

De-Centering Jenny.



RE-THINKING NEOLIBERALISM, MASS CULTURE, AND AESTHETIC IMPERIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

By Orrin Pavone

Commodification appropriates uniqueness, transforming the individual into a quantifiable object of production: it ensures that all objects, personal or otherwise, remain identical. Under the regime of capital, difference is a commodity that operationalizes mass culture; difference is the desired object of capital. Difference does not dissolve with each iteration but rather forms a new shape. It repurposes minutiae to ensure that “something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape” (Adorno and Horkheimer 97) mass culture. This equalization of difference, ultimately, ends with the replication of the subject, or the self, under neoliberalism. The labouring body, the site of production and consumption, becomes only an object of commercial exchange, suturing the personal to the professional. Commodification, inherently, ruptures any attempt to distinguish work from play.

In his essay *The Schema of Mass Culture*, Theodor Adorno describes the effects of late-stage capitalism on mass culture in the mid-twentieth century. Adorno asserts mass culture's commercial character is symptomatic of capitalist economic decay, especially when concerned with the commodification of the working-class subject (62). He equates the commercial character of

mass culture to that of a solution which erodes the distinction between culture and practical life (ibid). The commercial character of (mass) culture is, therefore, an apparatus of state capitalism: a control mechanism for the behaviours of the working class. It adjoins disparate leisure activities to labour, inviting capital into the interior spaces of the working-class subject: the *self*. In effect, the commercial character of mass culture commodifies the self, subjugating the individual to a framework of production present both inside and outside of the traditional domains of labour. The internal becomes an external site of labour commodification. In other words, the subject consumes as a means of production. This behaviour is prototypical to, and now a hallmark of, contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Fundamentally, neoliberal capitalism requires the sublimation of individuals into proprietary interests. Neoliberalism indentures individuals to capital and refashions them into autonomous economic units: the body itself becomes a self-sustaining economic apparatus (Shaviro 3). The neoliberal subject is, hence, an embodied object or resource of capital. Michel Foucault explains in his book *The Birth of Biopolitics* that neoliberalism mutates the theory of Homo oeconomicus so

"Homo oeconomicus is an entrepreneur [of] himself" (Foucault 226; Shaviro 3). In this sense, the contemporary neoliberal subject adopts a model of consumption that tethers production to consumption, thereby making the self its own site of capital, labour, and source of earnings (Foucault 226). Divided, the neoliberal subject exists as a function of themselves, dependent on their labour as a form of consumption and their consumption as a form of generative labour (ibid).

Under the regime of neoliberal capitalism, emotions are not exempt from exploitation. Emotions are, instead, considered resources that allow individuals to make renewable investments and expand their market shares. Subjects are nevertheless caught in a scheme of non-affective labour politics involving the sale of their "labour-power in the form of pre-defined and pre-packaged emotions" (ibid). This hyper-fixation on the neoliberal exchange of affect defines the behaviours of the main characters, or 'Jennies', in Ryan Trecartin's 2013 film *Center Jenny*. Operating as autonomous economic units, Trecartin depicts each Jenny as an exaggerated, proto-cyborgian replica of the other. All of whom are collectively suffering from a pervasive form of internalized neoliberalism, whose gestures and personae necessarily interpolate the excess(iveness) of early 2010s reality-TV shows (Åkervall 43). Consequently, these characters simultaneously embody what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe as the 'pseudo-individuality' or universalization of the individual in mass culture, and what Sianne Ngai terms the zany: an aesthetic category that describes the "hyper commodified, information saturated, performance driven conditions of late capitalism" (Ngai 1).

In this essay, I therefore attempt to explain the outcome of this regression of person/objecthood, or the material self, under contemporary neoliberal capitalism through what I theorize is *Anti-aesthetic imperialism*. Anti-aesthetic imperialism demarcates a form of deception performed by alternative objects to reappropriate the aesthetics of dissonance as a harmonized marketing technique rather than counter-hegemonic defiance. It defines the process of the alternative object's subsumption into the realm of neoliberal capitalism at the site of affective labour *par excellence*: the neoliberal individual subject. I specifically use the term imperialism to emphasize the violent exertion of political-economic power over alternative objects as they are repurposed into the capitalist domain. Imperialism, understood as a mode of western political and



