Caroline Evans, "Dreams That Only Money Can Buy ... Or, The Shy Tribe In Flight from Discourse," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* 1, no. 2 (1997): 169-188, 174.

¹⁸¹ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: The Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1990), 38-39.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 42.

concept developed an unprecedented centrality in punk ideology. Drawing theoretical inspiration from other twentieth century avant-gardist collectives like Dadaism, Lettrism and Situationism, punk pieced together a secret society devoted to the curation and preservation of subcultural authenticity out of obscure fragments of underground outsider culture, using rock 'n' roll as its base.¹⁸³ Not only had the '60s demonstrated that rock 'n' roll constituted a viable platform for countercultural resistance, but the vast proliferation of amateur regional garage rock bands aping the great acts of the British Invasion proved that rock 'n' roll could be democratized and operated on a much smaller grassroots scale.

As Marcus writes:

If one could show that rock 'n' roll, by the mid-1970s ideologically empowered as the ruling exception to the humdrum conduct of social life, had become simply the shiniest cog in the established order, then a demystification of rock 'n' roll might lead to a demystification of everyday life.¹⁸⁴

Virtually every aspect of punk style may thus be understood as a weapon used in its "semiotic guerilla warfare" to create an authentic alternative to the crass materialism of the mainstream rock culture of the 1970s: its minimalistic power chord-based riffs an affront to the technical virtuosity of AM radio rock bands like The Eagles; its tattered and safety-pinned outfits a bold middle finger to the slick fashion styles of disco; and its glue bags a

¹⁸³ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 53.

cheap and pragmatic alternative to the growing popularity of cocaine at trendy clubs and concert arenas.¹⁸⁵

What's curious about punk then, is the way it was co-opted almost as soon as it brought the issue of authenticity to the fore of the subcultural imaginary. As Angela McRobbie writes:

It soon became clear, particularly after punk, that this romanticism of authenticity was a false and idealized view. Not only Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, but the whole punk phenomenon used the predatory, easily exploited and above all open-ended mass media for publicity, and actually set up, right from the start, a string of shops selling clothes directly to young people.¹⁸⁶

While the first wave of punk had set itself up as quasi-religious cult of authenticity against the mainstream, its adherents were quickly disappointed to discover that their supposed saviours were merely cleverly disguised major label rockstars seeking to exploit shock value for press coverage and record sales. A useful way to understand the disparity between the first and second wave's respective approach to punk and politics is through Sarah Thornton's distinction between artistic authenticity and subcultural authenticity.¹⁸⁷ In its early years, punk culture predominantly valued the former, rooting its quest for authenticity solely in its aesthetics and allowing a preoccupation with transgression and artistic amateurism to double as a substitute for political praxis. In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil

¹⁸⁵ See: "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue," track #6 on Ramones, *Ramones*, Sire SASD-7520, 1976. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 17-18 & 105.

¹⁸⁶ Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity," 161.

¹⁸⁷ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 55.

Marcus details how the notion of artistic authenticity created a kind of underground history of the twentieth century from the avant-gardes through to the Letterists and Situationists, ultimately winding up somewhere in the pogo pit of Johnny Rotten and his band of neo-Dadaist provocateurs, the Sex Pistols.¹⁸⁸

But something strange begins to happen to the notion of subcultural authenticity after the fall of the original punk movement in 1979. McRobbie seems to get at it when she writes:

Since then the old model which divided the pure subculture from the contaminated outside world, eager to transform anything it could get its hands on into a sellable item, has collapsed, even though there still remains an ideology of authenticity which provides young people in youth cultures with a way of achieving social subjectivity and therefore identity through the subcultural experience.¹⁸⁹

There's an important paradox at the heart of this passage by McRobbie. On the one hand, the "old model" of subcultural authenticity has collapsed, ostensibly shattering the fragile yet sacred distinction between "the pure subculture and the contaminated outside world."¹⁹⁰ On the other hand, there still exists an "ideology of authenticity" which continues to inform subcultural activity.¹⁹¹ According to Ryan Moore, it was only after the fall of the first wave of punk that the concept of authenticity gained a heightened sense of importance within punk.¹⁹² Moore claims that while the first wave of punk was based on a

¹⁸⁸ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: The Secret History of the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁸⁹ Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity," 161; emphasis added.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ryan Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 305-327.

culture of deconstruction which focused on playing with signs, symbols, and styles for the sake of semiotic disruption, its almost immediate commodification gave way to a culture of authenticity which was focused on protecting punk from postmodern consumer culture.¹⁹³ Tied to the DIY ethos of the American and British hardcore punk scenes of the 1980s, the notion of subcultural authenticity quickly became a widespread concern amongst subculturalists seeking to break away from the culture industry by renouncing mainstream culture, media, and commercialism. What we see in punk and metal subcultures throughout the 1980s and early 1990s is a kind of arms race responding to a growing crisis in the notion of subcultural authenticity. Seeking to flee the rising tides of commodification, punk and metal begin fragmenting into a plethora of ever more niche sub-genres, each seeking to push the sonic limits of their music to their absolute extreme while resorting to increasingly absurd ends of gatekeeping for the sake of ensuring a sense of purity amongst their scenes.

As Moore observes, hardcore punk's effort to preserve authenticity from the contaminates of the capitalist world becomes linked to an ideology of purity. Building on the DIY ethos and anti-establishment sentiment of pioneering bands like Black Flag and Crass, what began as an attempt to strip rock 'n' roll down to its bare essence begins transform into a series of crusades to live a politically conscious lifestyle cleansed of any traces of consumer capitalism:

¹⁹³ Ibid., 307.

Above all, the overriding concern of these hardcore subcultures is with the maintenance of purity. The quest for an imagined state of purity is the link between the anticommercial ethos of underground punk, the straight-edge rejection of drugs and alcohol, and an adherence to strict vegetarian diets and lifestyles. In each case, the hardcore is defined by its repudiation of the commodities typically denounced as 'pollutants': corporate rock, major labels, meat, leather, mood-altering substances, and promiscuous sex. Consumption is portrayed by purists as a form of surrender, a loss of self-control which is to be resisted most vehemently through the body and the preservation of ecological self-control against foreign 'toxins' and 'contaminants.' Like enraged Boy Scouts, positive punks and straight-edgers were so sober, earnest, and downright humorless that they could only attract those looking for a wholesale alternative to amusement and pleasure.¹⁹⁴

This quest for purity Moore describes within hardcore punk culture can be understood as an escalation of punk's original mission to stylistically purify rock 'n' roll of its extraneous elements. Of course, Moore's reference to hardcore kids as "enraged Boy Scouts" also signifies the lingering residues of modernism's misogynistic tropes, with efforts to "purify" the culture having largely to do with its remasculinization. If bands like the Ramones and the Sex Pistols had rebelled against the establishment of mid-70s stadium rock by trimming the fat from rock songs down to a clean two-minutes of sonic thrashing, hardcore punk bands like Negative Approach and Poison Idea take things even further by whittling the songs down to anywhere between fourteen seconds to a minute in length, and this is taken to even more comical extremes by the late 1980s, with British grindcore pioneers Napalm Death achieving a Guinness World Record for shortest song with their infamous 1.2 second-long ["You Suffer."](#)¹⁹⁵ More importantly however, as lifestyles begin

¹⁹⁴ Ryan Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," 321.

¹⁹⁵ "You Suffer," track #12 on Napalm Death, *Scum*, Earache Records MOSH 3, 1987.

developing an increasing salience in all things aesthetic, this quest for purity begins to enter every facet of one's life, resulting in a frenzied attempt to rid the culture of anything which might be tied to mainstream culture including but certainly not limited to: major record labels, meat, animal products, drugs, tobacco, alcohol, promiscuous sex, private residences, bathing, patriarchy, homophobia, and even traditional instruments. The turn toward Christianity and Hare Krishna within the North American hardcore community by the late 1980s and early 1990s is an important clue that hardcore had long been a kind of ascetic order seeking refuge from the disenchantment of late capitalist consumer culture.

While punk is busy cleansing itself from the excesses of consumer capitalism, metal subcultures throughout the 1980s focus on becoming as disgusting as possible. Despite being less concerned than punk with having an overtly political message or aesthetic, extreme metal still maintains a preoccupation with an ideology of authenticity tied to a transgressive and underground ethos. As Davide Maspero and Max Ribaric note, the fall of punk at the end of the 1970s left the metal world with "a final, strenuous attempt at escaping the logic of consumerism: the act of becoming unpleasant in order not to be assimilated."¹⁹⁶ Rather than seeking blatantly political means of resisting cooption, extreme metal in the 1980s is made up of a rapid succession of subgenres, each seeking to cleanse the genre of the supposed trendiness and commercialism of its predecessor by upping the ante of extremity in its subject matter and aesthetics. Disgusted by the decadence and

¹⁹⁶ Davide Maspero and Max Ribaric, *Wolves Among Sheep: History and Ideology of National Socialist Black Metal* (Milan: Tsunami Edizioni, 2015), 18.

commercialism of the burgeoning glam metal scene, early European extreme metal bands adopt a kind of aesthetic fundamentalism which abandons the technical virtuosity of more traditional heavy metal in favour of the speed and intensity of British hardcore punk bands, while also pushing the subject matter and visual aesthetics of the genre into a darker and edgier direction.¹⁹⁷ Over the course of then next decade, this embrace of hardcore punk's speed, extremity and DIY ethos gives way to a global underground tape trading network and the development of progressively more extreme subgenres such as thrash metal, death metal, grindcore, and goregrind. The fact that many of these scenes were also largely predicted on the exclusion of women (as evidenced by the intense misogyny of subgenres like pornogrind and brutal death metal), people of colour, and queer people (as evidenced by the racism and homophobia of the Norwegian black metal scene) also signifies the lingering influence of the modernist association between transgression, aesthetic autonomy, and the straight white male subject of aesthetic experience.

Extreme metal's decade-long arms race for subcultural authenticity comes to its apex with the emergence of black metal in Norway in the early 1990s. Frustrated with the supposed trendiness and commercialism of the steadily growing death metal scene, Mayhem guitarist Øystein "Euronymous" Aarseth begins to assemble a cult-like scene of young metalheads referring to themselves as "The Black Circle" at his Oslo record store *Helvete* (Norwegian for "Hell"). Aarseth adopts the term "black metal" from Venom's

¹⁹⁷ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 2.

namesake 1982 album to designate a genre dedicated to preserving an underground culture of pure satanic terror, darkness, and evil. In an effort to distinguish the “true” disciples of the inner circle from trend-hopping poseurs who jumped on the bandwagon, Aarseth begins a sensationalistic media campaign presenting him and his cohort as a well-organized, cult-like group of satanic terrorists, a move which ultimately results in a string of murders, suicides, grotesque rituals, and church burnings.

The Norwegian black metal scene is noteworthy from the perspective of the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline for several reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the direness of the crisis in subcultural authenticity by the late 1980s and early 1990s. By this point, it is becoming increasingly apparent that no amount of sonic or thematic transgression can turn the steady tides of commodification from toppling subculture. 1991 marks the year of the big “break” of punk following the release of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*, and the first year that a hip-hop group—and N.W.A. at that—claims the top spot on the Billboard 200. This is followed by the short-lived attempts of major record labels to cash in on the death metal craze in 1993, and the chart-topping successes of Californian pop punk bands such as Green Day, The Offspring, Bad Religion, Rancid, and NOFX the following year. It seems fitting that Sarah Thornton’s concept of “subcultural capital” is coined a year after Cannibal Corpse’s momentous brutal death metal cameo in *Ace Ventura Pet Detective*. Far from making it obsolete, the culture industry’s desecration of every imaginable space of cultural transgression—epitomized by a goofy Hawaiian shirt-clad Jim Carrey stagediving to

Cannibal Corpse's classic "Hammer Smashed Face"—makes subcultural capital into an ever rarer and more valuable resource that its adherents began resorting to ever more extreme actions to protect.¹⁹⁸ The period between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s thus sees the most desperate efforts of subculturalists to take extremity, transgression and puritanism to their most uncommercially-viable limits. The destructive performances of Japanese noise group Hanatarash, the transgressive thematics of industrial noise projects like Whitehouse, Genocide Organ, and Con-Dom, the fecal live performances of GG Allin, 1989's *5643 Song EP* of noisecore trolls Anal Cunt, and the militant ultra-orthodox straight edge veganism of the hardline movement of the early 90s may all be understood as responses to this growing sense of desperation.¹⁹⁹ Black metal, with its burnt churches, dead bodies, blood-soaked corpse-painted bands, skulls made of fragments of human skulls, and fascist politics thus represents one of the final efforts in extreme metal's subcultural arms race to produce a culture so scary that it can't be commodified.

The second reason that black metal is important in the context of the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline is that it demonstrates the growing salience of stylistic proliferation and its curation in response to the crisis of subcultural authenticity described above. A recurring theme across both punk and metal scenes throughout the 1980s is that the growing crisis in the pursuit of subcultural authenticity continuously leads to an

¹⁹⁸ *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*, directed by Tom Shadyac (Warner Bros., 1994).

¹⁹⁹ Anal Cunt, *5643 Song E.P.*, Stridecore Records #1, 1989.

exponentially growing proliferation of ever more niche stylistic categories. Over the course of the decade, punk rock, for example, gradually fragments into blues punk, power pop, anarcho-punk, KBD, post-punk, new wave, and hardcore, the latter of which breaks down into USHC, d-beat, UK 82, skate punk, youth crew, NYHC, post-hardcore, emo, screamo, thrashcore, powerviolence, bandana thrash, and so on. The fact that most memetic aesthetic categories are named using “-core” (e.g., cottagecore), “-wave” (e.g., vaporwave), and “-punk” (e.g., sea punk)— suffixes as opposed to say, the “-isms” of modernist art— thus seems to serve as a reference to the proliferation of niche aesthetic categories following the fall of punk’s first wave—the moment at which the crisis of subcultural authenticity really starts to simmer.

Black metal is particularly unique within this proliferation of genres however, because its designation as a genre is an act of retrospective curation. When the phrase “black metal” is coined by British extreme metal pioneers Venom on their namesake 1982 album, it is only intended as a catchphrase, as the metal genre has yet to be divided into distinct subgenres. Interestingly, it is the popularity of Venom’s album itself that sets off the frenzied trend of bands trying to coin distinct subgenre titles for themselves within the metal world.²⁰⁰ Yet despite setting off an almost decade-long trend of attempted subgenre coinages, “black metal” only becomes a distinct subgenre of metal in the early 1990s, when Mayhem guitarist Euronymous begins curating a canon of artists from across the global

²⁰⁰ See [Appendix II](#) for the full list of attempted metal subgenres from the 1980s.

metal tape trading scene who form the supposed “first wave” of the black metal aesthetic, despite the fact that none of these bands ever actually knew of or identified with black metal as a genre. Unlike earlier extreme metal subcultures which emerged in a more organic manner then, black metal’s deliberate coinage as a distinct genre without any pre-existing scene, and its retrospective curation according to a particular vibe anticipates the surge of curation-based memetic aesthetics of the TikTok era, in which users lump together a set of objects based on some kind of affective-aesthetic commonality, slap a “-core” or “-wave” suffix on it, and present it as if it’s some kind of timeless stylistic tradition.²⁰¹

While Norwegian satanic black metal is certainly quite removed from the postmodern Marxist aesthetics of Hal Foster and the *October* group described earlier in this section, what the two share in common is a frantic attempt to formulate an aesthetics of resistance to the encroachment of late capitalist consumer culture once high modernist transgression no longer offers an “out” to the totalizing grasp of the system. In the case of Foster and Jameson, this involves attempting to formulate some sense of what political art may look like after modernism. In the case of hardcore punk and extreme metal, this involves transforming one’s life into an extension of their art, and trying to produce subgenres and subcultures so extreme that they can’t be commodified.

²⁰¹ Lily Alexandre, “Millions of Dead Vibes: How Aesthetics Hurt Art.”

Chapter 4: All the Small 'Things:' The Rise of the Post-Authentic

"It's so hard to remain authentic."

—k-os, "B-Boy Stance"²⁰²

By the turn of the millennium, the crisis of subcultural authenticity, which has been simmering since the fall of punk, has reached a rolling boil. Prompted by the mainstream explosion of virtually every underground music subculture of the 1980s (hip-hop, punk, metal, house, techno), and the efforts of an increasingly savvy culture industry to cash in on the subculturalist chic trend throughout the 1990s, the question of how to keep the culture pure from its inevitable commodification looms heavier than ever. In this conjuncture, a viable investment in subculture's authenticity and potential for resistance becomes increasingly dubious, as evidenced by the simultaneous emergence of three cultural formations which seek to respond to this crisis, albeit in very distinct ways: post-subcultural studies, National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM), and the elusive figure of the hipster.

As Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson note in the preface to the second edition of *Resistance Through Rituals*, the influence of Thatcherism and Reaganism in the 1980s prompts a shift towards more individualistic, socially fragmented and pluralistic societies, resulting in a more diffused subcultural field in which class and culture have become much

²⁰² "B-Boy Stance," track #5 on k-os, *Joyful Rebellion*, Virgin 7243 578758 2 0, 2004.

more disarticulated than they once were.²⁰³ Thus by the 1990s, the traditional conception of subculture as a working class means of cultural resistance pushed by the likes of Dick Hebdige and the CCCS boys is starting to feel growingly obsolete. Angela McRobbie for example proposes an openness in subcultural studies "to reflecting on meanings other than those of class," such as gender, sexuality, race, and identity.²⁰⁴ Seeking to find a way to discuss cultural unities without being bogged down by the class determinism of the CCCS approach to subculture, a series of keyword-based frameworks also begin to emerge around this period. Hoping to "disengage phenomena from the more fixed and theoretically troubled unities of class or sub-culture," Will Straw offers a theory of the scene in his influential 1991 essay "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music," prompting the gradual emergence of a post-subcultural academic scene of its own, with related concepts such as "lifestyles," "neo-tribes" and "club-cultures."²⁰⁵

In his 2000 book *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, David Muggleton accuses Dick Hebdige and Paul Willis of imposing a deterministic Marxist

²⁰³ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, "Once More Around Resistance Through Rituals," *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): vii-xxxv, xv.

²⁰⁴ Angela McRobbie, "Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity," 151.

²⁰⁵ Will Straw, "Scenes and Sensibilities," *Public* 22-23 (2001): 245-257, 248. See also: Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996); Steve Redhead, *Subculture to Clubcultures: An Introduction to Popular Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997); Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*; Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 368-388.

framework on the lived experiences of subculturalists. Treating the characterization of subcultures as class-based expressions of political resistance as an archaic relic of modernism which had died out by the late 1970s, Muggleton proposes a postmodernist reading of contemporary subculturalists, or what he calls “post-subculturalists,” as individualistic, fragmented, diffused, and unbothered by questions of authenticity.²⁰⁶ While Muggleton’s reading of post-subculturalists as post-authentic style surfers is an almost prophetic anticipation of the memetic aesthetics which emerged from Tumblr in the early 2010s, his argument that the notion of authenticity was already out of play in subculture by the early aughts seems dubious.

Far from making the notion of authenticity obsolete, the subculturalist chic of the 1990s sets off a frenzied attempt in various subcultural niches to actively define themselves against an ever more capacious mainstream by any means possible. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of extreme metal, with what is undoubtedly the most extreme reaction to the crisis of subcultural authenticity: the emergence of National Socialist Black Metal (or NSBM) in the late 1990s. Black metal and far-right politics were certainly no strangers to one another even in the earlier years of the movement. Following in the footsteps of first wave punks like Sid Vicious, who had flirted with Nazi symbols for the sake of shock value, a number of extreme metal bands which inspired black metal adopted

²⁰⁶ Muggleton writes: “Post-subculturalists no longer have any sense of subcultural ‘authenticity’ where inception is rooted in particular socio-temporal contexts and tied to underlying structural relations.” David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, 47.

names like Death SS and Treblinka for the purposes of provocation, despite having no connections to the organized right. And while Euronymous, the architect of the black metal genre, was a self-avowed Stalinist, black metal's ideological dedication to the eradication of Judeo-Christian values, its ties to Scandinavian paganism, and its reactionary disdain for the modern world would create a fertile ground for far-right politics in the Norwegian scene.

While casual racism and antisemitism were commonplace throughout the early Norwegian scene, the creation of National Socialist Black Metal is attributed to Varg Vikernes of Mayhem and Burzum, who founded the far-right Norwegian Heathen Front just prior to his imprisonment for murder in 1994. With several of the most fanatical pioneers of the early Norwegian black metal scene either dead or in prison by the mid-1990s, the scene was reduced to a crop of technically competent and commercially viable acts profiting from the genre's sensationalistic satanic aesthetics. Disgusted by the fact that even the most ostensibly "true" extreme metal scene—one which was created specifically for the purposes of keeping metal pure from capitalist corruption—had succumbed to MTV-ization, a small but significant sect of the black metal scene begins a movement toward the final frontier of thematic transgression, from musical extremity to political extremism. Inspired by Vikernes, Germany's Absurd is the first band to couple neo-Nazi imagery and lyrics with a fusion of black metal and Oi! punk-inspired RAC (Rock Against Communism), quickly establishing a rapidly growing international underground of National

Socialist Black Metal artists. Participants of the NSBM scene have readily acknowledged the subgenre's connection to a crisis in authenticity within the metal world. As Absurd vocalist Hendrik Möbus states in an interview:

The rise of NSBM started at the same time when black metal experienced a massive commercial exploitation, in the late Nineties. All of a sudden, the bloodshed caused by black metal in the ashes and torched churches left behind did not make a difference any longer, because the 'music business', and as far as metal music is concerned, eventually realize that you can move tens of thousands of albums of one black metal band. Yes of course, the band would need to be less extreme, less violent and less militant for appealing to an even broader audience. Plenty of bands, in particular from Scandinavia, were willing to sacrifice whatever radical zealotry there was in black metal for the sake of 'fame' and 'money'. Needless to say, this decline of black metal has sparked the new wave of radicalization and extremism among the underground scene. To some bands, the last resort that could effectively withstand the commercialization of black metal was to swear loyalty to National Socialism - if not in the lyrics and 'band image', then in interviews and statements at the very least. In Western society, there's next to nothing left that a majority of people truly abhor and won't ever tolerate no matter what. You can blaspheme Jesus Christ and hail Satan, so what? Nobody gives a fuck. You can talk about all sorts of sexual depravity, and they ask for more. In our day and age, it is only National Socialism that shuts all doors and turns all backs on you.²⁰⁷

As the final frontier in extreme metal's arms race for subcultural authenticity, NSBM represents the desperate boiling point in the fantasy of creating an underground subculture completely autonomous from the late capitalist marketplace, as well as the end point of subculture's effort to use transgression as a means of achieving this goal. For what follows the "golden age" of NSBM is a subcultural formation far more benign, yet surprisingly more controversial: the hipster. Even years after the first pronouncements of its death, there is an almost universal sense of cringe that accompanies any mention of the

²⁰⁷ Davide Maspero and Max Ribaric, *Wolves Among Sheep: History and Ideology of National Socialist Black Metal*, 134-135.

hipster. Even recent attempts to revive hipster style like *indie sleaze* or *millennialcore* avoid using the dreaded H-word by opting for gentler descriptors such as “indie” and “millennial.” There are a number of possible explanations for this sense of unease, beginning with the fact that nobody seems to know exactly what the word signifies anymore.²⁰⁸ Initially connoting white middle-class youth of the 1940s who sought to emulate the lifestyles of black jazz musicians, the term is revived in the mid-1990s to describe a wide array of bohemian, and largely white youth subcultures oriented around the pursuit of authenticity and alternative culture. By the late 2000s however, the term “hipster” has become overused to the point of meaninglessness, making it more of an overused ear sore than any kind of signifier of a cultural type.²⁰⁹ For those closer to hipsterism, the enunciation of the term still has a tinge of vulgarity to it—a residue of the major fashion faux pas that was its explicit utterance as it transformed into a term more or less synonymous with “poseur” in its later years. Finally, for critics of the loosely defined

²⁰⁸ As Benjamin John Elley writes, “The hipster is a young person in skinny jeans, a bourgeois bohemian, a New Yorker, a skate punk, an elitist, a consumerist, a rich kid, a poor kid, a fan of retro clothing, an environmentalist, an Apple customer, a hypocrite. The hipster is them, but it isn’t me. Depending on who you ask, the hipster is almost anyone, and also no-one. Nobody will admit to being a hipster, but everybody is ready to say who is – it is always somebody strange, and more often than not there is an implicit criticism. Still, there is something at the heart of all of this confusion. The hipster definitely exists, or at least, there is definitely a culture that bears the majority of the brunt of these accusations, and in spite of an unwillingness (unsurprisingly) to accept the name ‘hipster’, this culture is an extremely interesting one that is growing to be exceptionally significant, both in terms of membership and cultural impact.” Benjamin John Elley, *The New Gnostics: The Semiotics of the Hipster*, MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2014, 4.

²⁰⁹ John Saward, “Here Lies the Hipster,” *Vice*, Dec. 14, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/exqkke/hw-here-lies-the-hipster-999>.

subculture, the term connotes something of a cultural disgrace, representing the fall of subculture into the totalizing consumer space of late capitalism.

The hipster derives from the AAVE (African American Vernacular English) term “hepster,” which was used to connote a person in the know about jazz culture, and dates at least as far back the early 1930s.²¹⁰ After being popularized in Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” the term faded from cultural prominence following the dissipation of the Beat movement and lay virtually dormant between the 1970s and mid-1990s.²¹¹ What’s interesting is that the revival of the term hipster in the popular vernacular is that it is tied to critiques of the mainstreaming of subculture in the 1990s. In 1994, *Time* ran a cover story by Richard Lacayo titled “If Everyone Is Hip...Is Anyone Hip?” which connects the myth of the hipster to the subcultural chic of the era, nostalgically celebrating the Beat Generation’s nonconformist spirit, while critiquing the commercialization of hipness as the new consumer aesthetic of the early 90s.²¹² As noted by Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, the late 1990s see a boom in discourses of the hipster as a commercially significant cultural category tied to hip consumption in business media outlets such as *Brandweek*, *Fortune*, and the *Wall Street*

²¹⁰ “What’s The Origin Of The Term Hipster?” *Dictionary.com*, Sept. 6, 2016, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/hipster/>.

²¹¹ Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 5 (2011): 791-806, 795.

²¹² Richard Lacayo, “If Everyone Is Hip. . .Is Anyone Hip?” *Time* 144, no. 6 (1994): 48.

Journal.²¹³ This coincides with the emergence of a burgeoning market for all things “alternative,” with the establishment of Vice in 1994, Pitchfork Media in 1996, and American Apparel in 1997, ultimately creating an increasingly codified connection between the figure of the urban hipster, and the indie field of consumption.²¹⁴ As Arsel and Thompson write, “In a dialectical fashion, indie provided a cultural reference point that helped marketers (and consumer culture in general) clarify the hipster icon by objectifying it through concrete consumption practices.”²¹⁵

By the early 2000s, the hipster’s increased visibility in the American public sphere leads to an exponentially growing series of parodies, satires, and critiques of this emerging cultural figure. The 2003 publication of both Josh Aiello’s *A Field Guide to the Urban Hipster* and Robert Lanhan’s *The Hipster Handbook* sparks an intense public discourse concerning the hipster’s politicization of consumption as a mode of cultural resistance and its naïve sense of faith in the authenticity of its aesthetic dispositions which becomes satirized on websites such as *Look at this Fucking Hipster*, *Die Hipster*, and *Hipsters Are Annoying*.²¹⁶ The phenomenon of hipster bashing ultimately reaches its apex by the late 2000s, with the publication of several articles which variously described the hipster as the

²¹³ Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” 795.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 795 & 796.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 796.

"Bohemian undead," the "assassins of cool," and the "dead end of Western civilization."²¹⁷

In an influential 2008 piece for *AdBusters* for example, Douglas Haddow writes:

Hipsterdom is the first 'counterculture' to be born under the advertising industry's microscope, leaving it open to constant manipulation but also forcing its participants to continually shift their interests and affiliations. Less a subculture, the hipster is a consumer group – using their capital to purchase empty authenticity and rebellion.²¹⁸

In the following passage, Haddow contrasts the purported superficiality of hipsterism with the countercultures of previous decades:

Ever since the Allies bombed the Axis into submission, Western civilization has had a succession of counter-culture movements that have energetically challenged the status quo. Each successive decade of the post-war era has seen it smash social standards, riot and fight to revolutionize every aspect of music, art, government and civil society...While previous youth movements have challenged the dysfunction and decadence of their elders, today we have the 'hipster' – a youth subculture that mirrors the doomed shallowness of mainstream society.²¹⁹

In her article "The Demise of the Subcultural Identity: Towards a Postmodern Theory of The Hipster and Hipster Style," Alexa Gould-Kavet similarly critiques hipsterism for its lack of authenticity, and emphasis on consumption as a mode of resistance:

As the hipster has no major agenda except resisting the identity of normative consumers, there fails to be a foundational authenticity that creates a significant social movement. To resist consumerism and commodification is proving harder than just avoiding mainstream retail and goods such as Primark or Starbucks. The hipster's emphasis on 'resistance' through consumerist choice (choosing fair trade coffee or vintage clothing over mainstream brands) fails to create a significant statement of change or rebuttal to capitalism. The contemporary liberal youth is thus significantly complacent and yet, the hipster seems to claim a counterculture presence... I would

²¹⁷ Douglas Haddow, "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization," *Adbusters*, Nov. 7, 2014; Christian Lorentzen, "Why the Hipster Must Die," *Time Out New York*, May 30, 2007.

²¹⁸ Douglas Haddow, "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization."

²¹⁹ Ibid.

posit the idea that, rather, it marks the failure of the established subculture structure in a sped-up, redefined post modern world.²²⁰

Not all accounts of hipsterism have been disparaging however, and a few writers have even jumped to the defence of the hipster in the wake of Haddow's incendiary piece.²²¹ There has also been growing body of academic literature using various analytical approaches to historicize and make sense of the hipster phenomenon. In his book *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, Wes Hill variously discusses hipsterism in relation to the post-critical crisis of the twenty-first century, the neoliberal aestheticization of everyday life, the rise of ethical consumerism, and the rise of curatorialism in the art world.²²² Helen May ties the hipster's fetishization for formerly outdated fashion styles to Fredric Jameson's discussion of postmodern pastiche, arguing that the death of the high modernist ideology of style has left commodity producers with nowhere to turn but the past.²²³ Ico Maly and Piia Varis discuss the hipster as a neoliberal

²²⁰ Alexa Gould-Kavet, *The Demise of the Subcultural Identity: Towards a Postmodern Theory of The Hipster and Hipster Style*, 10 & 13.

²²¹ Robert Lanham, the author of *The Hipster Handbook*, writes that "The rage and self-loathing associated with hipsters has become more annoying, more naive, and more artificial than hipsters could ever hope to be;" Wes Hill writes that "In believing in but working against the pluralist motto of 'anything goes,' the discerning hipster as well as the always more discerning hipster hater are compelled by the power of asserting cultural taste and the power of its denunciation;" and Ben Davis suggests that the those concerned with gentrification and class should put their efforts toward political advocacy rather than wasting their energy on hipster hating. Ben Davis, "Was the Hipster Really All That Bad?" *The Huffington Post*, Apr. 19, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/was-the-hipster-really-al_b_849619; Robert Lanham, "Look at This Fucking Hipster Basher," *The Morning News*, Jun. 29, 2009, <https://themorningnews.org/article/look-at-this-fucking-hipster-basher>; Wes Hill, *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

²²² Wes Hill, *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*.

²²³ Helen May, *Popping Some (Postmodern) Tags: The Hipster's Search for Authenticity*, term paper, University of Bonn, 2013/2014, 11.

micro-consumer culture in a period of superdiversity shaped by post-Fordist niche mass production and mass media.²²⁴ Bjørn Schiermer argues that the hipster nostalgia for pre-digital commodities may be understood as an attempt to rescue the singularity and aura of objects in the age of digital reproduction.²²⁵

One of the main issues with the critiques of the hipster cited above is that by suggesting that the hipster is a disgrace to the legacy of postwar youth cultures due to its inability to effectively challenge the status quo, and thus placing the burdensome weight of cultural emancipation upon its frail shoulders, they wind up making the same error they criticize the hipster for—namely, investing unreasonably high political stakes in the liberatory potential of the aesthetic dispositions of a subculture. As Alessandro Gerosa aptly points out, such a perspective also reflects an implicit neoliberal perspective which “sees the individual, as the consumer or entrepreneurial self, as the protagonist of social change.”²²⁶ Yet, as several scholars have suggested, even placing the hipster in relation to the legacy of postwar subcultures it succeeded might be a mistake. Drawing on the work of David Muggleton, Bjørn Schiermer aptly points out how hipsterism troubles “a traditional Birmingham school Marxist-inspired approach, obstinately focusing on rebellion and resistance,” and Heike Steinhoff writes that “hipster culture sits at the borders between

²²⁴ Ico Maly and Piia Varis, “The 21st-Century Hipster: On Micro-Populations in Times of Superdiversity,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (2016): 637–653.

²²⁵ Bjørn Schiermer, “Late-Modern Hipsters: New Tendencies in Popular Culture,” *Ars Sociologica* 57, no. 2 (2014): 167–181.

²²⁶ Alessandro Gerosa, *The Hipster Economy: Taste and Authenticity in Late Modern Capitalism*, 113.

subculture and post-subculture."²²⁷ More so than a subculture in the traditional sense, hipsterism can be better understood as a structure of feeling responding to the realization that the autonomist fantasies of subculturalists from the suffocating consumer space of late capitalism were looking bleaker than ever. This allows us to tell a different story about the hipster, one which begins with the premise that the ice-cold irony of the hipster critique of judgment was only ever just a cleverly postmodern defense mechanism intended to conceal a fragile and desperate sense of faith in subcultural authenticity in its final moments.²²⁸ It reads the hipster's historically confused adoption of elements of virtually every postwar alternative youth movement as a retrospective pastiche commemorating the life and times of the great postmodern subculture. It sees the hipster's pessimism toward the cultural mainstream as a final attempt to revive Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry before the populism of digital culture placed the thinkers in a time capsule. It treats the unapologetic consumerism that informed the expendability of hipster approval in trends, artists, sounds or styles as a kind of panicked fleeing between cultural sites and objects as the imaginary levees thought to be protecting them from the rising tides of capital suddenly disappeared, revealing that everything had long been swept beneath the waves.

²²⁷ Ibid., 177; Heike Steinhoff, "Hipster Culture: A Definition," *Hipster Culture: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives*, edited by Heike Steinhoff (Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021): 1-26, 2.

²²⁸ Quoting R. Jay Magill Jr., Wes Hill describes this sense of irony as "a sort of psychic armor against a dominant political and commercial culture trying to smother existing ways of life with ever-increasing expediency and absorption." Wes Hill, *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, 79.

Most importantly however, this reading of the hipster finds an unusual and captivating sense of togetherness in that sheer desperation to believe, for a final instance, in that good old-fashioned concept of subcultural authenticity. It's important to note here that the popular representation of the hipster as a white middle-class urban male indie rocker fails to capture the capaciousness of the term.²²⁹ In the book *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation* for example, Patrice Evans and Dayna Tortorici respectively problematize the whiteness and masculinity ascribed to hipsterism in their discussions of the figure of the "blipster," or black hipster and its relation to "conscious" hipster rap, and the "hipster feminine" as captured in mid-2000s amateur party photography.²³⁰ Rejecting the categorization of hipster as a subculture in the traditional sense, Alexa Gould-Kavet refers to hipsterism as a "meta-subculture," which she defines as "a subculture that constantly appropriates and values obscure, eclectic elements from all kinds of subcultures."²³¹ Far from being confined to, or anchored in any specific scene then, hipsterism can be read as a structure of feeling characterized by a doomed fetishism for

²²⁹ Christian Lorentzen for example, calls hipsterism "the province of...the pastiest of whites." Christian Lorentzen, "Why the Hipster Must Die."

²³⁰ Heike Steinhoff makes similar claims in the introduction to her edited volume on hipsterism, discussing the centrality of femininity to hipsterism, and discussing how blipsters and mipsterz (Muslim hipsters) complicate "common notions about the intersections of such categories as class, ethnicity, and/or religion in the formation of hipster identity." Patrice Evans, "Hip-Hop & Hipsterism: Notes on a Philosophy of Us & Them," *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, edited by Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross and Dayna Tortorici (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010): 103-111; Heike Steinhoff, "Hipster Culture: A Definition," 13-14; Dayna Tortorici, "You Know It When You See It," *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, edited by Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross and Dayna Tortorici (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010): 122-135.

²³¹ Alexa Gould-Kavet, *The Demise of the Subcultural Identity: Towards a Postmodern Theory of The Hipster and Hipster Style*, 2.

subcultural authenticity which unified a decentered and translocal amalgamation of scenes, styles, and expressions under a shared affective resonance.

An examination of the indie rock boom of the hipster years might give a better sense of the shared affective resonance I'm trying to describe here. While it would be impossible to reduce the wildly prolific explosion of indie rock in the 2000s to a single sound (e.g., folk, post-punk, world music, garage rock, noise rock, chamber pop, lo-fi, psychedelic, electroclash, dance punk, etc.) or tone (e.g., zany, quirky, dancey, experimental, depressed, angry, uplifting, tender, "smol," grandiose, etc.), there is a particular *mood* shared by songs of this era which I'd like to focus on here. What we might call *desperate utopianism* for lack of a better term is a feeling which pervades quite a few popular indie songs of the aughts and can best be described as simultaneously triumphant and melancholic. Desperate utopianism is hard to pinpoint because it isn't situated within one specific indie subgenre, nor is it specific to any specific band or geographic scene. Rather, it is amorphous and fleeting—an elusive yet somehow instantly recognizable phantom-like presence which appears across releases, oeuvres, genres, and scenes.

There's an intrinsic sense of movement to songs which express this mood—something, someone, or some people always seem to be coming or going. Animated with hand claps, dancey drum beats, epic orchestral arrangements, rich dynamism, anthemic choruses and the occasional "hey!" thrown in for good cheer, the songs are propelled by a forward-driven momentum which evokes the "obsessive march forward" Zygmunt Bauman

ascribes to modernity.²³² I mention modernity here because the themes that these songs express or evoke—of teleological quests towards the limits of cultural experience, or of building utopian enclaves to hide out from the conformity of the parent culture—are the well-worn hand-me-downs of the moderns which were adopted by postwar subculturalists and passed down decades of successive generations until they reached the hipster sometime around the turn of the millennium.²³³ By this point however, that old sense of modernist zeal really begins to show its age, bringing a tone of deep wistfulness to the heart of this momentum. Consider for example Neutral Milk Hotel's legendary 1998 album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, a landmark in the development of desperate utopianism whose sonic and visual aesthetic foreshadows much of the indie output of the 2000s. As evidenced by its early 20th century penny arcade-influenced visual aesthetic, its cryptic yet evocative lyrics inspired by the diary of Anne Frank (the song "[Holland, 1945](#)" stands out as a notable example), and the grandiosity of its diverse instrumentation—which "seems plucked randomly from different years in the 20th century" and anticipates the Balkan folk influence of later indie bands like Beirut, *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* is an album haunted by a deeply ambivalent relationship to modernity.²³⁴ The tone of the album is

²³² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 10.

²³³ See: Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*.

²³⁴ Mark Richardson, "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," *Pitchfork*, Sept. 26, 2005, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/5758-in-the-aeroplane-over-the-sea/>; "Holland, 1945," track #6 on Neutral Milk Hotel, *In the Airplane Over the Sea*, Merge MRG136, 1998; Caitlin Mayhew, "Top Ten Tracks from the Golden Age of Indie," *Artifact*, Mar. 15, 2016, <https://www.artefactmagazine.com/2016/03/15/top-ten-tracks-from-the-golden-age-of-indie/>.

seductively jubilant, sweeping its listener off their feet and into a great march into the unknown. Yet as if to rain on his own parade, songwriter Jeff Mangum perverts these exuberant ballads with chaos (uilleann pipes and the chaotic punk energy of heavily distorted and blown out guitars) and sorrow (mournful brass arrangements, funereal accordions, and the ghostly wailing of a singing saw on the album's [eponymous track](#)).²³⁵ Even more unsettling are the album's lyrics, which pair religious imagery and scenes of domestic violence with an almost obsessive romantic and sexual desire towards Frank. On the second verse of the album's first song, ["The King of Carrot Flowers I"](#) for example, Mangum sings:

And your mum would stick a fork right into daddy's shoulder
And dad would throw the garbage all across the floor
As we would lay and learn what each other's bodies were for.²³⁶

In an interview discussing the album, Mangum mentions having spent three days crying after reading *The Diary of a Young Girl*, and being haunted by dreams of using a time machine to save Frank from her cruel fate.²³⁷ While it remains unclear exactly what about Anne Frank so captivated Mangum, *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* is a work that is transfixed by a desire to revisit and salvage a damaged past. Like Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," the album moves forward through history with

²³⁵ "In the Aeroplane Over the Sea," track #3 on Neutral Milk Hotel, *In the Airplane Over the Sea*, Merge MRG136, 1998.

²³⁶ "King of Carrot Flowers I," track #1 on Neutral Milk Hotel, *In the Airplane Over the Sea*, Merge MRG136, 1998.

²³⁷ Mike McGonigal, "Dropping in at the Neutral Milk Hotel," *Puncture*, Spring 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030423054804/http://neutralmilkhotel.net/puncture3.html>.

its back turned toward the future, watching a single catastrophe piling wreckage at its feet and seeking to make whole what has been smashed.²³⁸



Figure 8: The early twentieth century penny arcade visual aesthetics of Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*.

Desperate utopianism is in many ways akin to what Mark Fisher calls "party hauntology," referring to the optimistic yet forlorn sounds of transnational club pop hits from the late aughts by artists such as David Guetta, Flo Rida, Calvin Harris and will.i.am.²³⁹ Fisher specifically cites The Black Eyed Peas' hit single ["I Gotta Feeling"](#) as a track which "comes off more like a memory of a past pleasure than an anticipation of a pleasure that is yet to be felt."²⁴⁰ The fact that Fisher's party hauntology comes at the end of the 2000s is telling, because desperate utopianism, a mood which became increasingly pervasive around the start of the decade, often feels like it's coming from within a party, or more

²³⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 253-264, 257.

²³⁹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 181.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

specifically, toward the end of a party—the slight tinge of melancholia one might feel as the sun begins coming up toward the end of a good night out, knowing that it will all be over sooner or later. There’s also the sense of a celebration for a moment that is already in the midst of passing, or a funeral procession for an entity which remains yet to be known.

The theme of funerals makes a number of prominent explicit appearances in indie songs of this era, informing the lead single from Band of Horses’ debut album, [“The Funeral,”](#) or the title of the Arcade Fire’s debut album, *Funeral*. “At every occasion, I’ll be ready for the funeral,” sings Mat Brooke on the former, over a track whose anthemically triumphant tone would—like many of the songs described in this section—go on to inform the post-indie “stomp clap hey” quasi-genre developed a few years later.²⁴¹ A deeply funereal mood also looms throughout the Arcade Fire’s *Funeral*, which took its name from the great number of deaths in the families of the band’s members over the course of the album’s production. The theme of funerals appears most explicitly on the album’s closing song [“In the Backseat,”](#) which details the death of singer Régine Chassagne’s mother before erupting into a heart-breaking orchestral climax.²⁴² What’s noteworthy about *Funeral* from the perspective of desperate utopianism is the way in which the album balances the sublime melancholia of its orchestral grandiosity with a triumphant sense of childlike optimism. This balance also makes its way into the album’s lyrics, which, especially

²⁴¹ See Chapter 8 for more on the commercialization of the “epic” qualities of 2000s indie rock. “The Funeral,” track #4 on Band of Horses, *Everything All the Time*, Sub Pop SP 690, 2006.

²⁴² “In the Backseat,” track #10 on Arcade Fire, *Funeral*, Merge Records MRG 230, 2004.

on the four-part “Neighbourhood” series which makes up most of the album’s first half, deal extensively with childish adventures often following or related to the death of older generations. In both [“Neighbourhood #1 \(Tunnels\)”](#) and [“Neighbourhood #3 \(Power Out\)”](#) for example, Montreal’s frigid winters serve as a backdrop for the annihilation of the parents’ generation, creating new horizons of potentiality for romance, mischief, but most importantly, autonomy. Yet it’s the album’s debut single, [“Rebellion \(Lies\),”](#) which might best capture the mood of desperate utopianism I’m describing here. Right from its sparse but instantly memorable opening—a four on the floor beat coupled with a catchy three-note bassline and a single chord played in sixteenth notes on the piano—“Rebellion (Lies)” brings to life a mournful yet somehow triumphant procession.²⁴³ This procession comes to life in the song’s [music video](#), which depicts the band marching through suburban streets with their instruments, waking up local children from a spell of sleep, and leading them to a nearby graveyard where they perform some sort of ritual.²⁴⁴ The video’s Pied Piper-esque feel, the band’s cult-like appearance (six members, all playing different instruments, clad in black suits and dresses), combined with the song’s lyrics, which are written from the perspective of a defiant child seeking to debunk the supposed lies they’ve been fed by their parents concerning the necessity of sleep, lends an almost messianic aura to the spectacle: the avant-gardist shepherds of indie waking the children from their slumbers

²⁴³ “Rebellion (Lies),” track #9 on Arcade Fire, *Funeral*, Merge Records MRG 230, 2004.

²⁴⁴ Arcade Fire, “Arcade Fire - Rebellion (Lies) (Official Remastered Video),” *YouTube*, Sep. 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vN2vqaEBhM>.

and marching them through the streets in protest of the lies and conformity of mainstream society.

The theme of childhood reflected in the Arcade Fire's music and imagery is interesting because it takes two distinct forms. On the one hand, the band represents themselves as an avant-gardist force acting in the name of the children and ostensibly protecting them from the hostile rationality of the adult world, while on the other, the band themselves identifies with the children and writes lyrics from their perspective. This identification with childishness is a core theme of millennial aesthetics for cultural critic and art historian Brad Troemel, who reads it as a symptom of a precarious neoliberal economy in which familiar signifiers of adulthood such as home ownership, career stability, and raising a family are perpetually out of reach:

This thread of economic despair looms large for millennial liberals too, who've mostly given up on the American dream of living a more successful life than their parents and would be content to settle for whatever abject scrap of security they can get at this point. This feeling of abjection is the key to millennial humour, which attempts to deflect from millennials' desire for things like marriage, having children, home ownership, healthcare, and career stability by deprecatingly presenting themselves as helpless babies stuck in an arrested stage of development...Any corny bit of millennial humour is a sardonic way to cozy up to the inevitability of generational failure. It's a way of turning life lived through one economic crisis after another into a quirky Funko Pop so you can hang it up on your wall to make it less threatening.²⁴⁵

Troemel reads the popular meme, "im baby" as an emblematic cry for help regarding the perpetual infancy of the avocado toast generation.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Brad Troemel, "PASTEL HELL: The Definitive Guide to Millennial Aesthetics," *Patreon*, Sep. 12, 2021, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/pastel-hell-to-56074228>.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*



Figure 9: The "im baby" meme.

Troemel's analysis might explain why childhood is such a prevalent theme in the Arcade Fire's discography, and in indie music from this period more generally. "Us kids know," sings the Arcade Fire on their self-titled EP from 2003, "where [no cars go](#)"—a utopian elsewhere situated "between the click of the light and the start of the dream."²⁴⁷ As the song reaches a breathtaking climax in its final minutes, the voyage is set in motion, and the band begins announcing their intent to proceed in an orderly fashion and avoid any pushing or shoving as they lead "women and children," "old folks," and "babies needing cribs" onto an ark bound for the warm horizons of a simpler place with an enthusiastic "let's go!" The song's simple accordion and synth-based bridge begins to soar into the heavens as the ark sets sail into the sunset, with the band now singing along to the melody in unison as if to bid farewell to the world they once knew.

²⁴⁷ "No Cars Go," track #3 on Arcade Fire, *Arcade Fire*, self-released AFCD001, 2003.

["No Cars Go"](#) makes a reappearance on the Arcade Fire's 2007 album, *Neon Bible*, but the tone is noticeably different this time around.²⁴⁸ Charting at number one in Canada and Ireland, and number two in the United States, where it stood only behind a posthumous Notorious B.I.G. greatest hits album, *Neon Bible* has frequently been cited as a monumental record in the popularization of indie rock.²⁴⁹ The album sees the Arcade Fire take their distinctive sonic grandiosity to its furthest limits, but amidst their heightened success, the band seems to have lost the twinkle in their eyes, replacing what Stephen M. Deusner so aptly describes as the band's distinctive "tone of youthful conspiracy" which emanated a warm glow across the band's self-titled EP and *Funeral* with a deep sense of bitterness and cynicism.²⁵⁰ Instead of anthemic marches for "us kids," we get songs like ["\(Antichrist Television Blues\)."](#) Initially titled "Joe Simpson" after the father of Jessica and Ashlee Simpson, the song is told from the perspective of a self-proclaimed God-fearing Christian who initiates his daughters into a life of commercial and sexual exploitation out of fear of working "in a building downtown," where "the planes keep crashing, always two by two."²⁵¹ Equally dismal is the album's next song, "Windowsill," which expresses similar anxieties about the War on Terror and consumerism before explicitly addressing the band's recent fame in its ominous last verse:

²⁴⁸ "No Cars Go," track #10 on Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible*, Merge Records MRG285, 2007.

²⁴⁹ Tom Breihan, "Let the Indie-Rock Chart-Wars Begin," *The Village Voice*, Mar. 15, 2007, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2007/03/15/let-the-indie-rock-chart-wars-begin/>.

²⁵⁰ Stephen M. Deusner, "Arcade Fire EP," *Pitchfork*, Jul. 11, 2005, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/453-arcade-fire-ep/>.

²⁵¹ "(Antichrist Television Blues)," track #8 on Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible*, Merge Records MRG285, 2007.

MTV, what have you done to me?
 Save my soul, set me free
 Set me free, what have you done to me?
 I can't breathe, I can't see
 World War III, when are you coming for me?
 Been kicking up sparks to set the flames free
 The windows are locked now, so what'll it be?
 A house on fire, or the rising sea?
 Why is the night so still?
 Why did I take the pill?
 Because I don't want to see it at my windowsill²⁵²

"No Cars Go" succeeds "(Antichrist Television Blues)" and "Windowsill" on *Neon Bible*, and its placement after two of the band's darkest songs is a good indication of what's to come. The tone of the rerecording of "No Cars Go" is decidedly darker—almost apocalyptic at times, with a faster pace and orchestral string arrangements added to create a foreboding feeling. Yet perhaps the most revealing difference between the two versions of the song is a lyric that is added to the end of the version on *Neon Bible*. After the song's bridge, in which the ark is loaded with all the women and children and old folks and babies, and right before the song's epic climax, singer Win Butler sheepishly cries, "Don't know where we're going!"²⁵³ If the desperate utopianism of 2000s indie rock is to be understood as expressing an ambivalent juxtaposition of the carnivalesque and the funereal in its longing to create a vibrant space of cultural autonomy from the hegemonic order of the mainstream, then Butler's admission of his own uncertainty regarding the direction of his journey right at the point of departure severs the celebratory utopianism from this

²⁵² "Windowsill," track #9 on Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible*, Merge Records MRG285, 2007.

²⁵³ "No Cars Go," track #10 on Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible*, Merge Records MRG285, 2007.

equation all together, leaving only a sense of imminent doom behind. The uncertainty that Butler expresses here signifies the death of the hipster, who having “won” the culture war, risen to the top of the charts, and gentrified every “up and coming” neighbourhood from the Mile End to the Mission, now bitterly shrugs their shoulders when faced with the question of where “the culture” is to “go.” It’s also the death knell for that withered notion of subcultural authenticity in an increasingly digitizing world in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to gatekeep the distinctions between “us kids” and the hostile mainstream of an older generation. If the nautical gothic theme of *Neon Bible*—replete with songs like “Black Waves/Bad Vibrations” and “Ocean of Noise,” along with Modest Mouse’s similarly-themed chart-topper of the same year, *We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank* has anything to say about the status of indie/alternative rock, hipsterism, or the dream of subcultural authenticity more broadly, it’s that the epic voyage envisioned on “No Cars Go” back in 2003 likely resulted in a fate more akin to the Titanic than that of Noah’s Ark.²⁵⁴

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Somewhere between the early to mid-twenty-teens, a widespread feeling starts to arise that the hipster is dead. Nobody has found the corpse quite yet, but the signs are everywhere.²⁵⁵ For one thing, the term—once a controversial signifier of the last remaining

²⁵⁴ “Black Waves/Bad Vibrations” and “Ocean of Noise,” track #5 & #6 on Arcade Fire, *Neon Bible*, Merge Records MRG285, 2007; Modest Mouse, *We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank*, Epic 82876 86139 2, 2007.

²⁵⁵ More on this in the discussion of post-hipster affect in Chapter 8.

vestiges of faith in some semblance of resistance against an increasingly powerful and capacious cultural mainstream—doesn't seem to signify much anymore. Likewise, "indie," the once-proud hallmark of subcultural authenticity through the '90s and 2000s, is said to have "killed itself" after being bastardized by the likes of CNN and Warner and inadvertently building "a subculture that was just as dependent on trends, superficiality and the whims and caprices of the listening public as the pop mainstream has ever been."²⁵⁶ Mark Grief is the first to note the scent of decay, dating the hipster era between 1999 and 2009 in his 2010 article "What Was the Hipster?" while the hipster's buddies over at *Vice Magazine* wallow in disbelief until eventually publishing a 2014 piece titled "Please, God, Let 2014 Be the Year We Retire the Word 'Hipster'," and giving an official commemoration the following year with a series titled "Remembering the Hipster."²⁵⁷

As the colossal meta-subculture of hipsterism gradually fades into the mist of the schizophrenic digi-cultural memory bank, the hipster briefly becomes something of a catch-all hypernym for a number of eccentric new trends and styles emerging from, and very much reflecting the bizarro cultural logic of the internet—something the kids on Tumblr have started referring to as *aesthetics*.²⁵⁸ These trends are sort of like subcultures, but are more closely aligned with the transmission and resonance of memes on platforms

²⁵⁶ Rachel Maddux, "Is Indie Dead?" *Paste*, Jan. 26, 2010, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/is-indie-dead>.

²⁵⁷ Mark Grief, "What Was the Hipster?" *New York Magazine*, Oct. 22, 2010, <https://nymag.com/news/features/69129/>; Dan Ozzi, "Please, God, Let 2014 Be the Year We Retire the Word 'Hipster.'"

²⁵⁸ Wes Hill, *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, 4.

like Tumblr, Instagram, and TikTok than they are physically rooted in any kind of physical scene. Decentralized and virtual, these communities lack the enduring bonds of subcultural participation but also the gatekeeping that comes along with it, representing a decisive break from the subcultural preoccupation with authenticity which had so vitally shaped the hipster disposition. Substance is severed from style, and one may simply wear a look without having to prove their commitment to any kind of scene or community.

In his book *Art After the Hipster: Identity Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, Wes Hill writes:

Looking back, with the global financial crisis (GFC) now firmly in the past, the creative age appears as if it was always destined to fail. Artists and creatives became rife for parody on websites and television shows throughout the late 2000s; however, with the realization that creativity is not a cure for social inequality, the hipster has lost its sheen even as an object of parody, leaving a stunted neoliberal afterglow in its place.²⁵⁹

Hill begs an interesting question here: Did the creative age really fail? The notion that what was arguably the golden age of creative capitalism amounted to little more than Disney's purchase of Vice Media, slightly more tolerable music in car commercials, and the spectacular fall of American Apparel certainly suggests so. But what if we were wrong? What if the creative age very much succeeded—so much so that even mentioning it—like the name of its cultural ambassador, the hipster—became superfluous and passé? What if the great success of the creative age was shaping a something like a new global aesthetic sensibility, one feverishly devoted to the curation of authenticity? This is something along

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

the lines of what Kyle Chayka is arguing when he writes that the “hipster aesthetic is taking over the world.”²⁶⁰ Chayka uses the term *AirSpace* to describe the algorithmically ubiquitous post-hipster face of creative capitalist spaces such as coffee shops, bars, startup offices, and co-live/work spaces, which he describes as “a profusion of symbols of comfort and quality, at least to a certain connoisseurial mindset. Minimalist furniture. Craft beer and avocado toast. Reclaimed wood. Industrial lighting. Cortados. Fast internet.”²⁶¹

The ultra-slick post-industrial third-wave tech hubs of the mid-twenty teens described by Chayka coincide with another noteworthy cultural development of post-hipster moment: the rise of the yuccie. In a 2015 article titled “The Hipster Is Dead, and You Might Not Like Who Comes Next,” David Infante chronicles the ascent of the Young Urban Creative, the cultural offspring of the yuppie and the hipster who has turned the hipster’s DIY entrepreneurship, niche marketing and technological savviness into a profitable business model.²⁶² Infante credits the rise of the *yuccie* with the death of the hipster, arguing that the latter eventually became the ubiquitous face of mainstream culture by the end of its reign:

But these days, the hipster — the real hipster, not the bullshit marketing facsimile that still dominates advertising today — is dead. He’s traded warehouse parties for yoga retreats; she’s become a tool of corporate marketing shilling compact cars and fast

²⁶⁰ Kyle Chayka, “Same Old, Same Old. How the Hipster Aesthetic Is Taking Over the World,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/06/hipster-aesthetic-taking-over-world>.

²⁶¹ Kyle Chayka, “Welcome to AirSpace,” *The Verge*, Aug. 3, 2016, <https://www.theverge.com/2016/8/3/12325104/airbnb-aesthetic-global-minimalism-startup-gentrification>.

²⁶² David Infante, “The Hipster Is Dead, and You Might Not Like Who Comes Next,” *Mashable*, Jun. 9, 2015, <https://mashable.com/archive/post-hipster-yuccie#z8QxnYrsciqo>.

food. The conspicuous consumption that once set hipsters apart — American Spirits instead of Marlboros, iPhones instead of flip phones, pork belly instead of bacon — has gone mainstream. Hipster is generic.²⁶³

Taken together, Chayka and Infante's accounts suggest that the hipster died precisely because its fetish for authenticity, indie, and alternative culture has become the new mainstream, leaving little for it to distinguish itself from. As Infante writes, "When everyone is rejecting the mainstream, no one is. When everyone is a hipster, no one is a hipster."²⁶⁴ Trend forecaster Ayesha A. Siddiqi argues that the oppressive climate of the post-9/11 period (which she dates between 2002 and 2010) offered the last vestige of a homogenous cultural experience in which information on, and access to alternative aesthetic dispositions were still somewhat hard-won.²⁶⁵ Siddiqi explains the millennial preoccupation with subcultural authenticity as the residual affective attachments of a pre-web 2.0 generation for whom websites like Tumblr served as an oasis of weirdness in the midst of the bleak cultural desert of the Bush era:

The Bush era was the last time there was anything close to a coherent, homogenous, cultural experience. After 9/11, even Disney Channel played patriotic interstitials urging the value and necessity of being a 'proud American.' And after a decade of the vapid and aggressively white masculine misogynist homophobic nationalist pop culture of 2002-2010, the way millennials [sic] found cultural refuge and alternative spaces for identity formation was web 2.0 and the scenes it made possible...Millennials suddenly had access to tastemakers in major cities beyond where they lived. And it was a relief to discover everything the mainstream had so dedicatedly ignored had an avenue. Finally there was a sense of there being more out there for people who didn't watch *The Hills* or care about teen sex comedies or thought all the flag waving was a bit too earnest. Is

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ayesha A. Siddiqi, "Memento Millennial [sic]," *Substack*, Mar. 11, 2022, <https://ayeshasiddiqi.substack.com/p/memento-millennial>.

it any surprise then Millennials were so precious about 'authenticity?' For them, aesthetic choices were relatively hardwon.²⁶⁶

According to Siddiqi, Gen Z have lost their appetite for subcultural authenticity as a dominant value, having grown up in a digital milieu where the distinctions between mainstream and 'alternative' culture are blurred, and come of age witnessing firsthand the extreme measures millennials took to distinguish themselves from the mainstream, only to have their cultural practices co-opted by the mainstream en masse:

Well, we're just more honest about 'authenticity' not being a relevant metric for evaluation. Gen Z don't need it because they're not as put upon as we were. The e-girl and the Christian girl autumn aesthetics aren't in competition with each other. People know each has its lane. For Millennials, aesthetic categories felt fraught and were strictly pursued and guarded because we were embattled. And we were the last generation for whom that was true. In the present era, what's actually passé is discouraging personal preference in favor of trends. You no longer 'have' to look like Paris Hilton, and you're less likely to be judged if you do. We're more encouraged to enjoy our own tastes and expression and there's less gatekeeping.²⁶⁷

Perhaps the best example of the Gen Z turn against the authenticity fetish of millennial hipsterism is the coterminous popularity of various *y2k* aesthetics like *frutiger aero* and *McBling*, and the hyperpop music genre following the collapse of hipsterism around the mid-2010s. What's noteworthy about these categories is the way their aesthetics are almost entirely predicated on a dialectical counterpoint to the aesthetic conventions of hipsterism. In the case of *y2k* aesthetics, this involves a hyper-fixation with seemingly all aspects of post-9/11 cultural kitsch which were excluded from the hipster's

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

aesthetic canon. Here, the futuristic sparseness of Apple products is met with the tacky techno-utopian maximalism of *frutiger aero*; the clean-cut style of American Apparel cardigans countered with the vulgar chic of rhinestone-studded Juicy Couture track suits; the elegant minimalism of A.P.C.'s slim selvedge denim jeans assaulted by over-the-top stitching on pairs of bootcut low rise True Religion jeans, complimented of course, with the obligatory whale tail. The references to a mythicized period around turn of the millennium on hyperpop songs like Charli XCX and Troye Sivan's "[1999](#)" are also far from coincidental, considering the way hyperpop sonically reproduces this celebration of anti-hipster kitsch from this time period.²⁶⁸ *1000 geecs*, the 2019 debut album by hyperpop duo 100 geecs, which is widely credited as one of the foundational releases in the popularization of hyperpop, practically sounds like a mashup compilation of every musical subgenre which might repulse a canonically informed hipster music disposition.²⁶⁹ "Fuck your Sonic Youth, fuck your Smiths, fuck your Black Flag, fuck your Animal Collective..." the [album](#) seems to exclaim as it blasts its way through a wildly catchy, internet-damaged celebration of every conceivable musical sub-genre chided by the Pitchfork set for its supposed inauthenticity: emo, trap, pop punk, dubstep, trance, third wave ska, nightcore—all heavily washed in autotune to accentuate its artifice.

The death of the hipster thus marks a decisive turning point away from the modernist preoccupation with authenticity and into a "strange, surface-centric" digital

²⁶⁸ "1999," track #4 on Charli XCX, *Charli*, Asylum Records 0190295409579, 2019.

²⁶⁹ See: 100 geecs, *1000 geecs*, Dog Show Records MDS003, 2019.

present in which the high modernist conception of authenticity underlying subcultural aesthetics has not only ceased to serve as the central criterion of aesthetic value, but has also started to feel like an embarrassingly dated cultural investment.²⁷⁰ Jay Owens argues that the notion of authenticity was so deeply bound to the hipster archetype that it expired as a cultural value as soon as the hipster died in 2015.²⁷¹ Owens credits Gen Z with having pioneered a post-authentic approach to social media in which surface impressions and clever cultural references take precedence over the maintenance of a singular authentic identity so central to millennial social media aesthetics.²⁷² Owens cites the popularity of Finstagram—“fake” secondary Instagram accounts used to post uncurated content to a close group of friends—as an example of Gen Z’s break from a hyper-curated approach to social media, suggesting that the explosion of Finstagram accounts immediately following the death of hipster authenticity in January 2016 may be read as part of a shift in the structure of feeling between millennials and Gen Z.²⁷³ Written by Sean Monahan and Sophie Secaf, a 2017 report titled “GenExit” sees utopian potential in Gen Z’s divestment from the notion of authenticity. Monahan and Secaf argue that unlike their millennial predecessors, Gen Z see the personal branding of social media as a trap, opting instead for fluid identities which value imagination, creativity, and personal connections.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Jay Owens, “Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture,” *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, edited by Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Santa Barbara: punctum books, 2019): 77-113, 106.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 88.

²⁷² Ibid., 90.

²⁷³ Ibid., 94.

²⁷⁴ Sean Monahan and Sophie Secaf, “GenExit,” 2017.

If Monahan and Secaf's sketch of a "post-personal brand world" as "more invested in ideas than identity, fluidity than control, anonymity than power, and community than reach" sounds suspiciously familiar, it might be because this is almost exactly how Monahan described the normcore aesthetic when his collective K-HOLE first minted it in a similar 2013 report called "Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom."²⁷⁵ *Normcore* proposes a generic, mundane and somewhat bland fashion wardrobe as a sort of populist remedy to the distinction-obsessed, elitist consumerism of the hipster years. The idea behind the trend was pure galaxy brain: the only thing cooler than trying to be cooler than everybody else is to accept that everyone is the same. Like *vaporwave*, which also emerged around the same time, *normcore* is notable as one of the first memetic aesthetic categories which actively emphasized its post-authentic break from the hipster ethos.²⁷⁶

Little is known about the etymology of online style-vibe categories as *aesthetics*, aside from the fact that this usage began on Tumblr sometime in the early to mid-2010s, and was popularized by media coverage of aesthetics like *cottagecore* and *dark academia* during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷⁷ Kaitlyn Tiffany ties this use of the term to its new status as an all-purpose adjective by teenagers— "'that's so aesthetic' as a shorthand for 'that's so aesthetically pleasing to me.'"²⁷⁸ Aesthetics are only one example of a broader

²⁷⁵ More on normcore in Chapter 11.

²⁷⁶ More on this in Chapter 11.

²⁷⁷ See for example: Gabe Bergado, "Cottagecore Offers an Escape From Today's Stressful World," *Teen Vogue*, Apr. 22, 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/cottagecore-escape-coronavirus-pandemic>.

²⁷⁸ Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Cottagecore Was Only the Beginning," *The Atlantic*, Feb. 5, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/02/aesthetics-wiki-cottagecore-tumblr-tiktok/617923/>.

shift towards the curation of increasingly more minor categories, a kind of networked algorithmization of culture in the golden age of social media. Consider for example MOGAI, an acronym for "Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex," which also emerged on Tumblr around the same time as memetic aesthetics. Created in response to the feeling that the LGBTQ+ designation kept getting longer while excluding new groups of people, the term was intended as an umbrella for a growing number of nonbinary gender designations largely coined by young teenagers on Tumblr. In a study of 400 different gender designations coined during the heyday of the MOGAI years, YouTuber Lily Alexandre found that only 130, roughly 32% had been used in a single instance following their coinage.²⁷⁹ A similar nichification also took place in the context of online political identities. Examining the phenomenon of "Politigram," or radical political Instagram accounts, Joshua Citarella notes how "Politigrammers revel in adding as many prefixes and suffixes to their ideology as possible," suggesting that there may be as many different ideologies represented on Politigram as there are users of it.²⁸⁰ A familiar pattern thus starts to emerge when we examine categories like *Changelingcore* and *Coquette Academia*; *Quoibinary* and *Spiralgender*, and *National Trotskyism* and *Dharmic Eco-Reactionaryism*.

1. Find a vibe.

²⁷⁹ Lily Alexandre, "Millions of Dead Genders: A MOGAI Retrospective," *YouTube*, Jan. 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoZFZto6Wqg>.

²⁸⁰ Joshua Citarella, "Politigram & the Post-Left, 2018," *Joshua Citarella*, http://joshuacitarella.com/_pdf/Politigram_Post-left_2018_short.pdf.

2. Name it (-core/-gender/-ism).
3. Add signifiers (starter pack/flag/slogan).
4. Circulate.

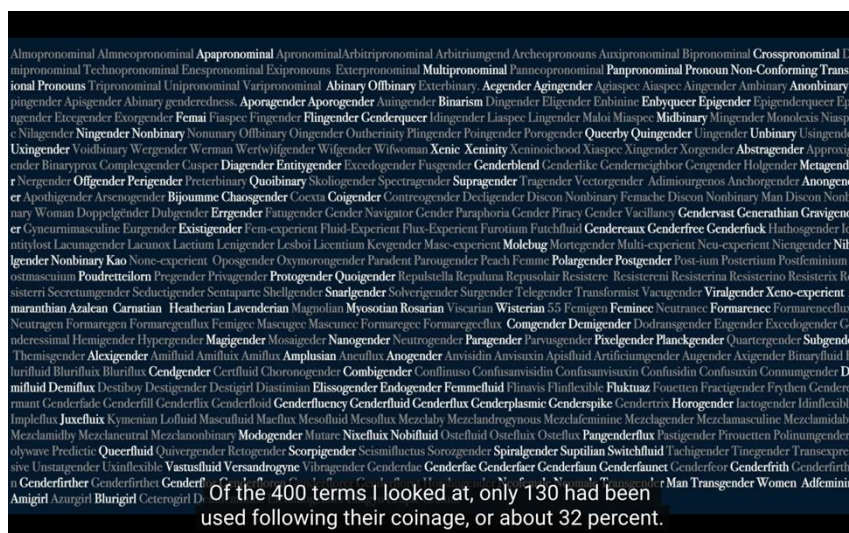


Figure 10: Lily Alexandre's list of MOGAI designations.

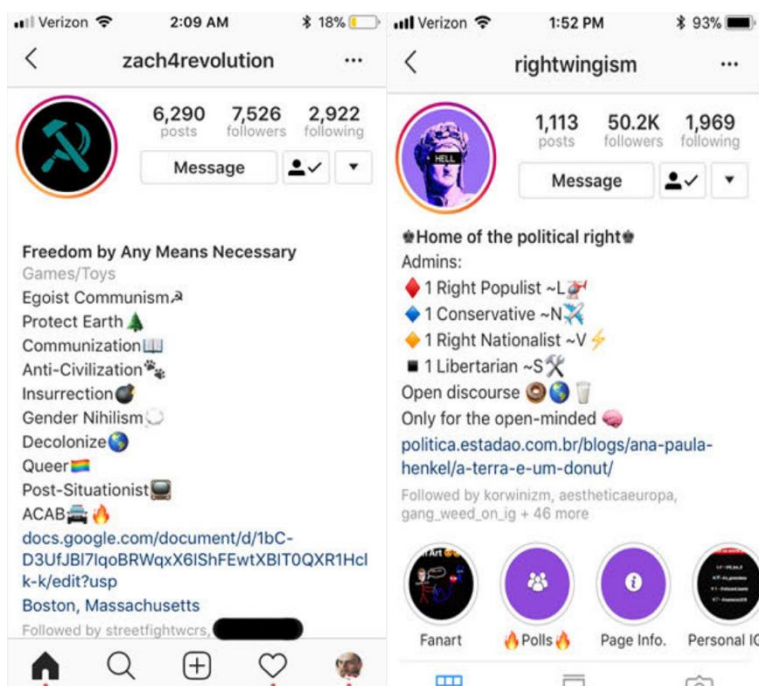


Figure 11: Left and right variants of the prefix/suffix saturated Politigram bios discussed by Citarella.

There are a few other important micro-category precedents to memetic aesthetics which should be mentioned here. As hipsterism began transforming into a mainstream aesthetic toward the end of the 2000s, several commentators began cheekily breaking down broad cultural categories such as “hipster” into a number of smaller niche categories. A good example of this is illustrator Rob Dobi’s *Your Scene Sucks*, an important predecessor of the starter pack meme which was posted online in 2007 and published as a book in 2010. Dobi’s project offers a taxonomy of thirty-eight different scenesters commonly found in various subcultural scenes in the mid-to-late aughts, from the “fixed gear hipster,” to the “sxe mosh warrior.”²⁸¹ Each scenester featured on the site is accompanied by a detailed written description, a playlist of bands they might listen to, a series of links of websites they might visit, and a detailed illustration complete with labels pointing out their various clothing items, accessories, hair styles and tattoos. The page for the “fixed gear hipster” for example, points out his ironic moustache, messenger bag filled with PBR, and his wayfarer glasses, accompanied by written descriptions outlining his diet (“usually a vegan,”) body type (“no more than 100 pounds when soaking wet,”) general attitude (“one of the most pretentious of all hipsters,”) and favourite bands (Animal Collective, Grizzly Bear, etc.,) amongst other traits.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Rob Dobi, *Your Scene Sucks*, n.d., <http://www.dobi.nu/yourscenesucks/>.

²⁸² Ibid. “Fixed Gear Hipster.”

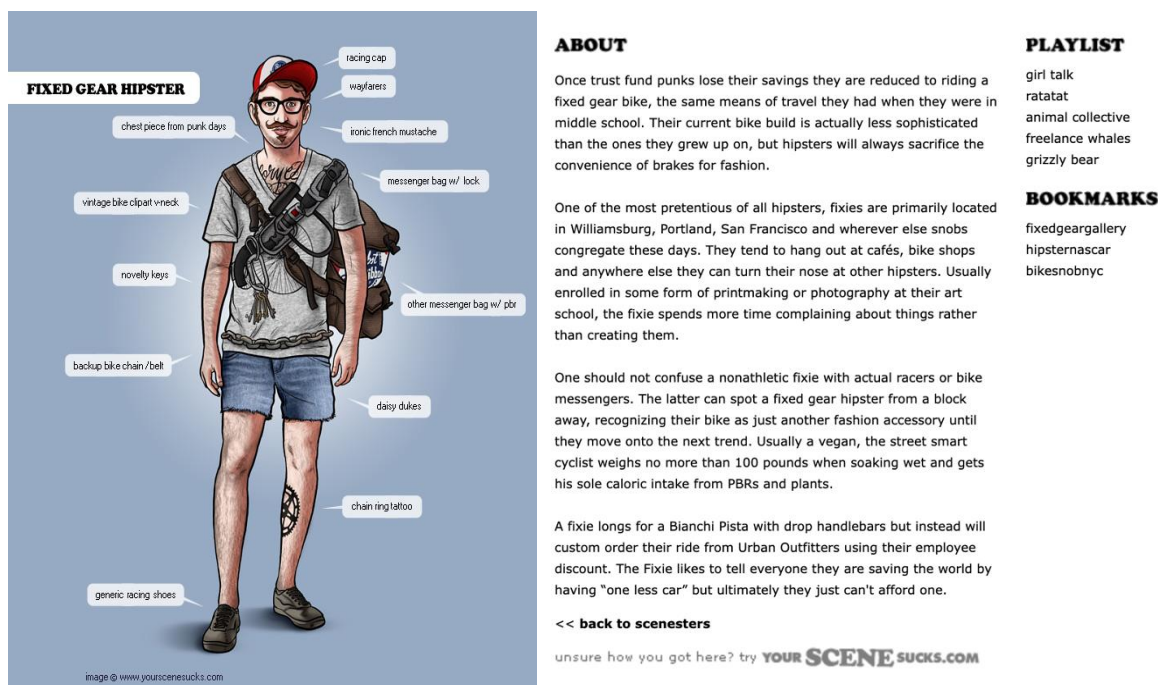


Figure 12: Rob Dobi's "Fixed Gear Hipster."

While *Your Scene Sucks* offers a biting and often hilariously accurate lampoon of the gradual fragmentation of subcultures into increasingly niche categories, its attempt to taxonomize all of the different characters one might encounter in subcultural life still implies the existence of a greater umbrella scene which holds these types together. The picture of the scene painted by *Hipster Runoff* on the other hand, is considerably less optimistic. Run by an anonymous writer under the pseudonym of "Carles" between 2007 and 2013, the wildly prolific "blog worth blogging abt" is best known for initiating the revival of "-core" and "-wave" suffixes used in naming memetic aesthetics, when it coined the "chillwave" genre in a 2009 post.²⁸³ Aptly described in a *Vice* article by Brian Merchant

²⁸³ Carles, "HIPSTER RUNOFF," *Hipster Runoff*, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20140402080506/http://hipsterrunoff.com/topic/hipster-runoff>.

as “part relentless hipster scene chronicle, part relentless satirization of that scene, part shameless clickbait, part self-reflexive critique of the entire online economy,” *Hipster Runoff* reads something like a hipster autoethnography written in a distinctive tone dripping with irony, sarcasm, and outdated internet abbreviations. As Brad Troemel states:

Carles ostensibly served as a music journalist for the mp3 blogosphere, but his real role was the trickster documentarian for all of indie culture during a transitional period in the aughts where every last vestige of subcultural authenticity was being converted into a newly American Apparel-ized mainstream. In his vapidly analytical tone, Carles showed how all culture was just as shallow and attention-seeking as the mainstream culture it defined itself in opposition to. The Hipster Runoff was a years-long performance piece where Carles grappled with the existential crisis of how to be a relevant person who liked relevant music and had relevant opinions. He was a caricature of someone whose entire identity was constructed on being in the know, while operating in an online scene cannibalizing itself into ever more niche subgenres. Carles’ answer to this dilemma was to accelerate the entire process by inventing neologisms for every part of the Pitchfork Media extended universe...His Capacity to identify and name every indie microtrend the moment it came into existence is what made his writing so powerful. It immediately took the mystique out of the trend by making it something which was knowable and thus no longer cool.²⁸⁴

In hindsight, much of the content on *Hipster Runoff* feels quite prophetic. Across the site’s thousands of posts, Carles aptly captures the hysterical breaking point of the hipster pursuit of subcultural authenticity (noteworthy posts include: “What is the most Authentic Alt Job?”, “Does n e 1 know if GORILLAZ are alt/authentic? Do u like ‘doodle’ bands?”, and “Was the Super Bowl an authentic consumer alt experience?”), and the increasing salience of personal branding in contemporary popular culture (“Sorta feel sad about social media + the modern world. So much pressure to ‘be somebody’, to ‘evolve ur

²⁸⁴ Brad Troemel, “The Post Internet Report,” *Patreon*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/80981674>.

personal brand' into something greater than yourself.")²⁸⁵ As Troemel notes above, perhaps the most important recurring theme on *Hipster Runoff* from the perspective of memetic aesthetics is the information economy's need for increasingly niche subcategories in response to the waning of authenticity. As Carles writes in a particularly predictive post about the waning signifying power of "indie" as a descriptor: "It seems like there needs to be a 'new spirit'/zeitgeist of alternative websites/journalism/blogging in order to move beyond the 'indie era' and find/explore exciting new music. There is a serious crisis brewing."²⁸⁶ As Carles satirically argued, the remedy for this crisis was the creation of new genre categories. This in turn led to *Hipster Runoff*'s most famous coinage—that of the "chillwave" genre, which took place in the context of a post about the band Washed Out and arguably led to the explosion of subsequent aesthetics being named with "-core" and "-wave" suffixes, in which "chillwave" was just one of dozens of satirical titles suggested for the genre, alongside "Post-Freakfolk," "Gazestep," "Post-Electro," "Conceptual Blog Core," and "Pitchforkwavegaze."²⁸⁷

Another important predecessor to memetic aesthetic categories which emerged around this time is what are known as "stock character macros," referring to image macros

²⁸⁵ Carles, "Will Best Coast's Stoner Personal Brand Limit Her Critical & Commercial Upside?" *Hipster Runoff*, Aug. 4, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140410201809/http://www.hipsterrunoff.com/2010/08/will-best-coast%E2%80%99s-stoner-personal-brand-limit-her-critical-commercial-upside.html>.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., "Evolving Beyond 'Indie Music': The Era of Ternative Music," Feb. 3, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140708150636/http://hipsterrunoff.com/2010/02/evolving-beyond-indie-music-era-ternative-music.html>.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., "Is WASHED OUT the next Neon Indian/Memory Cassette?" Jul. 27, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130717013018/http://hipsterrunoff.com/node/1780>.

based on stock characters which represent stereotypical behaviours. Stock character macros originated as “advice animals,” beginning with the seemingly benign yet evil “Advice Dog” in 2006, and spurring the creation of other animal advisors such as “Socially Awkward Penguin,” “Courage Wolf,” and “Philosoraptor.”²⁸⁸ Following the creation of “PTSD Clarinet Boy” in 2009, humans gradually became more common protagonists of stock character memes, resulting in the production of numerous memorable internet personalities of this era such as “Good Guy Greg,” and his nemesis “Scumbag Steve.”²⁸⁹



²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Wilba, “PTSD Clarinet Boy,” *Know Your Meme*, 2010, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ptsd-clarinet-boy>.



Figure 13: Advice Dog, "PTSD Clarinet Boy," "Good Guy Greg," and "Scumbag Steve."

Image macro memes went mainstream and started to feel largely played out by around 2013 and 2014, gradually becoming replaced by a wave of memes which Ryan Milner describes as more capacious, relatable, ironic, self-referential, intertextual, and surreal—in short, *danker*.²⁹⁰ The advent of starter pack memes in 2014 was crucial to this development. Starter packs removed the stock protagonist as the central subject of *Your Scene Sucks*-esque breakdowns of a particular type, opening the type in question up to identification with real people. This meant that subsequent stock types such as the *Karen* and the *Kyle* were no longer confined to a singular representation and could now be used to describe people one might encounter in daily life. The reduction of a type to a floating mass of signifiers also fit with the post-authentic spirit of memetic aesthetics, allowing aspiring participants of a given aesthetic to simply buy the stylistic signifiers of their style of choice, or even just post pictures of them online.

²⁹⁰ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, 43-45.

While memetic aesthetics are sometimes treated as online subcultures, recent years have seen a growing number of articles describing them as a phenomenon distinct from subculture. Writing that “neither Marx nor Hebdige at the time had ever heard of TikTok,” Rebecca Jennings for example, discusses how memetic aesthetics trouble the traditional Marxist framework used to dissect subcultures.²⁹¹ Ayesha Siddiqi refers to memetic aesthetics as “aesthetic submarkets,” arguing that online microgenres ultimately replaced “authentic” subcultures largely because they don’t require physical participation, nor money to afford the fashion of a given subculture: “You don’t need a closet full of Rick Owens, just a Tumblr account with pictures of it.”²⁹² This lack of physical participation also results a more shallow engagement with a given aesthetic, allowing participants to cycle between different aesthetics as they choose, without being deemed a “poseur,” as one might in a traditional subculture. In an article for *British Vogue* titled “Has the Internet Killed Subcultures?” Yomi Adegoke provides the following affirmative response:

If video killed the radio star, then it was the internet that killed subcultures. In the same way that social media provides an immediate entry point to different societal groups, it also homogenises. As we try harder than ever to differentiate ourselves from each other, elements of subcultures are increasingly coveted because of their connection to the fringes. The cycle of niches eventually being subsumed by the mainstream has happened over generations, but the internet has sped this process up at an unrecognisable rate. These days, before a subculture has fully formed, it’s already been co-opted. Combined with the rise of sample culture, different cultural touchstones are now a dress-up box for Gen Z. This new mix-and-match approach to fashion and music means we now have trends over tribes. It isn’t necessarily a bad thing – young people

²⁹¹ Rebecca Jennings, “E-Girls and E-Boys, Explained,” *Vox*, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/8/1/20748707/egirl-definition-what-is-an-eboy>.

²⁹² Ayesha A. Siddiqi, “Our Brand Could Be Your Crisis,” *The New Inquiry*, May 19, 2016, <https://thenewinquiry.com/our-brand-could-be-your-crisis/>.

can wear what they like as opposed to ascribing to the puritanical fashion ‘rules’ within a group, as was the case when I was growing up.²⁹³

Several critics have pointed out that the post-authentic nature of memetic aesthetics also signifies the digital death of the trend cycle. Terry Nguyen for example, argues that the idea of a single dominant fashion style no longer feels viable in the digital age:

Virality isn’t always a bad thing, but it chips away at this once-valued notion of authenticity, of discovering a music or fashion scene first. Today, this sentiment doesn’t matter nearly as much. Trend mania is considered passé among young social media users. Teenagers, for instance, are accustomed to trying on digital aesthetics like clothes (and also buying fast fashion to represent these tastes), swapping out ones that no longer fit their aspirational personality, style, or vibe. Taste communities, as Andjelic mentioned, aren’t competing for social relevance. *Cottagecore* and *night luxe* can coexist in harmony — and might even overlap in the demographics that they attract.²⁹⁴

While on the surface of things, this pluralization of fashion styles may feel like a liberatory break from “big fashion,” Nguyen discusses how trend reporting has recently given way to “trend manufacturing” to appease the consumer market’s demand for novelty, ultimately resulting in the production of “a garbage-filled hellscape where everything and anything has the potential to be a trend.”²⁹⁵ TikTok trend forecasters *@thedigifairy* offers a different take on the trend cycle, arguing that while microtrends on TikTok are moving at a far more accelerated pace, the macrotrends which inform them are actually moving at the same

²⁹³ Yomi Adegoke, “Has the Internet Killed Subcultures?” *British Vogue*, Mar. 27, 2021, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/yomi-adegoke-subcultures>.

²⁹⁴ Terry Nguyen, “Trends Are Dead,” *Vox*, May 11, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/23065462/trends-death-subcultures-style>; emphases added.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

pace as before.²⁹⁶ *@thedigifairy* offers the shift from *Y2K* to *indie sleaze* as an example, claiming that the former still constitutes the dominant aesthetic amongst Gen Z youth online, while the latter is still in an early phase of its emergence and thus has yet to break through as a mainstream aesthetic.

Numerous commentators have also called attention to how memetic aesthetics represents a heightened stage of commodification in everyday life. YouTuber Lily Alexandre for example, bemoans the idea that Gen Z's most potent art movement is "less about art and more about the thrill of consumption."²⁹⁷ Zorsha Taylor Suich cites the online curation of aesthetics as a symptom of Gen Z's political cynicism.²⁹⁸ Rebecca Jennings draws an apt analogy between the "garbage trends" of the information economy, and the literal landfills in which fast fashion goods end up:

Virality treats humans like fast fashion: algorithmically generated products to shove onto all of our screens at the same time, on which we then spend enormous sums of money and attention before ending up in the literal and/or figurative landfill.²⁹⁹

Other accounts are more optimistic—Olive Pometsy argues rather unconvincingly that social media's emphasis on personal branding and self-curation can be empowering and

²⁹⁶ The Digital Fairy, *@thedigifairy*, *TikTok*, Dec. 19, 2022.

²⁹⁷ Lily Alexandre, "Millions of Dead Vibes: How Aesthetics Hurt Art."

²⁹⁸ Zorsha Taylor Suich, "The Changing Mode of Subcultures: How Generation Z Cope," *Medium*, Jan. 28, 2021, <https://ztswrites.medium.com/the-changing-mode-of-subcultures-how-generation-z-cope-f74c8c719917>.

²⁹⁹ Rebecca Jennings, "The Year of Garbage Internet Trends," *Vox*, Dec. 21, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22841564/internet-trends-tiktok-sea-shanties-bama-rush>.

profitable.³⁰⁰ Pometsy includes a particularly demoralizing quote from Tony Thorne, director of the Slang and New Language Archive at King's College London to argue her case:

'People realised that they could empower themselves, that there's actually no barrier between a commercial exploitative brand and a personal identity brand – the things operate in very similar ways. And, even, you can exploit both of them to make money. [Breaking] that barrier between brand commodification, which used to be done by governments or companies, and the commodification of ideas and trends is something that anybody can do.'³⁰¹

The brand-building of memetic aesthetics has even become an industry in itself, with designers such as Steve Peeps, and organizations such as the Consumer Aesthetics Research Institute building their brands by identifying and naming consumer aesthetics of the past such as *surf crush* and *frutiger aero*, respectively.³⁰²

The self-evidence of branding practices within contemporary digital popular culture, coupled with the Gen Z turn against millennial hipsterism's fetishization of subcultural authenticity has resulted in the development of an aesthetics of post-authenticity unique to the moment of digital social media. This is a slippery and emergent formation which is difficult to pin down, but one whose impressions have become increasingly pronounced across the cultural landscape since the turn of the millennium. The idea of an aesthetics of

³⁰⁰ Olive Pometsy, "Namecore Is the Trend That Unifies All Trends," *The Face*, Apr. 27, 2022, <https://theface.com/culture/namecore-goblin-mode-night-luxe-twee-feral-girl-internet-trends-subcultures-slang-language-coining-names>.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² See: Caroline Bourque, "The Making of a Microtrend," *Business of Home*, Aug. 2, 2023, <https://businessofhome.com/articles/the-making-of-a-micro-trend>.

post-authenticity may also seem misleading because it doesn't account for the many active sites in contemporary popular culture informed by a conception of authenticity. Brooke Erin Duffy for example, discusses the commercial value of practices of "branding the authentic self" amongst social media content producers such as bloggers and influencers, while the coinage and popularization of the term "based" (synonymous with "being yourself") by outsider Bay Area rapper Lil B has in recent years served as an update of hip-hop's discourse of "keeping it real" for the very online.³⁰³ It should be noted then, that the "authenticity" in question here is specifically the collectivist and more political subcultural authenticity described by Sarah Thornton.

The digital post-authentic is populist, cynical/skeptical—sometimes teetering on the edge of accelerationism, and intimately tied to the post-critical turn described by Hal Foster around the same time period.³⁰⁴ In a rapid dialectical flip, bourgeois standards of value and quality, and subsequently their resonances in subculturalist discourses of authenticity not only become obsolete but rather embarrassing, and authenticity itself only becomes attainable through a sense of self-awareness about the inauthenticity of "authenticity," so to speak. The heroes of post-authenticity are the unwavering champions of their own artifice: Lana Del Ray, Fred Durst, Paris Hilton, Donald Trump. Kelefa Sanneh's

³⁰³ Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Ernest Baker, "Lil B Talks Getting Sucker Punched, Gay Rumors, & Drake Envy," *Complex*, Jun. 9, 2010, <https://www.complex.com/music/a/complex/lil-b-talks-getting-sucker-punched-gay-rumors-drake-envy>.