Figure 1. *Centre Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

economic hegemony, most aptly describes a similar violent process to that of anti-aesthetic amalgamation. The abstraction of an alternative object is, therefore, situated in a similar cultural hegemonic realm as imperialism in relation to the continuous subjugation, or exertion of power over objects. Anti-aesthetic imperialism can be thought of as an aesthetic *regime* of sorts, denoting the establishment of an aesthetic hegemony over culturally dissonant objects. In other words, it describes how the institutional use of dissonant aesthetics can maintain ideological control over counter-cultural objects while naturalizing, and universalizing, aesthetic appearance(s). Anti-aesthetic imperialism, hence, violently appropriates the performance(s) of counter-cultural objects to exert political and economic domination over all areas of aesthetic expression. I, thus, explore anti-aesthetic imperialism as neoliberalism's fortified "instrument of power and self-mastery" (Adorno and Horkheimer 28) to argue how it celebrates its ability to accommodate the negative aspects of life under capitalism, reducing the total weight of capital to a mere aesthetic category: anti-aesthetic imperialism teases the avant-garde, counter-hegemonic aesthetics of dissonance with a hyper-awareness of its own visual expressions of self-reflexivity.

Anti-aesthetic imperialism, however, is not an end in itself. Rather, I argue the hyper-commodification of difference does not negate our interpretations of, or engagements with, alternative media nor does it render their expressions meaningless. I emphasize that alternative objects retain their meanings insofar as audiences engage with their inconspicuous superficial expressions in the post-cinematic digital era. To this end, I seek to answer the question: Is Post-cinema a way out of anti-aesthetic imperialism?

This paper, thus, considers how the current hyper-fixated demand for newness encourages neoliberal mass culture to be "an organized mania for connecting

everything with everything else" (Adorno 83). I primarily examine the theoretical work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Siegfried Kracauer on mass culture, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's discussions on connexionism, Mark Fisher's capitalist realism, and the so-called new form of homo-œconomicus theorized by Michel Foucault. The material media objects I analyzed alongside these theories include: Ryan Trecartin's film *Centre Jenny* (2013), the promotional editorial photographs from the recent Heaven by Marc Jacobs FW2022 and SS2023 collections, Shygirl's music video *Playboy / Positions* (2023), the photography of Moni Haworth for THE FACE Magazine, and the runway pieces of designer Victor Barragán. I, thus, situate contemporary counter-hegemonic alternative objects in relation to the appropriation of dissonance-as-marketing-technique to elucidate the ubiquity of anti-aesthetic imperialism in mass culture.

In 2012, Ryan Trecartin began his self-titled Artforum article with the statement: "Production may really just be a creative way to thoughtfully consume" (Trecartin). Throughout his short essay, Trecartin theorizes the prosumer as an embodied form of capital where the act of childbirth exemplifies a natural prosumerism, a complex system of consumption and collaboration. "Trecartin suggests "in a very neutral and cute sense, nothing can be consumed without something being altered, produced, or shared. Creation and consumption are zodiac opposites: polar ends of the same attribute" (ibid). This inter-connective tissue of consumption-production characterizes a phenomenon unique to contemporary mass culture: the exhaustion of the individual under neoliberal capitalism. Our current hyper-fixated demand for newness encourages neoliberal mass culture to be "an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else" (Adorno 83). Reflecting on Adorno's discussions on the mania of mass culture, I am reminded of a similar mania defined in part by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's work on connexionism.

In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the authors explain in a connexionist world "the distinction between private life and professional life tends to diminish under the impact of [a confusion] between the qualities of the person and the properties of their labour power" (Boltanski and Chiapello 155). This con-

1. Prosumer is a portmanteau of 'producer' and 'consumer'. It defines the experiences of individuals who both produce and consume, and is often associated with the amalgamation of production and consumption activities under neoliberalism.

fusion describes what I consider to be an internalized prosumerism, engaging with a new form of homo-œconomicus which expands on the theorizations of Foucault and is found, visually mediated on, by Trecartin. Borderless, the processes of neoliberal capitalism (once internalized) hyper-fixate on the individual as an inexhaustible apparatus of capital accumulation. In understanding the neoliberal body-as-capital Sianne Ngai underscores how the role of the prosumer operates on an axiom of production. This is an axiom whereby, as the sphere of production expands, so do workers' expectations. In this sense, neoliberalism ultimately requires the worker to adopt the "grotesque metarole [that contains] all 'roles' [indifferent] to their individual specificity" (Ngai 202). This amalgamated metarole, I suggest, explains the hyper-excessive behaviours performed by the Jennies in Trecartin's film.