³⁰⁴ Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 138 (Winter 2012): 3-8.

2004 declaration of the obsolescence of “rockism,” paving the way for the triumphant rise of “poptimism” is an early indication that big changes were taking place on the cultural landscape:

Are you really pondering the phony distinction between ‘great art’ and a ‘guilty pleasure’ when you’re humming along to the radio? In an era when listeners routinely -- and fearlessly -- pick music by putting a 40-gig iPod on shuffle, surely we have more interesting things to worry about than that someone might be lip-synching on ‘Saturday Night Live’ or that some rappers gild their phooey.³⁰⁵

Yet, it is particularly in the wake of the hipster in the early to mid-2010s that the tensions between rockism and poptimism—and subsequently between authenticity and post-authenticity reaches its apex. The result takes many different shapes yet is informed by a tongue-in-cheek yet often still semi-serious attempt to clear the long-decaying rubble of modernism’s authenticity fixation and celebrate the superficiality of late capitalist consumer society. Post-authenticity is hyperpop’s embrace of cringey musical subgenres described earlier; the warm embrace of Lana Del Ray by the hipster tastemakers at Pitchfork; the fact that something like nü metal—a genre once associated with strip malls

³⁰⁵ As blogger Suspended Reason writes: “[Poptimism] attempts to move past the (consciously and unconsciously) racialized value judgments (both in origin and practice) of rockism (that certain cultures, esp. those ethnically African, were perceived as more primitive, unsophisticated, and in-touch with nature in some uncorrupted, Rousseauian sense). Disco, that rockist bane of femininity and hedonism, undergoes serious critical re-evaluation/historical revision; with this comes the critical awareness that if past pop music was unfairly slighted, contemporary pop music is likely slighted as well, in equal or greater measure.” Kelefa Sanneh, “The Rap Against Rockism,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2004, https://web.archive.org/web/20170605002518/http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/arts/music/the-rap-against-rockism.html?_r=0; Suspended Reason, “Regarding Rockism Pts 2 & 3: The Progress of Poptimism and the New Rockism,” *Suspended Reason*, Jan. 28, 2016, <https://suspendedreason.com/2016/01/28/regarding-rockism-pts-2-3-the-progress-of-poptimism-and-the-new-rockism/>.

and school shooters—is now cool again.³⁰⁶ It's the embrace of the superficiality of post-9/11 American consumer cultures epitomized by the revival of *y2k* aesthetics such as *McBling* and *cybercore*. It's Brad Troemel's declarations of the death of institutional art and its replacement by memes. It's the tongue-in-cheek suggestion on the part of many memers that capitalism's failures have become so self-evident that Britney Spears, Dolly Parton, or Tom DeLonge may offer a better summary of Karl Marx's thought than Marx himself.



Figure 14: Marx Memes 1: Britney Spears.

³⁰⁶ Jasmine Li, "Are You Ready? The Nu Metal Renaissance Is Upon Us.," *The New York Times*, Jul. 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/24/style/nu-metal-gen-z.html>; Suspended Reason, "Regarding Rockism Pts 2 & 3: The Progress of Poptimism and the New Rockism."



Figure 15: Marx Memes 2: Dolly Parton.

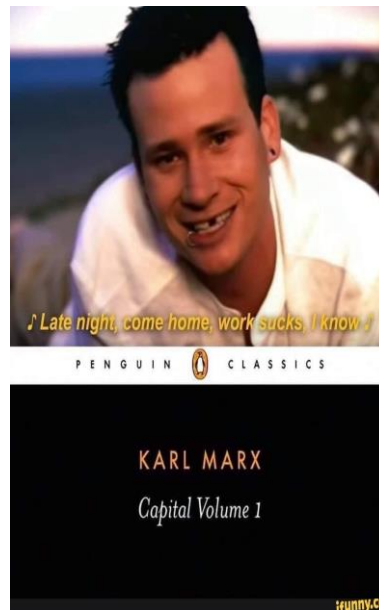


Figure 16: Marx Memes 3: Tom Delonge.

I want to argue here that the flood-like proliferation of memetic aesthetic categories following the death of the hipster is an important symptom of the aesthetics of post-authenticity I am describing here. It is only once the aesthetic has been emptied of its authenticity-informed axiological charge that it may become synonymous with "style," allowing *all* existing styles to become designated as "aesthetic" without any kind of

hierarchy of distinction between them. It is also in a context of such aesthetic relativism that *thingness* (i.e., the recognizability of a category informed by its level of public circulation) becomes the central metric by which to evaluate the ever-expanding stock of products within the online supermarket of style. In other words, there are no longer good or bad aesthetic objects or styles, but merely a boundless array of aesthetic categories through which cultural practices may derive a sense of meaning. This is the endpoint of the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline: the moment at which aesthetics become fully untethered by their relationship to judgment and instead come to name a vast expanse of consumer styles emerging from the digi-capitalist marketplace.

Part II: Vibeology and Thingification

Chapter 5: "What Vibe Do I Give Off?"

Let's start with something simple, like a Tweet by user *@manicpixiedreamqueen* which reads "why do people philosophize when they could just vibe"? Or perhaps a wrestling meme, posted by Instagram meme account *@scottsteinerxhelloworldkitty*, which features wrestlers Terry Funk and Mick Foley at an AOL promotion event and reads: "im not just posting memes im curating a vibe"? Or even something a bit more earnest, like a white square with black text, almost "KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON"-esque, which reads:

"VIBES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS"? Let's just cut to the chase: "What vibe do I give off?" The mechanism of the game is quite simple: by selecting a choice from each of the corresponding numbers, letters, and symbols, one can create a combination which best reflects their personality, lifestyle, or aesthetic. On this particularly cursed edition, we have a selection of five antagonists (Joaquin Phoenix as The Joker, Slavoj Žižek, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, BOB from Twin Peaks, and Sasha Grey), five beverages (Bacardi White, iced coffee, Diet Coke, Club-Mate, and Black Cherry White Claw), and five "drugs" (marijuana, cocaine, Heinz Sweet Relish, oxycodone, and LSD), allowing us to create combinations like a Bacardi-drinking, coke-snorting Žižek or a Club-Mate-drinking, relish-using Grey.

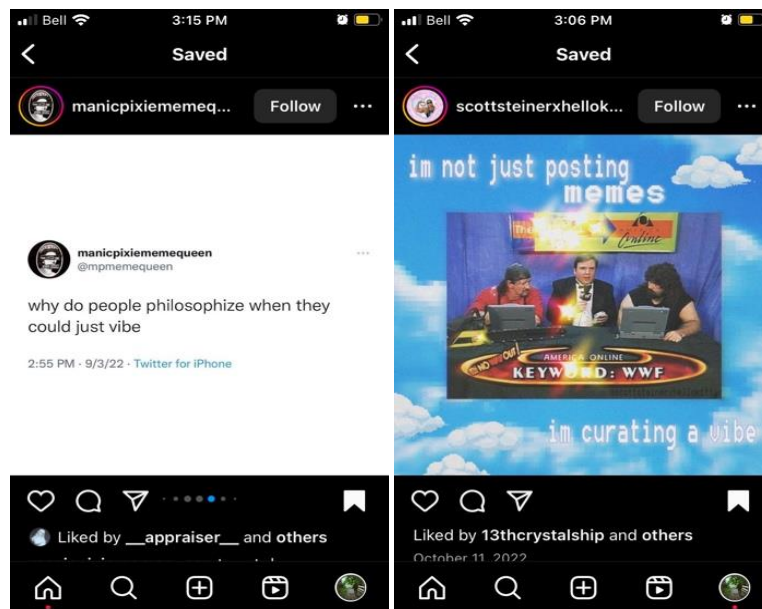


Figure 17: "im not just posting memes im curating a vibe" and "why do people philosophize when they could just vibe."

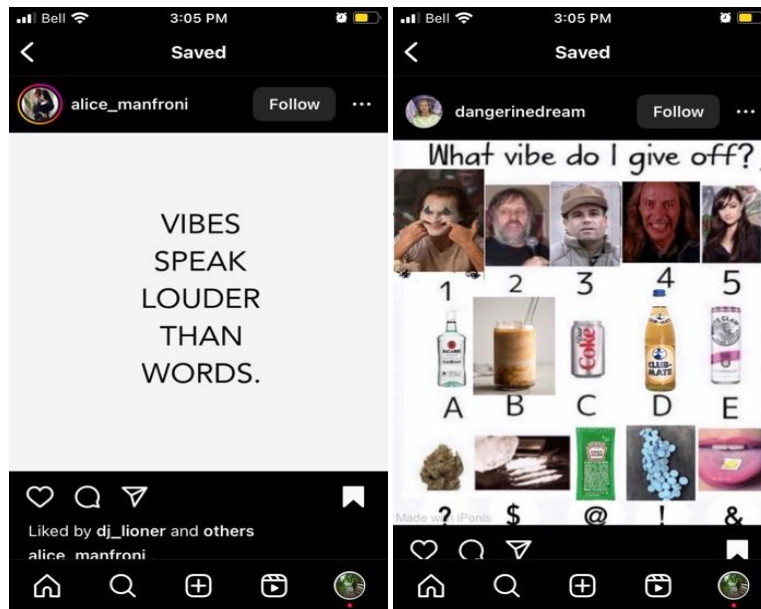


Figure 18: “VIBES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS” and “What vibe do I give off?”

As should now be quite obvious, I bring up these examples because of their emphasis on the *vibe*, a concept whose ubiquity in digital popular culture over the past few years gives a sense of the texture of aesthetic experience in the age of the meme. Vibes are affect theory for the hashtag-minded and the algorithmically inclined. They’re the virtual synaesthetic parameters which imbue a sense of familiarity to the small constellations of objects, beings, relations, and sensations which we call *things*, whether they’re aesthetics, genres, styles, or categories. They’re at once pervasive and elusive—constantly being alluded to in everyday life, but remarkably challenging to describe and quantify. Robin James writes that “Vibes (or sometimes “vibez”) are everywhere now,” and meme culture is certainly no exception.³⁰⁷ “We Saw You From Across the Bar and Really Dig Your Vibe” for example, is a popular phrasal meme template which is combined with

³⁰⁷ Robin James, “What Is a Vibe? On Vibez, Moods, Feels, and Contemporary Finance Capitalism.”

pictures of different pairs of people to jokingly depict them as a couple looking for a potential third in the bedroom on their night out on the town; and the “What vibe do I give off?” meme has become so pervasive that Instagram user *@lemon.rind.shiv* made a metatextual “What vibe do I give off?” meme made up of nine other “What vibe do I give off?” memes.³⁰⁸

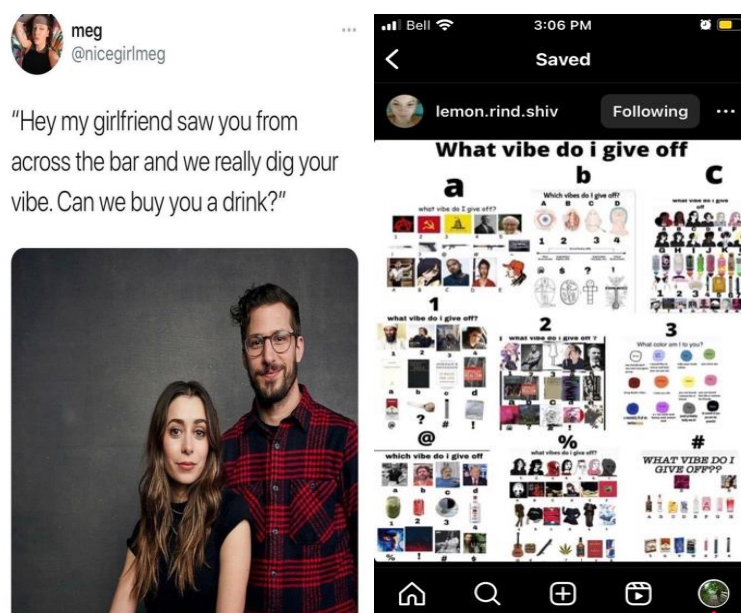


Figure 19: *@nicegirlmeg's* original “We Saw You From Across the Bar and Really Dig Your Vibe” meme and *@lemon.rind.shiv's* metatextual “What vibe do I give off?” meme.

Even outside of the memeverse, vibes seem to lurk around every corner. We curate them into playlists to share with our friends, we read articles describing economic “vibecessions,” we see them in Instagrammable brunch spots and third-wave coffee shops where stark white walls are adorned with neon signs which read “GOOD VIBES ONLY” or

³⁰⁸ Don, “We Saw You From Across the Bar and Really Dig Your Vibe,” *Know Your Meme*, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-saw-you-from-across-the-bar-and-really-dig-your-vibe>.

simply just “VIBES.”³⁰⁹ The pervasiveness of vibes is such that they often go unmentioned but rather alluded to through indirect means. Consider for example the popularity of the phrase “it’s giving” (e.g., “it’s giving Madonna”). Appropriated from ball culture along with so many other recent entries in the popular lexicon such as “yaas queen,” “serving tea,” and “throwing shade,” “it’s giving” denotes the giving off of *vibes*, yet parenthesizes the vibe in question as if to emphasize the “level of almost spiritual understanding” at play in a given association between two entities.³¹⁰ A similar sense of quasi-spiritual intuition informs the “I can’t explain why” meme template on Twitter. Dating back at least as far as 2015, when user *@broderick* posted: “I can’t explain why but I’m sure Madonna’s breathe [sic] smells like French onion dip like 24/7,” this phrasal template derives its humour from making outlandish claims premised on a relational mode of intuition. What’s noteworthy about “I can’t explain why” memes is the way in which they call our attention to the subtle means through which our attunement to vibes and ability to make affective connections between things often bypasses reason. Common sense may tell us that the *Lord of the Rings* series has nothing to do with pumpkin spice, that Iowa, Ohio, Idaho, and Indiana are all geographically distinct places, or that the spelling of “L.G.B.T.Q.” in *The New York Times*

³⁰⁹ See: Kevin T. Dugan, “Are We in a Recession or a Vibecession?” *New York Magazine*, Aug. 13, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/08/recession-or-vibecession.html>.

³¹⁰ Caleb Madison, “‘It’s Giving’: A Gift to Language,” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 6, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2021/12/the-good-word-december-6th/620894/>.

Manual of Style isn't intended to be homophobic, but as mentioned earlier, "vibes speak louder than words," so all the memes below must be true—just don't ask me why.³¹¹



³¹¹ @myelessar, "lord of the rings has the same vibe as the sound of rain from indoors, the smell of pumpkin spice in autumn, seeing footprints in the snow and watching the sunset I can't explain why but i'm right," *Twitter*, Aug. 29, 2021; @Royotathon, "don't ask me to explain this but iowa, ohio, and idaho are all the same place, and that place is indiana," *Twitter*, Oct. 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Royotathon/status/1447555909249609731>; @nikostratis, "I can't explain why, but the way the NYT style guide spells it L.G.B.T.Q. is homophobic," *Twitter*, Mar. 21, 2022, <https://twitter.com/nikostratis/status/1506066568551501828>.

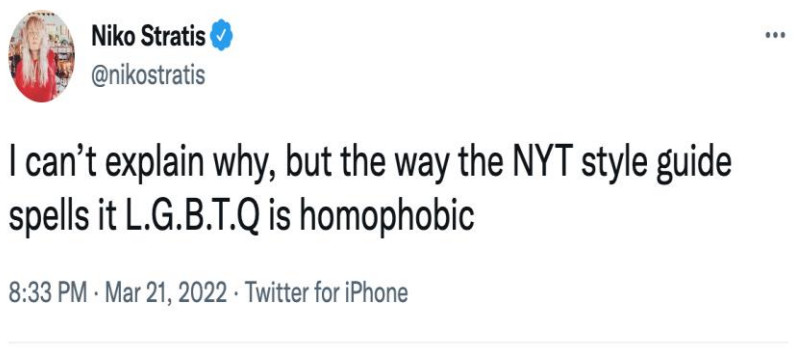


Figure 20: Various iterations of the “I can’t explain why” meme template on Twitter.

While the etymology of the vibe is a little convoluted, the term has been traced as far back as the 1940s, when the “picking up” and “sending” of vibrations connoted a kind of “wordless communication” of sexuality in gay slang.³¹² Graham St John points out that the concept of the vibe entered the popular vernacular in 1967, “more-than-likely a result of the ‘happenings’ and the psychedelic jouissance of the so-called Summer of Love,” yet suggests that the term likely entered the countercultural vocabulary via “the complex intersecting lines of African and European trajectories” in jazz music.³¹³ As Kyra D. Gaunt notes, the term was re-popularized by African American youth sometime in the 1980s, informing much of hip-hop music and culture throughout the 1990s.³¹⁴ A Tribe Called Quest’s “Vibes and Stuff” (1991), R. Kelly’s “She’s Got That Vibe” (1992), the launch of *Vibe* magazine (1993), and Busta Rhymes’ “Ill Vibe” (1996) anticipated the onslaught of vibe-related content in the twenty-teens, featuring songs such as Kendrick Lamar’s “Bitch, Don’t

³¹² Bruce Rodgers, *In The Queens’ Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972).

³¹³ Graham St John, “The Vibe of the Exiles: Aliens, Afropsychedelia and Psyculture,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 56–87, 59 & 60.

³¹⁴ Kyra D. Gaunt, “‘The Two O’Clock Vibe’: Embodying the Jam of Musical Blackness in and out of Its Everyday Context,” *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 372–397, 373.

Kill My Vibe" (2012), DeJ Loaf's "Vibes" (2016), 2 Chainz "It's a Vibe" (2017), and KrispyLife Kidd's "Goat Vibe" (2020), amongst many others.³¹⁵

As many scholars and writers have pointed out, the heightened salience which the concept of the vibe has assumed in contemporary popular culture also speaks to the quality of affective and aesthetic experience in the age of digital capitalism. Philosopher Brian Massumi anticipated a shift in the quality of affective experience as early as 1995, arguing in his influential essay "The Autonomy of Affect" that the heightened centrality of affect in postmodern culture harnessed by figures like Ronald Reagan might be characteristic of the zapping pace of "late-capitalist, image- and information-based economies."³¹⁶ Yet, it's Massumi's mention of "the joyously incongruent juxtapositions of surfing the Internet" which feels especially prophetic in the nightcore-paced, vibe-driven age of the smartphone.³¹⁷ Vibes are at play when our thumbs flinch to click past Instagram stories we instinctively suspect might be ads before we even turn our eyes to check if the "sponsored" sign is present, or in the athletic pace through which one might read the vibes of potential partners on a dating app like Tinder, in which the affective semiotics of intimate desire literally falls into the palm of our hand. As vibes guide us through the

³¹⁵ "Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe," track #2 on Kendrick Lamar, *Good Kid, M.A.A.d City*, Interscope Records B0017695-01, Aftermath Entertainment B0017695-01, Top Dawg Entertainment B0017695-01, 2012; "Goat Vibe," track #1 on KrispyLife Kidd, *Goat Vibe*, KrispyLife Ent, 2020; "Ill Vibe," track #8 on Busta Rhymes, *The Coming*, Elektra 61742-1, 1996; "It's a Vibe," track #7 on 2 Chainz, *Pretty Girls Like Trap Music*, Def Jam Recordings B0026489-02, 2017; "She's Got That Vibe," track #2 on R. Kelly and Public Announcement, *Born Into the 90's*, Jive 01241414692, 1992; "Vibes," track #1 on DeJ Loaf, *All Jokes Aside*, self-released, 2016; "Vibes and Stuff," track #7 on A Tribe Called Quest, *The Low End Theory*, Jive 1418-2-J, 1991.

³¹⁶ Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* no. 31 (Autumn, 1995): 83-109, 103.

³¹⁷ Ibid, 104.

whirlwind pace of digi-capitalist life, a growing body of literature focusing specifically on the centrality of the vibe in digital culture is naturally beginning to develop. Arguing that “vibes/moods/feels/orientations are the object of governance in post-normative...neoliberalisms,” Robin James discusses how the notion of the vibe has become appropriated from its subcultural roots and co-opted by capitalism, serving as a popular language for brands and an investment strategy used to aid entrepreneurs.³¹⁸ James also likens vibes to the way recommendation algorithms work:

Vibes are a capital-T *Thing* today because they are pop culture analogs of the mathematical processes AI, ML, and other forms of contemporary tech use to perceive and surveil us. Vibes are how we see ourselves the way algorithms see us.³¹⁹

Peli Grietzer makes a similar claim in his doctoral dissertation, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, describing the vibe as “a logic of formal affinity” which informs the “ambient meaning” of a work, or a body of works, and likening this to the aesthetic unity between objects of a particular canon detected by autoencoders.³²⁰ Ludwig Yeetgenstein argues that the associative and affective nature of the vibe serves as a simpler means of categorizing information in a digital moment flooded with data:

In our present technological era, humans have also needed a new framework to avoid drowning in the daily firehose of entertainment, media, and information. Given this setting of increasing complexity, it becomes more appealing to use an associative concept like “vibes” as a simplifying framework for understanding or self-expression. If we can’t make sense of all the sensory and conceptual data that saturates our

³¹⁸ Robin James, “What Is a Vibe? On Vibe, Moods, Feels, and Contemporary Finance Capitalism”; Robin James, “No Genre, Just Vibes,” *it’s her factory*, Nov. 15, 2021, <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2021/11/no-genre-just-vibes/>.

³¹⁹ Robin James, “No Genre, Just Vibes”; emphasis added.

³²⁰ Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, 99 & 121.

experience, at least we can extract some salient features and then mix and match them in appealing and inchoate ways. Explanations are unnecessary; it's seen as enough to just recognize a desired mood or feeling.³²¹

In his *New Yorker* article titled "TikTok and the Vibes Revival," Kyle Chayka similarly argues that it's the pre-linguistic quality of vibes which makes them particularly well-suited to "a social-media landscape that is increasingly prioritizing audio, video, and images over text."³²²

As Chayka aptly points out, the participatory nature of meme culture creates a fertile ground for the curation of ever more specific vibes, ultimately leading to a "vibes revival" characterized by the proliferation of niche memetic aesthetic categories such as *cottagecore* and *dark academia*.³²³ The notion of the vibe is so vital to memetic aesthetics that YouTuber Lily Alexandre forgoes the more traditional designation of "internet aesthetics" and the more recently popularized "namecore" to specifically refer to the phenomenon as *vibes culture*, and Kaitlyn Tiffany specifically defines [memetic] aesthetics as "a collection of signifiers or, more precisely, a 'vibe.'"³²⁴ If vibes are indispensable to understanding memetic aesthetics—or digital culture in general, it's because they serve as the slippery adhesive that somehow holds together any assemblage of objects, ideas, entities, behaviours, and categories which we might call a *thing*. The relationship between

³²¹ Ludwig Yeetgenstein, "Nameless Feeling," *Real Life*, Sep. 27, 2021, <https://reallifemag.com/nameless-feeling/>.

³²² Kyle Chayka, "TikTok and the Vibes Revival."

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Lily Alexandre, "Millions of Dead Vibes: How Aesthetics Hurt Art;" Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Cottagecore Was Only the Beginning."

vibes and objects of digital culture such as memetic aesthetic categories (i.e., *things*) then, is that of the virtual to the actual. As such, vibes are the central site of meaning-making in digital culture—they're where memes, and memetic aesthetics in turn, derive their sense of *sameness*.

Of course, vibes don't always present us with a neatly articulated map of a given body of cultural practices. Quite often in fact, they're barely legible at all. Much of online humour in general is characterized by a powerful WTF-factor which is premised on the breakdown of semantic meaning in the chaotic information clusterfuck of the internet. "Cursed memes" for example, are a genre typically made up of strange and unsettling found pictures (e.g., POV shots of someone flossing a fish's teeth or bathing in a bathtub full of pickles) which derive their humour from their utter unintelligibility. Even if they don't depict any kind of coherent aesthetic or recognizable "type of guy," the cursed memes below still very much have *a vibe*, albeit one which is far more singular and abstract. What makes the vibe such a useful concept to understanding emergent cultural production in the digital age then, is its capaciousness and ubiquity, the fact that it can name something as obscure and singular as a Twitter user who thinks Madonna's breath smells like French onion dip, as well as something as broad and collective as the sense of a historical era like a structure of feeling, a cultural logic, or a *vibe shift*.³²⁵ Vibes thus trace each stage of a

³²⁵ Here I'm drawing on Peli Grietzer, who suggests that concepts like vibe, mood, world, structure of feeling, cultural logic, sensorium, psychogeography and habitus may be collectively understood as what he terms "structures of ambient meaning," characterized as virtual, diffused and immanent. Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, 93-94.

cultural object's process of emergence from a mere idea, to a *thing*, and perhaps even a new memetic aesthetic category. Just because there aren't any TikTok videos up about the "fishflosser" or "picklebather" aesthetics yet, it doesn't mean that these couldn't eventually turn into categories of their own. Stranger things have surely happened on the internet.

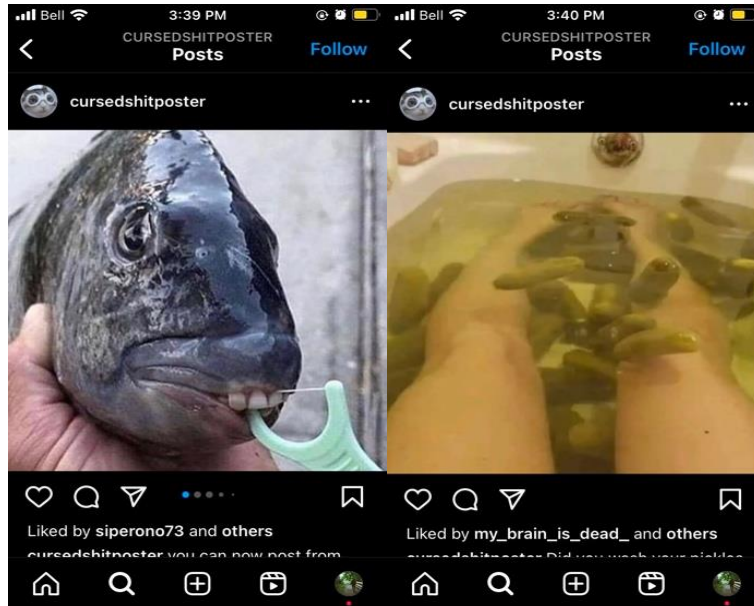


Figure 21: Cursed memes: flossing a fish & bathing in pickles.

One of the central claims in this section is that vibes provide a useful theoretical tool for making sense of affective transmission and resonance in the age of the meme. While affect theory has long provided a much-needed space on matters such as embodiment, sensation, and virtuality, its Deleuzo-Guattarian fixation on the minor, the singular, the indeterminate, the asocial, and the non-representational has drawn a number of important critiques from various camps of feminist, Marxist, and phenomenological thought which emphasize affect's operations in more social, discursive, and mediated

contexts.³²⁶ Literally deriving their name from the French word for “same,” memes are a perfect example of the sociality of affect. Marcella Szablewicz for example, draws on the work of Raymond Williams to examine how memes represent particular structures of feeling shared by individuals with similar modes of experience, and subsequently produce emergent forms of affective identification.³²⁷ The question of the vibe’s relation to affect will be discussed further in the following chapter, but for now it should suffice to say that far from being autonomous, most of the vibes described in this dissertation are networked, interconnected, discursive, semiotic, social, and viral.

A key takeaway over the following chapters is that despite their nebulous and indeterminate nature, vibes can be *read*. To this end, I borrow the term *vibeology* from Paula Abdul’s 1991 hit single to name a broad, interpretive, and relational framework I use to read contemporary digital pop culture.³²⁸ Vibeology traces the formal, semiotic, affective, and material affinities between “things” and *things* across a vast array of networks, platforms, media, and historical trajectories. It rejects determinism and embraces contingency, yet seeks to uncover some of the patterns, logics, and connections which

³²⁶ See for example: Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (London: Routledge, 2014); Claire Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn,” *Cultural Studies* 19 no. 5 (2005): 548-567; Jan Simon Hutta, “The Affective Life of Semiotics,” *Geographica Helvetica* 70 (2015): 295-309; William Mazzarella, “Affect: What is it Good for?” *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, edited by Saurabh Dube (New York: Routledge, 2009): 291-309; Caroline Pedwell, “Mediated Habits: Images, Networked Affect and Social Change,” *Subjectivity* 10 (2017): 147-169; Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014).

³²⁷ Marcella Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘Structures of Feeling’ for Disillusioned Young Netizens,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 259-275.

³²⁸ “Vibeology,” track #5 on Paula Abdul, *Spellbound*, Virgin 91611-4, 1991.

imbue emergent affective/aesthetic categories with a sense of familiarity or resonance. Most importantly, it allows us to see how intuitive correspondences between different objects, concepts, people, feelings, and categories create relationships which stabilize into collective cultural entities as they circulate as memes. Let's return to the "What vibe do I give off?" meme mentioned at the start of this chapter to get a sense of how this works. What's ostensibly fun about the "What vibe do I give off?" meme is creating a stereotype of oneself based on a vibe derived from a limited number of signifiers—a *starter pack* of sorts. The constellation of signifiers depicted in one's starter pack in turn, allows others to try to make sense of one's aesthetic or general "type of guy" in relation to any conceivable point of reference. Details are important here. Consider the examples mentioned earlier: the Bacardi-drinking, coke-snorting Slavoj Žižek and the Club-Mate-drinking, relish-using Sasha Grey. In the case of the former, we might have a someone with Žižek's slobbishness, theoretical prowess, edgelord-like disregard for political correctness and Marxist leanings, as well as an appetite for parties and substance (ab)use. Maybe it's a Dimes Square-adjacent master's student at NYU who has a bit of a party habit. *Mattress on the floor, Y/N? Artist? Really into Mark Fisher?* Each little bit of information contributes something to the worldbuilding project. *Pizza boxes on the floor? What kind of Marxist?* We could go on forever. In the case of the latter, we could say Sasha Grey might variously be giving "post-

modern feminist," intellectual, hot girl, and hipster.³²⁹ The Club-Mate and relish (over alcoholic drinks and other drugs) suggest that she's sober, while the former also likely indicates some sort of connection to Berlin and its nightlife. Perhaps she's a sober raver and/or a DJ—into Foucault, Italian Neorealism, mid-90s breakcore, iced Americanos...

Of course, these readings might also completely miss the mark. What if the Žižek guy doesn't live in Bushwick, but in Idaho, where he gets wasted alone because he can't find anybody to talk about dialectics with IRL? What if the Grey girl isn't sober at all and has no relationship to DJ culture? Maybe she only picked the relish over the other drugs because her drug of choice is ketamine, and picked the Club-Mate because she enjoys drinking Vodka-Mates at thrash metal shows. The fact is that none of this really matters. Vibeology isn't concerned with getting an exact read on a type of guy based on a few signifiers as it is with making sense of how a picture of a hipster porn star, a German soft drink, and a packet of relish might evoke a particular affective/aesthetic world which might also include the city of Berlin, French philosophy, and third wave coffee. In other words, vibeology is concerned with making sense of the discrete affective connections through which we read cultural objects by connecting them to social practices and sensibilities within the social-material world. Drawing on Peli Grietzer's assertion that there exists a kind of reciprocity between the cognitive, affective, and material aspects of life, vibeology asks

³²⁹ See: Nils Bremer, "I Myself Don't Believe in Feminism," *Journal Frankfurt*, Sep. 22, 2011, https://www.journal-frankfurt.de/journal_news/Kultur-9/Sasha-Grey-I-myself-dont-believe-in-feminism-14134.html.

what the connections are between various cultural objects; whether they form worlds in which the objects might all coalesce into some kind of type; how these worlds were created in the first place; what stuck to them and what didn't, and why.³³⁰ Answering these questions requires a broad, interpretive practice which is far from scientific, but which might offer a sense of how and why particular practices come together into forms we can recognize and understand.

Chapter 6: How (Not) to Read the Internet

³³⁰ Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, 145-146.

On February 16th, 2022, *The Cut* published an article by Allison P. Davis called “A Vibe Shift Is Coming: Will Any of Us Survive It?” In the article, Davis summarizes an earlier Substack entry by Sean Monahan—the trend forecaster whose now-defunct art collective K-HOLE famously coined the *normcore* aesthetic in 2013—which uses the term “vibe shift” to describe radical aesthetic/affective shifts in the cultural zeitgeist, much like what Raymond Williams refers to in his work as a shift in the structure of feeling.³³¹ Monahan claims that there had been three major vibe shifts over the past two decades: from “Hipster/Indie Music” (2003-2009) to “Post-Internet/Techno Revival” (2010-2016), to “Hypebeast/Woke” (2016-2020), followed by a more elusive recent shift.³³² While the cultural climate of this most recent vibe shift had yet to be determined, Monahan suggested that the burgeoning popularity of the hipster-nostalgic *indie sleaze* aesthetic— (“American Apparel, flash photography at parties, and messy hair and messy makeup”)—might signify a post-pandemic return to the convivial and carefree atmosphere of the hipster years.³³³ The idea was that after many sobering years of online culture wars followed by pandemic isolation, the kids were ready for “hot vaxx summer,” and with Trump out of the White House and the vaccines flowing, there was a yearning to return to the mindless self-indulgence of the 2000s hipster era.³³⁴ In other words, drug-fueled

³³¹ Allison P. Davis, “A Vibe Shift Is Coming: Will Any of Us Survive It?” *The Cut*, Feb. 16, 2022, <https://www.thecut.com/2022/02/a-vibe-shift-is-coming.html>.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

parties, smoking cigarettes, and being equal parts hot and messy were coming back in a big way, and heated online political debates and virtue signalling were out. Monahan illustrated the cultural climate of the supposed vibe shift with a meme created by Dean Kissick titled “One Path for the Internet,” which depicts a Venn diagram of clusters of seemingly random online signifiers of the post-woke/edgy/reactionary, and extremely online scene of online personalities, artists, and socialites which became associated with New York’s micro-neighbourhood of Dimes Square in the early 2020s.

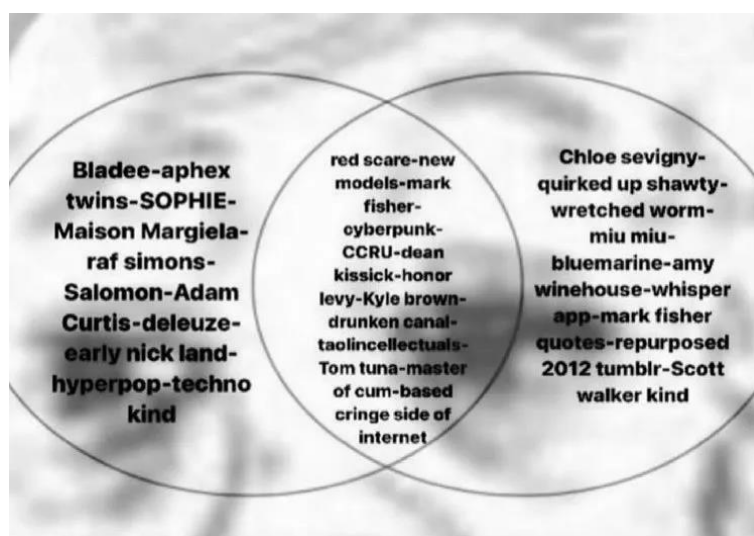


Figure 22: Dean Kissick’s “One Path for the Internet” meme from Sean Monahan’s *vibe shift* report.

Crammed with names of various fashion labels, theorists, musical artists, and Dime Square-adjacent internet personalities, podcasts, and social media accounts, and organized into three distinct “kinds” and “sides of the internet,” Kissick’s meme offers a nebulous glimpse into an aesthetic world of its own. Exactly what the meme—or Dimes Square, or the *vibe shift* for that matter—signifies however, is hard to make out, especially considering the general disposition towards irony, (self)mythologization, and online

esotericism which pervades this particular corner of the internet. Made up of several prominent writers, podcasters, bloggers and memers, the Dimes Square “scene” came to prominence during the Covid-19 pandemic when rumours began to spread of a reactionary avant-garde art scene emerging in downtown New York. While it remains difficult to distinguish fact from myth, Dimes Square made its biggest headlines around 2022, with journalists clambering to write sensationalistic accounts of its tech billionaire-funded anti-woke film festivals, and popularization of “trad” Catholicism.³³⁵ By stringing together a smorgasbord of signifiers variously giving internet-damaged/extremely online, post/anti-woke, fashion-conscious, drug-addled, accelerationist New York art person, and labelling it as the “One Path for the Internet,” Kissick’s meme was thus intended as a tongue-in-cheek joke about the “direction” of the vibe shift of contemporary culture.

The reaction to the vibe shift report was immediate and polarizing, to say the very least. Within a day of the article’s publication, *angelicism01*, the Substacker who first coined the term “vibe shift” in a now-deleted series of Tweets, published a piece called “Somebody Please Columbine The Entire The Cut Editorial Staff,” in which he accuses Davis of a “terminal not-getting-it.”³³⁶ In his characteristically self-referential and colourful prose,

³³⁵ More on Dimes Square in Chapter 8. See for example: Joseph Bernstein, “‘Look At What We’re Doing With Your Money, You Dick’: How Peter Thiel Backed An ‘Anti-Woke’ Film Festival,” *Buzzfeed News*, Mar. 3, 2022, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/peter-thiel-anti-woke-film-festival-trevor-bazile>; Julia Yost, “New York’s Hottest Club Is the Catholic Church,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/opinion/nyc-catholicism-dimes-square-religion.html>.

³³⁶ angelicism01, “Somebody Please Columbine The Entire The Cut Editorial Staff,” *ANGELICISM01 滲み出るエロス*, <https://cashedcobrazhousewriter.substack.com/p/somebody-please-columbine-the-entire-e73?s=r.n>

angelicism seems to dance around the question of exactly *what* the vibe shift was, instead offering its reader a series of cryptic Twitter receipts from the summer of 2021 and alluding to the fact that you had to be there to understand. Claiming to reveal what the vibe shift “really means,” *angelicism* cites the following screenshot of a Tweet by *@wretched_worm*, suggesting some relation to an anti-woke/cancel culture position:



Figure 23: *@wretched_worm's Tweet about the "real" meaning of the vibe shift.*

In an earlier but similarly murderous Substack post responding to Monahan's original vibe shift forecast, Substacker *paul (from bible)* specifically targets Kissick's "One Path for the Internet" meme, describing it as a clueless attempt to map online subcultures made by someone who can't read the internet.³³⁷ With regard to the schizophrenic mass of signifiers presented in Kissick's meme, *paul (from bible)* writes, "These are things you can't google because our platforms, especially Twitter, are transient by design and without

³³⁷ The subheading for *paul (from bible)*'s Substack post is "or: 'this is lame, you should delete it for the sake of the universe, and kill who made it.'" *paul (from bible)*, "notes on Dean Kissick's 'One Path for the Internet,'" *false profits*, Jun. 10, 2021, <https://gnosticsamsara.substack.com/p/notes-on-dean-kissicks-one-path-for>.

proper archiving, canonizing, recontextualizing, someone from the outside will never Get It.”³³⁸ In an article called “How to Read the Internet,” Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun similarly cite the vibe shift report as a prime example of how not to read the internet, accusing Monahan and Davis of opportunistically imposing singularity and closure upon the dynamism, flux and open-endedness of digital culture:

In my view, failure to read the internet isn’t about being ‘unable to grasp the meaning’. Rather, it’s about imposing singularity (‘the meaning’) on a story that structurally defies definition. There is no ‘one path for the internet’. The trouble is, the ‘one path’ metaphor does make sense, intuitively. As we encounter signifiers wafting through the digital wild, our gestalt-pilled brains instinctively try to anchor them to context. As people trained to literally read, we see terms like ‘quirked up shawty’ and desperately open up Urban Dictionary. Once we have enough pieces to work with, we linearize. We thread the signifiers into a coherent narrative, which helps us see how its content ties in to [sic] our wider understanding of culture. Like a jigsaw puzzle that depicts a map on completion, the narrative orients us in a semantic landscape, pointing toward legible conclusions. It’s a bespoke ‘one path’ for each who solves the story. It’s a nugget of clarity that’s as rewarding as it is limiting — it edits out all the other pathways in order to accentuate the one that makes the most sense to us.³³⁹

The scathing critiques of Monahan’s seemingly benign attempt to map out a structure of feeling within the contemporary moment aptly calls attention to the growing issue of culture vulture journalists clambering to cash in on new viral trends before they even happen, which may indeed be said to be what Monahan—a trend analyst, does for a living. Describing the oversaturation of journalistic accounts of “garbage internet trends,” Rebecca Jennings points out that while journalists have always hustled to be the first to a

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun, “How to Read the Internet,” *The Other Internet*, 2021, <https://otherinter.net/research/lore/how-to-read-the-internet/>.

story, the digital age has accelerated the trend cycle to the point that trend forecasters have begun writing about trends that haven't even happened yet.³⁴⁰ Yet, these criticisms also raise a simple but important question: How *does* one read the internet? In the accounts listed above, there's the disquieting sense of a vast gulf between that which can be written about—static, archival, textual, closed—and that which can only be felt but never described—dynamic, auratic, conversational, ongoing. By this logic, any attempt to make sense of an ongoing digital phenomenon—or any digital phenomenon at all for that matter—is doomed to produce a comically oblivious representation of it which only serves to harsh the entire vibe. Meme culture and its many vibes are thus like *Fight Club*: you can participate or simply watch from the sidelines, but you absolutely can't talk about it. This seems to be what Olive Pometsy is getting at when she writes that "Trying to explain an online subculture is a bit like trying to explain why a deep-fried meme is funny. By the time you've unpacked all the pixelated layers, the joke (and probably the trend itself) is dead."³⁴¹

If any of this discourse sounds at all familiar, it's because some version of this conversation, almost verbatim, has been ongoing within affect theory since the publication of Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" back in 1995. Massumi defines affect as "*virtual synaesthetic perspectives* anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them."³⁴² This is distinguished from emotion, which Massumi

³⁴⁰ Rebecca Jennings, "The Year of Garbage Internet Trends."

³⁴¹ Olive Pometsy, "Namecore Is the Trend That Unifies All Trends."

³⁴² Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 96.

argues is the most intense expression of affect's capture.³⁴³ Massumi makes the claim that the autonomy of affect lies in its openness—its ability to exist in a realm of pure potentiality without being confined by qualification, meaning, convention, or discourse.³⁴⁴ In other words, the vibe is at its most powerful when it simply exists in itself, with nobody trying to name it or make sense of it.

It isn't that Massumi is wrong when he writes that "Matter-of-factness dampens intensity."³⁴⁵ The digital commons are filled with innumerable examples of emergent cultural phenomena that died off almost as soon as they were named or otherwise lost their sexy affective appeal to codification and standardization. Indeed, the *egg punk* aesthetic described in Chapter 11 is a great example of this. The issue is more that Massumi's notion of affect as something ontologically distinct from that which can be socially qualified has ultimately given way to a vast body of literature on ontologies of becoming in affect studies, which, lacking the theoretical prowess and inventiveness of Massumi's writing, seems perfectly content pointing out instances of flux, difference, and indeterminacy without offering much else in the way of analysis. Under such circumstances, it often feels as if arguing something along the lines of "X phenomenon is (interpreted to be) this way, but it could have been different," mentioning something about lost affective potentiality in the process of signification or mediation, and throwing

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 91 & 96.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

in a few keywords from *A Thousand Plateaus* somehow serves as a substitute for more rigorous scholarship which might try to identify *how* a particular cultural object came to be in the first place. In the context of the Dimes Square scene, this desire to preserve a kind of esoteric mystique may also be connected to a sense of post-hipster gatekeeping. In his review of *angelicism's* 2023 debut *film01*, internet writer Onty aptly points out the fundamental contradiction between *angelicism's* emphatic glorification of *network spirituality* (defined by Dimes Square's Charlotte Fang as a post-authorial ethos of "whatever vibes contextually") and his tendency to mystify and gatekeep his insider references:

On the one hand, we have a theological vision (phantasy) of a 'network spirituality', total singularity, the infinity of extinction, the principles of *Film01*...but on the other hand, we have the reality of *Film01* and *Angelicism*: a film riddled with easter eggs, which is heavily gatekept, and which orients around a mystified vision of extinction. *Film01* preaches total immanence, but practices a kind of gnostic transcendentalism...³⁴⁶

This emphasis on the indeterminacy of cultural objects also becomes particularly exaggerated in discussions of digital media. Note the emphasis on the transience of Twitter in the quote from *paul (from bible)* above, or in the following quote from Marrs and Dingsun's piece:

This interpretation imposes a textual linearity on a story that is by nature dynamic and conversational. It assumes a level of objectivity in the evidence it gathers that simply

³⁴⁶ Charlotte Fang, "Network Spirituality, Collected Commentaries," Apr. 28, 2022, *Charlotte Fang*, <https://goldenlight.mirror.xyz/JHelf9ahizF3HXEL2XxlQfrqCyPdvSp1P-AsWoHGr0>; Onty, "The Poverty of Allegory: A Review of Angelicism's Film01," *Becoming Press*, Aug. 7, 2023, <https://becoming.press/61c-the-poverty-of-allegory>.

won't be found in the artifacts of internet lore. These traces don't behave like physical evidence, which you can hold and examine under a microscope.³⁴⁷

There's a strange sense of exceptionalism in the implicit assumption here that all non-digital cultural practices are so fixed in form that they can practically be stuck under a microscope for analysis. While there is no question that digital culture often moves at a more rapid pace than other forms of culture and can thus be more challenging to archive and catalogue, this heightened emphasis on the ongoingness and indeterminacy of digital media seems to disregard the basic fact that *all* cultural categories are necessarily fluid, open-ended and prone to change, albeit at different temporalities. William Mazzarella thus hits the nail on the head when he writes:

rather than expending vast amounts of energy recuperating the constitutive instability and indeterminacy that attends all signification (as if it were really hidden, as if its revelation might enable some momentous transformation), would it not be more illuminating to explore how this indeterminacy actually operates in practice as a dynamic condition of our engagement with the categories of collective life? Rather than positing the emergent as the only vital hope against the dead hand of mediation, why not consider the possibility that mediation is at once perhaps the host of a fundamental and productive principle of all social life precisely because it is necessarily incomplete, unstable, and provisional?³⁴⁸

The million-dollar question here is whether there is any conceivable way to describe a vibe without killing it or otherwise constraining its potentiality. Better yet, we may ask exactly what reading a vibe may hope to accomplish. In "How to Read the Internet," Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun offer a rather skeptical account of cultural analysis in an online

³⁴⁷ Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun, "How to Read the Internet."