What's interesting about Trecartin's observations are not, necessarily, the fact that we have been told, once again, we're caught in a never-ending cycle of production and consumption. Rather, what I find novel about this article is the idea that creation and consumption can be understood as, inherently, polar opposites: they exist on the same spectrum if only to balance the other out. Considering this theorization from an explicitly Adornian aesthetic standpoint one can productively think of creation and consumption as taking on similar aspects to that of expression and semblance. In this sense, creation can be equated to expression and consumption to semblance. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, that "expression and semblance are fundamentally antithetical" (110), they are therefore opposite yet must invoke the existence of one another in order to function. Put another way, they are counter-counter parts; they depend on each other if only to try to eliminate their existences. A fundamental dialectical tension underlies their relationship; and hence, the relationship Trecartin's aesthetics and cinematic form have to the post-cinematic (read: digital) moving-image.

Centre Jenny, therefore, emphasizes the dialectical tension inherent to aesthetic expression and semblance to categorically reject facile mutations of its subject matter. There is an autonomy affixed to post-cinematic digital expression that does not exist elsewhere in cinema. Trecartin's depictions of his characters hence operate in an aesthetics of dissonance unique to our current digital sensorium. In invoking the aesthetics of non-semblance, Trecartin's treatment of the Jennies formal, material and subjective, aesthetics illu-

minate the “desire suppressed by the affirmative power of society with which aesthetic semblance has been bound up” (ibid). Figures 1, 2, and 8 effectively illustrate Trecartin’s inclination to invoke dissonance as a critical anti-aesthetic and resistant practice. This practice materializes through the non-semblance of self-reflexive overlapping dialogue, quasi-identical wardrobe, and a-human proto-cyborgian coloured contacts and vibrant hair colours. These aesthetic choices translate similarly to the non-linearity of, and overlapping editing structure Trecartin adopts. In this sense, the fragmented images, abstracted hyper-pitched non-human robot-voices, and bass-boosted anxiety-inducing sonic landscape postures audiences towards the dialectical tension underlying post-cinematic expression and Trecartin’s rejection of the semblance character of traditional film and video. It is this form of dissonance, and expression thereof, which is in danger of being appropriated and reproduced under our contemporary aesthetic regime.

In a similar way, author Wes Hill describes Trecartin’s characters as comic-tragic figures of neoliberalism, imbued with an over-connected and over-emotional self-presentation “unable to stop, in fear they will be nothing if not performing” (13). This inability to cease production underscores the violent ramifications of a mass culture acculturated by a prosumerism intent on “competitive individualism” (ibid), a form of self-cannibalization inherent to our current phase of mass culture. Neoliberal hegemony has reached a point of standardization where the individual and their subjectivities converge in mass acculturation. This can be explained by the radical behaviours of the Jennies as themselves evolving from the “mutations of a single worldview” (Koestnbaum in Hill 13); a pattern where characters replicate the behaviours of mass culture to illustrate their existence as “productive spectacles” (Åkervall 44) of internalized neoliberal desire. These spectacular behaviours, thus, mirror our culture of pro/consumerism as they manipulate excess and exaggerate affect through the self-reflexive neoliberal apparatus I define as *Anti-aesthetic imperialism*.

I, however, would first like to emphasize the critical similarities between Trecartin’s Jennies and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s notion of pseudo-individuality before expanding on anti-aesthetic imperialism as such. Adorno and Horkheimer note in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the culture industry tolerates individuals insofar as their identity remains a product of the universal (124). The pseudo-individuality

of those persons under monopoly capitalism reduces the peculiarity of the self to a “socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural” (125). Individuality is, therefore, reduced to minor transgressions of difference such as the presence of one’s accent or facial hair growth (ibid). No one is spared from this phenomenon, neither the film stars nor the working-classes.



Figure 2. *Centre Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

Adorno and Horkheimer consider pseudo-individuality as the residual effect of advertising from the culture industry. In this sense, pseudo-individuality is a form of mimesis, or capital-driven replication. In practice, pseudo-individuality is otherwise considered the “compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities” (136) who are aware of the universalizing effects of capital, though continue to behave according to the culture industry’s proprietary interests. Hence, if we are to read the Jennies’ performances as mimicking the “exhibitionism of twenty-first-century reality TV” (Åkervall 36), then their excessive behaviours follow Shaviro’s concept of the pop culture figure as being an ‘ideal commodity’ under neoliberalism. The Jennies, thus, represent what I argue is a pseudo-individuality-centred neurosis, or the symptom of one’s relentless participation in neoliberal capitalism. Adorno moreover explains how the commercial character of culture, a cultural quality I understand to merge the personal and the professional, obscures the “borderline between culture and empirical reality” (61) to the point of indistinction (ibid). It does so in perpetuity and is properly understood as concerning the replicative process of abstraction. I define abstraction as the material result of mass culture’s incessant adoption of capitalist excess, characterized by the insatiable fetish for unbridled growth, demanding nothing which is (re)produced becomes new. Abstraction subjugates the working class to an object of mass-produced capital, modelled on the need to satisfy mass culture’s demand that “no one can be any different from itself” (Adorno and Horkheimer

92). Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer observes in *The Mass Ornament* how early twentieth-century capitalism engaged with and was thus defined by a certain abstract quality. Ergo, the abstract qualities of capitalist thought emphasizes a form of capital(ism) dependent on the processes of abstraction, or undue replication, to sustain the mechanical nature of the commodity (81). Kracauer asserts how the limits of abstraction are identified by its inability to grasp the "actual substance of life" (ibid) and must inevitably, by way of ineptitude, "give way to concrete observation of phenomena" (ibid). The inability of abstraction, the primary faculty of capitalism, to generate objects or commodities *sui generis* connects its purpose to the rapacious desire to fulfill the never-ending lacuna of capitalist production.

More recently, Mark Fisher notes in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, that the phenomenon of newness, or new objects, under neoliberal capitalism exists in tandem with the pre-established object. The new object defines itself with what has been previously established, while at the same time, the established reconfigures itself against the new (Fisher 2). This interdependent dynamic elucidates the antagonisms that underlie newness and the fallacies thereof in neoliberal capitalist epochs. Capitalism's desire for what is new aligns with the incessant need for market expansion, invariably exhausting production practices so that all new materials are subsumed in a regeneration process: the making new of existing materials (17). This falsified production of newness, however, is itself not novel but instead defines the *raison d'être* of neoliberal capitalist regimes. The continuous movement, the re-creation through destruction, relates to capitalism's intolerance of the new as being unreliable. This risk daunts the balance sheets of even the most financially secure venture capitalists. Despite this, the cardinal sin of neoliberal capitalism is not taking this risk. Neoliberalism, as a political-economic regime, problematizes the relation of the new to the old (or pre-established) in an effort to sustain its project of regeneration. The exclusion of the new which defined the epoch of late liberalism that Adorno and Horkheimer wrote from re-asserts itself in contemporary neoliberalism as an ever-perverse form of market expansion. Neoliberal individualism, the site of prosumerism, thus locates in itself the ceaseless production of difference.

In retaliation to mid-century liberal market capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest "the less the system tolerates anything new, the more those who

have been forsaken must be acquainted with all the latest novelties if they are to continue living in society rather than feeling themselves excluded from it" (83). In other words, we can understand how the anxieties inherent to post-1980s neoliberal capitalism culminate in an antagonistic relationship that secures the threat of exclusion to individual production. In this sense, the subject's interiority retains, at any given moment, an ambient threat of exclusion. The internalization of naturalized prosumer logic is an insidiously affective phenomenon; I can, therefore, only define the embodiment of capital-induced stress as a symptom of neoliberal neurosis. This pervasive threat of exclusion is what fastens prosumers, the neoliberal subjects *par excellence*, in an endless state of production and consumption; a value-added model that removes overhead costs from corporations and redirects them to subjects themselves ("Prosumer Business Model"; Fisher 2). Put differently, the "machine is rotating on the spot" (Adorno and Horkheimer 106) insofar as "nothing is allowed to stay as it was; everything must be endlessly in motion" (ibid) under neoliberal capitalism. The endlessness which defines our current phase of mass culture and schema of prosumerism doubly emphasizes the disingenuity of the novel object as itself a pre-made artifact. The neoliberal apparatus has, in effect, dissolved difference to the extent that there is no longer what we have long considered an 'alternative object', neither as a designated media category or a facet of autonomous decision-making. Neoliberalism subsumes the counter-hegemonic and restructures it as a vehicle for liberal progressiveness. Now more than ever, the resistant object transforms into a mere performance of counter-hegemony, allowing consumerism to mutate into the most novel 'progressive' form. The Amazon storefront selling sustainability-branded merchandise with political slogans calling for the end of environmental catastrophe, such as "There is No Planet B", demonstrates these self-reflexive strategies of neoliberal capitalism quite well.