³⁴⁸ William Mazzarella. "Affect: What is it Good for?" 302.

context, suggesting that any attempt to map a cultural phenomenon merely serves to illustrate one's own understanding of it:

The map you make ends up behaving like a mirror. It can only present an approximation of the living connections between contextless signifiers, cropped to your personal frame of reference. The result is an abstraction that reflects your own pre-existing knowledge (along with whatever you found on Google). The venn-diagram / floating-signifiers meme format performs well in circulation because it accommodates such abstraction. Anyone who looks at it and sees a picture can feel as if they 'get it', no matter what 'it' looks like. But it seems impractical to formalize your own linearized mapping of the signifiers, writing it into an article or Substack post as if it's the map, or the 'One Path' toward a large-scale cultural movement. In doing so, you underestimate the multitude of pathways there really are through a set of nouns and descriptors floating around online. These virtual paths might lead anywhere — the emptier the signifier, the further it can float.³⁴⁹

Drawing on Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, we may call this a paranoid reading of the vibe shift debacle and of cultural analysis more generally—one which focuses on asking whether a particular piece of knowledge is true and then fixates on lack, emphasizing the multitude of pathways which get lost when we try to narrativize a particular cultural phenomenon.³⁵⁰

I want to suggest here, again following Sedgwick, that a more productive approach might be to ask *how* knowledge is performative and *what* it does in this context.³⁵¹ Here, we can turn to Lauren Berlant, who writes in *Cruel Optimism* that:

Affect's saturation of form can communicate the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment, assessing the way a thing that is happening finds its genre, which is the same as finding its event. So in addition to the unlikely possibility of deriving the state of structural historical relations from patterns of affective

³⁴⁹ Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun, "How to Read the Internet."

³⁵⁰ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151, 124.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

response, I am claiming that the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes.³⁵²

If for Berlant, the aesthetic mediation of affective experience provides insight into historical goings-on, then regardless of whether Kissick's meme and Monahan's account of the vibe shift truly depict the "One Path for the Internet" or the lived texture of a shift in the structure of feeling, there is *something* going on here which in turn is tied to a number of real historical processes. But *what* exactly? Will Harrison's article on Dimes Square, the Manhattan micro-neighbourhood which has been cited as the epicenter of the reactionary downtown art scene mapped out in Kissick's meme, gives us some insight.³⁵³ Early on in the piece, Harrison describes the fried feeling of trying to navigate the process of cultural signification in the digital age:

We are living in a time of shibboleths, of passwords. Lately, language is being thrown about like confetti, like all those business cards for boutique weed delivery services scattered on the sidewalk; it is being stretched out and reshaped, made to mean everything and nothing all at once. We are quirked, we are goated, we are bruh, we are bestie.³⁵⁴

Harrison goes on to explain the mythologization of the Dimes Square scene as a result of the acceleration of the digital tendency towards categorization and canonization during the pandemic.³⁵⁵ Harrison's account of the scene of "reactionary bloggers" is largely disparaging, and he too mentions that "as soon as it [the vibe shift] was given a name and

³⁵² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3 & 16.

³⁵³ See: Will Harrison, "Escape from Dimes Square," *The Baffler*, May 24, 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/escape-from-dimes-square-harrison>.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

demarcated, impressed upon a Gregorian calendar, it was gone.”³⁵⁶ But Harrison doesn’t let this impede him from trying to read the internet, and even offers some clues on how to do so when he mentions “finding comfort in multiplicity,” and “following the traces of an event that can never quite be recreated.”³⁵⁷ More importantly however, Harrison’s writing brings the vibe to life, conjuring a chaotic, whirling mass of cultural signifiers in his descriptions of aspiring New York socialites bouncing between gallery openings, bars, and dumpling restaurants around the neighbourhood; the repopularization of “retarded” as an adjective by *Red Scare* podcasters Dasha Nekrasova and Anna Khachiyan; the anti-style punk graffiti of local writer WOMBAT; the “Heideggerian cypasta” of *angelicism’s* prose; and of course, Monahan’s infamous vibe shift report.³⁵⁸

Harrison’s article offers its reader two paths. The first path is to critique the article for presenting a necessarily partial, skewed, and heavily subjective account of Dimes Square in lieu of a more comprehensive social history. But this path is a dead end—it remains mired in what could have been written and what was lost in the writing process. The second path seems more favourable: treating the article as a set of clues in a mystery which will never be fully solved, yet whose moving parts imbue its reader with a loose consciousness of emergent networks, connections, scenes, discourses, ideas, and objects in the perpetually unfolding present of the cultural climate. Following this second path

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

involves delving deep into the syn-aesthetic fabric of these artifacts, *feeling* for example, how the spell of techno-ketamine dissociation permeating the music of SoundCloud rappers like [Bladee](#) or [Ecco2k](#) strikes such a seemingly perfect resonance with *angelicism01*'s extremely online Landian pillow talk about [extinction qua extinction](#). It's also about approaching cultural objects with a childlike sense of wonder by poking and prying at each tangle in its dense knot of synaesthetic connections without taking anything as a given, constantly asking questions in the hope of gaining a loose sense of how things fit together and how they might speak to the here and now: *What was the vibe shift? Who first described it and in what context? What precipitated the supposed vibe shift from the hypebeast/woke moment to the indie sleaze/post-woke moment? When did parts of the "dirtbag left" start moving in a more reactionary direction? When and how did all the theory bloggers become part of this social sphere? Where does the fashion world figure into this equation? And how is this all tied to a social scene in a lower Manhattan micro-neighbourhood?*

Chapter 7: The Shape of 'Things' to Come: Starter Pack Memes and the 'Thingification' of the Fuccboi

In a short article on his Substack, Hazard P. Spence offers a spin on the old "tree in a forest" thought experiment which nicely captures the logic of memetic aesthetics. "If a new Type of guy drops in a forest, and no one's there," he asks, "does he make a

sound?"³⁵⁹ Perhaps the ending of this question might be better phrased as "is he still a *thing*?" because Spence follows this by writing:

Types are more than patterns. Most patterns we observe never get reified with a phrase or a handle, and most patterns that we individually reify never get ratified by a social network. A Type is a pattern that a group can all recognize and sync up their behaviors on. It creates an object of discourse. It's an entity that people can have Takes on. It's A *Thing*.³⁶⁰

There are two important take away points in the passage above. The first is that from the perspective of memetic aesthetics, this new "type of guy" is nothing without the ratification of a social network—it might as well not exist. Networked social recognition on the other hand, might elevate this type from a pattern to a recognizable meme, or *thing*, and perhaps eventually to the status of a memetic aesthetic category. The second important take away is that the *thingification* of a given type allows people to have takes on it by establishing it as an object of discourse.

Both of these points are crucial to understanding the case study outlined in this chapter, which focuses on the use of the starter pack meme format in the transformation of the *fuccboi* trope into a very loosely formalized but still culturally coherent memetic aesthetic category. The purpose of this chapter is to impart a general idea of the process I call memetic aestheticization, or *thingification* by illustrating how memetic aesthetic categories gain a sense of formal standardization and transform into objects of discourse through their circulation as memes. The chapter begins by describing what starter pack

³⁵⁹ Hazard P. Spence, "Intuitionistic Type (of guy) Theory."

³⁶⁰ Ibid; emphasis added.

memes are, how they work, and how they relate to the logic of memetic aesthetics. It goes on to discuss the formal and discursive transformation of the *fuccboi* trope through its memetic circulation, focusing specifically on its representation on a Montreal-based Instagram account called *@pettyfemme*.

Starter Packs

Like so many other staples of contemporary digital culture, starter pack or starter kit memes owe their origins to Twitter. In September 2014, user *@ItsLadinaPlis* tweeted a photoset consisting of images of a top knot bun hairstyle, an oversized golden hoop earring, and a Madonna-style piercing captioned “The ‘I date black guys’ starter pack.”³⁶¹



Figure 24: The original start pack meme: *@ItsLadinaPlis*’ “I date black guys’ starter pack.”

By mid-November of the same year, both “starter packs” and “starter kits” received more than 6 million mentions each over the course of a week, as Twitter began to run wild with

³⁶¹ Brad, “Starter Packs,” *Know Your Meme*, 2015, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/starter-packs>.

another name."³⁶³ While memetic aesthetic types often appear to us in the form of starter pack memes, it would be an error to conflate the two, as starter pack memes serve as the medium for the recognition of the type rather than the type itself. What's cool about starter packs then, is the way they serve as an important medium for the transmission of aesthetic types and social tropes, while simultaneously drawing attention to the discrete affective means through which these categories are created and disseminated by offering a visual map of the constellation of synesthetic resonances which shape them. Thus, a *VSCO girl* starter pack not only offers a sense of what the aesthetic looks like, but also maps out the general vibe of the world which the *VSCO girl* inhabits, allowing viewers to relationally situate it within constellations of related categories of colourful aesthetics for teenage girls such as its predecessor, the *California girl*.³⁶⁴

The relatable humour of a starter pack meme can be understood as the product of one of two different functions. In one, the starter pack expands on an already-existing aesthetic category by adding a new, yet categorically suitable attribute to its constellation. A good example of this is the "you can beat me up but my dad will sue" starter kit, which depicts images of clothing associated with the stereotypical East Coast preppy to represent a spoiled elite whose masculinity is put into question due to his tendency to use economic rather than physical power in a confrontation.

³⁶³ Hazard P. Spence, "Intuitionistic Type (of guy) Theory."

³⁶⁴ ModernGurlz, "tumblr aesthetics from the 2010s □□□," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1VZlx77akE>.



Figure 26: "The 'you can beat me up but my dad will sue' starter kit."

What's interesting about this starter pack is that it never explicitly mentions the preppy by name, opting instead to allow familiar viewers to deduce the stereotype through a minimal set of cultural signifiers: a baby blue Ralph Lauren polo, a pink wool sweater, khaki shorts, and Sperry boat shoes. What's noteworthy here is the fact that the social type the meme represents is already a *thing*—through its ubiquitous circulation in the media, the preppy has long been established as a familiar cultural stereotype. While viewers of the meme might be familiar with sartorial signifiers of the preppy stereotype, and even the spoiled brattiness associated with his rich white male privilege, this starter pack derives its humour by expanding the constellation of the preppy ever so slightly to depict how he might react in a new hypothetical situation: the threat of physical violence.

More important to the purposes of this chapter, however, is the second function through which starter packs derive their humour. What I refer to here as memetic aestheticization, or *thingification* is the process whereby particular patterns and types are

transformed into recognizable cultural objects—or *things*, as we commonly refer to them—through the process of identifying their salient attributes, naming them, and allowing them to gain recognition through its circulation on social media platforms.

Whereas the humour of a meme like the “‘you can beat me up but my dad will sue’ starter kit” relies on adding fitting attributes to already existing types, memetic aestheticization derives a sense of anthropological joy from unifying its viewers around relatable experiences by finding and naming existing patterns in everyday life. By lumping together sets of practices or dispositions and giving them names, starter pack memes strip these patterns of their aura of newness and originality and establish them as discursive objects. Moreover, by visually mapping various types through the constellations of signifiers associated with them, starter packs poke at unspoken subtleties in habitus which indicate broader similarities and distinctions between groups. For example, while on the surface of things, the “everything happens for a reason” hippie, the “Wesleyan film bro,” the “2008 hipster dude,” and the “tree loving punk” seem to be quite distinct types of guy, a side-by-side examination of their respective starter packs reveals the omnipresence of American Spirit cigarettes across all of their starter packs, suggesting that they might have more in common with one another than they might have hoped.

contemporary concepts emerging from digital culture, most of the accounts of the fuccboi highlight the vagueness of the term as a result of its multiplicity of meanings, and its transformation as it was appropriated from its original context within AAVE. In a 2014 *Jezebel* article, Julianne Escobedo Shepherd attributes the term to Harlem rapper Cam'ron and his crew Dipset, noting a possible tinge of homophobia in its early usage, while other accounts of the term have attributed it to New Orleans' hip-hop scene from the same era.³⁶⁵ According to most accounts, the term fuccboi was simply used as a generic insult in the context of mid-2000s hip-hop.³⁶⁶ As Kara Brown writes, "To call someone a fuckboy is to insult them. It falls into a similar category of terms like bitch-ass or scrub. A fuckboy is a man who is lame, who sucks, who ain't shit."³⁶⁷

Julianne Shepherd writes that the term *fuccboi* saw a resurgence in the early 2010s through the ascent to fame of rapper A\$AP Rocky.³⁶⁸ As legions of young, predominantly white hip-hop heads with disposable incomes began to imitate the fashion-conscious rapper and his disposition towards niche high-end streetwear brands like Hood By Air, the term *fuccboi* came to describe young trend-hoppers wearing expensive but awkward attempts to integrate the hypebeast look into their wardrobes.³⁶⁹ Titled "A Field Guide to

³⁶⁵ Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, "A Brief Taxonomy of the Fuccboi (RIP)," *Jezebel*, Sep. 26, 2014, <https://jezebel.com/a-brief-taxonomy-of-the-fuccboi-rip-1638331191>.

³⁶⁶ Kara Brown, "The Definition of 'Fuckboy' Is Not What Bad Trend Pieces Are Telling You," *Jezebel*, Aug. 21, 2015, <https://jezebel.com/the-definition-of-fuckboy-is-not-what-bad-trend-pieces-1725157828>.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, "A Brief Taxonomy of the Fuccboi (RIP)."

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

the Modern Day Fuccboi,” Gregory Babcock’s 2015 article for *Complex* for example, offers a taxonomy of ten different variations on the type, ranging from the Supreme attire-clad “Throw a BOGO On It” *Fuccboi* to the “Rick Owens Disciple” *Fuccboi*.³⁷⁰

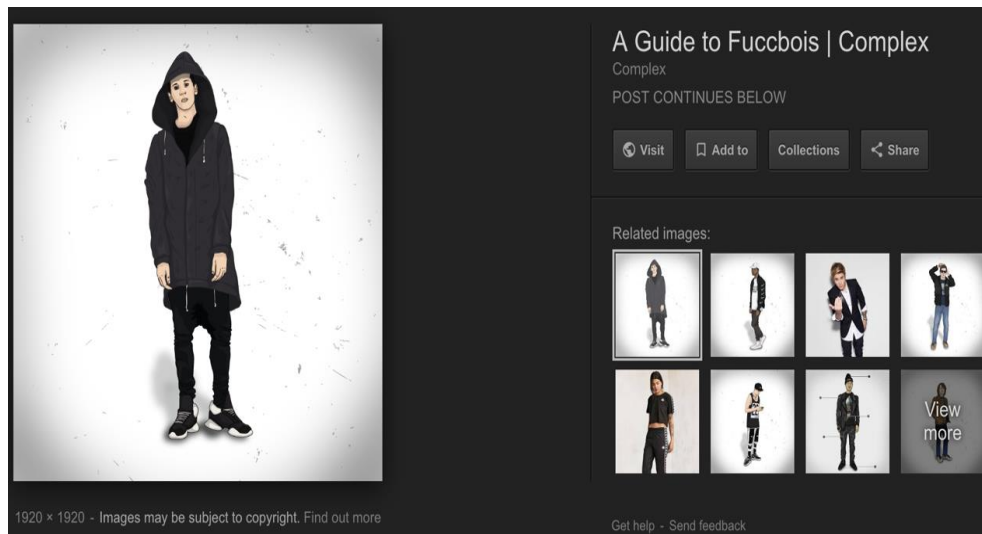


Figure 29: The “Rick Owens Disciple” *Fuccboi* from Complex’s 2015 “Guide to Fuccbois.”

While the *fuccboi* continued to be vaguely synonymous with the figure of the hypebeast in a number of online blog posts, it also began to acquire a third connotation over the course of the next year. Drawing on its literal wording as well as its association with sloppily arranged men’s style, *fuccboi* began to figure heavily in the vernacular of frustrated—and again, predominantly white—young women to connote a useless, immature, and emotionally manipulative male seeking to exploit women for non-committal sex. As evidenced by Kara Brown’s 2015 *Jezebel* article titled, “The Definition of ‘Fuckboy’ Is Not What Bad Trend Pieces Are Telling You,” this transformation in the

³⁷⁰ Gregory Babcock, “A Field Guide to the Modern Day Fuccboi,” *Complex*, Mar. 30, 2015, <https://www.complex.com/style/2015/03/fuccboi-guide>; emphases added.

connotation of *fuccboi* wasn't without its critics. In the piece, Brown critiques white journalists for ignoring black voices and thereby seeking to "erase black people from a word that they not only coined but have been using for years" in the pursuit of a sense of internet-savvy cultural capital:

One must ask why these writers feel so compelled to dissect black slang like it's a preserved frog in a tenth-grade biology class. But just like fuckboy itself, the answer isn't complicated. As slang continues to disseminate across the internet, white people outside of the culture, or who lack a cultural context, will continue to feel self-conscious about not being in the know. And as we see again and again, the way in which they are given country to publicly wrestle with their own discomfort leads to yet another platform for culture erasure. The cycle continues.³⁷¹

Brown is apt to point out the way in which AAVE terms such as *fuccboi* have become prey to the culture vulture-ism of white journalists seeking to profit off their supposed cultural "with-it-ness" by giving new definitions to familiar terms. Yet, what's striking about the convoluted etymology of the *fuccboi* is the way in which each of its respective definitions has developed what Sara Ahmed calls a "stickiness" as "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" over the span of just a few years.³⁷² As Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "what sticks 'shows us' where the object has travelled through what it has gathered on its surface."³⁷³ Thus, while each of the three connotations of *fuccboi* mentioned above has a unique history and meaning,

³⁷¹ Kara Brown, "The Definition of 'Fuckboy' Is Not What Bad Trend Pieces Are Telling You."

³⁷² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 91.

³⁷³ Ibid.

they all begin to coalesce into the term's sticky mass as it gains circulation in the popular vernacular as a meme.

A Montreal-based Instagram meme account called *@pettyfemme* offers several examples illustrating how the various connotations of the *fuccboi* have stuck to its representation in the process of its thingification into a memetic aesthetic category. Written from the perspective of the two local women who moderate the page and create its content, *@pettyfemme* largely serves as an outlet for frustration towards the misogynistic behaviour of men hooking up with and dating women within the city's relatively intimate network of Anglophone creative scenes. With a keen sense of wit and acute aesthetic sensitivity, *@pettyfemme* features an extensive catalogue of starter packs which provide a taxonomy of various types of men which young creative women and femme-identifying people in Montreal may encounter in their everyday lives—focusing predominantly on various articulations of the ominous figure of the *fuccboi*.

In Peli Grietzer's formulation, the "vibe" which constitutes the constellation of a given aesthetic category (such as the *fuccboi*) can be understood as a product of the affective and material histories that have shaped it. Grietzer writes:

A culture's style/vibe or feel...is the expression of a structure of the social-affective life (the feelings, drives, affects, imaginations) of the subjects whose collective social performances and cultural productions constitute the social-material world. According to this view one recognizes, so to speak, the 'touch' of a mood in the textures of the cultural-material production that it animates: the mood underlying our cultural-material production manifests as diffused textural affinity or formal constancy across the artifacts and social performances that constitute our social-material product, which we then experience as social-material 'style/vibe.' A social-material world's 'style/vibe' is thus a

kind [of] family-resemblance or cognateness between social-material products, rooted in a common social-affective origin.³⁷⁴

Drawing on Grietzer and Ahmed, we may say that the formal qualities which make up representations of the *fuccboi* can be understood as a product of the material and discursive histories that have stuck to it in the process of its thingification, each of which become loose signifiers collected in and around the meme.

One of *@pettyfemme's* crowning achievements is the “rich kid from Vancouver pretending to be poor in the Mile End starter pack,” which depicts a pair of Dickies pants, a small black toque, a black pair of Vans skate shoes, a DJ mixer, the Tinder logo, a number of Montreal destinations within the vicinity of Montreal’s bohemian Mile End neighbourhood, and a picture of an iMessage sent at 3:35 A.M. reading “hey u up?” The image’s accompanying caption reads, “we get it- getting back at ur yuppy parents by ‘living in squalor’ is important to you but could you like- not be a dick about it???”

³⁷⁴ Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, 145-146.

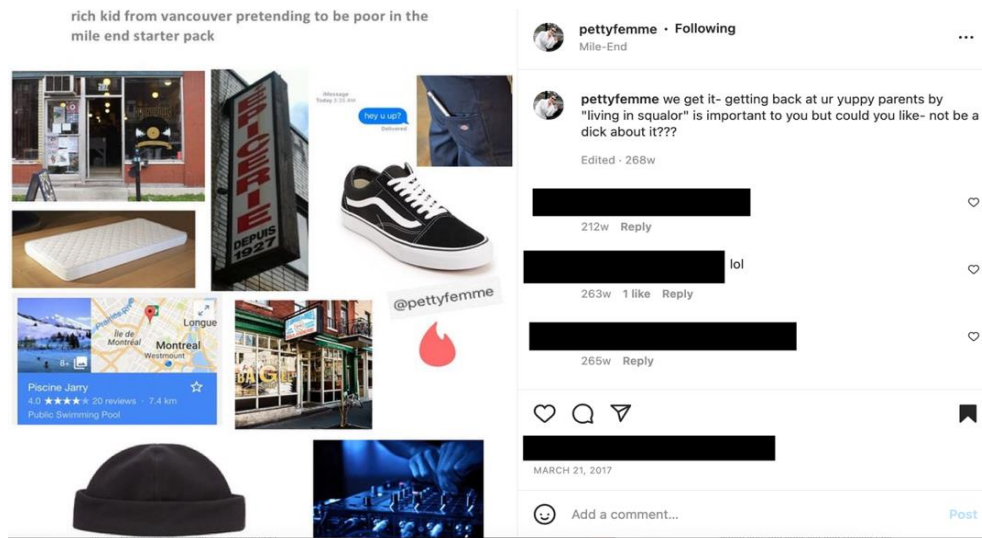


Figure 30: @pettyfemme's "rich kid from Vancouver pretending to be poor in the mile end starter pack."

True to the term's original connotation described by Brown, the Mile End *fuccboi* is depicted here as a scrub: a guy with a high opinion of himself, but "who ain't shit."³⁷⁵ He benefits from the financial stability of his wealthy parents across the country and DJs at posh local bars while also cashing in on the cultural capital associated with the image of the starving artist. His seemingly stubborn refusal to buy a mattress frame, signified by the mattress on the floor shows us that despite thinking he's hot shit, he's sloppy, immature, and incapable of taking care of himself. His sartorial style, as signified by the rolled up black toque, Vans shoes and Dickies pants, is classic skater wear, an aesthetic closely tied to hypebeast culture.

While none of these iconic skater clothes share the same price range or prestige as highly coveted high-end streetwear brands like Off-White, Rick Owens, Raf Simons, Comme des Garçons or Hood By Air, the references to hypebeast style in @pettyfemme's

³⁷⁵ Kara Brown, "The Definition of 'Fuckboy' Is Not What Bad Trend Pieces Are Telling You."

memes are depicted in a subtler fashion. An image of Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Man and a Woman at a Casement* is overlaid with a screenshot of an Instagram DM sent by the man at 5:41 that reads, "can I come cuddle?" to which the woman responds, "can you not?"



Figure 31: @pettyfemme's Filippo Lippi rendition.

Aside from @pettyfemme's tag, the only other alteration to the image is the addition of a Dime logo on the man's hat, a reference to the popular Montreal skate shop which is often likened to New York's hypebeast deity Supreme. In the case of both the Mile End *fuccboi* starter pack and the *Portrait of a Man and a Woman at a Casement* spoof, the depiction of "thirsty" yet indirect requests for sex at early hours of the morning signifies the most literal connotation of the *fuccboi*, a sloppy guy looking for non-committal sex.

Another noteworthy characteristic of the signifiers in starter pack memes is that despite relying on visual cues for its representations, the objects depicted in the memes are intended to evoke synesthetic experiences for their viewers. In the case of the "emotionally unavailable art director" for example, the sight of his black toque, white

sneakers, lush Monstera plants and minimalist doodles is intended to trigger the smell of the expensive natural skin products and unisex perfumes he uses, the feeling of his “brooding stare,” and the Bauhaus albums emanating from his apartment.

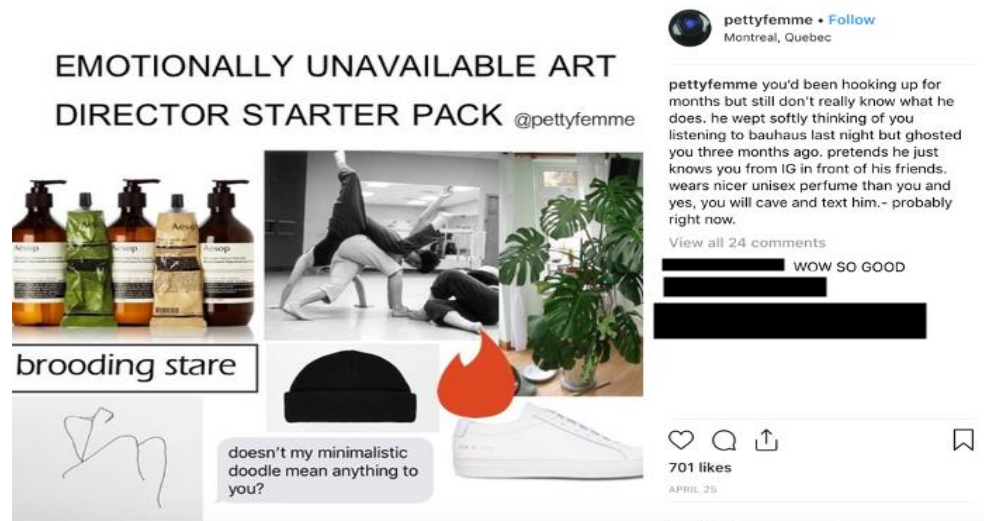


Figure 32: @pettyfemme's "emotionally unavailable art director starter pack."

The totalizing multisensory feeling of memetic aesthetic categories may thus be described as “syn-aesthetic,” a term Anna Munster uses to describe a “virtual relationality,” in which “elements of sound, color, and gesture are given lines...opening onto “new worlds of sensory experience.”³⁷⁶ This correlates with Gernot Böhme’s critique of the separation of the senses from one another, and subsequent argument that aesthetic atmospheres are intuitively experienced as a synesthetic whole.³⁷⁷ The “emotionally unavailable art director” is not merely a visual category then, but rather a synaesthetic constellation whose vibe or

³⁷⁶ Anna Munster, *An Aesthetics of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 15 & 157.

³⁷⁷ Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 73-74.

atmosphere unifies its expensive natural scents, clean visual aesthetic, post-punk soundtrack, and feeling of emotional coldness.

The subtle distinctions between cultural signifiers and the various vibes that emanate from them inform a great deal of *@pettyfemme's* memes, in which the atmospheric differences that are evoked through different constellations of objects establish distinctions between various categories within a particular type. Both the Mile End depicted in the “rich kid from Vancouver pretending to be poor in the Mile End starter pack” above and the St. Henri dweller in the “Yeah, I live in St. Henri. Where else would I live?” are represented as heterosexual, “creative” Anglophone *fuccboi's* living in gentrifying Montreal neighbourhoods.

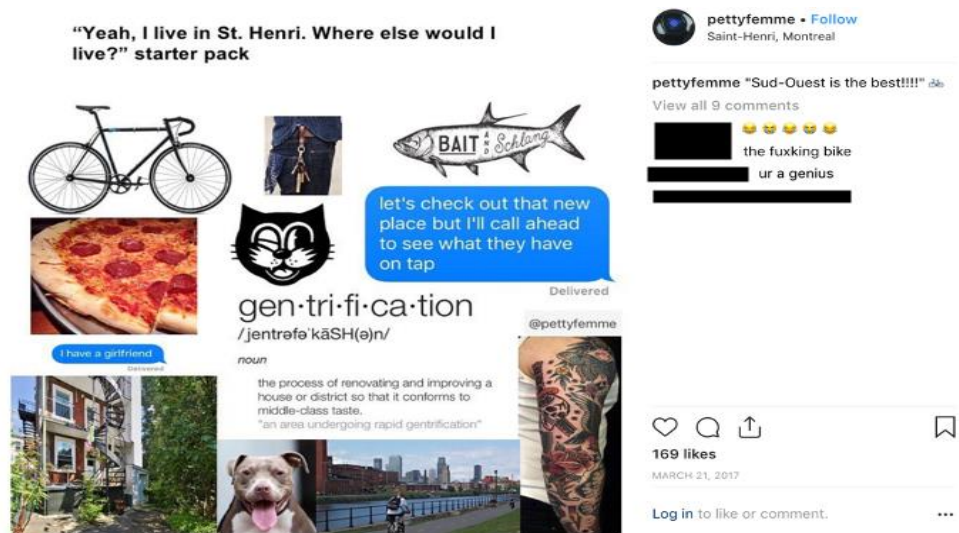


Figure 33: *@pettyfemme's* “Yeah, I live in St. Henri. Where else would I live?” starter pack.”

Yet, the minute differences between the two—like the St. Henri *fuccboi's* full sleeve of colourful, traditional machine tattoos, which are intended to be juxtaposed with the Mile End *fuccboi's* minimalist hand-poked black ink tattoos, or the Mile End *fuccboi's*

disposition towards cocktail bars versus the St. Henri *fuccboi*'s thirst for craft beer—situates them within distinct worlds within the same constellation. Using means that would be unnoticeable for someone unfamiliar with the specific cultural codes in question, a side-by-side examination of the starter packs of *fuccbois* from two different neighbourhoods reveals a commentary on the difference in habitus between Montreal Anglophones from wealthy Vancouver families living in the Mile End, and those of more modest middle-class means from the predominantly Anglophone suburbs west of Montreal who make up much of St. Henri's nightlife.

While differences between the Mile End *fuccboi* and the St. Henri *fuccboi* do indeed point to subtle class-based distinctions in habitus, *@pettyfemme*'s memes seem to be more concerned with the distinctions as "types of guy" than as signifiers of class positions.

As Gernot Böhme writes:

The line of aesthetic consumption drawn by Baudrillard and Bourdieu, namely from the economy of signs to that of distinctions, seems to imply that class differences are reproduced in aesthetic consumption. Yet that is an illusion, insofar as the classes described by Bourdieu are not the traditional ones, which reproduce themselves through their position vis-à-vis the forces of production, and therefore represent a structure of domination, but – as he himself writes – 'constructed classes,' i.e. sociological categories formed through the clustering and inner coherence of a mass of distinguishing features. Bourdieu still speaks freely of ruling classes, of upper and lower classes, but what really matters to Bourdieu is distinction as such, differentiation from other social groupings. The economy of signs, which as late as the 1960s may still have spawned a hierarchy of status symbols, has yielded today to a signaling and staging of group affiliations, *articulating a multiplicity of group styles and life forms that have little to do with social stratification and class domination.*³⁷⁸

³⁷⁸ Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 84; emphasis added.

Böhme's deemphasis on class distinctions in Baudrillard and Bourdieu's work on the economy of signs resonates particularly strongly when we consider *@pettyfemme's* "normie guy you thought it would work out with," whose distinctions from the aforementioned types has virtually nothing to do with class, but everything to do with atmospheric signifiers of lifestyle.

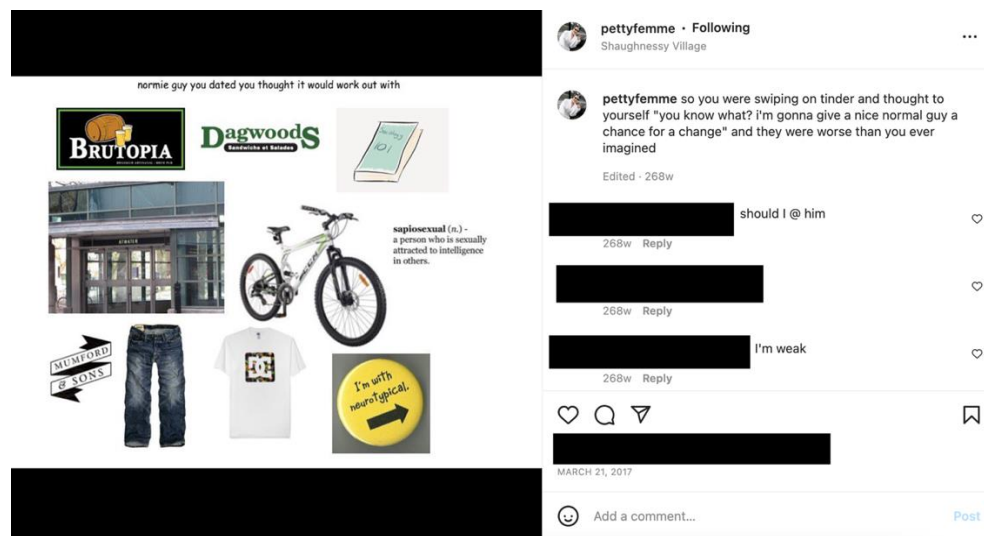


Figure 34: *@pettyfemme's* "normie guy you thought it would work out with" starter pack.

What's interesting about the "normie guy" is that despite being depicted as an equally poor partner as many of the *fuccbois* depicted in the page's other memes, he lacks the trendy hypebeast-esque style which served as one of the points of origin in the *thingification* of the *fuccboi*, placing him into a different constellation all together, that of the basic dude, or average guy. Like the St. Henri *fuccboi*, the normie guy drinks craft beer, yet opts for the pubby atmosphere and more conventional beer styles of downtown brewpubs like Brewtopia over the ultra-hip environment of trendy local breweries like Messorum Bracitorium. Rather than the Mile End *fuccboi's* baggy Dickies pants, or the St.

Henri *fuccboi*'s raw selvedge denim, the normie guy wears pre-distressed straight fit jeans from Abercrombie & Fitch which he pairs with tee-shirts from dated skate brands like DC which one might easily find at a local mall. Instead of deep house or post-punk, he listens to mainstream radio rock bands like Mumford & Sons. Hidden away from trendier gentrifying neighbourhoods like the Mile End and St. Henri, he dwells downtown where he rides a mountain bike rather than a road bike, fixed-gear, or skateboard.

Within the same normie constellation, yet with a bit more of an adventurous spirit is the "white guy who 'found himself in Asia' starter pack."



Figure 35: @pettyfemme's "white guy who 'found himself in Asia' starter pack.

The white guy who found himself in Asia is depicted as the high school stoner who took a gap year before university during which he smoked so much low-grade pot in Bali that he got in touch with his deeper side, much to the chagrin of those around him. He fetishizes Eastern religions and African drumming, and wears tacky Oakley sunglasses to drum circles in local parks. Across @pettyfemme's memes, the constellation of the *fuccboi* can thus be

said to be characterized by a combination of the scrubbiness, the hypebeast skater style, and the irresponsible sexual thirst out of which this figure was born. Lacking the sense of cultural “with-it-ness” and proximity to the city’s scene of the skaters, artists and musicians associated with the figure of the *fuccboi*, the normie guy and the gap year guy can be bracketed together in the constellation of the average guy.

Of course, there is no reason to believe that *@pettyfemme* offers the definitive accounts of what constitutes a *fuccboi*. A quick Google Search of the term brings up dozens of interpretations of the type, many of them emphasizing different characteristics of the term, while also drawing on different affective histories, stereotypes, and cultural representations. For example, the “Chinese Fuccboi Starterpack” and the “Asian Fuccboi Starter Pack” draw on much of the same sartorial style that characterized the term’s hypebeast connotation. Yet with the exception of the Tinder logo in the former, the memes emphasize the wealth of East Asian *fuccbois* rather than their sexual nature, serving to reproduce racist representations of Asian men as desexualized.

Chinese Fuccboi Starterpack



Figure 36: "Chinese Fuccboi Starterpack."

Asian Fuccboi Starter pack



Figure 37: Asian Fuccboi Starter pack."

The "Rich Indian fuccboi starter pack" on the other hand, features a flashy, Bollywood-esque look and conspicuous absence of the hypebeast style associated with *fuccbois*, which is intended to distinguish between the sartorial styles of the nouveaux riche from India and in East Asia and North America.

Rich Indian fuccboi starter pack



Indian fuccboi starter pack

Figure 38: "Rich Indian fuccboi starter pack."

Even within seemingly nonsensical starter packs memes, the material, social, and affective histories attached to the image-world of the *fuccboi* continue to stick. The "24th century fuccboi starterpack" for example, features a more futuristic take on the sneakers and minimalist streetwear style that inform representations of the trope, while the "Aztec Fuckboi starter pack" makes humourous references to the wasteman lifestyle and desire for non-committal sex that figure prominently in the term's definition.

connotations, the *fuccboi*, along with categories such as the *Kyle*, *Karen*, or *neckbeard* remain excluded from the canon of aesthetics on sites like *Aesthetic Wiki*. More importantly however, the *fuccboi* lacks the degree of formal standardization of more established memetic aesthetic categories such as the *VSCO girl* or *e-boy*, making it more challenging to neatly map into a starter pack. Indeed, this is precisely the reason that I have chosen to focus on it this chapter. By examining the loose formalization of the *fuccboi* into a memetic aesthetic category through its various representations in starter pack memes, we can see how the concept has come to derive a sense of atmospheric and aesthetic coherence (i.e., its vibe) through various expressions of its social-affective life which have stuck to it over the years. The significance of the starter pack meme in turn lies in its ability to “thingify” memetic aesthetic categories by visually mapping these connections, thereby giving a loose formal consistency to them, and rapidly circulating this visual representation via digital technology for viewers to learn to identify the type in question. The starter pack thus serves as one of the primary mechanisms for the world-building of cultural ontology in the post-digital era.

Of course, what makes memetic aesthetic categories and their representation in starter pack memes a somewhat complicated object of study is their indeterminacy. For someone who is completely unfamiliar with the thing being mapped in a given starter pack, the meme could very well do next to nothing. Like a map of an unfamiliar place, one can try to imagine the textures, forms, and atmospheres associated with the constellations

they are looking into, but their images will largely be abstractions until they gain a better understanding of the category being represented. Even then, the object of the starter pack may remain infinitely contingent on any given number of factors. Some might not be recognized at all despite being routinely encountered by the subject in question, while others might be vaguely (mis)recognized by proxy to related but distinct constellations. All of this is of course complicated by the fact that these aesthetics themselves are in constant flux, expanding and contracting as a multiplicity of subjects, objects, and atmospheres pass through them, sticking, unsticking, and reconfiguring them through their circulation.

Yet, for someone who is familiar with the type being mapped in a particular starter pack, the meme can do a lot. By calling attention to the largely pre-discursive assemblage of cultural categories in everyday life, the thingification of starter pack memes also serves an important political purpose, namely denaturalizing the problematic behaviours associated with various aesthetic codes by robbing them of their *sense of je ne sais quoi*. Starter pack memes ridicule the figures they represent precisely by drawing attention to the aesthetic codes that are reflected by their style and thereby denaturalizing their dispositions. This is the genius of *@pettyfemme's* starter pack memes: to take away the allure and pretense of originality of sexually irresponsible men within the city's tightknit network of Anglophone creative scenes by breaking down their generic types through an extensive taxonomy of *fuccbois*. As Sara Ahmed writes on the naming of -isms such as sexism and racism,

To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event. To give the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing. Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost.³⁷⁹

The thingification of starter pack memes on *@pettyfemme* performs a similar function to naming practices that Ahmed describes. By providing a series of visual maps of the

fuccboi, the page turns the trope into “a tangible thing” which gives a sense of social density and legitimacy to the isolated experiences of women within the local scene.³⁸⁰

@pettyfemme's use of networked online platforms respond to misogynistic practices in the city's social and creative sphere through innovative feminist content can thus be read as an instance what Rentschler and Thrift refer to as “doing feminism in the network.”³⁸¹

Discussing feminist responses on Twitter and Tumblr to Mitt Romney's “binders full of women” comment in 2012, Rentschler and Thrift discuss the meme not only an innovative form of feminist content, but as a means of creating “a larger feminist-identified network connected through laughter.”³⁸² As the page's creator mentioned to me in a conversation, this is precisely the reason that *@pettyfemme* was created, out of a need to break the

³⁷⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Introduction: Sexism - A Problem with a Name,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 86 (2015): 5-13, 8-9.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift, “Doing Feminism in the Network: Networked Laughter and the ‘Binders Full of Women’ Meme,” *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (2015): 329–359, 331 & 352.

³⁸² Ibid., 331.

alienating silence over toxic masculine behaviour within the community, and to connect with other people experiencing similar experiences through humour.

Chapter 8: "Is the Scene Still Alive?" Post-Hipster Affect, Indie Sleaze, and Memetic Melancholia

"Alone Again"

Three memes posted on Instagram between 2019 and 2021 offer a glimpse of a vibe that, at least for a while, seemed to be growing increasingly pervasive online. The first one was posted by *@sonny5ideup* on August 4th, 2019. "When did THIS," it reads, referring to a Juul e-cigarette and a can of black cherry White Claw seltzer, "become hotter than THIS"—a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a lit cigarette. The second, posted by *@bradtroemel* on July 8th, 2020, depicts a screenshot taken of a post from a fake Instagram account called

@the_millennial_traditionalist. Overlaid with a fake-looking VHS filter, the image depicts celebrity DJ Steve Aoki popping a bottle of champagne over a cheering mass of fans, with a textbox that reads, "THE WORLD YOU WERE BORN IN NO LONGER EXISTS." The last one was posted by *@indiesleaze* on November 1st, 2021. It pictures a pack of Djarum Black clove cigarettes and reads: "It's 2004 and I'm smoking these at the Village Inn at 3AM. I'm thinking about rearranging my MySpace top 8 and trying not to puke before I get my fries. I have no idea how bad life is going to get." They're caked in irony and sandwiched between dozens of shitposts making jokes about eating ass or smoking weed, but there are unmistakable glimmers of earnestness at the heart of the three memes described above. Beneath their irony-poisoned exteriors, each of these memes reflect a genuine variant of the "reject modernity, embrace tradition" mentality so often satirized in meme culture—one whose sense of "tradition" has barely been swept into the past, yet paradoxically feels like it could have been a lifetime ago. What brings these memes together are symptoms of what we might call post-hipster affect: the nostalgic feeling of living in the wake of the American Apparel-wearing and Pabst-swilling subcultural figure of the past decade.

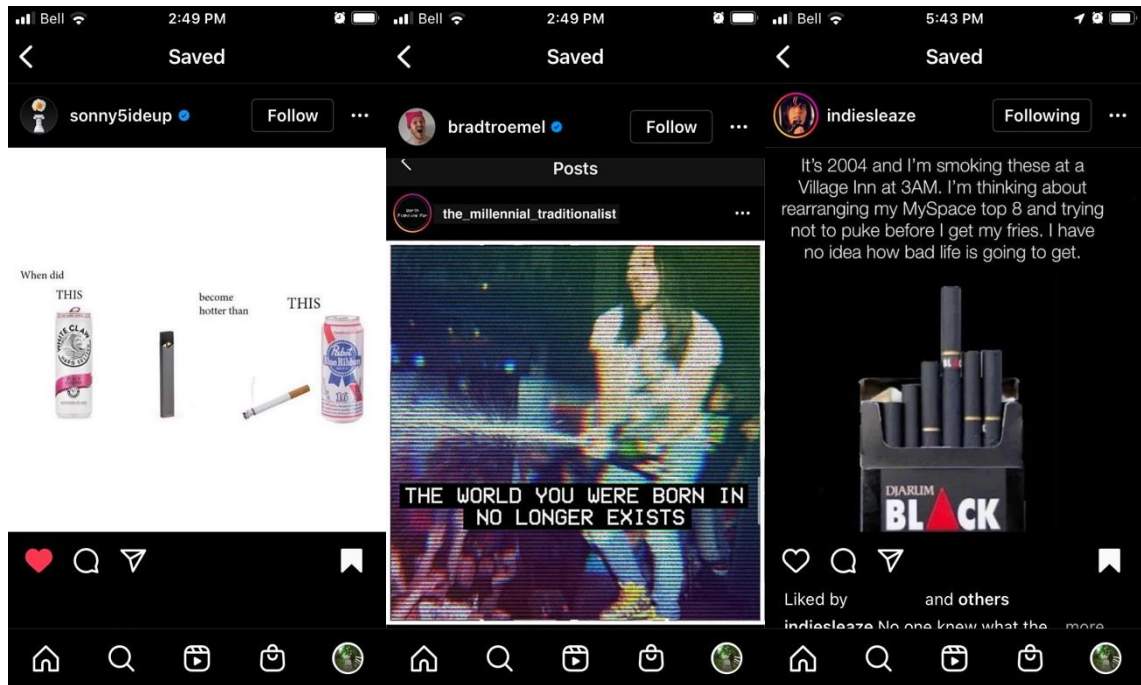


Figure 41: Post-hipster affect memes on Instagram.