Classifying media objects into frivolous subcategories or subgenres similarly perpetuates the overwhelming fallacy of newness in neoliberal society. Relegating an object to a subcategory is an act of subjugation itself; it is the exclusion of an object based on the ambiguity or indistinction newness requires. Fisher notes that categorizing objects as alternative or independent no longer refers to those outside mass culture or the mainstream. However, instead, they exist as "styles, in fact

the dominant styles, within the mainstream" (Fisher 6). The category of the Alternative, once championed as a vector for resistance, is nevertheless subsumed in mass culture as a savvy marketing technique. Mass culture, therefore, learns from the Alternative what it is deficient in and what supplements to take to remedy this self-included malady. Similar to the contemporary

machine-learning algorithms punctuating our twenty-first century hyper-globalized media landscape, the neoliberal product also re-formats and regenerates pre-existing objects to equip itself with the facets it previously lacked. It is productive to think of the new object as a self-reflexive weaponized



Figure 3. Yves Tumor for HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs F/W 22

defence mechanism devoted to preserving the ever-decaying body of late-stage capitalism. The conveyor belt of industrial capitalism detailed in Kracauer's treatise on the mass ornament has ostensibly secured itself to the neoliberal subject. Instead of "[running]' its secret course in public" (Kracauer 78), the inverse logic of neoliberal capitalism is that it openly accentuates its structures of subjugation to signal professional development; success is tied only to the outward celebration of capitalistic excess.

Anti-Aesthetic Imperialism: The Hyper-Commodification of Difference

Anti-aesthetic imperialism is the product of regression under neoliberal capitalism, the gauche act of repurposing, regenerating, and re-commodifying existing material; it is a form of deception. In disguise, the new product provides consumers with what they already have again and again. Anti-aesthetic imperialism occurs when neoliberalism subsumes the alternative, the expression of counter-hegemony, into the realm of production; it adopts the alternative to acknowledge capitalism's mutation of difference into a commodity itself. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, "adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power[;] The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (28). The prosumer's distraught adaptation to new trends suggests an era of

irresistible regression in our attempt to keep pace with the ever-changing demands of mass culture. We are witnessing an era of mass culture defined by hyper-accelerated consumerism; cultural trends exist now even more as apparitions, their duration cut short by the next short-form TikTok video or carousel Instagram post.

Deception occurs when the alternative object is held in tension with capital. Anti-aesthetic imperialism draws upon the legacies of postmodernism and the anti-aesthetic as a strategy to further exploit and expand the market, fetishizing difference as a prerequisite to consumer satisfaction. Previously saturated by so-called traditional forms of beauty, our current phase of mass consumerism has adopted the alternative. Self-reflexivity, appropriation, and parody define capitalism's narrow attempts towards dominating consumer interest(s). This phenomenon is not, however, limited to the digital or cinematic realms. Instead, there now exists a hyper-obsession in popular culture with high-fashion clothing brands and other luxury retailers adopting counter-aesthetic aesthetics as marketing technique(s). For example, this phenomenon culminates in areas of contemporary fashion such as Marc Jacobs' release of their Gen-Z targeted sub-brand, Heaven. Defined as "a gateway into the sprawling and enigmatic omniverse of Marc Jacobs subversion" ("HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs"), Heaven appropriates the postmodern aesthetics of parody and stylistic amalgamation, a trademark of cur-



Figure 4. Doja Cat for HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs F/W 22

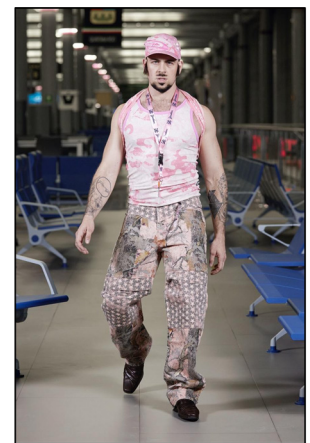


Figure 5. Barragá S/S24

rent lesser-known designers, to corner the interests of the Gen-Z market. Blatantly, the brand positions itself at the "intersection between fashion, art, TV, and film" (Wenger), often collaborating with mainstream artists from all four cultural domains. In this sense, the brand positions itself as a synthesis of all of the various fac-