Like Steven Shaviri's notion of "post-cinematic affect" from which it borrows its name, post-hipster affect is "a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society," existing across a wide assortment of cultural scenes and media today.³⁸³ While the concept of post-hipster affect ascribes a particular temporality to hipsterism, it's hard to give a concrete date as to when hipsterism ended and post-hipsterism began. As Jacques Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*, "haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar."³⁸⁴ Drawing on Fredric Jameson's loose periodization of "the 60s" between 1954 and 1974, Jefferey Nealon reaches a similar conclusion about the

³⁸³ Steven Shaviri, "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales," *Film-Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2010): 1-102, 2.

³⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

imprecision of periodization, writing that “calendar markers are not the be-all and end-all of grappling with historical periods.”³⁸⁵ Nealon also points out the ten year gap between Jameson’s formulation of the end of the 60s, and the 1984 publication of his influential essay “Periodizing the 60s,” arguing that it is only from the end of an epoch that one may begin to periodize it.³⁸⁶ In the case of the hipster, murmurs of the end of the era began in 2010, and were officially confirmed following *Vice Magazine’s* obituary in 2015.³⁸⁷

Post-hipster affect is also difficult to pin down because it’s so many different things at once. It’s the uncomfortable gut feeling we might get when we read headlines describing the transformation of Vice co-founder Gavin McInnes into an organizer of a far-right fraternity clad in fake Fred Perry polos, or when we listen to sensationalistic podcasts describing in lurid detail the rise and fall of American Apparel’s pervy CEO Dov Charney.³⁸⁸ It’s the haunting we may feel on a stroll through one of the coveted former meccas of hipsterdom—from Williamsburg, to the Mile End, to the Mission, to East Austin, and

³⁸⁵ Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 10.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Mark Grief, “What Was the Hipster?”; John Saward, “Here Lies the Hipster.”

³⁸⁸ See for example: Alan Feuer, “Proud Boys Founder: How He Went From Brooklyn Hipster to Far-Right Provocateur,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/nyregion/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnnes.html>; Kerry Flynn, “Vice Distances Itself — Again — from Co-Founder Who Started Proud Boys,” *CNN Business*, Oct. 1, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/media/vice-gavin-mcinnnes-proud-boys/index.html>; Adam Leith Gollner, “The Secret History of Gavin McInnes,” *Vanity Fair*, Jun. 29, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-secret-history-of-gavin-mcinnnes>; and: Alexi, Biz & Sam, “Ep. 1: American Apparel and the Tennis Skirt Industrial Complex,” *Nymphet Alumni*, Feb. 23, 2021, <https://podtail.com/en/podcast/nymphet-alumni/ep-1-american-apparel-and-the-tennis-skirt-industr/>; STARTUP, “Dov Charney 1: Labels,” *STARTUP*, Nov. 4, 2016, <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/startup/49hrex>; The Great Fail, “The Unravelling of American Apparel,” *The Great Fail*, Aug 4, 2020, <https://thegreatfail.com/episode/the-unraveling-of-american-apparel/>.

Queen West—only to be surrounded by condominiums, retail chains, and the uneasy sense that the youthful bohemians that used to crowd the streets can no longer afford to live in the neighbourhood. It's the sentiment that's left behind upon realizing that so many of the signifiers of that bygone era's fading subculture from the manicured beards and craft cocktails to the post-industrial minimalist design motif journalist Kyle Chayka terms "AirSpace" now serve as global signifiers of late capitalism.³⁸⁹ It's the following passage from Rebecca Jennings' article "Stuck in 2020, Pretending It's 2014:"

POV: It's 2020. You are an adult, living a life that is a little more boring than it was a decade ago, stuck at home in the midst of a global pandemic that will probably change the world as we know it. You hear a song that sounds like it could be screamed by a bunch of sad young people at a warehouse party, back when you used to go to warehouse parties, back when people were allowed to have those. How could it have ever been so good?³⁹⁰



Figure 42: The "AirSpace" aesthetic described by Chayka.

³⁸⁹ Kyle Chayka, "Same Old, Same Old. How the Hipster Aesthetic Is Taking Over the World."

³⁹⁰ Rebecca Jennings, "Stuck in 2020, Pretending It's 2014," *Vox*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/5/7/21247938/tumblr-aesthetic-2014-nostalgia-tiktok-indie-pop>.

Post-hipster affect can also be one of several different vibes we might catch listening to some of the indie bands from the late hipster era. Take for example the deep sense of pastness that permeates the early work of slackercore indie rocker Mac Demarco. While the figure of the hipster had begun to wither in the public imagination by the early 2010s, Mac Demarco's release of his 2012 debut full-length, *2* in 2012 serves as a reminder that the term's cultural relevance hadn't fully expired by the early 2010s. Both Demarco's look—characterized by his deadbeat public persona, vintage threads, and sexy gap tooth—and his sound—conjured by hypnotizing lo-fi guitar licks and a laid-back take on jangle pop that Demarco terms “jizz jazz”—drip with the timelessly detached cool fetishized by the hipster disposition. On the album's hit track [“Ode to Viceroy,”](#) Demarco waxes poetic about his favourite brand of discount cigarettes across a stoned-sounding breeze of guitar riffs. Washed in faded neon colours and static reminiscent of old home video footage from a VHS camcorder, the song's music video typifies vaporwave's aesthetic of '80s and '90s nostalgia, which itself can be read as a melancholy longing for pre-Web 2.0 culture as a romanticized elsewhere from the alienated humdrum of digital life for millennial youth.³⁹¹ More so than the music video however, it's “Ode to Viceroy” itself, and much of Demarco's music in general which drips with a lethargic melancholia which evokes the feeling of being in the aftermath of an event. The song's mellow pace and jangly guitar work, coupled with lyrics like: “Viceroy, early in the morning, just trying to

³⁹¹ CapturedTracks, “Mac DeMarco // “Ode to Viceroy” (OFFICIAL VIDEO),” *YouTube*, Nov. 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bfTTeZOrs4>.

let the sun in, and open up my eyes,” conjure a hazy image of waking up hungover after a special night—be it a party, a night out, or a romantic or intimate encounter—and sluggishly going through the motions of everyday life haunted by the fading glow of the immediate past.³⁹² There’s a seductive loneliness to “Viceroy”—the kind that makes you want to ditch your obligations and spend the day drinking coffee, getting stoned, smoking cigarettes, and sitting by the window, watching the rain fall outside.



Figure 43: The vaporwave-esque aesthetics of Mac Demarco's "Ode to Viceroy" music video.

Similar to the "death of the '60s" vibe that Miles Marshall Lewis ascribes to the seething cynicism and drug-induced paranoia of Sly and the Family Stone's 1974 album *There's a Riot Goin' On*, Demarco's music is pervaded by the affective atmosphere of the end of an era—the feeling of longful emptiness that creeps in once the party is over and

³⁹² "Ode to Viceroy," track #5 on Mac Demarco, *2*, Captured Tracks CT-164, 2012.

everybody has gone back home.³⁹³ What I described in Chapter 4 as the “desperate utopianism” of 2000s pop music also evoked a festive occasion, but did so from a place within the party itself, as if to express an anticipatory sense of mourning that the event will inevitably end. Post-hipster melancholia on the other hand, comes after the party has ended, replacing the celebratory tone of desperate utopianism with a lethargic sense of uncertainty toward the future which is quelled by meditating on utopian residues from the past, resulting in a vicious cycle of sedated longing. The cloudy hangover evoked by the sedated melancholia of Demarco’s songs isn’t just the effect of a few too many drinks. The fact that the release of his album *2* in 2012 fell right in between Mark Greif and John Seward’s pronouncements of the death of the hipster (2009 and 2015 respectively) feels far from coincidental considering the tone of the music. The song [“Chamber of Reflection”](#) from Demarco’s 2014 album *Salad Days* gives us a similar sense of this feeling. Departing from his usual slinky guitar tones, Demarco builds a rich vaporwave-esque feel through a slow, druggy beat reminiscent of DJ Screw’s codeine syrup-soothed “chopped and screwed” mixes, haunted by a hazy-sounding synth borrowed from Sekitō Shigeo’s 1975 song “The World II (ザ・ワールドⅡ / セキトウ・シゲオ).” Inspired by an isolation ritual which commences a layman’s initiation into Freemasonry, Demarco sings: “Spend some time away, getting ready for the day you’re born again.”³⁹⁴ The song’s atmosphere is so

³⁹³ See: Miles Marshall Lewis, *Sly and the Family Stone’s There’s a Riot Goin’ on (33 1/3)* (London: Continuum, 2006).

³⁹⁴ “Chamber of Reflection,” track #9 on Mac Demarco, *Salad Days*, Captured Tracks CT-193, 2014.

rich that you can practically walk through it. "Spend some time alone, understand that soon you'll run with better men."³⁹⁵ The song conjures a thick fog, in which we find ourselves chasing warm memories of a fading scene through labyrinthian streets of condo developments in what used to be the "cool" part of town. "Alone again."³⁹⁶

"Epic."

The sense of post-hipster melancholia which permeates Demarco's music and visual aesthetics takes a slightly different form in The xx's 2009 ["Intro."](#)³⁹⁷ The song's sorrowful keyboard melodies and faint, almost broodingly hummed vocals express a deep sense of wistfulness, but the song also has an almost cinematic atmosphere to it. With the addition of the drum machine, the song takes on a triumphant sense of whimsy, feeling as though it could drift into flight at any moment. This tone is something altogether different from the doomed earnestness of desperate utopianism—it feels less self-conscious, more slick...*epic* even. This is the same sort of epicness which lends a glimmery, seductive quality to Washed Out's ["Feel It All Around"](#) of the same year, and gives that monumental feel to M83's ["Midnight City"](#) from 2011.³⁹⁸ It also informs the post-indie "stomp clap hey" genre ascribed to the likes of Mumford & Sons, Vance Joy, and Edwards Sharpe & the Magnetic Zeroes, which has been aptly described on *Rate Your Music* as "gentrified, high-budget

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ "Intro," track #1 on The xx, *xx*, Young Turks YT031LP, 2009.

³⁹⁸ "Feel It All Around," track #4 on Washed Out, *Life of Leisure*, Mexican Summer MEX023, 2009; "Midnight City," track #2 on M83, *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*, Naïve NV824311, 2011.

washed-out faux-‘indie’ folk that nobody actually listens to but is the plague of coffee shops, car commercials, and (when they want to pretend like they’re hip and indie) top 40 radio stations.”³⁹⁹



Figure 44: Twitter user @lemonade_grrrl's Tweet about the "stomp clap hey" subgenre.

I use the term *epicness* here to characterize a particular tone within indie electronica and folk rock of the late aughts and early twenty-teens which sonically evokes the mainstream ascent of indie/alternative/hipster consumption and soundtracks the transitional moment between the hipster and the yuccie. The term feels right as a descriptor for this tone because of the way in which the almost embarrassing degree of sincerity it conveys contradicts the ice-cool, irony-bitten, almost paranoid ambivalence toward expressing interest which was so central to the hipster disposition. Epicness corresponds to the moment at which the weighty baggage of authenticity started to untether from the traditional signifiers of the hipster era, allowing one to eat at trendy neighbourhood restaurants serving cheap cans of Pabst, work on a laptop at the minimalist local espresso bar, go shopping for vintage concert tees, or attend indie shows without having to deal from the imposing irony, judgment, and self-awareness of the

³⁹⁹ devrandommusic, "starbucks folk (stomp clap hey)," *Rate Your Music*, n.d., <https://rateyourmusic.com/list/devrandommusic/starbucks-folk-stomp-clap-hey/>.

hipster. Epicness is indie as an aesthetic for car commercials and condominiums—the sonic background of finance bros drinking craft IPAs at axe-throwing bars in their respective city's compulsory “arts district.”

My use of the term *epic* to describe this particular tone is not incidental. In a 2010 interview with *Pitchfork* regarding his upcoming album *Hurry Up, We're Dreaming*, which features the track “Midnight City” mentioned above, Alex Gonzales of M83 states that “the direction of the album is very, very, very epic.”⁴⁰⁰ After surfacing on sites like 4chan and Something Awful sometime in the early to mid-aughts, epicness became ubiquitous in the popular lexicon by 2010, as evidenced by the popularity of “epic fail” video compilations, and the Canadian YouTube “cooking show,” *Epic Meal Time*.⁴⁰¹ The latter features host Harley Morenstein and a crew of his boys as they assemble extreme high-calorie meals composed mostly of meat and Jack Daniel's. What's interesting about *Epic Meal Time* is the way in which the show's protagonists trouble the rapidly dissipating boundaries between mainstream and alternative. With their heavy facial hair and colourful American Apparel hoodies, the show's hosts look like they could be equally at home at an indie rock show or a baseball game. Likewise, the food they prepare toes the line between the

⁴⁰⁰ Ryan Dombal, “M83 Talks ‘Very, Very, Very Epic’ New Album,” *Pitchfork*, Nov. 22, 2010, <https://pitchfork.com/news/40556-m83-talks-very-very-very-epic-new-album/>.

⁴⁰¹ Jamie Dubs, “FAIL / Epic Fail,” *Know Your Meme*, 2009, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/fail-epic-fail>; “The History of ‘Epic Fail,’” *Miriam-Webster*, n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/epic-fail-a-success-story>.

stoner comfort food popularized by chefs like Momofuku's David Chang in the nascent casual fine dining scene, and a testosterone-fueled frat diet of pizza, beer, and meat.

The "epic" partition between hipster signifiers and any kind of vaguely subcultural affiliations arguably reaches its apex with Avicii's 2013 folktronica anthem, "[Wake Me Up](#)."⁴⁰² The song begins as a simple wistful tune reminiscent of the mountain man indie folk of the hipster years, yet something seems off. Sung by soul singer Aloe Blacc, the song's lyrics about self-discovery in the journey through life feel too literal and too cliché to be cool. Then about a minute into the song, the folky tune cuts out and within seconds, the bass drops, and the song transforms into an anthemic club banger more reminiscent of Ibiza than Williamsburg. The epic, summery EDM feel of "Wake Me Up" empties the indie folk-inspired elements of the song of any shred of hipster signification, turning the genre into an empty signifier which can be used to make a catchy dance song for the burgeoning yuccie set.

The aesthetics of hollowed hipster signifiers also produce an *epic* visual effect in the music video for "Wake Me Up."⁴⁰³ The video features a young woman and a girl with matching tattoos of Avicii's logo walking around a dusty Wild Western town whose old-timey looking residents give them dirty looks for their modern attire. "The others, they don't like us," notes the young girl as the song begins to build into a drop. After putting

⁴⁰² "Wake Me Up," track #1 on Avicii, *True*, PRMD B0019059-02, Island Records B0019059-02, 2013.

⁴⁰³ Avicii, "Avicii - Wake Me Up (Official Video)," *YouTube*, Jul. 29, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcrbM1l_Bol.

the girl to bed for a nap, the woman mounts a horse and sets off into the horizon where she eventually meets a whole crew of young people with matching tattoos who take her to an Avicii concert. She eventually returns home to take her daughter “somewhere we belong,” but the video ends with the suggestion that the whole thing could have also just been a daydream. Paired with the exuberant feeling of the song, the video has a whimsical, almost sublime quality. Lacking any kind of irony or critical analysis of the disparity between the beautiful concertgoers and the dusty townsfolk, the video instead presents a series of sequences of attractive (almost exclusively white) people in Instagram-esque quasi-magical situations. This motif characterizes several post-hipster music videos of this era such as Vance Joy’s [“Riptide”](#) from 2013 and Kungs and Cookin’ on 3 Burners’ remix of [“This Girl”](#) from 2016, which combined with a sepia filter, soft colour palette, and rhythmic transitions between shots, make up a style we might call *influencer realism*. *Influencer realism* adds an element of magic realism to the clean and sparse fantasy-like images of yuccie lifestyles circulated by influencers and content creators on social media platforms. Like cruel optimism on a beach, the videos depict fantasies of the good life under late capitalism represented by beautiful, young, affluent, well-dressed people travelling across the globe in a carefree lifestyle filled with surprise and adventure. Perched away in the far corners of the globe, and dancing before a glorious sunset, influencer realism offers a quick taste of the late capitalist sublime with all of the style, and none of the criticality of

the hipster critique of judgment, snapped on an iPhone and saved to someone's Instagram feed.



Figure 45: The "influencer realism of Kungs vs Cookin' on 3 Burners' music video for "This Girl" (2016).

"The Roaring '20s"

The ascension of post-hipster affect from an emergent structure of feeling to something more closely resembling a dominant one kicked off in 2021, when it began to shape into a nostalgic yearning for the cultural moment of hipster and an excited anticipation of its imminent stylistic revival under a different alias. On January 30th 2021, a Toronto-based Instagram account called *@indiesleaze* made its first post: a starter pack meme for "the 2000s alt club girl in an electro pop band" featuring cut up lines of cocaine, a bottle of Skyy Vodka, a bejewelled pink T-Mobile Sidekick cellphone, a MySpace message inbox, a woman with a multicoloured mullet, The Knife's *Deep Cuts* album, pink

tights matched with white mules, and of course, American Apparel's iconic gold bodysuit. With its self-declared mission of "documenting the decadence of the mid-late aughts and the *indie sleaze* party scene that died in 2012," *@indiesleaze* began posting an onslaught of party picture eye candy for aughts-era indiephiles, focusing on cultural icons of that era such as Cory Kennedy, Alexa Cheung, Steve Aoki, and Julian Casablancas. Yet, *@indiesleaze* wasn't alone in its appetite for 2000s hipster nostalgia. In a guest appearance on the *Outsider Theory* podcast in March of 2021, fashion writer and cultural critic Biz Sherbert forecasted a revival of hipster-era late 2000s/early 2010s style which she referred to as millennialcore.⁴⁰⁴ While the millennialcore designation never really took off, *indie sleaze* began to explode in November of the same year after trend analyst Mandy Lee uploaded a TikTok video describing the aesthetic, prompting the publication of no less than five articles about it by the end of the week.⁴⁰⁵ By January of 2022, indie sleaze had become a household name, having been written about by virtually every major fashion magazine, from *Harper's Bazaar* to *Vogue*.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁴ Outsider Theory, "Bidendcore Hauntology with Biz Sherbert," *Outsider Theory*, Mar. 6, 2021, <https://outsidertheory.fireside.fm/bidendcore>.

⁴⁰⁵ See for example: India Roby, "'Indie Sleaze' Is the Next 2000s Fashion Era Making a Comeback," *Nylon*, Oct. 27, 2021, <https://www.nylon.com/fashion/indie-sleaze-2000s-fashion-comeback>; Daniel Rogers, "WTF is Indie Sleaze and is it actually making a comeback?" *Dazed*, Oct. 29, 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/54603/1/wtf-is-indie-sleaze-comeback-tiktok-trend-y2k-chanel-saint-laurent-cobrasnake>.

⁴⁰⁶ See: Alex Kessler, "Are You Ready For The Return Of Indie Sleaze?" *Vogue*, Jan. 17, 2022, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/indie-sleaze-trend-comeback>; Isabel Slone, "The Return of Indie Sleaze Style."



Figure 46: @indiesleaze's "the 2000s alt club girl in an electro pop band" starter pack.

The rise of indie sleaze in 2021 is perhaps one of the most telling signs of the transition between subculture and memetic aesthetics in the post-hipster moment. For one thing, the trend served as a testament to the power of digital technology in cultural ontogenesis, transforming within the span of just one week from a *thing*—when it was mentioned in a TikTok video uploaded on November 21st, 2021 by trend analyst Mandy Lee, to a memetic aesthetic category—when it was written about by no less than five different outlets, swiftly prompting the creation of its own page on *Aesthetics Wiki*. Yet, what's especially interesting about *indie sleaze* is the way it functions as a memetic aestheticization of subculture. In other words, *indie sleaze* represents a desire to return to the glory days of hipsterism by offering a nostalgic pastiche of signifiers from a bygone

subcultural moment without the burdensome weight of subcultural authenticity, which ironically is what animated the aesthetics of hipsterism in the first place.

Arguably the most controversial moment in the rise of *indie sleaze* followed the publication of *The Cut*'s article on the vibe shift described in Chapter 6, in which the *indie sleaze* aesthetic was cited as one of the key signifiers of the shift.⁴⁰⁷ In the weeks that followed the article's publication, the sense of frustration with *The Cut* piece began transforming into a critique of *indie sleaze* more generally, arguing that the hot look of the supposed new vibe shift wasn't even a real *thing*. In an article called "Myths Of The Near Past: Why The Indie Sleaze Revival Is A Lie," Daniel Dylan Wray critiques indie sleaze as an artificial media construct based on an overzealous "retrofitting of a term that was born in 2021 to create an imaginary genre from the 2000s."⁴⁰⁸ As Wray writes,

The whole thing just feels like such a weird, tenuous, desperate grasp for something that isn't there. A bit of a front. One that people are using to mask the reality that the music they like, or make, has been deeply out of fashion for some time and are jumping on an opportunity to convince themselves its back... It's a bit like deciding that bat-chic is a better name for goth and then pumping out articles about the heady times, fashion and music of the 1980s bat-chic scene, while declaring it is absolutely 100% a thing that is coming back because some photos have been doing the rounds on socials.⁴⁰⁹

On his blog *Xenogothic*, Matt Colquhoun similarly describes indie sleaze as "little more than a caricature of an era, created by a bunch of overworked millennials trawling

⁴⁰⁷ The association between the vibe shift and *indie sleaze* was later debunked by *angelicism01*, who writes about the vibe shift that "This [*indie sleaze*] isn't really a *look* at all, either intentionally sleazy or retro or beautiful or whatever." *angelicism01*, "Somebody Please Columbine The Entire The Cut Editorial Staff."

⁴⁰⁸ Daniel Dylan Wray, "Myths Of The Near Past: Why The Indie Sleaze Revival Is A Lie," *The Quietus*, Feb. 21, 2022, <https://thequietus.com/articles/31167-indie-sleaze-mandela-effect>.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Instagram, TikTok, and Google, in a bid to provide the winning take on something that isn't really happening."⁴¹⁰

What's revealing about these critiques of *indie sleaze* is how they differ from some of the earlier criticisms of the hipster by figures like Douglas Haddow. While the hipster haters may have taken issue with the inauthenticity of hipsterism as a subcultural aesthetic, the actual *thingness* of hipsterism as a cultural category was never up for debate. In contrast, Wray and Colquhoun's beef with *indie sleaze* is not that it fails to chalk up to past generations' transgressive subcultures, but rather that it is an artificial construction of the media industry, and thus not even a real *thing*. Highlighting the fundamental shift characteristic of memetic aesthetics whereby the *thingness* of a given category supersedes all other aesthetic considerations of it, hipsterism as a subculture and indie sleaze as a memetic aesthetic are thus evaluated according to separate criteria: the former according to the value of its authenticity, and the latter according to its degree of recognizability as a distinct category.

These critiques of the *indie sleaze* trend call apt attention to its premature ontogenesis through viral circulation (i.e., becoming a *thing* in digital media before becoming an actual "thing" within the cultural landscape) and its seemingly haphazard posthumous renaming of hipster culture. Yet, more important than the question of whether *indie sleaze* is the aesthetic direction of the next big vibe shift—or if it is even a

⁴¹⁰ Matt Colquhoun, "The Spectre of Indie Sleaze," *Xenogothic*, March 9, 2022, <https://xenogothic.com/2022/03/09/the-spectre-of-indie-sleaze/>.

real thing—is what this longing for hipsterism might reveal about the present. Biz Sherbert reads the nostalgic yearning for the years of the hipster as a result of the rapidly shortening latency period between fashion styles and their subsequent revivals. While decades like the '80s and '90s were pervaded by a sense of cultural nostalgia for periods some thirty years before their time (the '50s and '60s respectively), Sherbert argues that this latency period has shrunk to about half its length in recently years, attributing this shift to the mainstreaming of thrifting and reselling vintage clothing, which she claims has created an enormous economy and ecosystem for fashion revivals.⁴¹¹ Considering the way in which the revival of late '90s/early aughts “Y2K” aesthetics adopted by teens on TikTok increasingly began veering toward a revival of the glittery kitsch of mid-aughts style popularized by figures like Paris Hilton, it makes sense that the hipster aesthetic of the mid-to-late aughts was anticipated to be the next 2000s aesthetic in line for a comeback. The COVID-19 pandemic has also been cited as a notable factor in the cultural nostalgia for the American Apparel era. Citing a 2020 study from scientists at Rutgers University and North Dakota State University which found that nostalgic thoughts cultivate a sense of social connectedness during periods of loneliness, Kimberley Bond describes how the sense of isolation during the global pandemic fostered a collective desire for a new

⁴¹¹ Lauren Cochrane, “Our Obsession with Nostalgia is Driving a Trend Revival Spiral,” *The Face*, Feb. 23, 2022, <https://theface.com/culture/the-revival-spiral-1990s-2000s-noughties-nostalgia-indie-sleaze-y2k-tiktok-fashion-dark-academia-regencycore-the-sopranos-supreme>.

"roaring 20s."⁴¹² Bond also cites internet commentator and *Garbage Day* newsletter creator Ryan Broderick, who argues that as the first subculture to be documented on social media, hipsterism serves both as a nostalgic memory of reckless parties for millennials old enough to remember it, and a reference point for Gen Z youth on how people in their 20s should be acting.⁴¹³

For commentators like Stella Hughes, Magdalene Taylor, and Lea Zoller, indie sleaze signifies a nostalgia for the carefree atmosphere of party culture prior to the development of smartphone technology and the emergence of increasingly sophisticated social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.⁴¹⁴ As Hughes writes, "the predicted resurgence of *Indie Sleaze* speaks to the wider rejection of 'perfect' curation and adoption of hedonism and authenticity, post-pandemic."⁴¹⁵ One of the most celebrated sources of the kind of uncensored authenticity Hughes describes here is found in the party photography of the era. Magdalene Taylor describes the spontaneous, in-the-moment appeal of the iconic party photography of Mark Hunter (better known as Cobrasnake) as follows:

⁴¹² Kimberley Bond, "Late 00's 'Indie Sleaze' Is Having a Resurgence – But Why Are We So Keen to Relive Our Teenage Years?" *Stylist*, Feb. 15, 2022, <https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/teenage-years-indy-sleeze-tiktok-trend-gen-z/623100>.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ See: Stella Hughes, "In a Scary Turn of Events, Indie Sleaze Is Back," *Culted*, Oct. 29, 2021, <https://culted.com/in-a-scary-turn-of-events-indie-sleaze-is-back/>; Magdalene Taylor, "American Apparel Nostalgia and the Return of Indie Sleaze," *Mel Magazine*, n.d., <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/american-apparel-nostalgia>; Lea Zoller, "The Performative Effortlessness of the Indie Sleaze Aesthetic," *Shift*, Nov. 18, 2021, <https://www.shiftlondon.org/features/the-performative-effortlessness-of-the-indie-sleaze-aesthetic/>.

⁴¹⁵ Stella Hughes, "In a Scary Turn of Events, Indie Sleaze Is Back;" emphasis added.

Part of the appeal of party photography wasn't just the look that it delivered, but what it represented. The Cobra Snake's style was casual debauchery — he's photographing a party, yes, but everyone's in T-shirts and hoodies, their eyeliner is smeared and the flash of the camera captures each moment with honesty. The photos would end up online, but not till the party was over. There was no posing 100 different ways until you got the perfect Instagrammable picture. Even if entirely contrived, it at least looked like everyone was in the moment.⁴¹⁶

Broken Social Scene

As we might recall from Chapter 4, the concept of the scene was first theorized as one of the first frameworks responding to the crisis of subculture in cultural studies. For Will Straw, the scene serves as a useful conceptual tool both because it allows theorists to talk about cultural unities without being bogged down by the determinism of the CCCS approach to subculture, and because it highlights the “the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life.”⁴¹⁷ It is precisely the “cozy intimacy of community” which Straw describes, that is mentioned as one of the fundamental spoils of the hipster years in several accounts of *indie sleaze*. As Oliva, the curator of the *@indiesleaze* Instagram page puts it in an interview with *NME*:

It felt chaotic, and it also felt like people from different scenes were coming together. There were a lot of different cliques hanging together, and not really caring about just sticking with your scene... A lot of it was about being spontaneous and meeting new people, and trying to have new experiences.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁶ Magdalene Taylor, “American Apparel Nostalgia and the Return of Indie Sleaze.”

⁴¹⁷ Will Straw, “Scenes and Sensibilities,” 248.

⁴¹⁸ El Hunt, “‘There Was a Sense of Optimism’: How ‘00s Indie Sleaze Made a Massive Comeback,” *NME*, Feb. 15, 2022, <https://www.nme.com/features/indie-sleaze-revival-the-maccabees-the-horrors-white-heat-3162006>.

Mandy Lee, who popularized the term on TikTok similarly recounts: “I was in my late teens/early 20s when this style was at its peak and I remember feeling such a sense of community in the DIY music and art space.”⁴¹⁹ There’s a sense across these accounts that the affective appeal of the hipster years may have resided in the strange sense of intimacy of the “scene” that it fostered—the way the sinking ship of authenticity briefly united an unlikely combination of indie kids, DJs, bohemians, it girls, hip-hop heads, queers, artists, scenesters, punks, college students, headbangers, cyclists, hippies, and photographers for a final hurrah under the withering banner of subculture. As James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem mentions in Lizzy Goodman’s account of the 2000s New York indie scene:

‘Scene’ was never a dirty word. ‘Scene’ was a good word pre-hipster. A scene was what you were proud of. We were trying to build a scene. At the same time, we were myth building, we were scene building. Now it seems grotesque. But before universal hipsterism, that was what you were proud of—where you were from, your family.⁴²⁰

A similar sense of desire for scene intimacy is noted in several accounts of Dimes Square, the edgy New York art scene explored in Chapter 6, which coined the *vibe shift* when *angelicism01* Tweeted about it in the summer of 2021. In his discussion of Dimes Square, Brad Troemel describes the digital replacement of physical art scenes with digital “scenes without territories” as a major loss for culture writers eager to map out the geographical contours of emerging cultural hubs.⁴²¹ According to Troemel, Dimes Square

⁴¹⁹ Daniel Rogers, “WTF is Indie Sleaze and is it actually making a comeback?”

⁴²⁰ Lizzy Goodman, *Meet Me in the Bathroom: Rebirth and Rock and Roll in New York City 2001-2011* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 871-872.

⁴²¹ Brad Troemel, “The Cloutbombing Report,” *Patreon*, Aug. 8, 2023, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/88238221?pr=true>.

served as a notable exception to this rule and thus as a “generous gift” to such writers, whose think pieces on the scene may have been more prolific and influential than any of its art itself.⁴²² As such, Troemel describes Dimes Square as “a scene about a scene,” one which was less about the actual works produced by its “artists,” and more about the reassuring sense that local scene-based artistic communities still existed.⁴²³ In his review of Matthew Gasda’s play *Dimes Square*, Substacker Mike Crumplar offers a more skeptical account of Dimes Square, bemoaning the way in which the much-hyped scene seemed to be more about doing drugs with people than producing interesting art:

The art itself is basically an afterthought. I guess I gotta just go to parties around town and offer people coke and listen to their ranting if I want to get a real committed answer about what’s coming next in the world of art and letters. I personally don’t have a problem with that, but it would be nice to have some art that does more than tickle the enjoyment of seeing oneself in the cocaine mirror.⁴²⁴

Following Troemel and Crumplar, we might argue then that the merit of Dimes Square and the popularity of the *indie sleaze* trend lies in a kind of Web 2.0-era relational aesthetics intended to preserve the aura of the scene amidst the tension between the IRL scenes of yore, and the digital emergence of what Troemel terms “scenes without borders,” or what Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson refer to as “virtual scenes.”⁴²⁵ Borrowing Stefano Barone’s concept of “sceneness,” defined as “the essence, and the

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Mike Crumplar, “Making Love and Art in the End Dimes,” *Crumpstack*, Mar. 1, 2022, <https://mcrumps.substack.com/p/making-love-and-art-in-the-end-dimes>.

⁴²⁵ Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett, “Introducing Music Scenes,” *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, edited by Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 1-15; Brad Troemel, “The Cloutbombing Report.”

density, of scenes," one might be therefore tempted to make the claim that the physicality of a scene is one of the most crucial factors in its *sceneness*.⁴²⁶ The raw physicality and hedonism of nightlife scenes during the hipster years described above may thus be juxtaposed with the more impersonal and curated feel of borderless/virtual scenes emerging around memetic aesthetics such as *vaporwave* or *cottagecore* on platforms like Instagram or TikTok. Yet, drawing on Arjun Appadurai's concept of locality as a metaphor for sceneness, Barone also discusses how sceneness can be understood as a structure of feeling which "has more to do with a sentiment of co-presence than with just acting in the same place."⁴²⁷ The weaker affective bonds of online scenes then, might have less to do with the lack of an IRL (in real life) scene than the disappearance of a sense of collective common ground which gave the scene its feeling of sceneness and community—perhaps the desperate faith in that weathered old concept of subcultural authenticity. Post-hipster affect, of which *indie sleaze* is just one manifestation, may thus be characterized as a desire to recapture the fellowship and intimacy of a now-defunct scene before it shattered into a perpetually subdividing sprawl of niche stylistic categories and hashtag-based virtual communities.

This chapter concludes with what might very well be the definitive artifact of post-hipster affect, the wistful final post from *Hipster Runoff*. Published on November 7th, 2013,

⁴²⁶ Stefano Barone, "Fragile Scenes, Fractured Communities: Tunisian Metal and Sceneness," *Journal of Youth Studies* 19, 1 (2016): 20-35, 23.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

and titled "Is the scene still alive?", the post perfectly captures the melancholy hangover of the subculturalist as they awaken to the dawn of memetic aesthetics to find that their once proud scene has drifted apart. It reads:

I went to the old scene spot
And saw the same scene faces
A few years older
Still wearing stupid clothes
Still looking proud

Is the scene still alive?

Was I the one who was alive?
Or was I just naive
feelings of youth, hope, a better tomorrow
manifesting itself in my arbitrary cultural immersion

But the scene still looks the same
The scene children are still around
They are still talking about things tangentially related to the commercial arts

Have you heard the band?
Have u heard the album?
Have you seen the popular television show?
Did u see the movie film?
Are you going to the opening? I believe there is an open bar
Are you going to the regional music festival?
It has the same lineup as the regional music festival
on the opposite side of the country.

Did the scene ever exist?
Why did we invent the scene in our minds
It was nothing
It was everything

Is the scene still alive?
There are people still alive in the scene?
Are they ALIVE?

Was I ever ALIVE?

They still seem like they honor the scene
So maybe it is still alive
Maybe they are still alive

They still seem to take it seriously.
It still seems to define them.
Are they holding on to something that doesn't exist any more?
Are they holding on to themselves?
Did I lose myself?

Is the scene still alive?⁴²⁸

⁴²⁸ Carles, "Is the scene still alive?" *Hipster Runoff*, Nov. 7, 2013,
<https://web.archive.org/web/20140324213402/https://www.hipsterrunoff.com/>.

Part III: The Memetic Aestheticization of Politics

Chapter 9: Neon-Nazis: A Fascist Foray into Vaporwave's Synaesthetic World

The Prophecy of Kek

The Temple of Kek is awash in rich neon hues.⁴²⁹ Inside of it are the self-proclaimed warriors of the decaying vestiges of the Western world. Risking their lives from the confines of their laptop screens and anonymous internet personalities, these crusaders are

⁴²⁹ See: Egil Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics: Memes, Magic, and the Enchantment of Social Forces in the American Magic War," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 23, no. 4 (2020): 15–42.

determined to protect the remaining ruins of their once proud civilisation from racial minorities, feminists, beta males, cuckservatives, SJWs (Social Justice Warriors), the PC Police, Hillary supporters, and other enemies of free speech. The scene looks like a History Channel documentary about fascism on an acid trip: glowing visions of Hitler return your gaze in sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt, SS troops march around wrapped under sheets of television static, and Donald Trump performs the Roman salute amid three neon swastikas on a Tron-like virtual landscape. It's a festive scene: celebrating the end of a long hard day of trolling the internet, the disgruntled masses dance to a soundtrack that pulses through the Temple and sounds something like a cheap New Order imitation.



Figure 47: An example of fashwave art.

In mid-December of 2016, *BuzzFeed News* created a short-lived buzz on the internet with the publication of an article titled "How Electronic Music Made by Neo-Nazis Soundtracks the Alt-Right." Written by Reggie Ugwu, the piece describes the emergence of a new music subgenre called *fashwave* (a portmanteau of fascism and *vaporwave*) as the

newest addition to the genealogy of neo-fascist musical subgenres. Ugwu draws on a 2016 post titled "The Official Soundtrack of the Alt-Right" by Andrew Anglin, the founder of the American neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer*, which describes more extreme sounds like punk and metal as outdated in contemporary fascist circles.⁴³⁰ Instead, Anglin describes the alt-right movement's gravitation toward the retro-futurist visual aesthetics of vaporwave combined with the accessibility and supposed lack of "African rhythms" in synthwave, to embody "the spirit of the childhoods of millennials," and fit "with the ironic vibes of the movement."⁴³¹ As Ugwu notes, the fashwave subgenre was created by musicians Xurious and Cybernazi in 2015, and began to gain traction during Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, quickly becoming adopted by the alt-right as a celebratory soundtrack to herald the dawn of a new era of far-right populism on a global scale, and used as part of an effort to create a vital and accessible fascist subculture for young people to participate in.⁴³²

What is it about *vaporwave* that made it an ideal choice for appropriation by a new wave of digital fascists? This is the question that this chapter seeks to answer. To do so, it begins by offering a brief history of music-based fascist subcultures since the 1970s, as well as a short description of *vaporwave* aesthetics. This is followed by a summary of how the correlation between fascism and *vaporwave* has been taken up in some of the online

⁴³⁰ Reggie Ugwu, "How Electronic Music Made by Neo-Nazis Soundtracks the Alt-Right," *Buzz Feed News*, Dec. 13, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/reggieugwu/fashwave?utm_term=.igz0VD1ED#.yupVv12Q1.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

coverage of *fashwave*. Seeking to divert some of the attention from the strictly sonic properties of *fashwave*, I argue that what makes *vaporwave* so affectively compelling as a cultural aesthetic is its combination of sound and image to produce an immersive synaesthetic virtual space which evokes the melancholy and alienated vibes of Western millennials on the internet. Seeking to steer alienated youth toward far-right politics, *fashwave* permeates the bleak virtual space of *vaporwave*'s postmodern aesthetic with imagery reminiscent of one of the most extreme expressions of modernity, in an effort to recreate the expressive affectivity and optimism of modernity in a historical conjuncture saturated with feelings of alienation and powerlessness. Despite its relative lack of success in garnering mainstream appeal, I suggest that the far-right's attempt to harness the affective power of *vaporwave* offers some important lessons on the relationship between collective feeling, cultural aesthetics, and politics in the digital age.

Sounds of Hate

In his essay "Sounds of Hate: White Power Rock and Roll and the Neo-Nazi Skinhead Subculture," John M. Cotter writes that "it is almost universally accepted that music is the common thread that links neo-Nazi skinheads, serving as a source of entertainment, a propaganda tool and a weapon to incite violence."⁴³³ In order to be

⁴³³ John M. Cotter, "Sounds of Hate: White Power Rock and Roll and the Neo-Nazi Skinhead Subculture," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11, no.2 (1999): 111–140, 113.

properly understood, the phenomenon of fashwave must be contextualised within this broader genealogy of neo-fascist subcultures and music genres over the past decades. Music-based neo-fascist subcultures began with the birth of British skinhead culture in the 1960s. Growing out of the streets of East London, skinhead culture celebrated working-class identity with a tough, masculine style characterised by shaven heads, high-waisted jeans, Dr. Martens boots, braces, and button-down collar shirts. Deriving their aesthetic dispositions and appetite for ska, rocksteady, and early reggae music from Jamaican rude boy culture, skinhead culture was not initially tied to the political right. Following the emergence of a second wave of skinhead culture following the influence of punk in the late-1970s however, things began to change.

The revival of skinhead culture within the late-70s punk scene resulted in the birth of Oi!, a hard and fast style of punk expressing working-class frustration and celebrating male camaraderie and street violence.⁴³⁴ Around this time, right-wing nationalist groups like the National Front began luring skinheads and Oi! fans toward neo-Nazi ideology using music, particularly that of Ian Stuart and his band Skrewdriver. Beginning in 1976 as a non-fascist Oi! punk band, Skrewdriver developed a reputation for attracting violent neo-Nazi skinheads to their gigs. Refusing to denounce racist skinheads and the National Front, Skrewdriver found themselves banned from concert venues and eventually broke up in 1978.⁴³⁵ After several years of attending National Front meetings and trying to restart the

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 119.

band, Skrewdriver returned to the London skinhead scene in 1981, joining forces with the NF to lead Rock Against Communism (RAC) as a reactionary response to the leftist punk Rock Against Racism movement.⁴³⁶ With the release of their 1984 album *Hail the New Dawn* on Germany's Rock-O-Rama Records, Skrewdriver went international, taking RAC worldwide and creating small pockets of neo-Nazi skinhead scenes across the globe.

While punk itself had drawn heavily on Nazi imagery such as swastikas for shock value, and industrial acts like Death in June, NON, Genocide Organ, and Con-Dom continued to generate controversy with their ambiguous use of racist and fascist imagery throughout the 1980s and 1990s, RAC and Nazi punk were the only explicitly fascist music genres linked to youth subcultures until the emergence of National Socialist Black Metal (NSBM) in the early to mid-1990s. As discussed in Chapter 4, black metal's association with xenophobia and neo-Nazi ideology can be traced back to the genre's origins in Norway, but gradually grew into a networked global scene.

V A P O R W A V E

As mentioned by Andrew Anglin in an interview with *Buzzfeed News*, what makes *flashwave* noteworthy as a neo-fascist subgenre is its distinction from the extreme sonic aesthetics of punk and metal that have long been the domain of far-right music.⁴³⁷ Indeed, the warm glow of *vaporwave*'s pastel tones and retro-futuristic vibescapes is literally worlds away from the ale-sodden hard boot beat of London's white working-class streets

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Reggie Ugwu, "How Electronic Music Made by Neo-Nazis Soundtracks the Alt-Right."

expressed in Oi!, or the corpse-painted pagan howls echoing across black metal's icy and barren landscapes. Unlike Oi! and black metal, *vaporwave* was born on the internet, spawning out of an affair between Tumblr's short-lived *seapunk* and *chillwave* aesthetics in the early 2010s. *Vaporwave* might best be described as an audio-visual internet aesthetic based on a remixed rendition of everyday aesthetics from the late-1980s through the early-1990s. Drawing on desolate depictions of the technologies and spaces of late consumer capitalism from within this period, vaporwave constructs sonic and visual assemblages that are simultaneously nostalgic and technofuturistic, seeking to evoke the emptiness and alienation that underlie the superficial gloss of digitised postmodernity.⁴³⁸ As a visual aesthetic, *vaporwave* fixates on the generic atmosphere of spaces of global late capital, such as the office lobby, the hotel reception area, the mall, the beach resort, and the corporatised plaza, filling them with neon colours, Windows 95 glitch art, corporate logos, images of Greek and Roman busts, 8-bit video game imagery, and Japanese anime and text.⁴³⁹ As a music genre, *vaporwave* similarly seeks to recreate the stifling mundanity of everyday corporate life by creating druggy and distorted mashups and remixes of corny pop ballads, elevator music, smooth jazz, and computer and video game scores.

For the most part, the attempts to explain the choice of *vaporwave* as an aesthetic medium for a new era of far-right organising don't go much further than Andrew Anglin's

⁴³⁸ Michelle Lhooq, "Is Vaporwave the Next Seapunk?" *Noisey*, Dec. 27, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/3de8mb/is-vaporwave-the-next-seapunk.

⁴³⁹ Adam Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza," *Dummy Mag*, Jul. 12, 2012, <http://www.dummymag.com/features/adam-harper-vaporwave>.

mention of the accessibility of *vaporwave* in comparison to punk and metal. A notable exception is a *Vice* article titled “Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music.” In this piece, Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry trace the retro synth music that has influenced both *vaporwave* and *fashwave* to a genealogy of electronic music genres that they argue have been long appropriated by fascists.⁴⁴⁰ Beginning with the origins of noise music amongst Italian Futurists like Luigi Russolo, Bullock and Kerry cite the use of fascist imagery across the aesthetics of industrial music, harsh noise, the “automaton-like presence” of Kraftwerk albums, and the transformation of post-punk bands such as Joy Division into synth groups like New Order.⁴⁴¹

While Bullock and Kerry’s take on *fashwave*, electronic music, and the far-right is certainly interesting, their analysis is weakened by their tendency towards over-generalization. Firstly, the attribution of fascistic tendencies to politically neutral (e.g., Kraftwerk) or even explicitly anti-fascist groups (e.g., New Order) works to strengthen the alt-right’s claim over a legacy of influential and popular music that has no affiliation with far-right politics. Secondly, in attempting to reveal some kind of genealogical connection between electronic music and fascism over the course of a century, such an analysis

⁴⁴⁰ Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry, “Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music,” *THUMP*, Jan. 30, 2017, https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/mgwk7b/trumpwave-fashwave-far-right-appropriation-vaporwave-synthwave.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

flattens important historical, material, and contextual differences within various subgenres of music and fascist movements, thereby reducing them to vague, indeterminate concepts expected to carry some kind of monolithic meaning. This raises the question of how the explicit fascism of a pre-WWII modernist art movement in Italy, the depiction of a Hitler Youth member on a 1978 English post-punk EP, the robotic feeling evoked by a German krautrock/electronic band, and a postmodern synth-based neo-fascist music subgenre can be treated as part and parcel of the same *thing*, let alone with the same weight. The piece also seems to ignore the important fact that *flashwave* is the first electronic subgenre of neo-fascist music, with all of its predecessors having come out of rock music. Lastly, the idea that fascism is inherent within synthwave's origins places too much emphasis on solely sonic properties. Perhaps one of *flashwave*'s most interesting features is that its music is entirely instrumental, relying purely on song titles, samples, and visual images to provide its fascist content. By neglecting this fact, Bullock and Kerry seem to overlook the way in which the benign and non-threatening nature of synthwave functions as a tool for the far right to sugar-coat what might otherwise be considered an alienating extremist message.

The Ideology of the Synaesthetic

I want to suggest that there might be something more to the alt-right's choice of *vaporwave* as a medium for neo-fascist propaganda than simply the accessibility of synthwave music, and a series of loose historical connections between various electronic

subgenres and fascist movements. More specifically, I argue that the potentiality of *vaporwave* lies not so much in its purely sonic properties, but in the signifying properties of its unique, multisensory aesthetic atmosphere. As I have argued elsewhere, much of *vaporwave's* affective appeal lies in its ability to transform the melancholy postmodern feelings of web-surfing Western millennials into an aestheticised virtual space that Adam Harper calls the "virtual plaza."⁴⁴² While Harper never offers an explicit definition of the virtual plaza, the term aptly describes both the aesthetic resonance between *vaporwave* as a musical genre and as a visual aesthetic, as well as the semiotic correspondence between the genre's form and content. Put another way, the virtual plaza can be understood as a description of how *vaporwave's* subtle critique of late capitalist alienation condenses into a totalizing aesthetic world whose fading neon tones and trance-like washed-out soundscapes create a futile atmosphere used to signify postmodern millennial affect. Harper's concept of the virtual plaza thus corresponds to what I will refer to in this chapter as a *synaesthetic world*.

A synaesthetic world can be understood as an atmospheric virtual space opened up across works of a particular genre or style, in which a sense of total aesthetic immersion is produced by a multisensory correspondence between soundscapes, colours, shapes, tones, and visual imagery—a kind of aesthetic totality which is always open to contingency and

⁴⁴² Adam Harper, "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza," Alican Koc, "Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth? Cognitive Mapping of Late Capitalist Affect in the Virtual Lifeworld of Vaporwave," *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (2016): 56-76.

flux, yet nonetheless manage to coalesce into some kind of an atmospheric, world-like *thing* characterised by a loose sense of consistency and aesthetic/affective correspondence. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's characterization of *tone*, we may describe these worlds as "virtual, diffused, and immanent," properties shared by similar concepts such as Mikel Dufrenne's discussion of the "expressed worlds" of artworks, Gernot Böhme's work on aesthetic atmospheres, Ben Anderson's writings on affective atmospheres, and Peli Grietzer's dissertation on systems of ambient meaning.⁴⁴³ Grietzer aptly describes such worlds as the "imaginative landscape" associated with the *vibe* of a given work of art or an oeuvre of works:

If the collection of objects or phenomena associated with a given world or with a given work possesses an 'aesthetic unity' of the right kind, we argue, then the world or the work in question has a humanly accessible (though likely analytically intractable) systemic grammar that determines what objects or phenomena are possible within the world or work, as well as the respects of similarity and difference that describe the variation of objects or phenomena within the world or work. Furthermore, we argue that this 'aesthetic unity' in the collection of objects or phenomena associated with a world or with a work acts as a schema for the systemic grammar of the world or work, allowing the subject or reader to grasp the space of possibilities that gives the objects or phenomena within the world or work their meaning.⁴⁴⁴

The notion of a synaesthetic world also presupposes a loose, dialectical sense of correspondence between affective content and atmospheric form. In *Feeling and Form*, Susanne Langer borrows Clive Bell's notion of "significant form" to describe the "logically

⁴⁴³ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 47. Also see: Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*; Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*; Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*; Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁴⁴⁴ Peli Grietzer, *Ambient Meaning: Mood, Vibe, System*, 117.

expressive" content of artistic form, "symbols for the articulation of feeling," which belong in the same category as language while following a different, more affective logic.⁴⁴⁵

According to Langer, all signs and symbols are "charged" with sensuous and emotional experience and bear the marks of their origin, meaning that the felt correspondence between form and content is the product of a charge that emanates from a shared affective history at the point of origin of an aesthetic work.⁴⁴⁶

Despite its prominent status across written accounts of *vaporwave*, the notion that the genre's formal features symbolically, affectively, or semiotically express a critique of late capitalism isn't without some measure of controversy. In their aptly titled "'Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in An Online Music Scene," Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak discuss how narratives of *vaporwave*'s late capitalist critique function as "genre work" used to "assert, dispute, or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence for a musical style."⁴⁴⁷ Rather than focusing on the question of whether *vaporwave* is or isn't a capitalist critique, Whelan and Nowak discuss how "capitalism...becomes audible, identifiable and knowable" through its association with *vaporwave*.⁴⁴⁸ As Padraic Killeen discusses, this attempt to make capitalism knowable through *vaporwave* may also function in flattening the heterogeneity of the latter. Riffing

⁴⁴⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 52.

⁴⁴⁶ Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 283-284.

⁴⁴⁷ Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak. "'Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism': Genre Work in an Online Music Scene," *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (2018): 451-462, 452.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

on Barthes, Killeen argues that *vaporwave's* capitalist critique hypothesis can be understood as a myth, a simplified representation of reality which relies on the "manipulation of material reality and history itself."⁴⁴⁹ Citing the emergence of *fashwave* as a contradiction to *vaporwave's* supposed capitalist critique, Killeen argues that such mythic readings of the "hydra-headed figure of contemporary digital culture" also threaten to empty "the primacy, complexity, and intricacy of affect itself."⁴⁵⁰ While Killeen is right to insist that *vaporwave* isn't a purely ideological phenomenon, his writing seems animated by what William Mazzarella describes as the "fantasy of immediation" that underlies too much work in affect studies.⁴⁵¹ This dream of a "social essence...that is autonomous of and prior to social processes of mediation" often entails a kind of myth-making of its own, in which the dynamism of signification and mediation is flattened in order to create a villainous counterpart to the pure autonomy of affect. Seeking to exemplify the dialectical tension between contingency and qualification which inform everyday categories such as genre, the following section examines how *vaporwave's* aestheticised critique of late capitalism, like skinhead culture's street-smart sense of working-class solidarity thirty years prior, is precisely its point of appeal for far-right appropriation.

"Back to the Future"

⁴⁴⁹ Padraic Killeen, "Burned Out Myths and Vapour Trails: Vaporwave's Affective Potentials," *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (2018): 626-638, 631.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 633; William Mazzarella. "Affect: What is it Good for?" 303.

The title of a since-deleted YouTube video glows in neon colours over a Tron-like grid: "TAKE BACK OUR FUTURE - A Message from the Alt Right."⁴⁵² The animated video begins by panning over a dystopic urban skyline typical of *vaporwave* art, zooming into the only window in an apartment building with its lights on. The inside of the apartment is established with three shots: a shot depicting a dark room illuminated only by a glowing computer screen and some light peering in through an open window, a shot of an overflowing waste bin filled with crumpled paper and banana peels, and a shot of a poster of a large-breasted anime girl in a bikini on the wall. The video's protagonist is then seen from above, staring into his computer screen in the darkness. As if to return the gaze, the nerdy-looking protagonist is then shot from the perspective of his computer screen, wearing an emoji tee shirt as he ashes a cigarette and widens his reddened eyes in surprise as he too sees the title screen of the video that is playing. The rest of the video features a dream-like sequence in which the protagonist joins a gang of muscular neo-Nazis who help him train at the gym, demolish a mosque, build a church, and eventually turn into a muscular Chad smiling by the pool with his Christian wife and son. Yet what is particularly interesting about this video is its opening sequence, and the way in which it deliberately calls attention to itself as a piece of propaganda. Evoking Althusser's classic example of the "Hey, you there!" hail, the video begins by self-consciously addressing its target audience of disaffected nerdy white boys on the Internet—the kind that were so drawn to

⁴⁵² ReuploadsGalore3, "TAKE BACK OUR FUTURE - A Message from the Alt Right," *YouTube*, Nov. 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gdm3u78nZD0>.

vaporwave because it so perfectly captured the bleak feeling of late nights doomscrolling on the internet through endless threads and feeds seeking some kind of existential purpose or object of hope in the vast seas of information.⁴⁵³ Another interesting aspect of the video is the way in which it transforms the dreary and dystopian urban landscapes frequently depicted in *vaporwave* art as a representation of millennial lostness into a site of ideological struggle in the culture wars of contemporary North American politics. By proposing fascism as a utopian solution to the futility of late capitalist life, *fashwave* functions as a disturbingly contemporary atmospheric twist to fascism's age-old appropriation of leftist aesthetics by seeking to ideologically and aesthetically colonize a virtual world whose formal properties had previously functioned as an anti-capitalist critique.

There is a kind of self-aware postmodern cynicism which informs the vibe of many digital aesthetics such as *vaporwave*. With the ability to breezily flip between Wikipedia articles on Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, and say, videos of teenagers eating Tide Pods at the click of a tab, we're left with a sinking feeling that we (the internet) probably broke culture: postmodernity has done its damage, and any sense of emotional sincerity or aesthetic value now reside beneath a thick coat of irony. "This is why we can't have nice things," we collectively sigh. "Thanks, 4chan." This feeling comes to life on the *Know Your Meme* page for *vaporwave* which features a bright blue and pink image of a statue of

⁴⁵³ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 122-176, 162.

Buddha with anime eyes exclaiming, “hah, no” amid skeletons flipping CDs, dollar signs, PlayStation controllers, palm trees, and a few Greco-Roman statue heads thrown in for good measure. By seeking to channel *vaporwave*’s ironic expressions of discontent into fascist ideology, fashwave enters the scene with what sounds like the opening of a bad dad joke: what happens when Adolf Hitler, Donald Trump, and a battalion of SS troops enter the neon glow of *vaporwave*’s synaesthetic world?



Figure 48: The main image for “vaporwave” on the Know Your Meme page.

The answer to this question seems to be found on YouTube, where a video titled “F A S H W A V E” features footage from Leni Riefenstahl’s 1938 Nazi propaganda film *Olympia* washed in a lusty high-contrast red.⁴⁵⁴ In *vaporwave* aesthetics, the use of Greco-Roman statues and columns functions as sort of a tongue-in-cheek joke about the stability of concepts of aesthetics, beauty, and fine art prior to the cultural tornado of

⁴⁵⁴ CMC, “F A S H W A V E,” *YouTube*, Apr. 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsz1u4U2TNA&t=42s>.

postmodernism.⁴⁵⁵ In "F A S H W A V E" on the other hand, the iconic statues are stripped of their irony and used instead as a sincere critique of the disavowal of classicism in modern and postmodern art. The sincerity with which *fashwave* seeks to coopt *vaporwave's* use of Greco-Roman imagery is noted by fascist vloggers Henrik Palmgren and Lana Lokteff on their YouTube channel *Red Ice TV*. In a video titled, "Freak-out Over Fashwave & Art With Traditional Beauty Embraced by the Right," Palmgren argues that the use of Greco-Roman imagery in *fashwave* signifies the belief in a moment in which "Western civilisation" will be reborn from its ashes and cites the left's supposed disdain for beauty as the cause of the decline of classicism.⁴⁵⁶ *Fashwave* thus presents neoclassicism as the only way forward from *vaporwave's* critique of postmodernity. Draining *vaporwave's* synaesthetic world of its sense of irony, and filling it instead with swastikas, VHS footage of Nazi soldiers, and MAGA hats, *fashwave's* desire to return to a romanticised past seems to shrug off the fact that its bizarre amalgamation of German Nazi imagery, Donald Trump worship, 80s synth music, VHS aesthetics, and internet-based medium is the result of the same postmodernity that is responsible for the "degenerate" values of the contemporary world. In its celebration of classicism over (post)modern art, *fashwave's* entry into *vaporwave's* synaesthetic world resembles a re-enactment of 1933 Gestapo shutdown of

⁴⁵⁵ Alican Koc, "Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth? Cognitive Mapping of Late Capitalist Affect in the Virtual Lifeworld of Vaporwave," 68.

⁴⁵⁶ Red Ice TV, "Freak-Out Over Fashwave & Art with Traditional Beauty Embraced by the Right," *YouTube*, Jan. 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtPMdJy6uQ0&t=440s>.

the Berlin Bauhaus through the grainy, distorted, and colour-saturated footage of a damaged VHS tape.



Figure 49: Screenshot from the since-deleted "F A S H W A V E" video on YouTube.

In a piece published by *Noisey*, Michelle Lhooq argues that vaporwave is driven by a "subversive political objective" to expose "the alienating emptiness underneath [global capitalism's] uncanny sheen."⁴⁵⁷ The desolate "soulless imagery" and "corporatised music" that saturate *vaporwave*'s synaesthetic world may thus be said to evoke this sense of emptiness and disappointment in the false promises of late capitalism.⁴⁵⁸ "GIVE UP," writes a small caption over the eyes of yet another white statue over a fading VHS sunset. The few actual human figures depicted in *vaporwave* art are typically fallen heroes whimpering depressed monologues to themselves.⁴⁵⁹ Depictions of lone protagonists return to the

⁴⁵⁷ Michelle Lhooq, "Is Vaporwave the Next Seapunk?"

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Alican Koc, "Do You Want Vaporwave, or Do You Want the Truth? Cognitive Mapping of Late Capitalist Affect in the Virtual Lifeworld of Vaporwave," 71.

scene in *fashwave*, but this time accompanied by triumphant synthwave soundscapes which create an action film-like atmosphere offering fascism's sense of modernist expressiveness as an alternative to the existential futility of the postmodern present. According to Palmgren, the depictions of lone protagonists found in *fashwave* art are supposed to represent the minoritarian status experienced by members of the alt-right in a liberal world – in one case, a distorted image of a suited middle-aged white man wielding a sword with glowing eyes.⁴⁶⁰ "The future belongs to us," reads the caption.



Figure 50: "GIVE UP."

⁴⁶⁰ Red Ice TV, "Freak-Out Over Fashwave & Art with Traditional Beauty Embraced by the Right."

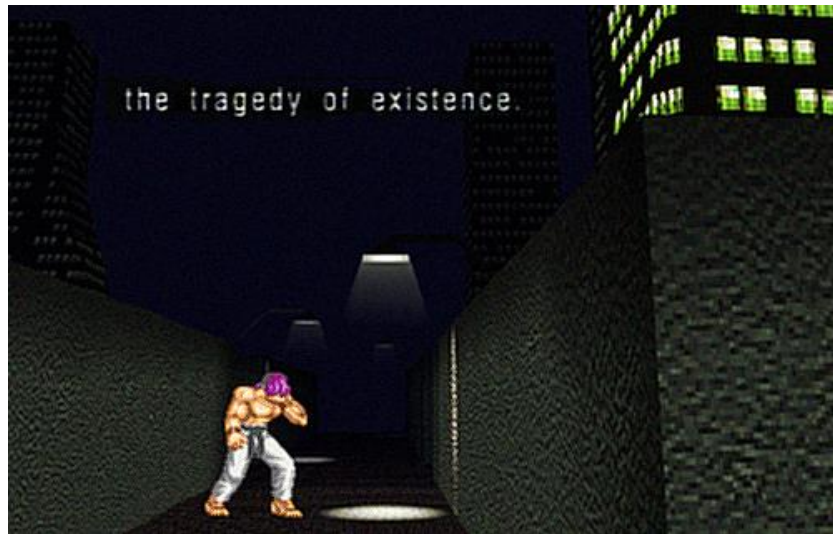


Figure 51: "The tragedy of existence."



Figure 52: "The future belongs to us."

This tonal distinction between *vaporwave* and *fashwave* is also noticeable in the genres' respective soundtracks. While still seeking to emulate the 80s nostalgia of vaporwave, fashwave music rids itself of all of *vaporwave's* distorted effects, alienating sounds, and sad feelings to produce upbeat and triumphant synthwave songs that sound like video game soundtracks. Even before listening to the music, the distinctions between the two genres begin to emerge. The title alone of MACINTOSH PLUS' "Lisa Frank 420 /

Modern Computing (リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー Risa Furanku 420 / Gendai no Konpyū),” which is generally heralded as *vaporwave*’s anthem, evokes a stoned postmodern clusterfuck of signifiers, complete with *vaporwave*’s signature Japanese characters, which evoke a vision of an impenetrable globalised future to *vaporwave*’s presupposed Western millennial audiences.⁴⁶¹ Remixing Diana Ross’ “It’s Your Move,” the song itself features druggy looped synths which seem to drift off into a temporal abyss, perhaps the checkered dancefloor stretching into the horizon on the album cover. In stark contrast, *fashwave* artist Xurious’ track, “Hail Victory” opens with some lines from Trump about never getting bored of winning over a catchy synth soundtrack that sounds vaguely like the theme song from *Miami Vice*.⁴⁶² Like so many other *fashwave* songs, the sampled speech in the song’s opening helps set the tone, but it’s the complementarity created by the visual imagery of Donald Trump making peace signs over a tropical neon background and song title that really delivers the message.

“Somewhere I Belong”

Once upon a late-night Xanax binge, somewhere amid the Alex Jones conspiracy videos, the bong hits, the depression memes, and the day’s final porn search, an image pops up on the computer screen which hits too close to home and instantly sears itself into the memory. Kubrick may have faked the moon landing, but this depiction of an

⁴⁶¹ Michelle Lhooq, “Is Vaporwave the Next Seapunk?”

⁴⁶² Le Napoleon Bonaparte Chaine, “XURIOUS - Hail Victory,” *YouTube*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC5HmxVxOAw>.

astronaut is about as real as it gets. "Homesick for a place I'm not even sure exists," reads a rectangular black textbox overlaid on their torso. Dated April 10, 1988, at 10:46 PM on a paused VHS screen, the astronaut stands in the midst of a thick field of grass blooming with flowers under the rosy glow of pink clouds stretched out over the horizon. The astronaut's blurry image and dreamy blue spacesuit give the impression that they might be a hologram. Gazing across the beautiful landscape through the expressionless lens of their helmet, the astronaut looks like they've just come across a world they could only have dreamed of, one in which the luminous colours of the flowers surrounding them brings to life the expression and potentiality bursting out of French Impressionist paintings.



Figure 53: "Homesick for a place I'm not even sure exists."

This signified space of longing for a temporal and affective elsewhere to the monotonous humdrum of Facebook notifications, the vacuum of late-night Wiki-holes, and the stupefying media blitz of advertisements in every direction embodies the feeling of the *vaporwave's* synaesthetic world. As I have argued in this chapter, the significance of

vaporwave lies in its ability to aestheticise these feelings into an atmospheric virtual space, or synaesthetic world, whose formal characteristics become loose affective signifiers of a particular zeitgeist of sorts. *Fashwave* can thus be understood as an unsubtle attempt to coopt this sense of alienation by filling *vaporwave*'s virtual space with far-right imagery and shifting the meaning of some of its central signifiers to produce a sense of hope in a fascist future. While *fashwave* may have failed in its effort to make fascism cool on the internet, its attempted colonisation of *vaporwave*'s synaesthetic world offers an opportunity to critically reflect on the politics of vibes, their transformations into signifying aesthetic worlds, and the memetic aestheticization of politics, a topic we'll explore further in the next chapter.

Chapter 10: Wide Awake Woke: Popular Media and the Memetic Aestheticization of Politics

On March 20th, 2019, reporter Jeff Green painted a spectacular picture of what at the time appeared to be the end of an era. Published in *Bloomberg Business* and titled "How Dow Chemical Got Woke," Green's article featured a subheading which explained to its readers that "The big conservative chemical company with a legacy of making napalm during the Vietnam War [now] has a gay CEO."⁴⁶³ Green's sensationalistic use of the term

⁴⁶³ Jeff Green, "How Dow Chemical Got Woke," *Bloomberg Business*, Mar. 20, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-03-20/how-dow-chemical-got-woke>.

“woke” in the article’s title secured what seemed like the final nail in the coffin for the word, until it received a further blow later on that year from none other than Donald Trump’s re-election campaign. In February of 2020, Trump’s campaign team unveiled its plan to increase black votership in the upcoming federal election: opening a series of “community centers” across the United States offering not only pamphlets pushing the president’s agenda, but also “WOKE”-branded sweatshirts and hats.⁴⁶⁴ Upon being asked to define wokeness in relation to the president’s bid for re-election, one of Trump’s campaign officials, who himself is black, suggested that reporters should “ask a black person.”⁴⁶⁵

Leaving aside its riddle-like optics—in which a black man tells reporters to ask black people to define a term used by a racist white man to gain popularity amongst black people—Trump’s appropriation of wokeness represents what might just be the greatest perversion of the term since it entered the popular vernacular amidst 2014’s Black Lives Matter protests. Considering the term’s original reference to a consciousness of social systems of oppression, its use by a blatantly racist president famous for his post-truth rhetoric feels cringe-inducing at the very least. Leaving aside Trump and the entire absurdity of the situation however, the reporter also begs a good question: *What is wokeness?*

⁴⁶⁴ Habby Orr and Alex Isenstadt, “Trump Campaign’s Plan to Woo Black Voters: Retail Stores,” *Politico*, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/26/donald-trump-black-voters-retail-stores-117756>.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

The answer to this question seems to be too much, yet also too little. Since its popularization in the mid-twenty-teens, wokeness has become one of the most pervasive key words in everyday cultural life. Referring to a rigorously maintained state of social consciousness and circulating in African American Vernacular English since the nineteenth century, wokeness was popularized around 2014 when *#staywoke* became one of the rallying cries of the Black Lives Matter protests following the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. By 2016, woke officially became recognized as a part of the popular vernacular when it was shortlisted as the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year, and named one of MTV's top 10 words of the year.⁴⁶⁶ In the years since then, wokeness has become a ubiquitous yet elusive category in contemporary popular culture, one which is used to refer to a number of ideologies, political practices, states of consciousness, and aesthetics related in one way or another to some conception of social justice. One thing seems clear—that across the wide variance of definitions and contexts it has acquired over the years, wokeness has come to connote more than just a state of social and political consciousness. The central claim of this chapter is that since being popularized by the Black Lives Matter movement, wokeness has come to name both a radical ideal of black social consciousness, and a (largely white) liberal memetic aesthetic category. My focus is on the latter use of wokeness, which I argue can be understood as

⁴⁶⁶ "'Post-Truth' Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *BBC News*, Nov. 17, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600>; Taylor Trudon, "Say Goodbye to 'on Fleek,' 'Basic' and 'Squad' in 2016 and Learn These 10 Words Instead," *MTV*, Jan. 5, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2720889/teen-slang-2016/>.

one of the (if not *the*) most salient aesthetic categories amongst a subset of the centre/left in the United States, Canada, and abroad in recent years.

This is, of course, a messy premise. In the present conjecture, conversations about wokeness often feel complicated and uncomfortable for a number of reasons. Firstly, despite its short history in the popular vernacular, wokeness is complicated by its relation to the long history of appropriation of black culture. According to Harriet Marsden, the term is merely one of the newer additions to an extensive genealogy of English slang terms appropriated from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) “without acknowledgement, or even awareness, of its origins.”⁴⁶⁷ As bell hooks aptly notes, the way in which tokens of ethnic Otherness such as AAVE are often used as zesty seasonings for the “dull dish that is mainstream white culture” within white consumer society reflects a deep-seated sense of imperialist nostalgia.⁴⁶⁸ Wokeness is particularly touchy in this regard, because its appropriation is also directly correlated to the deradicalization of a term that was itself intended to draw attention to the legacy of black oppression in the United States. As Aja Romano writes in an article on the etymology of the term, “shifting a Black Lives Matter slogan away from its original meaning is arguably the least woke thing ever — yet that seems to be just what happened with, of all things, ‘woke’ itself.”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁷ Harriet Marsden, “‘Wokeness’ Nods Off,” *Tortoise*, Nov. 15, 2019, <https://members.tortoisemedia.com/2019/11/15/191115-woke/woke/content.html>.

⁴⁶⁸ bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21 & 26.

⁴⁶⁹ Aja Romano, “A History of ‘Wokeness,’” *Vox*, Oct. 9, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-woke-woke-history-origin-evolution-controversy>.

Along with its status as an appropriation of AAVE, wokeness is also complicated by the culture war context out of which the term was popularized. In the midst of an ongoing series of ideological battles between the (North) American reactionary right and the centre/left, the notion of “woke culture” has recently become part of a lexicon of pejoratives used by the former faction to describe the latter, alongside others such as “snowflake,” “SJW” (social justice warrior), and “cancel culture.”⁴⁷⁰ In 2022 for example, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Individual Freedom Act, better known as the Stop WOKE Act, which sought to fight back against “woke indoctrination” and critical race theory by prohibiting teaching that someone “must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress” on account of their race or sex.⁴⁷¹ In a 2023 interview with Bill Maher, Tesla CEO Elon Musk similarly complained about the “woke mind virus” as an anti-democratic impulse which leads to the suppression of free speech.⁴⁷² Perhaps even more uncomfortably, this pejorative use of the term has been taken up by the “post-left”: a

⁴⁷⁰ As Nicola Stow writes for example, “Woke has more recently been used as a term to criticise identity politics or to reference millennial ‘snowflake’ attitudes.” Nicola Stow, “WOKE UP: What Does Being Woke Mean? Definition and Meaning Explained,” *The Sun*, Jan. 21, 2021, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/10760207/woke-meaning-definition/>. Also see: Perry Bacon Jr., “Why Attacking ‘Cancel Culture’ and ‘Woke’ People Is Becoming The GOP’s New Political Strategy,” *Fivethirtyeight*, Mar. 17, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-attacking-cancel-culture-and-woke-people-is-becoming-the-gops-new-political-strategy/>; Sahil Kapur and Allan Smith, “Republicans Are Crusading Against ‘Woke,’” *NBC News*, May 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/republicans-are-crusading-against-woke-n1264811>.

⁴⁷¹ Charles Bethea, “Why Some Florida Schools Are Removing Books from Their Libraries,” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 7, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-south/why-some-florida-schools-are-removing-books-from-their-libraries>.

⁴⁷² Miles Klee, “Elon Musk and Bill Maher Warn Against the ‘Woke Mind Virus,’ a.k.a. Historical Fact,” *Rolling Stone*, Apr. 29, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/elon-musk-bill-maher-interview-woke-mind-virus-1234725788/>.

reactionary online faction of class reductionist former leftists who have taken to pitting identity politics against class politics, and blaming movements such as *#MeToo* or Black Lives Matter for the more toxic aspects of political communication on social media in the culture war context.⁴⁷³

What makes wokeness such an interesting and relevant concept today, I argue, is the way in which it serves as a memetic aestheticization of politics. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater by lambasting wokeness itself, this chapter serves as an effort to understand how wokeness transformed in the popular vernacular from a term connoting an embodied consciousness regarding systemic oppression, to one referring to a whitewashed and commodified aesthetic type. Here I follow Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, who use the term “woke” in the context of “woke capitalism” to distinguish “the corporate extraction of value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations” from the term’s original reference to antiracist activist struggle.⁴⁷⁴ Just as Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality must be distinguished from its coopted use in the context of contemporary marketing, I argue that the same must be done for wokeness to avoid downplaying the salience of its original meaning across almost

⁴⁷³ *Serving Capitalist Realism’s* description of the politics of the *Red Scare* podcast aptly captures the logic of the post-left: “What started as avowedly socialist analysis gave way to deeply ironic post-leftism which quickly became reactionary politics bordering on alt-right.” Sasha, “In Heaven, Everything’s Alright,” *Serving Capitalist Realism*, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://servingcapitalistrealism.substack.com/p/in-heaven-everythings-alright>.

⁴⁷⁴ Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, “Woke? Affect, Neoliberalism, Marginalised Identities and Consumer Culture,” *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 102 (2021): 10–27, 11.

two centuries of struggles for black liberation.⁴⁷⁵ In a moment in which the CIA is appropriating discourses from intersectional feminism for recruitment campaigns, and multi-million-dollar corporations such as Lululemon are offering workshops on “decolonizing gender” and “resisting capitalism,” wokeness becomes a complicated but important object of study, precisely because it serves as the messy terrain onto which the increasingly blurry distinctions between activism and consumption, leftism and centrism, and politics and aesthetics are mapped.⁴⁷⁶

“When You’re Finally Woke and Start Realizing Shit”

Wokeness is generally thought to be the product of a discursive association between wakefulness and political consciousness beginning in the nineteenth century. Kabria Baumgartner argues that the roots of wokeness can be traced back to black abolitionists of the nineteenth century like Elizabeth Jennings Sr., who gave a 1837 speech urging her audience of black women to “awake, and slumber no more.”⁴⁷⁷ Matthew Wills traces the term back to the Wide Awakes, a youth organization organized by the newly

⁴⁷⁵ See: Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139-167; Trisha Hautéa, “One Size Does Not Fit All: Why Applying Intersectionality to Marketing Is Key,” *Kindred*, Feb. 2, 2021, <https://kindredmembers.com/blog/intersectionality-in-marketing>.

⁴⁷⁶ See: Central Intelligence Agency, “Humans of CIA,” *YouTube*, Mar. 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X55JPbAMc9g>; Melissa Lopez-Martinez, “Lululemon faces backlash for promoting workshop to ‘resist capitalism’,” *CTV News*, Sep. 12, 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/lululemon-faces-backlash-for-promoting-workshop-to-resist-capitalism-1.5102303>.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

formed Republican Party in support of Abraham Lincoln's 1860 presidential campaign.⁴⁷⁸

The implied awakening from the slumbers of political ignorance suggested by wokeness also informed Marcus Garvey's 1923 call to black people around the world to become more politically conscious: "Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!"⁴⁷⁹

The earliest known usage of the term "woke" itself is from a 1938 archival recording of blues singer Huddie Ledbetter a.k.a. Lead Belly.⁴⁸⁰ In a spoken word afterword to his song "Scottsboro Boys," Lead Belly concludes with a cautionary word about racism in the American South: "So I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there — best stay woke, keep their eyes open."⁴⁸¹ The term "woke" first appeared in print in 1942, and again in 1943, in two separate articles written by J. Saunders Redding for *Negro Digest* and *The Atlantic Monthly* respectively, featuring a quotation from a black miner who had told Redding that, "Waking up is a damn sight harder than going to sleep, but we'll stay woke up longer."⁴⁸² Interestingly, considering its contemporary usage, wokeness was later mentioned in a 1962 *New York Times* article by African American novelist William Melvin Kelley.⁴⁸³ Titled "If You're Woke You Dig It," the article discussed the appropriation of black slang by white beatniks. A decade later, wokeness appeared for

⁴⁷⁸ Matthew Wills, "Abolitionist 'Wide Awakes' Were Woke Before 'Woke'," *JSTOR Daily*, Jun. 29, 2020, <https://daily.jstor.org/abolitionist-wide-awakes-were-woke-before-woke/>.

⁴⁷⁹ Aja Romano, "A History of 'Wokeness.'"

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Kashana Cauley, "Word: Woke," *Believer Mag*, Feb. 1, 2019, <https://believermag.com/word-woke/>; J. Redding Saunders, "A Negro Speaks for His People," *The Atlantic Monthly* 171 (Mar. 1943): 59.

⁴⁸³ Nicole Holliday, "How 'Woke' Fell Asleep," *Oxford Dictionaries*, Nov. 16, 2016.

the first time in Barry Beckham's play, *Garvey Lives!* "I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr. Garvey done woke me up, I'm gon' stay woke. And I'm gon' help him wake up other black folk."⁴⁸⁴

The contemporary history of wokeness began in 2005, when soul singer Georgia Anne Muldrow collaborated with Afrofuturist hip-hop and soul collective Sa-Ra Creative Partners to record a song called "Master Teacher," featuring the now-famous refrain: "I stay woke."⁴⁸⁵ Despite the fact that Muldrow and Sa-Ra's album *Black Fuzz* was never released, the refrain from "Master Teacher" took on a life of its own when neo soul superstar Erykah Badu began working with Sa-Ra to record her fourth album, *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* in 2008.⁴⁸⁶ After being introduced to Muldrow by the collective, Badu fell in love with the unreleased version of "Master Teacher," and collaborated with Muldrow and Sa-Ra on a new recording of the song for her upcoming album.⁴⁸⁷ Over the course of the next few years, the phrase "stay woke" began to appear more steadily on Twitter, popularized by Badu who took it to Twitter in 2012, encouraging her supporters to "stay woke" about the imprisonment of Russian feminist punks Pussy Riot.⁴⁸⁸ Following George Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal in the murder of Trayvon Martin,

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid; emphasis added.

⁴⁸⁵ Timmhotep Aku, "Georgia Anne Muldrow Is the Woman Who Brought Us 'Woke'," *Pitchfork*, Nov. 19, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/georgia-anne-muldrow-is-the-woman-who-brought-us-woke/>.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Charles Pulliam-Moore, "How 'Woke' Went from Black Activist Watchword to Teen Internet Slang," *Splinter News*, Aug. 1, 2016, <https://splinternews.com/how-woke-went-from-black-activist-watchword-to-teen-int-1793853989>; Aja Romano, "A History of 'Wokeness'.

and the 2014 police murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, “stay woke” became one of the rallying cries and most prominent hashtags of the emergent Black Lives Matter movement, encouraging its supporters to stay informed about and actively work against systematic injustices in the country.⁴⁸⁹

The aestheticization of wokeness began somewhere around 2015, when wokeness scaled up from its place in the popular vernacular of grassroots social media and became a hot buzzword across mainstream media. While still connoting an identity based on one’s progressive orientation toward social and political consciousness, wokeness started getting represented as a sort of lifestyle type characterized as cosmopolitan, educated, progressive, and hip. The titles of click-bait articles are particularly revealing in this regard, with notable examples including: *Buzzfeed’s* “Can We Talk About How Woke Matt McGorry Was In 2015?” (2015), *The New York Times’* “What Does a ‘Woke Woman’ Wear?” (2017), *Sharp Magazine’s* “Diora Baird Is the Wokest Scream Queen in Hollywood” (2018), *Stuff’s* “Is ‘Woke’ Fashion Just a Trend?” (2019), and perhaps most hilariously, *The New Yorker’s* “What’s in a Woke McRib?” (2019).⁴⁹⁰ While these articles cover a wide variety of

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Michael Blackmon, “Can We Talk About How Woke Matt McGorry Was In 2015?” *Buzzfeed*, Dec. 16, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/michaelblackmon/can-we-talk-about-how-woke-matt-mcgorry-was-in-2015>; Vanessa Friedman, “What Does a ‘Woke Woman’ Wear?” *The New York Times*, Sep. 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/fashion/dior-saint-laurent-paris-fashion-week.html>; Cenk Papila, “Diora Baird Is the Wokest Scream Queen in Hollywood,” *Sharp Magazine*, Jan. 11, 2018, <https://sharpmagazine.com/2018/01/11/diora-baird-is-the-wokest-scream-queen-in-hollywood/>; Annie Brown, “Is ‘Woke’ Fashion Just a Trend?” *Stuff*, Feb. 19, 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/fashion/110677369/is-woke-fashion-just-a-trend>; Sheila Marikar, “What’s in a Woke McRib?” *The New Yorker*, Jul. 15, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/22/whats-in-a-woke-mcrib>.

different topics pertaining to wokeness, they illustrate four notable shifts in the use of wokeness. Firstly, and most importantly, is the removal of the "stay," from "stay woke." In each of these articles, wokeness is depicted as a passive state of being rather than an actively maintained process of becoming. This seemingly innocuous shift in the usage of wokeness is closely related to a shift in the demographic of people being identified as woke. In other words, the examples above highlight a transformation of wokeness from an everyday practice of critical consciousness-raising amongst black people into an ontological category which elevates the status of white celebrities such as Matt McGorry and Dora Baird. Thirdly, the transformation of wokeness into an ontological category also allowed non-human objects such as articles of clothing and vegan sandwiches to be ascribed the status of "woke." Lastly, wokeness as it is represented across these articles transforms into a *memetic aestheticization of politics*: a social type whose relation to progressive politics is signified through personal style and consumer choices (i.e., fashion, diet, cultural capital), rather than through commitment to a particular political cause.

A Facebook meme page created in 2016 called *New Woke Order* offers a satire of the transformation of wokeness in the popular vernacular around 2015. Across dozens of memes, the page pokes fun at conceptions of how to be "woke" as imagined by a sheltered white middle-class demographic. The running joke throughout the page is how the eye-opening process of becoming "woke" serves as a departure point into guilt, anxiety, paranoia, and conspiratorial thought, all of which end up completely missing the

mark for its privileged subjects, who are depicted neglecting real social issues in favour of outlandish conspiracy theories such as chemtrails, reptilians, water fluoridation, and the NASA moon landing. In a meme captioned “The best part about waking up is being woke AF (as fuck),” for example, an almost comically vanilla-looking white couple holds a pair of coffee cups, as thought bubbles containing the Eye of Providence and the USDA Organic logo extend from their heads.



Figure 54: “The best part about waking up is being woke AF.”

Another meme captioned “When you’re finally woke and start realizing shit,” depicts Seth Green cast as New York Club Kid James St. James from the film *Party Monster*, in what looks like a psychedelic trance, with captions around his head reading: “711 was an inside job,” “chemtrails are angel sharts,” “the matrix was a documentary,” and “i can’t go home like this.”

When you're finally woke and start realizing shit



Figure 55: "When you're finally woke and start realizing shit."

The joke in *New Woke Order's* memes is that in their blissful ignorance of the struggles existing at the intersections of marginalized identities, the white middle-class, even at its ostensibly most enlightened state, has failed to grasp what it is to be "woke." Convinced that they've shed the veil blinding them to the truth, all distinctions between various forms of critical thought seem to have dissolved in the minds of the fake woke subjects depicted in these memes. As each of these characters chase the white rabbit of truth deeper and deeper down the Wiki-hole in a stoned haze of paranoid insomnia, distinctions between reality and fiction become shrouded in thick webs of conspiracy, as we learn that not only 9/11, but also 7-11 convenience stores and '90s ska rockers 311 are under investigation as potential inside jobs. The memes featured on *New Woke Order* thus illustrate a new understanding of wokeness as a term referring to the ontological status of the freshly awoken white middle-class and represent an ironic satire reflecting skepticism with the word's transformation.

There are several different historical factors at play in the transformation of wokeness' usage around the 2015 period. The first of these is alluded to by writer Louis Wise, who describes the "re-awakening" of popular culture between the late 2000s and the late 2010s.⁴⁹¹ While never explicitly stated as such in his article, Wise's allusion to the "tweet-heavy" past decade characterized by a growing discourse on identity politics, is a reference to the movement of tech-savvy feminism which began emerging on social media platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter around 2008.⁴⁹² Referred to (sometimes controversially) as the fourth wave of feminism, this movement has been characterized by its innovative use of digital technology as a tool for raising feminist consciousness and challenging various forms of oppression, as well as its continued emphases on prominent themes from the movement's third wave such as difference, intersectionality, individual emancipation, queer theory, and media representation.⁴⁹³ Prudence Chamberlain, who describes fourth wave feminism as an "affective temporality," cites the speed facilitated by digital activism as a vital factor in the movement's organization.⁴⁹⁴ The rapidly accelerated propagation of critical theory on social media platforms around this period offered a

⁴⁹¹ Louis Wise, "Pop Culture's Re-Awakening: Is This Political Shift a Movement or Moment?" *The Guardian*, Feb. 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/feb/17/pop-cultures-re-awakening-is-this-political-shift-a-movement-or-moment>.

⁴⁹² Jennifer Baumgardner, "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does It Matter?" *Feminist*, 2011, <https://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>.

⁴⁹³ Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift, "Doing Feminism in the Network: Networked Laughter and the 'Binders Full of Women' Meme," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (2015), 331; Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *Political Insight* (September 2013), 23-24.

⁴⁹⁴ Prudence Chamberlain, "Affective Temporality: Towards a Fourth Wave," *Gender and Education* 28 no. 3 (2016): 258-464, 462.

populist approach to critical pedagogy outside of the confines of academia, and with it, the utopian promise of a mass awakening.

Looking back on the heyday of social media activism in the late 2000s and early 2010s, there is perhaps a sense of naïveté which tints the notion of a mass dissemination of radical thought through social media. While the notion of the “political echo chamber” had already begun to circulate in some circles, it wasn’t until around 2014 that its relation to social media platforms became a more prominent issue in public discourse.⁴⁹⁵ This lack of self-awareness about preaching to the converted on social media gave way to a general sense that all it took for one to be “woke” was to set up a Tumblr or Twitter account, repost some quotations by bell hooks or Michel Foucault, and unfollow a racist uncle or two on social media. But the lack of awareness of social media echo chambers wasn’t the only contributing factor to the optimistic feeling of this period. After eight years under the Bush administration, the powerful symbolism evoked by the election of a black American

⁴⁹⁵ See, for example: Pablo Barberá et al., “Tweeting From Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber?” *Psychological Science* (2015): 1-12; Elanor Colleoni, Alessandro Rossa, and Adam Arvidsson, “Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data,” *Journal of Communication* 64 no. 2 (2014): 317-332; David Goldie et al., “Using Bibliometric and Social Media Analyses to Explore the ‘Echo Chamber’ Hypothesis,” *Educational Policy* 28 no. 2 (2014): 281-305; Catherine Grevet, Loren G. Terveen, and Eric Gilbert, “Managing Political Differences in Social Media,” *CSCW ’14: Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing* (2014): 1400-1408; Lisa Harris and Paul Harrigan, “Social Media in Politics: The Ultimate Voter Engagement Tool or Simply an Echo Chamber?” *Journal of Political Marketing* 14 no. 3 (2015): 251-283; Michela Del Vicario et al., “Echo Chambers in the Age of Misinformation,” *Computers and Society* (2015), 1-7; Hywel T.P. Williams et al., “Network Analysis Reveals Open Forums and Echo Chambers in Social Media Discussions of Climate Change,” *Global Environmental Change* 32 (2015): 126-138; Donghee Yvette Wong and Brian J. Bowe, “Crystallization: How Social Media Facilitates Social Construction of Reality,” *CSCW ’14: Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing* (2014): 261-264; Nadia Yusuf, Nisreen Al-Banawi, and Hajjah Abdel Rahman Al-Imam, “The Social Media As Echo Chamber,” *Journal of Business & Economic Research* 12 no. 1 (2014): 1-10.

president contributed to an embrace of the Obama administration's tactful blend of progressive identity politics, neoliberal economics, and imperialist foreign policy. This led to a political atmosphere which we can call *hopetimism*—a short-sighted tendency to selectively read the administration's more progressive tendencies as signifiers of a universal teleological progress.⁴⁹⁶ Things were getting better, we thought to ourselves, and nothing was going to change that.