ets categorizing our culture industry. Heaven demonstrates how the apparatus of anti-aesthetic imperialism replicates 'difference' as an object of desire to dominate creative output and sway contemporary patterns of mass consumption. In this sense, anti-aesthetic imperialism can be considered neoliberalism's "instrument of power and self-mastery" (ibid), realizing the objectives of neoliberalism through an aesthetic curation of cultural products to control mass consumption. Above all else, anti-aesthetic imperialism celebrates its ability to accommodate the negative aspects of life under capitalism, reducing the total weight of capital to a mere aesthetic category; it teases the avant-garde with its own aesthetic expressions of dissonance and self-reflexivity. Anti-aesthetic imperialism is the parodic spectacle of cultural entropy: a weaponized superficiality acknowledging the oppressive nature of capital through the hyper-commodification of difference.

Anti-aesthetic imperialism, however, is not an end in itself. The hyper-commodification of difference, a strategy dominating film programs, the pages of periodicals, and music-streaming services, does not negate our interpretations of alternative cultural objects nor render their expressions meaningless. Adorno and Horkheimer note:

"The regression of the masses today lies in their inability to hear with their own ears what has not already been heard, to touch with their hands what has not previously been grasped; it is the new form of blindness which supersedes that of vanquished myth. Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity" (28-29)

This regression underscores the ideology operationalizing anti-aesthetic imperialism. It defines a process of commodification where products are merely amalgamations of abstraction; objects pieced together with the constituent parts of previous items. This, however, is not the problem I primarily concern myself with, nor do I agree that repurposing previously made objects is inherently fatalistic. This practice has defined and sustained the creative output of artists for decades. Instead, I use anti-aesthetic imperialism to describe the

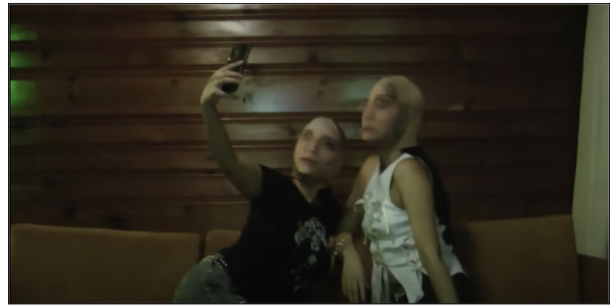


Figure 6. *Playboy / Positions*, Shygirl (2023)

phenomenon of capital adopting abstraction, the parasitic piecing together of objects to exploit difference as a means of capital accumulation. Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of regression applies to anti-aesthetic imperialism as it remains outside of the cultural domains of artistic practice; art and commerce cannot knowingly coincide.

Instead, I assert alternative media objects under the regime of anti-aesthetic imperialism retain their meanings insofar as audiences engage with their inconspicuous superficial expressions. Kracauer's thesis is essential here. I posit that the surface-level expressions of contemporary mass culture, especially regarding the consumption and production of alternative objects, demarcate the beginning of an epoch similarly defined by a cult(ure) of abstraction operating under the auspices of apparition. I emphasize the importance of an analysis of the surface-level expressions of prosumers in the digital era as I believe it can "provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things" (Kracauer 75). Our current era of cultural production, specifically in terms of post-cinema, has reconfigured the mass in Kracauer's text. The "aerial photographs of landscapes and cities" (77) that delineated the movement and consumption behaviours of the masses have now been replaced by uniform photographs in fashion periodicals and on social media, replicating avant-garde counter-aesthetics to the point of exhaustion. This hyper-commodification of dissonant



Figure 7. Jenna Ortega for *THE FACE* Magazine, shot by Moni Haworth (2022)

aesthetics has engendered a form of mimesis distinct to our neoliberal capitalist epoch.

Cultural objects similarly preserve their affective qualities under anti-aesthetic imperialism; affect does not cease to exist under the structures of capital. Still, alternative objects still resist classification, commodification, and re-articulation by corporations and prosumers alike. The resistance and self-reflexivity of alternative media, the fetish object of anti-aesthetic imperialism, is irreplicable vis-à-vis its affective qualities regardless of its proximity to the re-produced object. Shygirl's music video *Playboy / Positions* (figure 6), the avant-garde runway pieces of designer Victor Barragán (figure 5), the photography of Moni Haworth (figure 7), and Ryan Trecartin's film *Center Jenny* (figures 1, 2, 8), exemplify the fact that alternative objects can resist domination despite mass culture's repackaging of their experimental, boundary-pushing, and ugly aesthetics; often to maintain cultural relevance and market shares.