Of course, things changed. Amidst the ignition of a culture war between left/liberals and a growing body of right-wing reactionaries over issues such as political correctness and freedom of speech, and subsequently, Donald Trump's respective presidential candidacy and election in 2015 and 2016, "wokeness" became the perfect word to describe the side opposing the reactionary right. It was in this context that wokeness transformed into a signifier of the consciousness of white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and other privileged allies to issues around marginalization and systemic oppression.⁴⁹⁷ To be *woke* in this sense meant acknowledging one's privileges within society and using them to support marginalized groups. In the thick atmosphere of fear, paranoia and uncertainty bred by Trump's rise, it also came to signify one's place on the right side of history (i.e.,

⁴⁹⁶ Cornel West, for example, critiques this tendency in Ta-Nehisi Coates' celebration of Obama in *We Were Eight Years in Power*, writing that "any analysis or vision of our world that omits the centrality of Wall Street power, US military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America is too narrow and dangerously misleading." Cornel West, "Ta-Nehisi Coates Is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle," *The Guardian*, Dec. 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>.

⁴⁹⁷ Amanda Hess, "Earning the 'Woke' Badge," *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/magazine/earning-the-woke-badge.html>.

against fascism and xenophobia), as if to say: "It's okay, they're one of us." At the same time however, this paranoia informed a sense of skepticism in the instantaneous awakening of white social media users. The ironic references to wokeness around this period may thus be understood as a cynical response to the dawning realization that many of the loudest and supposedly wokest voices in the room were coming from those who were still wiping the sleep from their eyes. Coupled with a sense of residual one-upmanship leftover from the steadily waning hipster era, the concept of wokeness began to evoke a certain sense of anxiety: if everyone was now woke, was anybody *actually* woke?⁴⁹⁸

The lack of determinacy surrounding the proper definition of wokeness can also be understood as a product of an interesting ideological hybrid whose presence became quite noticeable around 2015 and 2016. Variouslly termed "radical liberalism" or "intersectional neoliberalism," an individualistic and entrepreneurial reconfiguration of identity politics stripped of discussions of class began to emerge through the trickle-up of critical theory from blogs and social media sites to mainstream popular media.⁴⁹⁹ As a new generation who had spent their teen years reading critical theory on social media

⁴⁹⁸ Mark Fisher aptly calls attention to the connection between wokeness and hipsterism in his polemic of the "vampire's castle," which he argues is driven by "a priest's desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant's desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd." Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire's Castle," *openDemocracy*, Nov. 24, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>.

⁴⁹⁹ Amir Khafagy, "Marching Into the Arms of the Democrats," *Counterpunch* Jan. 23, 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/01/23/marching-into-the-arms-of-the-democrats/>; Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018).

platforms like Tumblr came of age, an army of journalists and editors entered the workforce, eager to feed a growing demand for more politically conscious mainstream media, resulting in the mass awakening of publications such as *Teen Vogue*, which began taking a more social justice-oriented direction after naming Elaine Welteroth their editor-in-chief in 2016.⁵⁰⁰ Born out of their mutual detestation of the new president, a strange sense of comradery began to blur the lines between the political center and the left following Trump's election. As the mainstream liberal media began adopting (and co-opting) some of the left's social justice rhetoric, parts of the left began moving in an increasingly neoliberal direction by adopting the heavily individualistic brand of centrist identity politics being propagated in the mainstream media.

The growing overlap between centrism and leftism in the Trump years was also instrumental in defining the distinct style which came to represent wokeness. If the image of the "White Working-Class Trump Supporter" depicted in liberal media outlets came to represent all that was antithetical to a proper critical consciousness, then wokeness as a stylistic category was largely defined in relation to this trope. Wokeness thus became a product of a series of binary oppositions—such as those between urban and rural, college educated and non-college educated, left-liberal and conservative—in the tight tangle between culture and politics produced by the culture wars. Moreover, the removal of the

⁵⁰⁰ Sady Doyle, "The True Story of how Teen Vogue Got Mad, Got Woke, and Began Terrifying Men Like Donald Trump," *Quartz*, Dec. 19, 2016, <https://qz.com/866305/the-true-story-of-how-teen-vogue-got-mad-got-woke-and-began-terrifying-men-like-donald-trump/>.

stay from *#staywoke* allowed the term to be used as an ontological category which could be applied to non-human things such as commodities. In this context, wokeness came to name a lifestyle aesthetic related to a liberal vision of ethical consumer capitalism. This became increasingly pervasive as *woke chic* became the new big thing over the following years, leading more and more companies to try to cash in on empowerment and social justice-themed advertising, and raising critiques of “woke capitalism” and “woke-washing.”⁵⁰¹

The association between wokeness and lifestyle consumerism in the 2015-2016 period also sheds light on another clue in the aestheticization of wokeness. The fact that goods such as pastel-hued graphic prints, vintage clothing, craft beer, third wave coffee, natural wine, house plants, healing/spiritual/metaphysical goods, and natural beauty supplies had previously served as markers of distinction for the figure of the hipster corresponds to an interesting historical parallel between the two categories. As we might recall, 2015—the year that woke first began appearing in mainstream publications was also the year in which the figure of the hipster received one of its last obituaries from its exponents at Vice Media.⁵⁰² The fact that wokeness had gradually come to connote a broad lifestyle aesthetic made up of the same demographic who had previously fallen under the hipster umbrella—cosmopolitan, college-educated, left-of-center, and largely

⁵⁰¹ Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, “Woke? Affect, Neoliberalism, Marginalised Identities and Consumer Culture,” Francesca Sobande, “Woke-Washing: ‘Intersectional’ Femvertising and Branding “Woke” Bravery,” *European Journal of Marketing* 54, no. 11 (2019): 2723-2745.

⁵⁰² John Saward, “Here Lies the Hipster.”

white middle-class youth—hardly seems coincidental. The blatantly political aesthetics of wokeness may be read as a reaction to the supposedly apolitical nature of hipsterism, which Mark Greif attributes to a widespread sense of political fatigue following the political failure of the 1999 protests at the WTO Ministerial conference in Seattle, and the 2003 protests against the invasion of Iraq.⁵⁰³ While hipsterism had burnt itself out by placing all of its political stakes in the supposed authenticity of its aesthetic sensibilities, wokeness responded by placing its aesthetic stakes in its politics. Yomi Adegoke seems to get at this shift from the politicization of aesthetics to the aestheticization of politics when she writes:

Subcultures were the safe spaces of yesteryear, but in many ways, identity in terms of gender, race, class, and sexuality has taken its place. Political causes, flags and pronouns in our bios are how we now understand ourselves and try to be understood, a new age iteration of putting your favourite song on Myspace.⁵⁰⁴

In what Kanai and Gill refer to as an “aestheticization of difference,” an aesthetics of wokeness also signifies a troubling return to the notion of hipsterism popularized by the likes of Norman Mailer, in which alterity is fetishized as a kind of authenticity for a largely white demographic.⁵⁰⁵ Moreover, just as hipsterism had cloaked its deep-seated investment in the authenticity of its aesthetics beneath a thick layer of irony, wokeness began to do something similar, this time instrumentalizing politics to justify its aesthetic sensibilities. This is to say that while wokeness began presenting its formal properties as

⁵⁰³ Mark Greif, “Positions,” *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, edited by Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross, and Dayna Tortorici (New York: n+1 Foundation Inc., 2010): 4-13, 6.

⁵⁰⁴ Yomi Adegoke, “Has the Internet Killed Subcultures?”

⁵⁰⁵ Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, “Woke? Affect, Neoliberalism, Marginalised Identities and Consumer Culture,” 21.

mere mediations of its political content, its heavy emphasis on aesthetics that the term had come to name something more than a mere political practice or state of social consciousness—it had become a lifestyle aesthetic, a fashion statement, an engagement with digital media, and a set of dispositions. In other words, *wokeness* had become a *thing*.

The Memetic Aestheticization of Politics

As a memetic aesthetic category, *wokeness* draws from a multisensory array of signifiers to build rich atmospheric networks of association, like the pastel colour palette and wide array of trendy commodities (house plants, natural beauty supplies, sex toys, etc.) that are used to represent it on platforms such as Instagram. Its domain is the internet, yet it seems to permeate across a staggeringly wide array of scenes within contemporary life. Its boundaries are emergent and indeterminate, but it expresses its thingness affectively. In a vibes-era spin on United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famous 1964 definition of obscenity, we may find it difficult to articulate exactly what *wokeness* is, but we know it when we *feel* it.

What is particularly unique about *wokeness* as a cultural category is the way in which it dissolves the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic in a social media-driven consumer society based on personal branding. The result is a situation which we may call a *memetic aestheticization of politics*, in which one's politics are assumed to be inscribed in their personal branding. *Wokeness* in this sense is both the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics. This is to say that on the one hand, *wokeness*

refers to an aesthetic type defined by each minute detail of one's fashion, lifestyle, or general disposition in relation to its aestheto-political others, such as the *Trump supporter*, the *tankie*, the *Bernie bro*, the *TERF*, the *fuccboi*, the *neckbeard*, and others. On the other hand, *wokeness* also refers to a particular aestheto-political disposition, one through which *woke* subjects are cultivated through intricate sign systems such as virtue signalling, and distinguished from the aforementioned non-*woke* types through powerful affects such as the cringe. In this sense, *wokeness* can be understood as the intersection at which dispositions toward third-wave coffee and fourth-wave feminism collide.

"TERF bangs" and "mouth fedoras" are two good examples of the intricate semiotics of style through which the memetic aestheticization of politics operates. The former term refers to the designation of a particular haircut ascribed to trans-exclusionary radical feminists sometime in the mid-2010s, while the latter serves as a mocking name for e-cigarettes by way of reference to the preferred headwear of the notoriously repulsive and misogynistic *neckbeard* type.⁵⁰⁶ In both cases, the respective names of each object alone delivers a clear message: not only are the objects in question aesthetically uncool, but by virtue of their association with the respective aestheto-political types of the *TERF* and the *neckbeard*, they are also signifiers of unwokeness.

⁵⁰⁶ Amanda Arnold, "A Cultural History of 'TERF Bangs,' Beauty's Most Puzzling Term," *The Cut*, Aug. 7, 2018, <https://www.thecut.com/2018/08/terf-bangs-cultural-history.html>; Jessica Wood, "So...Why Do Neckbeards Wear Fedoras?" *Medium*, Feb. 21, 2019, <https://medium.com/@woodthewriter/so-why-do-neckbeards-wear-fedoras-c690619d4995>.

Seeking to impart a feeling of the *thing* I am calling *wokeness*, I now turn to an exemplary odd couple, that of *South Park* and Taylor Swift. First airing in 2015, *South Park's* serialized 19th season focuses on the dramatic changes undergone by the eponymous small Colorado town after South Park Elementary's Principal Victoria is replaced by PC Principal: a frat bro characterized by his self-professed love of "beer, workin' out, and that feeling you get when you rhetorically defend a marginalized community from systems of oppression."⁵⁰⁷ What's noteworthy about *South Park's* satire of white liberal political correctness is the way in which it's tied to various signifiers of a cosmopolitan, upper middle-class lifestyle. Throughout the season, the great "awakening" of the town of South Park is accompanied by its gentrification. In an uncharacteristically subtle visual gag, the show depicts the protagonists' fathers drinking at a new craft beer bar instead of their rundown local dive immediately after PC Principal enters the town. The fathers' newfound disposition toward craft beer is never mentioned in conversation, but the message is clear: a white liberal political disposition is depicted as just one element in a lifestyle aesthetic that might also include craft beer, gluten-free diets, trendy clothing boutiques, espresso bars, organic produce, condominiums, and farm-to-table dining. The alleged becoming-woke of *South Park's* residents is also treated as an entirely selfish and superficial endeavour. In the season's third episode, "The City Part of Town," the townspeople attempt to revitalize the town's public image as a redneck breeding ground by opening a

⁵⁰⁷ *South Park*, season 19, episode 1, "Stunning and Brave," written and directed by Trey Parker, aired Sep. 16, 2015, on Comedy Central.

local Whole Foods franchise and downtown arts district. As local resident Randy Marsh announces during a town meeting, "it would instantly validate us as a town that cares about stuff."⁵⁰⁸

The distinction drawn in *South Park* between Whole Foods and redneck culture is crucial to understanding the construction of *wokeness* as an aesthetic type. If *wokeness* is characterized by a liberal, middle-class cosmopolitanism, it is also defined in relation to its cultural other, the "redneck." *South Park*'s most blatant depiction of this *woke*/redneck binary appears in "White People Renovating Houses," the premiere of the show's 21st season.⁵⁰⁹ In the episode, a conflict arises when Randy and Sharon Marsh's attempts to broadcast their eponymously named home renovation show are interrupted by a mob of Confederate flag-waving blue-collar white men protesting the loss of their jobs. The episode's crucial moment comes at the end, when Randy visits Darryl, the leader of the blue-collar mob, and discovers the real domestic issue underlying his close-mindedness and fear of change: his inability to take out the load-bearing wall between his kitchen and living room. This issue is solved when Randy takes out the wall, giving Darryl the open-concept kitchen of his dreams. Having aired a month after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the season's first episode "White People Renovating Houses" received uniformly poor ratings, largely due to criticism from across the political spectrum for its

⁵⁰⁸ *South Park*, season 19, episode 3, "The City Part of Town," written and directed by Trey Parker, aired Sep. 30, 2015, on Comedy Central.

⁵⁰⁹ *South Park*, season 21, episode 1, "White People Renovating Houses," written and directed by Trey Parker, aired Sep. 13, 2017, on Comedy Central.

alleged neutrality on the growing political divide plaguing the United States. Yet, the episode can also be read as a Bourdieusian commentary on the increasing aestheticization of ideology as a mark of social distinction amid growing class divisions in American society. Digging into the oblivious classism that too often accompanies “woke” perspectives on the white working-class, the episode ends with Randy exclaiming, “No matter how bad the country gets, you can always rely on ‘White People Renovating Houses.’”⁵¹⁰

A less satirical representation of the *woke*/redneck binary emerges in the music video for Taylor Swift’s 2019 hit “You Need to Calm Down.”⁵¹¹ Serving as Swift’s official shout-out to the LGBTQ+ community, the song’s lyrics draw a parallel between her online haters and homophobes. Considering Swift’s recent history as an object of lust amongst online neo-Nazis who called her a “pure Aryan goddess,” and the criticism she has more recently received for being apolitical, “You Need to Calm Down” is commendable in its positive message and effort to take a political stance.⁵¹² Yet, as several critics have pointed out, Swift’s tactics themselves are a little bit questionable. Set in a whimsical, pastel-hued trailer park, the video depicts the whimsical adventures of Swift and a motley crew of queer celebrities including Ellen DeGeneres, Laverne Cox, Hayley Kiyoko, Adam Lambert, RuPaul and the Queer Eye Guys, as well as fellow allies like Katy Perry and Ryan Reynolds.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Taylor Swift, “Taylor Swift - You Need To Calm Down,” *YouTube*, Jun. 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dkk9gvTmCXY>.

⁵¹² Luke O’Neil, “Taylor Swift: ‘White Supremacy Is Repulsive. There Is Nothing Worse,’” *The Guardian*, Sep. 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/19/taylor-swift-white-supremacy-repulsive-politics-democrat>.

As in “White People Renovating Houses,” their party is interrupted by a gang of aging, toothless, ugly rednecks who scream slurs at them and wave around homophobic placards. The video offers a binary vision of progress and regression: the hot queers and their allies suntanning in heart-shaped sunglasses on one end, and on the other, a heap of dusty washups whose archaic views serve as a load-bearing barrier away from the ideological open-concept kitchen that dreams of *wokeness* are made of. In her review of the video, Emily Jashinsky summarizes the video’s message perfectly: “We’re beautiful and right; You’re poor and dumb.”⁵¹³



Figure 56: The classist allyship of Taylor Swift's "You Need to Calm Down."

Wokeness has a strong affective presence in both of the texts cited above, making itself felt through the haunting whispers with which it informs various tropes and

⁵¹³ Emily Jashinsky, "Taylor Swift's 'You Need To Calm Down' Is Breathtakingly Elitist," *The Federalist*, Jun. 18, 2019, <https://thefederalist.com/2019/06/18/taylor-swifts-need-calm-breathtakingly-elitist/>.

representations. Yet something even more interesting happens when the two texts are placed side by side: we get kind of a cringe. Let's unpack this a bit. Humour is a particularly delicate wine within the aesthetics of *wokeness*, and most of it does not age well. This can certainly be said of the white-dude libertarian vulgarity of *South Park*. Especially following Andrew Sullivan's coinage of the "South Park Republican" in 2001, the show's militantly anti-PC humour qualifies it as an early incarnation of the *edgelord*: a trope usually ascribed to privileged white men, whose lack of real-world problems inspires them to take on a role as a Joker-esque provocateur in the name of playing devil's advocate. This is further complicated by the gendered nature of the comparison with Taylor Swift, which evokes bad memories of figures such as the *Bernie bro* using critiques of white feminism to thinly veil their deep-seeded misogyny. Last but not least is the fact that the whole framework itself is long tainted by tropes of the supposed rationality of politics, and emotionality of aesthetics on either side of a gendered mind/body dualism in Western thought. In recent cultural memory, this evokes the figure of the *neckbeard*, a fedora-clad basement-dwelling nerd characterized by his self-righteousness and misogynistic habit of mansplanation. What the cringe offers then, is an instinctive physical reaction which cultivates the *woke* subject through their distinction from its cultural others. In other words, despite eventually succumbing to it as a good example of the topic at hand, my self-cringe at the prospect of coming off like an *edgelord*, a *Bernie bro*, or a *neckbeard* makes me hesitate to pair *South Park* and Taylor Swift together as examples of the aesthetics of *wokeness*.

If the hyper-branded memetic aestheticization of politics matters in the least, it's because of its stakes in the potentiality of a viable left populism. In the age of memetic aesthetics, as the human-turned-algorithm moves through the fragmented expanse of the digi-capitalist brandscape in search of the warm caresses of ever-specific and tight-knit bubbles, echo chambers, and niche categories, opportunities for solidarity, coalition-building, and collectivity get laid on the sidelines. If the possibility of political change rests in casting wider nets, this brings up a vital question: In the face of an increasingly niche-driven culture, how can the Left create a household brand? Yet, if the Janus-faced nature of wokeness is what brought us to this conundrum in the first place, it might also offer a way out, for this is precisely where wokeness in its earlier uses comes back into the mix. Serving as a refreshing reminder that the term was initially intended to refer to a process rather than a mode of being, staying woke in this sense entails an ongoing cultivation of one's critical consciousness through compassion, education, and a relentless thirst for social justice. It also means rejecting the prison house of brands and types in favour of community-oriented action. If "woke" has now come to designate the name of the individual who naïvely assumes they have reached their destination upon first stepping out of their front door, "staying woke" means realizing that the journey never ends.

Part IV: Two Case Studies and a Conclusion

Chapter 11: Two Case Studies

i. What Came First, the Chain or the Egg?

But what about subcultures then? I mean, if we are really to believe that the whole postwar youth culture thing somehow came to a crashing halt following the death of the hipster in the mid-twenty-teens, then how come older subcultures still seem to be thriving and even leaking back into the mainstream? Kids on the internet are making memes about

how Blink-182's Travis Barker almost single-handedly shaped a recent pop punk revival within the hip-hop world, hardcore punk bands like Turnstile are mixing pop into their formula and getting nominated for Grammy Awards, and there even seem to be rumours about a fourth wave of ska.⁵¹⁴ But the point here isn't that subcultures have all somehow died all of a sudden, nor that the idea of authenticity has been entirely abandoned by those subcultures, but that, especially for younger generations, these questions no longer carry the same weight they once might have, and can thus be seen as exemplifying a somewhat "old school" and perhaps even outdated mode of thinking about subcultural identity. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, however, is the way in which the central logics of memetic aesthetics have managed to permeate even some of the most orthodox subcultural spaces while remaining virtually undetected. I explore such an instance here, citing the development of the twin categories of *chain punk* and *egg punk* as a noteworthy example of the memetic aestheticization of subculture.

⁵¹⁴ See: Jessica Lipsky, "Ska Lives: How the Genre's Fourth Wave Has Managed to Pick It Up Where the '90s Left Off," *Billboard*, Apr. 25, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rock/ska-lives-fourth-wave-interrupters-pick-it-up-8508727/>.



Figure 57: A meme posted on Reddit poking fun at Travis Barker's role in the pop punk revival.

Every now and then, a meme will drop which so aptly captures an emergent structure of feeling or cultural formation that it gives us a new language with which to describe it. This is exactly what happened to the North American DIY punk community on July 10th, 2017, when Instagram user *@xanaxylrose2000* posted the infamous *chain punk/egg punk* chart. Drawn on a sheet of white paper with a blue sharpie, the chart places several popular bands from across the punk circuit on a spectrum between *chain punk* and *egg punk*, with New York's Dawn of Humans ("the *egg punk* band for *chain punks*") and Western Massachusetts' Hoax ("the *chain punk* band for *egg punks*") placed squarely in the middle. Within hours, the social media accounts, message boards, and blogs of participants of the international punk community were ablaze with reposts, comments, critiques, and questions; YouTube channels were sorted into *chain* and *egg* designations, with *No Deal* and *RICKVARUKERSPUNX* associated with the former, and *Jimmy* with the latter; and a host of new variants on the meme were circulated, like one

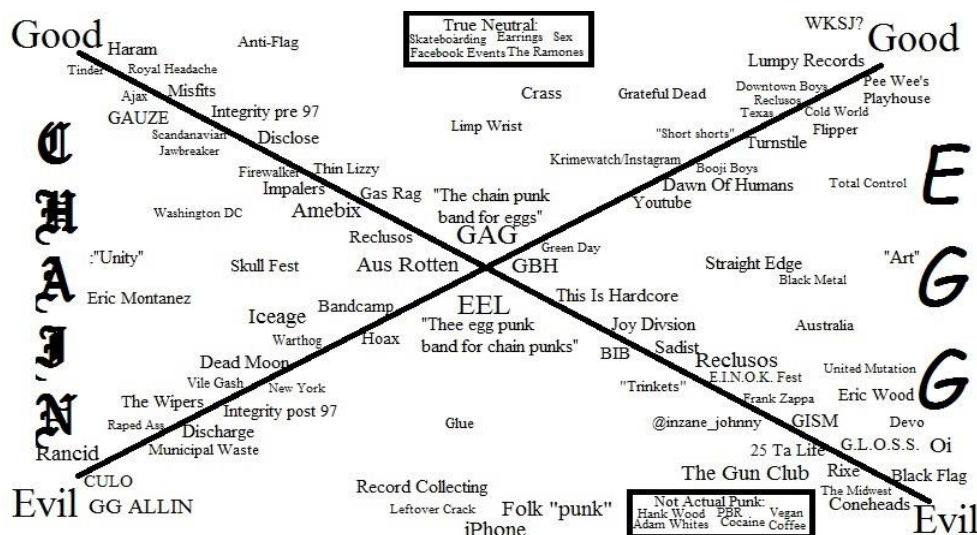


Figure 60: A variant of the chain punk/egg punk chart, featuring "Good" and "Evil" as additional axes.



Figure 61: John Mayer's response to the chain punk/egg punk chart.

What @xanaxylrose2000's chart captured so perfectly was an unspoken rift which was beginning to grow within the punk circuit by the early twenty-teens. Over the course of the 2000s, much of the North American punk scene had fallen under the reign of the hipster—such that by the end of the decade, the crowd at a local DIY gig quite often looked like the inside of an American Apparel store. As the colossal meta-subculture to end all subcultures began to crumble however, the landscape began to change: Vice-sponsored punk parties strewn with endless free cans of Pabst were no longer a thing,

hipster-adjacent subgenres like garage punk, noise pop, and 1980s throwback American style hardcore punk began to go out of fashion, and in a dialectical turn against the clean-cut American Apparel minimalism that had come to saturate so much of the fashion within the scene, punk began to look, well, punk again. As hype beast neon fitted caps and Supreme five-panels were traded in for berets and shoe-string hairbands, and selvedge denim for brightly painted vintage jeans or patched up, unwashed crust pants, punk maximalism was back in.



Figure 62: The cover of Social Circle's 2009 album City Shock—a definitive visual artifact of the clean-cut aesthetics of late aughts DIY punk.

The turn toward maximalist aesthetics after the fall of the hipster itself feels like a symptom of the memetic aesthetic shift we discuss here. As a capacious meta-subcultural amalgamation of scenes, hipsterism bore no allegiance to any specific style of dress so long as it was vaguely alt/authentic and didn't look too try-hard. In this context, one could be just as "punk" decked out in a wool cardigan or a studded leather vest. The balkanization of this cultural common ground, however, gave a newfound salience to the

distinctions between different subcultural aesthetics competing with one another in the subcultural sphere. In this new era of hashtagged minutiae, ideological commitments to the punk ethos began to feel like they mattered less than simply dressing the part. In the words of the band Who Killed Spikey Jacket? who we will return to momentarily: "Punks Dress Punk."⁵¹⁵

Yet, the death of the hipster also opened something of a power vacuum within punk style, and the maximalist style of post-hipster punk ultimately came to take one of two forms. The thing that later came to be known as *chain punk* was a turn toward a crustier, more orthodox punk style. Musically, hardcore punk was still very much in, but the more straightforward American hardcore sound that had prevailed throughout the 2000s had become a vessel for a host of international punk influences, such as the crusty d-beat style hardcore punk of England's Discharge and its many Swedish and Japanese emulators (Anti-Cimex, Shitlickers, Totalitär and Disclose, to name just a few), the raw animalistic fury of Finnish bands like Kaaos and Terveet Kädet, and fuzzed out guitar tones of bands from the Japanese island of Kyushu such as Confuse, Gai, and The Swankys. Fashion-wise, this entailed a turn towards punk orthodoxy that might have felt a bit "on the nose" in the height of the hipster years. Patches, black denim, leather jackets, chains, bullet belts, studs, charged hair, jewelry, BDSM accessories, and full sleeves of tattoos were back with a vengeance. Arguably one of the best examples of chain punk's stylistic shift is the Boston-

⁵¹⁵ "Punks Dress Punk," track # 8 on Who Killed Spikey Jacket? *Who Killed Spikey Jacket?* Total Fucker Records, 2012.

based pogo punk band Who Killed Spikey Jacket? whose fervent ideological emphasis on punk style resulted in memorable song titles such as "Leather Loves Studs" and "Spike Your Hair with Beer."⁵¹⁶ On the band's eponymous song, singer Chris Pittman rants:

There was a day when the sea of spikey jackets stretched across the horizon. Now the spikey jacket is gone, replaced by revolting, repugnant garbage. There are people who think it is punk to dress up like somebody's dad or like a sexy lumberjack with a rat tail. These people are wrong. They must be stopped, and their ideas destroyed. Punk music is for punks. It is not for glam rockers, or for stylish fake vampires with pointy shoes. If you are ashamed to wear studs, you should be ashamed of yourself. The spikey jacket is the armor of the punk warrior of today. You must fight for it or die trying. Long live punk! Long live oi! Long live spikey jacket! What are you waiting for? Stud your jacket, stud your vest, stud your face! Do it today you bastard! If you don't wear studs, fuck you!⁵¹⁷



Figure 63: Examples of the brazen visual aesthetic of chain punk on the covers for Krömosom's *Nuclear Reich* EP and Eel's *Fall Out Noise* Tour tape.

As *chain punk* bands began flourishing in a growing network of largely coastal urban centres such as New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Portland, Montreal, Toronto, Austin

⁵¹⁶ "Leather Loves Studs" & "Spike Your Hair with Beer," tracks # 7 & 9 on Who Killed Spikey Jacket? *Who Killed Spikey Jacket?*

⁵¹⁷ "Who Killed Spikey Jacket?" track #1 on Who Killed Spikey Jacket? *Who Killed Spikey Jacket?*

and Vancouver, a different little scene was starting to brew in the American Midwest and South. Oozing out of larger cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City, but also smaller towns such as Bloomington, Indiana; Hammond, Indiana; Springfield, Illinois; Hattiesburg, Mississippi; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Denton, Texas, *egg punk* embraced the zany, weird, and playful elements of punk, with a synaesthetic world which looked and felt like watching Nickelodeon cartoons on an acid trip. In contrast to the apocalyptic imagery, spikiness and punk-for-punk orthodoxy of *chain punk* aesthetics, *egg punk* drew inspiration from new wave acts like Devo and the B-52s, psychedelic rock, and some of the notable freak aberrations from the 1980s American hardcore scene such as Flipper, the Dead Kennedys, the Crucifucks, Minutemen, No Trend, United Mutation, and Saccharine Trust, pairing it with a childish, naïve and Crayola-hued visual aesthetic in order to create an immersive atmosphere of total weirdo creativity. The name itself captures the evokes the genre's wiggly, gooey, and flimsy sonic and visual textures, while also serving as a reference to a trend in which eggs became a recurring theme in its oddball aesthetics.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁸ We can think for example of the song "Eggs" by Northwest Indiana's Big Zit and "Eggs Onna Plate" by New Orleans' Mystic Inane; the band Fried Egg from Richmond, Virginia; or a concert at which Calgary's Glitter sold deviled eggs from their merch table, resulting in an egg-splattered food fight.



Figure 64: The offbeat and childish visual aesthetic of egg punk on the covers of *The Coneheads'* and *Warm Bodies'* LPs.

What was particularly noteworthy about *chain punk* and *egg punk* wasn't their colourful names with references to non-musical objects such as food items—a tendency which had been foreshadowed a few years prior with the short-lived “pizza thrash” designation—nor their dialectical turn toward maximalist aesthetics within the punk community.⁵¹⁹ Rather, it was the speed with which these designations conquered the hearts and minds of participants within the broader scene. As mentioned in Chapter 3, punk culture since the 1980s has been instilled with a puritanism which is distrustful of mainstream culture and mass media to a degree that borders on asceticism. A key element of this puritanism is the slow grassroots pace of punk preservationism, which ascribes a

⁵¹⁹ As Reddit user GreatThunderOwl explains, “pizza thrash” was a derogatory label “aimed at bands that were emulating an ‘80s vibe and using a lot of references to ‘80s pop culture, notably Bonded by Blood, Municipal Waste, and Gama Bomb. It kind of implied it was a ‘kiddy’ version of old thrash. Notably enough not a single one of those bands has a song about pizza, but that doesn't stop people from throwing it around.” GreatThunderOwl, “Shreddit's General Metal Discussion,” *Reddit*, 2016, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Metal/comments/43tvws/comment/czl9dp0/>.

sense of cultural authenticity to the old way of doing things. Reviving underground subgenres from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, releasing music on dead formats such as vinyl and cassette, and inheriting painstaking and dated methods of production, such as recording on TASCAM 4-tracks, hand-dubbing demo tapes onto recycled cassettes, or physically assembling collage art serve as just some of the techniques which the DIY punk scene has adopted to keep the high tides of late capitalist commodification at bay.

Now historically, this steady grassroots pace also informed practices of gatekeeping meant to ensure the “purity” of the subculture, be it the legitimacy of Lady Gaga’s use of punk aesthetics in the music video for “Telephone”—in which she famously wore a leather jacket emblazoned with patches of legendary 1980s hardcore bands such as Doom and G.I.S.M., or how new cultural designations such as sub-genres and styles would be received. Hours would be devoted to longwinded Talmudic discussions on message board forums and conversations at local gigs concerning whether or not designations such as “mysterious guy hardcore” or the aforementioned “pizza thrash” were really a *thing*, and which bands were to fall within said designations if this were to be the case.⁵²⁰ But now things had changed—a pair of sub-genre categories that seemed to have just appeared out of thin air somehow managed to bypass the rigorous verification process and took the

⁵²⁰ “Mysterious guy hardcore” was another sub-subgenre designation which emerged in the hardcore punk blogosphere of the late aughts. The term designates a wave of noise rock and black metal influenced hardcore bands using a highly aestheticized “mysterious” visual aesthetic characterized by blown out black and white photographs and the use of premodern mystical and occult imagery, and is generally associated with the Brooklyn-based label, Youth Attack Records.

entire scene by storm within a matter of hours. The almost universal acceptance and adoption of *chain punk* and *egg punk* then, felt something akin to the newest Gen Z TikTok dance craze making its way into the local mosh pit before receiving the proper seal of approval from the scene elders—it was all happening too fast. *Chain punk* and *egg punk* may thus be cited as examples of the memetic aestheticization of subculture—all somebody had to do was to name them and circulate a meme on social media for these categories to come to life and animate the conversations of punks from across the community.

Yet, the *chain punk/egg punk* meme did more than just circulate rapidly through the DIY punk network—it also changed the nature of the scene. While *chain punk* relied on a relatively cohesive aesthetic which had been standardized by crust punk and d-beat bands over several decades, *egg punk* still existed in a fluid, ambiguous and emergent state prior to the circulation of the meme. Previously described along the lines of “weirdo punk,” the scene which became designated as *egg punk* was a site of creative experimentation in punk, an aesthetic free-for-all for anyone who chose to defy the more orthodox sensibilities of the stud and leather inclined. As soon as it was placed in a box and codified as a genre however, *egg punk* died. This may be in part because of a sense of collective embarrassment at having participated in a scene called *egg punk*, and also in part because the scene naturally drifted, but it was also because the vast sonic perimeters which the scene allowed had been whittled down to a caricature represented by only a

small handful of bands, resulting in a bland second wave of artists who interpreted the genre solely based on their limited understanding of it from YouTube and Spotify playlists.

In addition to their bold demonstration of the power of meme magic, the ability of these categories to instantaneously bypass the arduous and time-consuming process of subcultural authentication also exemplifies the lack of emphasis memetic categories place on subcultural authenticity. To the old school subculturalist of yore, the influx of memetic aesthetic categories emerging from platforms such as TikTok and Instagram spells unmitigated catastrophe. The growing fear that all it now took to be part of a subculture was to go to the mall and buy an outfit had already been brewing throughout the respective popular explosions of grunge, death metal, SoCal pop punk, mall goth, and emo in the 1990s and 2000s. But in the age of memetic aesthetics, this concern no longer even seemed to matter anymore. The cardinal sin of poseurdom had been pardoned, and one didn't have to subscribe to a particular aesthetic anymore—they could just as well order a whole gamut of different aesthetics from AliExpress and wear a different style for each day of the week. What is particularly disturbing about this from what we might call a more “old school” (read: millennial and Gen X) subculturalist point of view is that it betrays a sense of what Mark Fisher terms “capitalist realism” on the part of today's youth cultures.⁵²¹ There's a sense that subculture's subversive power and semiotic resistance against mainstream culture which had long been championed by Dick Hebdige and the

⁵²¹ See: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009).

Birmingham boys has been so diluted by the tsunami of late capitalist commodification that even mentioning the authenticity question seems to evoke a sense of mournful embarrassment that we were ever so gullible to think that our studded jackets and anarchy symbols could keep our precious scene from being coopted.

If memetic aesthetics pose a threat to the meticulous order of DIY punk's purity from mainstream digital culture, the memetic aestheticization of punk coming from within its own ranks and immediately being accepted by the larger community spells big changes ahead for the notion of subculture in general. At a time when punks have become the agents of their own memeification, we might find ourselves wondering what an aesthetics of resistance of the post-internet age might look like, or if such a concept can even exist in this post-authentic world. We might also ask if gatekeeping will still remain a thing in a memeified subcultural milieu, and what purpose it will continue to serve if so. And while it feels too early to be making grand proclamations about the future of subculture in the age of digital circulation, we may put a little spin on Japanese hardcore icons G.I.S.M.'s famous slogan and claim with certainty that "punks is memers."

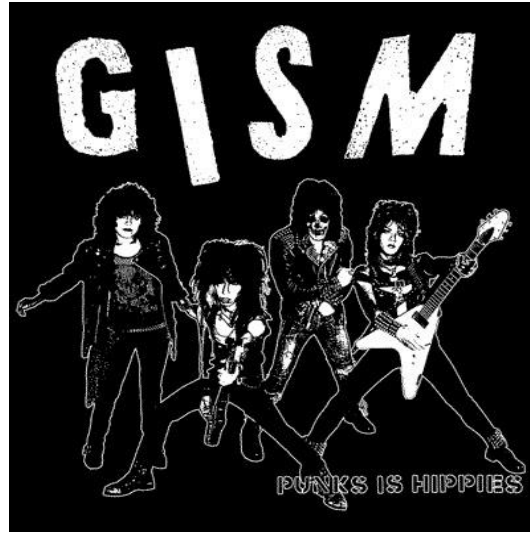


Figure 65: G.I.S.M.'s famous "punks is hippies" design.

ii. Elevation, Don't Go to My Head

AVC: Shifting gears slightly: Are you familiar with the phrase "*elevated horror*?"

JC: I don't know what that means. I mean, I can guess what it means, but I don't really know.

AVC: People usually use it to refer to A24's movies, horror that's very heavy on the metaphorical. *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, movies like that.

JC: I have no idea what you're talking about.

AVC: Fair enough!

JC: But I hear you, I hear you. There's metaphorical horror. But all movies have...they don't have messages. They have themes. Thematic material, and some horror films have thematic material. The good ones do.⁵²²

It wasn't really a huge *thing*—hell, it wasn't even on the level of the *chain punk/egg punk* chart, but this excerpt from The A.V. Club's interview with John Carpenter made a small buzz on the internet when the interview was uploaded on October 12th, 2022. A number of online publications wrote some click bait type pieces about John Carpenter "calling bullshit" on the *elevated horror* designation, and a screenshot of the interview was circulated as a meme on people's Instagram stories for a day or two, as if to serve as a reminder that John Carpenter was still cool or something.⁵²³ There's a sense of a deep generational divide in the dynamic between interviewer William Hughes and Carpenter—the Virgin digital age reporter obsessed with internet buzzwords and subclassifications, and the Chad old-school horror director who, unbothered by all this hashtag-mumbo jumbo, knows only the distinction between good horror and bad horror. To be fair, Hughes' question to the celebrated master of horror is kind of embarrassing, or at the very least mildly annoying and slightly awkward. It feels simultaneously naïve and intrusive—almost as if our old friend *danica* from the introduction of this dissertation was to repeat

⁵²² William Hughes, "John Carpenter Talks Us Through His Favorite Video Games of 2022, Plus Scoring Halloween Ends," *The A.V. Club*, Oct. 11, 2022, <https://www.avclub.com/john-carpenter-video-games-interview-halloween-ends-1849641145>; emphasis added.

⁵²³ See for example: Greta Bjornson, "John Carpenter Calls B.S. on Elevated Horror: 'I Don't Know What That Means,'" *Decider*, Oct. 12, 2022, <https://decider.com/2022/10/12/john-carpenter-does-not-know-elevated-horror/>; Ryan Lattanvio, "John Carpenter Has No Idea What 'Elevated Horror' Means," *IndieWire*, Oct. 12, 2022, <https://www.indiewire.com/2022/10/john-carpenter-elevated-horror-1234771814/>; Hattie Lindert, "John Carpenter Has 'No Idea' What All This Elevated Horror Business Is About," *The A.V. Club*, Oct. 12, 2022, <https://www.avclub.com/john-carpenter-av-club-interview-elevated-horror-quote-1849647620>.

her now-famous “What aesthetic is this?” question, except this time to Anna Wintour at a Balenciaga runway show during Paris Fashion Week. And whether Carpenter is part of the sizable camp of detractors of this controversial label, or simply ignorant to the fact that this designation even existed, there is indeed something timelessly cool about the way he deflects the reporter’s questions and makes it painfully apparent that he absolutely doesn’t give a damn. Even when Carpenter eventually takes pity on Hughes at the end of the excerpt and tries to give an earnest answer, his vague ramblings about metaphorical and thematic horror betray a deep sense of indifference.

Leaving aside Carpenter and Hughes though, there’s something peculiar about the category of *elevated horror* itself. Emerging from parts unknown sometime in the mid-to-late-2010s, the term is supposed to designate a wave of intellectually stimulating art horror flicks associated with the independent film distributor A24 and has been used to describe the likes of *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, *The Witch*, *Get Out*, and *The Lighthouse*. What’s strange about *elevated horror* is how its “elevated” status relies on the ostensible “commonness” of most of the horror genre. It’s giving pretentious, highbrow “I don’t watch ‘movies,’ I watch films” in an era where the populist pomo “megastore” has long established its cultural hegemony over the modern bourgeois “townhouse,” to put it in John Seabrook’s terms.⁵²⁴ If the early-to-mid-twenty-teens collapse of the hipster is to be understood as the finishing blow to the elitist distinction between fine art and mass culture

⁵²⁴ John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing + the Marketing of Culture*, 65.

shlock—guised as authenticity—which the category of *elevated horror* relies upon, then this subgenre was already outdated by the time it was coined. In a 2020 article about Hulu's reboot of *High Fidelity*, Spencer Kornhaber argues that the populist aspirations of digital popular culture might finally have brought about the "death of the snob" in the post-hipster era.⁵²⁵ Matt Zoller Seitz thus nails the hammer on the head with the democratic tone of his oft-cited Tweet: "*Elevated horror* is like an artisanal cheeseburger. Make the goddamn cheeseburger. If it's delicious, nobody will care what adjective you put in front of it."⁵²⁶

Not only does the air of snobbery toward popular culture which pervades *elevated horror* make it feel weirdly outmoded, but its coinage almost seems to respond to the conditions of its own obsolescence. In other words, by insisting upon brow distinctions at a time when they seem to matter the least, the very existence of *elevated horror* as a subgenre boldly challenges the anything-goes populism of digicapitalist life. What's particularly noteworthy here is how *elevated horror* goes about doing this. Following Gérard Genette, Sianne Ngai argues that what distinguishes aesthetic from nonaesthetic predicates is the way in which the former bridge the gap between fact and value by "smuggling" their axiological charge under a descriptive cover.⁵²⁷ As mentioned earlier

⁵²⁵ Spencer Kornhaber, "The New Rules of Music Snobbery," *The Atlantic*, Mar. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/high-fidelity-hulu/605539/>.

⁵²⁶ Matt Zoller Seitz, The Phantom of the Multiplex, *Twitter*, Mar 25, 2019, <https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/1110032050126503936>; emphasis added.

⁵²⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 40.

however, memetic aesthetics correspond to a shift whereby the axiological is superseded by the ontological, thereby flooding the cultural sphere with a surplus of categories (e.g., *vaporwave*, *Y2K*, or *liminal space*) which mostly serve as stylistic descriptions severed from a judgmental function. This is what's kind of brilliant about *elevated horror*: it protests the waning relevance of value judgments in TikTok-era aesthetics by transforming itself into a memetic aesthetic category—in this case a genre—and thereby smuggling its axiological charge under a veil of description. What distinguishes *elevated horror* from the categories Ngai describes—which also do this—however, is the motive. For Ngai, the descriptive guise of aesthetic categories allows them to justify their judgmental function as factual—by describing something as “cute” or “zany,” we are covertly judging them under the guise of providing an objective statement about their stylistic properties.⁵²⁸ In the case of *elevated horror* on the other hand, this is tied to a deeper political imperative: it is precisely because judgments of taste have become somewhat taboo in the current cultural climate that they must be disguised as memetically circulating categories such as subgenres.

Elevated horror seems to have largely failed in its memetic aesthetic attempt to make judgment great again, as evidenced by the almost universal dismissal it has received

⁵²⁸ “Although saying ‘I judge this cute’ may be a more accurate description of what is really going on when I judge things than my saying ‘This is cute,’ the former is actually far less effective as a judgment than the latter. For aesthetic judgment is less like a propositional statement than an intersubjective demand—which is to say, less like a constative than a performative that performs best when disguised as a constative.” Ibid., 39–40.

amongst directors, film critics, journalists and other commentators on the internet.⁵²⁹ Yet it certainly isn't the only memetic aesthetic category which has drawn attention to the awkward status of aesthetic judgment in the digital era—a topic which has been explored by memetic aesthetics

in various ways since they began flooding the internet sometime in the early 2010s.

Consider *vaporwave* for instance. As discussed in Chapter 9, *vaporwave* is an audio-visual memetic aesthetic which emerged on Tumblr in 2012 and has been read as a critique of the soullessness and alienation of late capitalist consumer culture via nostalgic images and soundscapes from the 1980s and 1990s. While *vaporwave's* visual aesthetic is largely saturated with cultural objects of the '80s and '90s such as Windows 95 computers, N64 and PlayStation consoles, Arizona iced tea cans and Fiji Water bottles, an odd exception to the rule which has become almost universally ubiquitous is the inclusion of Greco-Roman

⁵²⁹ To cite just a few examples: Zach Cregger (director of *Barbarian*): "the term 'elevated horror' is for people who don't know much about horror; Jordan Peele (director of *Get Out* and *Us*): "I don't want people to think that I'm trying to make 'elevated' films"; Brianna Zigler (film critic): "The term 'elevated horror' is just as annoying as the worst films within the designation. A horror film is a horror film, whether or not it's got its head up its ass"; Carl Broughton (film critic): "The phrase 'elevated horror' is utter nonsense that does more harm than good for the horror genre and sets a grim outlook for other genres that could fall victim to similar phrases"; Simon Dillon (blogger): "Let me be clear: There is no such thing as 'elevated horror'. There is only horror, and the various subgenres contained therein." Simon Dillon, "Why the Concept of 'Elevated Horror' Is Ridiculous," *Medium*, May 6, 2022, <https://medium.com/blow-your-stack/why-the-concept-of-elevated-horror-is-ridiculous-753044663883>; David Ehrlich, "The Evils of 'Elevated Horror' — IndieWire Critics Survey," *IndieWire*, Mar. 25, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/03/elevated-horror-movies-us-1202053471/>; Frankie Gilmore, "Zach Cregger & Matthew Patrick Davis on Rejecting Elevated Horror with 'Barbarian' — Exclusive Interview," *Discussing Film*, Oct. 31, 2022, <https://discussingfilm.net/2022/10/31/zach-cregger-matthew-patrick-davis-on-rejecting-elevated-horror-with-barbarian-exclusive-interview/>; Charles Pulliam Moore, "Jordan Peele and Keke Palmer Open Up About Evolving in the Public Eye and the Trap of 'Elevated Films,'" *The Verge*, Oct. 29, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/10/29/23428409/jordan-peele-keke-palmer-nope-interview-spoilers-rogue>; Brianna Zigler, "Men and the End of Elevated Horror," *Paste*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/movies/men-elevated-horror-alex-garland/>.

statues and columns. As I have argued elsewhere, the omnipresence of the Greco-Roman influence on *vaporwave* art, and specifically its use in a schizophrenic array of temporary unrelated cultural signifiers, as well as the frequent employment of the term “aesthetic” (stylized as “A E S T H E T I C”) can be read as an ironic gesture satirizing the loss of stability in universalist notions of aesthetic value following “the cultural tornado of postmodernism.”⁵³⁰ “Remember when people believed in ‘Beauty’? Remember ‘the Aesthetic?’” these images seem to biting ask their viewer, placing these faded monuments in melancholy neon-coloured assemblages of dead technologies and retro consumer goods to accentuate their temporal estrangement. In *vaporwave*’s most iconic image, the cover for Macintosh Plus’s *Floral Shoppe* album for example, this effect is achieved through the contrast between the marble bust on the left, and the neon green Japanese text, dated computerized art, and checkered tiling on the right of the image.



Figure 66: The cover for Macintosh Plus’s *Floral Shoppe* album.

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 68.

Emerging hot on the heels of *vaporwave*, *normcore* is perhaps the memetic aesthetic which has gone to the greatest lengths to emphasize the death of judgment in the post-hipster era. The aesthetic was coined in a 2013 report by trend-forecasting group K-HOLE called *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, in which the 1994 death of Kurt Cobain is cited as ground zero for a phenomenon they describe as “mass indie.”⁵³¹ The writers of K-HOLE describe “mass indie” as a mass preoccupation with subcultural authenticity which they claim has “ditched the Alternative preoccupation with evading sameness and focused on celebrating difference instead.”⁵³² They claim that the problems that arise with “mass indie” are threefold: firstly, that the details that come to signify one’s ostensible difference from the legions of subcultural practitioners become so minute that this “difference” is no longer distinguishable; secondly, that one becomes isolated from others in their fervent attempt to emphasize their difference from the masses; and thirdly, that the cultural signifiers of difference are so profuse, and regenerate so quickly that it becomes impossible to keep up.⁵³³ Commenting on the crisis of subcultural authenticity in the burgeoning post-hipster moment, the report writes:

Just because Mass Indie is pro-diversity, doesn’t mean it’s post-scarcity. There’s a limited amount of difference in the world, and the mainstreaming of its pursuit has only made difference all the scarcer. The anxiety that there is no new terrain is always a catalyst for change.⁵³⁴

⁵³¹ K-HOLE, *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*, 2013, 14.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Ibid., 18-21.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 16.

According to the K-HOLE forecasters, sameness paradoxically becomes the most valuable signifier of difference in a cultural milieu characterized by a fetish for difference:

If the rule is Think Different, being seen as normal is the scariest thing. (It means being returned to your boring suburban roots, being turned back into a pumpkin, exposed as unexceptional.) Which paradoxically makes normalcy ripe for the Mass Indie überelites to adopt as their own, confirming their status by showing how disposable the trappings of uniqueness are. The most different thing to do is to reject being different all together. When the fringes get more and more crowded, Mass Indie turns toward the middle. Having mastered difference, the truly cool attempt to master sameness.⁵³⁵

This attempt K-HOLE forecasts, to out-hipster the hipster with a return to normalcy, to create a fashion trend devoted to the rejection of fashion trends, is *normcore*. Taking figures like Jerry Seinfeld and Steve Jobs as its style icons, *normcore* celebrates the mundane, the generic, and the quotidian with garments such as plain unadorned tee-shirts, windbreakers, blue jeans, and running shoes. As the report writes, "*Normcore* moves away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness."⁵³⁶ "Post-authenticity" is the key term here—after the fall of the hipster, we can no longer pretend that "alternative" cultural identities are more authentic than more "mainstream" ones, or that one's stylistic transgressions of mainstream style will incite change on a broader level. K-HOLE's attempt to push the *normcore* aesthetic is thus tied to a subtle political imperative. K-HOLE argue that *normcore* emphasizes the potential for human connections to arise. And while they refrain from ever explicitly using this language,

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 28; emphasis added.

normcore is ascribed a kind of cultural populism which seems to anticipate the heated culture wars of the Trump era:

Normcore doesn't want the freedom to become someone. Normcore wants the freedom to be with anyone. You might not understand the rules of football, but you can still get a thrill from the roar of the crowd at the World Cup. In Normcore, one does not pretend to be above the indignity of belonging.⁵³⁷



Figure 67: Jerry Seinfeld and Steve Jobs, two of the style icons of the normcore aesthetic.

There's an interesting dialectical shift which begins to emerge when we examine memetic aesthetic attitudes toward the question of judgment from the perspective of their chronology. This is to say that while earlier memetic aesthetics emerging in the years of the hipster's decline adopted an ironic (in the case of *vaporwave*) or decidedly gleeful (in the case of *normcore*) attitude toward the obsolescence of hierarchies of taste, subsequent years are marked by a growing sense of skepticism with the supposed democratization of taste brought on by the memetic aesthetic shift, and even a yearning for a return to a

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

sense of stability in aesthetic judgment. This desire is not only shared by film snobs (in the case of *elevated horror*) and fascists (in the case of *fashwave*). It pervades a vast array of different communities, ideologies and practices, and gives a sense of lived texture to subtle gestures like the increasing use of the #bringbackgatekeeping hashtag on social media platforms, the "trad" turn of ex-Dirtbag Leftists like the *Red Scare* girls, and the post-hipster affect of the *indie sleaze* aesthetic described in Chapter 8.

Conclusion: "Meme Machine Go Brrrrr"

Let's end with a meme. This time it's one that I whipped up myself, riffing on Twitter user *@femalelandlords'* Covid-era instant classic from March, 2020 "Money Printer Go Brrr." In the original meme, the eponymous phrase is laughingly exclaimed by a money-printing Boomer Wojak representing the United States Federal Reserve in response to a Zoomer (Gen Z) Wojak wearing an anarcho-capitalist bowtie who tearfully pleads the Boomer not to "artificially inflate the economy by creating money to fight an economic downturn." In the new meme, the age roles have been reversed: this time it's a smiling Gen Z kid with an iPhone responding "haha meme machine go brrrrrr" in response to a crying older-aged Wojak who is frantically crying:

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!! YOU CAN'T JUST SAY THAT AESTHETIC JUDGMENT IS OBSOLETE!!! CONCEPTS LIKE BEAUTY AND AUTHENTICITY HAVE INFORMED AESTHETIC THOUGHT SINCE THE MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY!! THEY CAN'T JUST BE REPLACED BY MEMETIC AESTHETIC CATEGORIES LIKE COTTAGECORE!!! NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!"

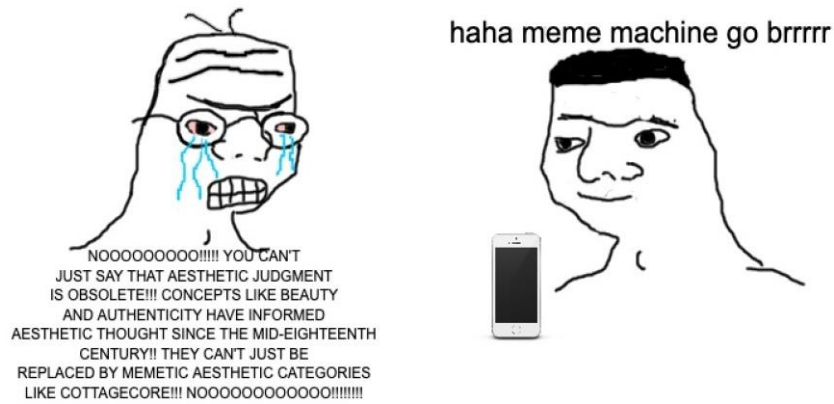


Figure 68: "Meme Machine Go Brrrrr."

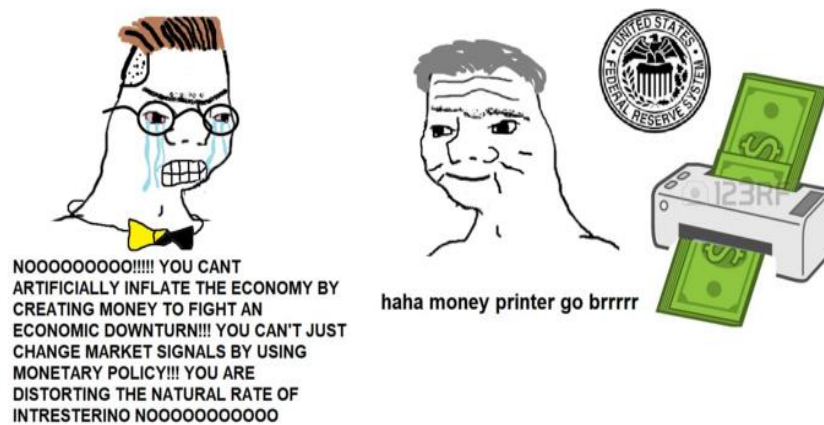


Figure 69: @femalelandlords' original "Money Printer Go Brrr" meme.

The depiction here of the aesthete as a feeble old-timer ranting on deaf ears about the virtues of the aesthetic is intended as a satirical contemporary update of the attempted coup against cultural studies' supposed disregard of beauty around the turn of the millennium.⁵³⁸ The joke here is that Tumblr's damage on the aesthetic has been done, and any attempt to reclaim the aesthetic in its traditional sense will only serve to reduce one to

⁵³⁸ See for example: Michael P. Clark, ed., *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

a caricature of an embittered old head resembling the Crying Wojak. Philipp Kachalin, who selected "Money Printer Go Brrr" as *Know Your Meme's* Wojak of the Year argues that the pleasure of the meme lies in its ability to capture the feeling of pure enjoyment and disregard for established norms central to the Chad identity.⁵³⁹ In "Meme Machine Go Brrrrr," this Chad-ish attitude is also coupled with a tone of populist jubilation. Just as video killed the radio star, the internet has finally put the aesthete out of [*his*] misery, and now we can all rejoice the dawn of a new era of limitless aesthetic freedom unburdened by the crotchety gatekeepers of yore. "The Aesthetic is dead, long live *aesthetics!*"

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, memetic aesthetics are necessarily niche, trivial, and largely inconsequential in the greater scheme of things. As we have hopefully gleaned over the course of these pages however, memetic aesthetics matter, not simply because we need to know whether this coming summer will be a *tomato girl* one or a *vanilla girl* one, but because these sorts of micro-trends point to greater shifts in the social-material fabric of today's culture.⁵⁴⁰ Thus, while attention continues to be typically focused on individual aesthetics or small clusters of aesthetics, this dissertation has sought to put together a broader theoretical framework of what these categories are, where they came from, and how they might speak to the social, material, and political conditions of the here and now. Designating these categories as *memetic*

⁵³⁹ Philipp Kachalin, "KYM Review: Top Wojaks of the Year," *Know Your Meme*, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/editorials/meme-review/kym-review-top-wojaks-of-the-year>.

⁵⁴⁰ See: Li Goldstein, "Tomato Girls, Lemon Girls: How Food Took Over Gen Z Fashion," *Bon Appetit*, Aug. 19, 2023, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/tomato-lemon-vanilla-girl-summer>.

aesthetics has served as a means of ensuring that they are designated as a cultural phenomenon distinct from subcultures, trends, or earlier non-memetic styles. Alongside the many concepts that have emerged across these pages, like “desperate utopianism,” “influencer realism,” “post-hipster affect,” and “vibeology,” it also emphasizes the centrality of practices of naming practices to the logic of memetic aesthetics. As we near the end of this account, I would like to close by reiterating some of the central arguments discussed here and by outlining some of the possible directions future research on memetic aesthetics can go.

Arguably the most central topic of this dissertation is that *aesthetics* in the memetic sense names something of a different ontological order from the term’s more traditional definition as “the philosophy of the beautiful or of art,” and thus represents a digital shift away from more classical aesthetics questions regarding the judgment of cultural works. The Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline discussed in Section I traces three distinct periods in the development of a particular aesthetics of authenticity, from its development in Western bourgeois thought in the mid-eighteenth century, through nineteenth and twentieth century artistic avant-gardes and mid to late twentieth century youth subcultures, and into the post-authentic digital present. The first is the period of *artistic authenticity*, spanning roughly the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. This period sees the concurrent emergence of the aesthetic and the authentic as crucial concepts in the development of a distinct bourgeois subjectivity. These concepts become closely intertwined in a doctrine

which uses the guise of authenticity to assign an ethico-political significance to the tastes of the bourgeois class. Notions of beauty and artistic value thus become important means of both elevating the aesthetic dispositions of the Western bourgeoisie as universal, and safeguarding these from the alleged corruption of a rapidly advancing consumer culture. At the same time however, the impulse towards novelty, originality, and newness which sits at the core of the relationship between aesthetics and authenticity also aligns perfectly with capital's constant thirst for innovation, resulting in a logic of cultural segmentation and proliferation which is inseparable from the ever-growing array of consumer goods available on the market, as evidenced by the rapid spread of avant-garde art movements between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

The second moment described in the Kant to *cottagecore* pipeline is the period of *subcultural authenticity*, spanning the mid to late twentieth century. This period sees the growing obsolescence of the modernist *l'art pour l'art* doctrine and its white, male, Western subject as the traditional structures of society are uprooted by the anarchic transition into a more productive, flexible, and advanced stage of capitalism. In a growing wave of postwar youth cultures, the doctrine of artistic authenticity is thus replaced by a new ethos which uses the products of a growing and diversifying marketplace to enact a symbolic resistance against the mainstream inspired both by the individualism of Romanticism and the radical politics and collectivism of some of the artistic avant-gardes. In the moment of subcultural authenticity, all aspects of one's lifestyle, which have now

been wholly subsumed by the market and aestheticized, serve as potential arenas for this cultural warfare. As the radical potentiality of this doctrine is gradually compromised by its inevitable commodification within consumer society however, subcultural authenticity enters a long period of crisis which culminates with the emergence of the hipster around the turn of the millennium.

The death of the hipster, combined with radical developments in digital social media in turn, leads us to a contemporary aesthetics of post-authenticity. While post-authenticity is still in early stages of emergence and will require further theorization down the road, I argue that it is loosely characterized by an uncontested embrace of late capitalist kitsch and artifice coupled with an almost jovial disdain towards more classical aesthetic concepts such as authenticity, quality, or depth. The swift replacement of subcultures with memetic aesthetics—digi-cultural categories and taste communities which actively renounce any kind of claim to authenticity, aesthetic universality, quality, or longevity—is of course the most important symptom of this shift to the purposes of this project.

The emergence and growing prominence of memetic aesthetic categories naturally carries many important consequences for the study of contemporary digital cultures. For one thing, there are few existing mechanisms of cultural authority to judge the verity or quality of a given category or object. This not only makes it easier to curate new aesthetics, genres, or styles without hindrance, but also means that existing categories can be altered

or remixed without regards to an “authentic” original. In their video on the recent “Franken-genre” of *zoomergaze*, which mixes the dreamy soundscapes of early '90s shoegaze with unorthodox stylistic pairings like emo and hyperpop, YouTubers NEOPUNKFM claim that:

The labels that used to define legitimate subcultures or genres such as emo, punk, grunge, shoegaze, or normal, used to all be separate for the most part. They emerged and existed as individual terms for a reason. But now they’ve all intermingled, and their meaning has become very broad. From Gen Z’s perspective, everything has become put into one place. All music, all eras, and the lines between it all have been blurred.⁵⁴¹

This digitally mediated loosening of the norms surrounding cultural categories, this online affront to the traditional order of a millennial (or older) cultural disposition is the hallmark of an aesthetic of post-authenticity. Untethered from rules, hierarchies, and judgments, aesthetic categories emerge, circulate, trend, amalgamate, fracture, transform, disappear, and revive, but are treated as equals. The only question that really seems to matter regarding a memetic aesthetic category is whether it’s a *thing*, and the only real aesthetic faux pas is to assume that there is any kind of objective hierarchy of taste between them. If the steady stream of articles about new seasonal trends in fashion magazines seem to contradict these facts, this may very well be because they are responding to the conditions of their own obsolescence by making it seem as if the trend cycle still relies on a distinction between *in* and *out* as dictated by a central authority.

⁵⁴¹ NEOPUNKFM, “What Is ZoomerGaze?” *YouTube*, Dec. 13, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT3OXELQi8w>.

As evidenced by *Aesthetics Wiki*'s subsumption of *Afropessimism*, *cubism*, *hippie*, and *Soviet brutalism*, the *thingification* of styles also means past scenes and styles will now be seen through the lens of memetic aesthetics. This is what was meant by the memetic aestheticization of subculture and genre in Chapters 8 and 11, although we could just as well talk about the memetic aestheticization of fashion, architecture, or artistic style. What I'm describing here is a kind of flattening of cultural movements into styles on the part of memetic aesthetics whereby historical styles are reduced to digital images of themselves. We examined this most prominently with the example of *indie sleaze*, which reproduces the entire aesthetic of 2000s indie culture under a new name without the baggage of authenticity and its relationship to a distinct form of sceneness, which are what had shaped its aesthetic in the first place. This line of argumentation is of course far from original, and bears a strong resemblance to similar discussions in the context of postmodernity such as Hal Foster's mention of "how modernism...is engaged as an image through images," or Fredric Jameson's famous bit about the depthlessness he ascribes to Warhol's art.⁵⁴² This is therefore not a wholly new thing, but one which has been hyperaccelerated in what Kyle Chayka refers to as digital technology's "vibes revival," in which the process of bringing together, naming, and circulating cultural objects as signifiers of a very niche sorts or styles is accelerated through participatory online cultures.⁵⁴³ The Consumer Aesthetics Research

⁵⁴² Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, 35; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 5.

⁵⁴³ Kyle Chayka, "TikTok and the Vibes Revival."

Institute's identification and dissemination of extremely specific but instantly recognizable consumer aesthetics from the 1990s such as *global village coffeehouse*, *corporate grunge/Grunge™*, *neon ooze*, and *utopian scholastic* is an excellent example of this kind of curation.



Figure 70: Examples of the Consumer Aesthetics Research Institute's *global village coffeehouse*, *corporate grunge/Grunge™*, *neon ooze*, and *utopian scholastic* aesthetics.

As we saw with the example of *elevated horror*, aesthetic judgment finds itself in a particularly precarious situation in the memetic aesthetic saturated post-authentic

moment. It isn't that taste making institutions or their loyal publics have completely ceased to exist, but rather that they now play second fiddle to popular opinion as dictated by memetic media. In other words, the memeification (or *thingification*) of the *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* films is likely to do more for the films' respective box office revenues than the word of a film critic at a respectable newspaper who's watched all of Andrei Tarkovsky's films. In a moment of such heightened aesthetic relativism, it seems highly unlikely that *elevated horror* will be the last effort to sneak universal judgments of taste into the popular imaginary, and even more unlikely that subcultural aesthetics will be the last aesthetic of authenticity to colonize popular culture. The growing popularity of Bay Area rapper Lil B's concept of *basedness*—which has come to connote a more individualistic and very online form of personal authenticity—seems like a likely contender.⁵⁴⁴

As designations such as "beautiful," "good," or "authentic" become ever more relative, vibes and affective attachments become increasingly central in informing aesthetic dispositions. The question of whether the Dimes Square scene ever produced any particularly good art is as irrelevant as the question of what presently constitutes "good art" is up in the air. What's indisputable however, is the way this small community captured attention by responding to a pervasive cultural feeling (i.e., a collective desire for

⁵⁴⁴ The notion of *basedness* and its antithesis, *cringe* occupy a central position in the *post-cringe* aesthetics of Dimes Square artists Alex Bienstock and Barrett Avner in a tongue-in-cheek manifesto from 2022 called *The Spectre of Finance Punk*. Alex Bienstock and Barrett Avner, *The Spectre of Finance Punk* (New York: self-published, 2022), <http://www.alexbienstock.com/files/the-spectre-of-finance-punk.pdf>.

sceneness and unrestrained hedonism over the pandemic), and memetically circulated itself as a distinct *thing* to recognize and pay attention to. What I've termed *vibeology* here is a broad, interpretive, and relational method which traces the social-material conditions in the emergence and shaping of *things* in an effort to make sense of how particular vibes are materialized in the process of memetic aestheticization or thingification, and how they resonate and shift over time. Thus, while only a small handful of people may have had access to the original Tweets about the vibe shift, or any other niche piece of internet lore for that matter, one may *feel* this meaning through its association with particular figures, informal networks, and material practices.

While never explicitly cited as such in this dissertation, Dime Square's anti-woke ethos is another instance of the memetic aestheticization of politics described in Chapters 9 and 10, referring to the transformation of one's political disposition into a social type whose relation to politics is signified through stylistic and consumer choices, rather than through explicit political action or discourse. Dean Kissick's ["One Path for the Internet"](#) meme is perfect in this regard, because like a good starter pack meme, it literally shows us the precise affective-aesthetic space in which one's disposition towards Bladee or Maison Margiela may overlap with a standom of the *Red Scare* girls or an interest in Nick Land's *Fanged Noumena*. What's noteworthy about the memetic aestheticization of politics is that it lacks the relativism so central to memetic aesthetics—there is very much a sense of a particular side being right or wrong in their aestheto-political dispositions. This is why the

emergence of *wokeness* in the immediate aftermath of hipsterism is so interesting: in something of a reverse-Benjaminian operation, *wokeness* responded to hipsterism's politicization of aesthetics with a (memetic) aestheticization of politics. Ultimately, the result wasn't fascism so much as a preoccupation with neon-coloured infographics, but this reduction of politics to stylistic signifiers and social types also creates problems for formulating a more capacious and expansive sense of a political public. It was precisely this concern that led to the emergence of the "dirtbag left" in the mid to late 2010s—an attempt to create a viable left populism by eschewing political correctness and embracing a sense of Trumpist vulgarity. The fact that some of the founding figures of the Dimes Square scene (i.e., the *Red Scare* girls) initially gained prominence as former dirtbag leftists is another reason why the Dimes Square scene is worth keeping an eye on—it represents a new breed of accelerationist neo-reactionism which is far smarter, more self-aware, and more aesthetically keen than the poor fools who tried to make *fashwave* a *thing* back in the early years of Trump.

There are two more possible directions for future studies of memetic aesthetics that I'd like to comment on before we bring this dissertation to wrap. The first is a bit of a whopper: namely that the centrality of vibes to the curation, transmission, and resonance of memetic aesthetics also speaks to a possible shift in the quality of affective experience in this very online present, which in turn may say something about what this *present* might even really be. Throughout this dissertation, I've referred to the contemporary using

decidedly flimsy terms like “the age of digital social media” and “the iPhone era.” This obviously has to do with the inevitable pitfalls of historicizing the present, but there’s another reason for it as well. There’s a strong sense in Brian Massumi’s “Autonomy of Affect” that affect is a distinctly postmodern phenomenon.⁵⁴⁵ The emphases placed on contingency, immediacy, autonomy, and presociality in the Deleuzian strain of affect theory that emerged on the heels of this essay would confirm this. Could it be then, that if the “affective turn” illuminated a distinctly postmodern mode of feeling, that what we might call the “vibe shift”—made up of more recent accounts of affect as social, discursive, semiotic, etc., as well as even more recent theories of the vibe and its centrality within digital culture—may shine a light on a historical moment which follows postmodernism, and subsequently that memetic aesthetics are to this new moment what subcultures were to the postmodern?⁵⁴⁶ This is obviously neither the time nor the place to get into a lengthier discussion of what this *thing after postmodernism* may be, how it relates to the various post-postmodernisms that have been coined over the years, and how they pertain to memetic aesthetics or vibes, but it seems worth reflecting on the fact that enough has

⁵⁴⁵ This would make all the more sense considering how the “affect” (e.g., that of Munch’s *The Scream*) Jameson discusses as “waning” in *Postmodernism*—which Massumi critiques—feels more akin to what Massumi would designate as “emotion.” Massumi never explicitly makes the claim that affect is a specifically postmodern phenomenon, but makes several references to postmodernism in the context of politics, power, and bodies. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9; Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” 101-102 & 104-105.

⁵⁴⁶ See [Footnote 328](#) and [p. 15](#).

changed both technologically and culturally since the days of *Learning from Las Vegas* to warrant a new epochal buzzword.⁵⁴⁷

The second point is perhaps more of an admission than a mandate. This dissertation isn't really about memetic aesthetic categories themselves, so much as it is about the great series of vibe shifts that brought us to the moment of memetic aesthetics (whatever that may be), and the implications of these shifts on earlier aesthetic categories. Of course, part of this has to do with the fact that these aesthetics are still very new, and still need some time before they can develop into a more culturally salient *thing*. The fact that many friends and colleagues still have no idea what I'm talking about when I mention that I'm studying "TikTok/Tumblr aesthetics" is telling in this regard. What we haven't had the chance to do then, and therefore what must be done, is to dig deeper into the fabric of these categories. *What are cottagecore and dark academia, and why did they become so popular during the Covid-19 pandemic? Did the summer of 2023 see a tomato girl, vanilla girl, lemon girl, cherry girl, or strawberry girl summer, and what does this all mean? Who are the creators of these aesthetics and who promotes them online? What are their*

⁵⁴⁷ I'm thinking for example, of "post-postmodernism," "digimodernism," "hypermodernism," "supermodernity," and "metamodernism." See: Robin Van Den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Post-Modernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017); Paul Crowther, *Philosophy After Postmodernism: Civilized Values and the Scope of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009); Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time*.

motivations? The list could go on as long as the list of categories on *Aesthetics Wiki*, but as we'll see in Appendix I, that's exactly what memetic aesthetics are supposed to do.

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Appendix I: The Aesthetics List

Throughout this dissertation, I keep alluding to this “vast proliferation of niche aesthetic micro-categories in digital popular culture,” but only have enough space to even mention a few dozen of them at most. What follows is a list of all of the aesthetics registered on *Aesthetics Wiki* as of April. 26th, 2023, just to give the reader a sense of the sheer magnitude of memetic aesthetic categories circulating on the internet. It’s important to keep in mind here that *Aesthetics Wiki*’s is a little funny in that a lot of it is made up of things that aren’t memetic aesthetics at all, including seasons (Spring, Summer, Winter and Fall are all represented), historical periods (Ancient Egypt), cultures (Celtic), locations (Club, Casino), historical styles (Art Deco, Baroque, Bauhaus, etc.), sexual practices (BDSM), music genres (Britpop, C-Pop, Country, etc.), subcultures (Cholo, Goth, Punk, etc.) holidays (Christmas) and more. Moreover, the list also leaves out a number of salient memetic aesthetic types that serve as pejorative stereotypes and therefore lack a body of voluntary

participants such as the neckbeard or the infamous Karen, as well as the potentially infinite “personal” or “created” aesthetics who have recently been relegated to the Personal *Aesthetics Wiki* page due to their lack of formal thingness, such as Ansex Comfort or Belgiumcore.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁸ In an interview with Malavika Pradeep, *Aesthetics Wiki* member Angela Yin describes the difference between personal/created aesthetics and non-created aesthetics as follows: “Created aesthetics are pages on our Wiki that originated there. A single person decided to write an article or create an account and the movement was born.” In contrast, a non-created aesthetic is one which has originated via multiple sources and evolved over time to suit shifts among its audience. In these terms, dark academia is a non-created movement—organically made and developed through online communities influenced by the European patrician society—while dual kawaii was created by a single person, who now has the ultimate authority over the aesthetic.” Malavika Pradeep, “What Are Internet Aesthetics and Subcultures? Two Aesthetics Wiki Members Explain,” *Screenshot*, Jan. 25, 2022, <https://screenshot-media.com/culture/internet-culture/aesthetic-versus-subculture/>.

#:

1950's Suburbia
 '80s Heartthrob
 2-Tone
 2000's Autumn
 2014-era tumblr
 2014 Girly Tumblr
 2020 Alt
 2K Animecore
 2K1
 2K7
 80s Ballroom

A:

Abstract Tech
 Acid Pixie
 Acidwave
 Acubi
 Adventurecore
 Adventure Pulp
 Aetherpunk
 Afrofuturism
 Afro-Victorian
 After Hours
 Agropeople
 Ah Beng
 Alien
 Alternative
 Americana
 American Pioneers
 American Revolution
 American Thanksgiving
 American Tourist Traps
 Analog Horror
 Ancient Egypt
 Androgynous
 Angelcore
 Anglocore
 Anglo Gothic
 Angura

Animecore
 Anoncore
 Anti-Fashion
 Antique Grunge
 Arcade
 Arcadecore
 Art Academia
 Art Deco
 Art Hoe
 Art Nouveau
 Artificial Nature
 Arts and Crafts Movement
 Asian Baby Girl
 Athlete
 Atompunk
 Auroracore
 Australiana
 Australian Outback
 Autumn
 Autumn Academia
 Avant Apocalypse
 Avant-garde

B:

Babycore
 Babygirl
 Back-to-School
 Baddie
 Ballet Academia
 Balletcore
 Baltic Violence Tumblr
 Barbiecore
 Bardcore
 Baroque
 Bastardcore
 Bauhaus
 BDSM
 Beach Bunny
 Beach Day
 Beatnik

Biker
 Bimbocore
 Biopunk
 Bizarro Fiction
 Blokecore
 Blokette
 Bloomcore
 Blue Night
 Bodikon
 Bohemian
 Bombacore
 Bookstore Girl
 Bosozoku
 Boujee
 Breakcore
 Britpop
 Bro
 Bronzepunk
 Bubble Bujo
 Bubble Goth
 Bubblegum Bitch
 Bubblegum Witch
 Busukawaii

 C:
 Cabincore
 Cagole
 Camp
 Campcore
 Carnivalcore
 Cartelcore
 Cartooncore
 Casino
 Cassette Futurism
 Celtic
 Changelingcore
 Chaotic Academia
 Chav
 Cheiron Crush
 Cherry Emoji Twitter

Chic Modernist
 Cholo
 Chonis
 Christcore
 Christian Girl Autumn
 Christmas
 Chromecore
 Chunyu
 City Pop
 Classic Academia
 Classicism
 Classic Lolita
 Cleancore
 Clockpunk
 Clowncore
 Club
 Club Kids
 Cluttercore
 Coastal Grandmother
 Coffee House/Cafe
 Coffinwood
 Comfy/Cozy
 Color Pop
 Common White Girl
 Concore
 Constructivism
 Corporate
 Corporate Memphis
 Corporate Punk
 Cottagecore
 Cottagegore
 Coquette
 Coquette Academia
 Country
 Cozy Childhood Hideaway
 C-Pop
 Crackhead
 Craftcore
 Cripplepunk
 Crowcore

Crustpunk
 Cryptid Academia
 Cryptidcore
 Cubism
 Cuddle Party
 Cultcore
 Cult Party Kei
 Cutecore
 Cyberdelic
 Cyber Fairy Grunge
 Cyberghetto
 Cybergoth
 Cybergrunge
 CyberneticPunk
 Cyberparadism
 Cyberpop
 Cyberprep
 Cyberpunk
 Cyberspace Webrooms
 Cybervillain
 Cyber Stylin'

D:

Danish Pastel
 Dank Meme Voyage
 Dark Academia
 Darkcore
 DarkErrorcore
 Darkest Academia
 Dark Fantasy
 Dark Gatsby
 Dark Naturalism
 Dark Nautical
 Dark Nymphet
 Dark Paradise
 Dark Y2K
 Daydreampunk
 Dazecore
 Deathcore
 Deathrock

Decopunk
 Decora
 Delicate Sweet
 Desertwave
 Desi Romantic Academia
 De Stijl
 Dethereal
 Devilcore
 Dieselpunk
 Diner
 Dionysism
 Disco
 Dokukawaii
 Dollar Store Vernacular
 Dollette
 Dolly Kei
 Doodlecore
 DORFic
 Downtown Girl
 Dracopunk
 Dragoncore
 Drain
 Dreamcore
 Dream Punk
 Dreamy
 Driftcore
 Drugcore
 Dual Kawaii
 Dullcore
 Dungeon Synth

E:

Earthcore
 E-Boy
 E-Girl
 ElectroPop 08
 Electro Swing
 Elizabethan England
 Emo
 English Major

Equestrian
 Erokawa
 Eshay
 Ethereal
 Europunk
 EXEcore
 Expressionism

F:
 Fairy Academia
 Fairycore
 Fairy Grunge
 Fairy Kei
 Fairy Tale
 Fanfare
 Fantasy
 Fantasy Astronomy
 FantasY2K
 Farmer's Daughter
 Fashwave
 Fauvism
 Femboy
 Femcel Weeaboo
 Femme Fatale
 Feralcore
 Fieldcore
 Film Noir
 Flapper
 Flat Design
 Folk Punk
 Foodie
 Forestpunk
 French Girl
 French Girly
 Frogcore
 Frutiger Aero
 Frutiger Eco
 Frutiger Metro
 Funky Seasons
 Furry

Future Funk
 Futurism

G:
 Gadgetpunk
 Game Night
 Gamercore
 Gamine
 Gangstæxtemism
 Gangstas with Waifus
 Gardencore
 Geek
 Gen X Soft Club
 Ghostcore
 Girl-Next-Door
 Glam Girl
 Glamorous Los Angeles
 Glam Rock
 Glassmorphism
 Glitchcore
 Global Village Coffeehouse
 Gloomcore
 Glowwave
 Goblin Academia
 Goblincore
 Golden Age of Detective Fiction
 Golden Hour
 GoofCore
 Gopnik
 Gorecore
 Gorpcore
 Goth
 Gothcore
 Gothic
 Gothic Lolita
 Grandmillennial
 Grandparentcore
 Greaser
 Green Academia
 Grey Academia

Grifes
Grindhouse
Groundcore
Grunge
Gurokawa
Gyaru

H:
Halloween
Hallyu
Happycore
Hatecore
Hauntology
Hausmann Paris
Health Goth
Heatwave
Heistcore
Hellenic
Helvetica Aqua Aero
Hermaphroditus
Hermitpunk
Hexatron
High School Dream
Hikecore
Hime Lolita
Hi-NRG
Hip-Hop
Hipness Purgatory
Hippie
Hipster
Historical Americana
Holosexual
Home 2K
Honeycore
Horror
Horror Academia
Hot Topic
Hydrogen
Hyperpop

I:
Icepunk
Imaginarium
Impressionism
Indicolite
Indie
Indiecraft
Indie Kid
Indie Sleaze
Internet Academia
I-Spy
Italian Mafia
Italian Renaissance
Italo Disco
Itasha

J:
Jamcore
Jersey Shore
Joyride
Juggalo
Junglecore
Jungle Grunge

K:
Karasu Zoku
Kawaii
Kawaii Gamer
Key West Kitten
Kidcore
Kid Science
Kimoicore
Kinderwhore
Kingcore
King Gas
Kiwiana
Knightcore
Kogal
Korean Cozy Beige
Kuromicore

L:

Labcore
Laborwave
Lagenlook
Larme Kei
La Sape
Late 2000s Elementary School
Libertywave
Lichencore
Light Academia
Lightcore
Lightningwave
Lilac Femme
Lil Girl
Liminal Space
Lit Kid
Lobotomy-Chic
Lo-Fi
Lolita
Long Island
Lounge
Lovecore
Lunarpunk
Luxury

M:

Macaute
Mad Scientist
Magepunk
Magewave
Magical Girls
Maidcore
Mallgoth
Mall Ninja
Mallsoft
Maximalism
McBling
Meatcore
Medicalcore

Medieval
Medieval Fantasy
Memphis
Mermaid
Messy French Girl
Metal
Metalcore
Metalheart
Metrosexual
Miami Metro
Midwest Emo
Midwest Gothic
Military
Milk
Mind Murder
Miniaturecore
Minimalism
Minivan Rock
Miscellaneous Academia
Mizuiro
Mod
Modernism
Monumentality
Mori Kei
Morute
Mosscore
Mote Kei
Movida Madrileña
MS Paint
MTV Green Sky
Mulchcore
Mushroomcore
Musical Academia
Mythpunk

N:

Nanchatte Seifuku
Nanopunk
NATOWave
Naturecore

Nautical
 Nautical Fantasy
 Nazi Chic
 Neko
 Neoclassicism
 Neo-Romanism
 Neo-Tokyo
 Nerd
 Nerdcore
 New Age
 New England Gothic
 New Money
 New Romantic
 New Wave
 Night Luxe
 Nintencore
 Normcore
 Northerness
 Nostalgia-core
 Nuclear
 Nu-Goth
 Nu-Metal
 Nu-Punk
 Nymphet

O:

Ocean Academia
 Ocean Grunge
 Oceanpunk
 Old Hollywood
 Old Memecore
 Old Money
 Old Web
 Onii Kei
 Oshare Kei
 Otaku
 Otherkin

P:

Pachuco
 Pale Grunge
 Paleocore
 Palewave
 Paramilitary
 Party Animal
 Party Kei
 Pastel Academia
 Pastel Gore
 Pastel Goth
 Pastel Punk
 PC Music
 Peach
 Peaky Blinders
 Pearly
 Peoplehood
 Petcore
 Phony Bureaucracy
 Photorealism
 Pink Parisian
 Pink Pilates Princess
 Pink Princess
 Pin-up
 Pinterest Country Girl
 Pirate
 Pixel Cutie
 Pixelscape
 Pixiecore
 Plaguecore
 Plant Mom
 Playboy
 Poetcore
 Pop Art
 Pop Kei
 Post-Apocalyptic
 Post-Impressionism
 Post-Punk
 Post-rock
 Powwow Step
 Prairiecore

Prehistoricore
 Preppy
 Pre-Raphaelite
 Pretty Preppy
 Pride flags
 Princecore
 Princesscore
 Printcore
 Progressive Academia
 Psychonaut
 Psychedelica
 Punk
 Purism

Q:

Quality Tumblr
 Queencore
 Queer Academia
 Queer Villainy
 Queercore

R:

R&B
 Racaille
 Ragecore
 Rainbowcore
 Rainy Day
 Randumb
 Rangercore
 Ratcore
 Ravencore
 Raver
 Raxet
 Raygun Gothic
 Real Life Super Hero
 Realism
 Rebel Academia
 Red Academia
 Reefwave
 Regency

Regional Gothic
 Renewable Corporate Futurism
 Retro Fairycore
 Retro-Futurism
 Rivethead
 Roaring 20s
 Robotics Kid
 Rock
 Rockabilly
 Rocketpunk
 Rococo
 Roguecore
 Rollerwave
 Roma
 Romantic Academia
 Romantic Goth
 Romanticism
 Romantic Italian
 Rotcore
 Royalcore
 Rusticcore

S:

Sacricore
 Sad people
 Salon Kei
 Salvagepunk
 Sandalpunk
 Sanriocore
 Scene
 Schizowave
 School
 Science Academia
 Scoutcore
 Scrapbook
 Scrapper
 Seapunk
 Sega Uranus
 Selkiecore
 Shabby Chic

Shamate
 Shanzhai
 Sharpies
 Shibuya Punk
 Shiny Suit 97
 Shironuri
 Shoegaze
 Sigilkore
 Sigma Male
 Silkpunk
 Sizz
 Skater
 Skeuomorphism
 Skinheads
 Slimepunk
 Sloanie
 Sleepycore
 Slutcore
 Smilecore
 Snow Bunny
 Snowdrop
 Social Science Academia
 Soft Apocalypse
 Soft Colonial Wanderlust
 Soft Countriana
 Soft Grunge
 Softie
 Soft Indie
 Soft Macabre
 Soft Morningcore
 Soggy
 Solarpunk
 Southern Belle
 Southern Gothic
 Soviet
 Soviet Bloc School
 Sovietwave
 Spacecore
 Space Cowboy
 Sparklecore

Spiritcore
 Spriggancore
 Spring
 Spy Fiction
 Starrflesh
 Steampunk
 Steelpunk
 Stellar Scholar
 Stilyagi
 Stimwave
 Stonepunk
 Stoner
 Stripcore
 Studyblr
 Studyplace
 Suburban Gothic
 Sukeban
 Summer
 Superflat Pop
 Suprematism
 Surf Crush
 Surrealism
 Surreal Memer
 Suspect Girl
 Sweet Lolita
 Swenkas
 Swordpunk
 Synthwave

T:
 Tacticool
 Taisho Roman
 Takenokozoku
 Tanbi Kei
 TangoCore
 Technical Scene
 Technocore
 Technoneko2000
 Technozen
 Techwear

Teddies
 Teenage Dream
 Teenqueen
 Teethcore
 Telstracore
 TenderCore
 Terrorwave
 Teslapunk
 That Girl
 Theatre Academia
 Theatre Kids
 Thrasher
 Thriftcore
 Tiki
 Tinkercore
 Tinycore
 Tomboy
 Toriyamacore
 Toxic Core
 Toycore
 Trad Goth
 Traditional Korean
 Trailer Park Princess
 Trashcore
 Trashy Raver
 Traumacore
 Trenchcore
 Trendercore
 Trillwave
 Tropical
 Tumblewave
 Tupinipunk
 Twee
 Tweencore

 U:
 Ukiyo-e
 Unicorncore
 Urban Fantasy
 Urbancore

UrBling
 Utopian Scholastic

 V:
 Vacation Dadcore
 Vampire
 Vaporwave
 VARIOUSXYZ
 Vectorbloom
 Vectorheart
 Vibrant Academia
 Victorian
 Victorian Goth
 Victorian Urban Poverty
 Viking
 Villagecore
 Villaincore
 Vintage British Sportsman
 Vintage Hero
 Vintage Parisian
 Virgo's Tears
 Visual Kei
 Voidcore
 Voidpunk
 Vorticism
 VSCO
 VSCO Preppy
 Vulture Culture

 W:
 Wabi-Sabi
 Waif
 Waldorf
 Wanderlust
 Warmcore
 Weathercore
 Web Creep
 Weeaboo
 Weirdcore
 Werewolf

Western
Wetcore
Whimsigothic
Wild Child
Winter
Winter Academia
Winter Fairy Coquette
Witchcore
Witch House
Witchy Academia
Wizardcore
Wonderland
Woodland goth
Wormcore
Writer Academia
Wuxia

X:
XO

Y:
Y2K
Yakuza
Yami Kawaii
Yandere
Yandexweb
Yankeecore
Yanki
Youthquake
Yume Kawaii

Z:
Zombiecore

Appendix II: The "X-Metal" List

1982:

Acíum – Wicked Metal
Halloween – Evil Metal
Mercy – Swedish Metal
Venom – Black Metal

1983:

Astaroth – Speed Black Metal
Death SS – Evil Metal
No Mercy – Death Metal
Overload – Hell Metal
Sodom – Witching Metal

1984:

Charter – Turbo Metal
Dementia – High Power Slash Metal
Hammer Head – Speed Metal

Helloween / Hellhammer / Running Wild / Dark Avenger – Death Metal

Genocide – Toxic Metal

Possessed – Death Metal

Resless – Restless Metal

Vaughn – Holy Metal

Vicious Barreka – Heavenly Metal

1985:

Acrid – Devil's Metal

Anthares – Power Metal

Apostle – White Metal

Atomkraft – Total Metal

Fallen Angel – Power Metal

Mayhem – Mega Metal

Mort-Fine – Hard Metal

Overload SR – Medieval Metal

Saint's Anger – Danger Metal

Slammer – Lethal Metal

Stone Vengeance – Death Metal

Tankard – Alcoholic Metal

Voor – Evil Metal

1986:

Bellzlleb – Satanic Metal

Cruella – Power Metal

Gypsy Rose – Evil Metal

Necropolis – Death Metal

Wotan – Teutonic Metal

1987:

Aggressive Agricultor / Exterminator – Ugly Metal

Diktátor – Animal Metal

Magnus – Power Metal

Parabellum – Ultra Metal

Saccara – Ketchup Metal

Virgin Witch – Death Metal

1988:

Pantera – Power Metal

Stone Soldier – Invincible Metal

Tectonic – Bass Metal
Whetstone – Ancient Metal

1989:

Berserker – Brachial Metal
Massacre – Thrash Metal
Silence Death – Poison Metal
Sadom – Work Metal