Post-Cinema: Is this our way out?

In conclusion, I would like to re-pose the question I asked at the beginning: Is Post-Cinema a way out of aesthetic imperialism? What is different in our current phase of mass culture than from the epoch Kracauer, Adorno, and Horkheimer theorized is the decentralization of media consumption sites. Contemporary media spectatorship in the post-cinematic era designates the circulation of media outside traditional exhibition spaces. The same media object presented to

each of us online now exists in multiple formats on countless streaming platforms (Åkervall 38). Therefore, the consumption practices that define post-cinema have disrupted "the privileged spaces of reception for the moving image...from the cinema through the living room of domestic television" (ibid). This idea of cinema outside of fixed spaces problematizes the traditional notion of viewership or consumption as a communal experience. Instead, the contemporary viewing environment foregrounds a mode of consumption that is singular and mobile, often occurring across multiple screens (ibid). This decentralization of media consumption sites, therefore, obfuscates a Kracauerian understanding of contemporary mass culture as audiences have abandoned the behaviours previously used to trace mass consumption. The diffusion of media objects into the personal domain, hence, calls for a rethinking of alternative consumption under neoliberalism as an individual pursuit. Instead of masses "experiencing events together in public venues" (Averkall 36-37), the mobile phone or tablet screen demarcates a new hidden form of consumption implying a pervasive interconnected culture suffering from the unrelenting omnipresence of capitalism, alone.

Post-cinematic theory and aesthetics, ostensibly, address the problem of novel digital technologies, affixed to neoliberal economic relations, allowing our culture to manufacture and articulate lived experiences in radically new ways (Shaviro 2). These aesthetics, hence, operate in a digitally hybrid form by suturing



Figure 8. *Center Jenny*, Ryan Trecartin (2013)

contemporary media to transhistorical cultural behaviour. Post-cinematic film and videos, like Ryan Trecartin's *Centre Jenny* or Shygirl's *Playboy / Positions*, are thus concerned with engaging various media and popular culture references to critique our everyday usage of media, while at the same time decentering the individual, a strategy done so through what Lisa Åkervall terms the 'posthuman sensorium'. The posthuman sensorium considers the self in post-cinema as decentered and poly-perspectival, allowing affect to exist outside the singular subject (Åkervall 41). Films enacting the posthuman sensorium exist in multiplicities and cannot be "mastered by a subject or employed to consolidate the perspective of a humanist subject" (ibid). This idea similarly reflects Shane Denson's assertion of the post-cinematic as a media regime where "subjects and objects of perception are tragically transformed" (Denson 1).

In the regime of post-cinema, the borders of the human subject and media object are fluid, dissolving as new relations are forged through continuously advancing digital algorithms (ibid). It is this creation of a posthuman sensorium through digital manipulation which demarcates the post-cinematic aesthetic strategies of Trecartin's *Centre Jenny* and his strategic uses of the Jennies in the film. In this sense, the Jennies can be considered critically dissonant reiterations of one another, or rather individual imperial centres fetishizing the minutiae and aesthetics of contemporary pseudo-individuality. Trecartin's film, hence, applies a post-cinematic treatment to the experiences of the prosumer under neoliberal capitalism by visually illustrating the phenomenon of globalization "through a series of appendages, networks, and technologies" (Åkervall 41). Trecartin's use of sound-processing technologies digitally manipulates and exaggerates the high-pitched voices of his characters to depict a posthuman sensorium reconstructed by the engagement with new media technologies (ibid). Trecartin, therefore, formally suspends, and transcends the limits of, the human body to posture it towards our contemporary technological landscape. While, at the same time, abandoning the perceived formal norms ingrained by classical filmmaking to favour instead "editing styles and stories that exceed and overwhelm [audience's] perceptual and cognitive faculties" (41-42). *Centre Jenny* is itself a hybrid media object existing in the borderlands of anti-aesthetic imperialism as it repurposes digital and material media to critically (en)counter our relationship to

and use of entertainment. The post-cinematic is, thus, perhaps the closest mode of (non) cinema that calls on us to address our current neoliberal moment self-reflexively; examining our positions in the regime of neoliberal capitalism, and our relationships to prosumerism and anti-aesthetic imperialism. Hence, although I cannot yet answer the above question, our way out of, or at least against, anti-aesthetic imperialism cannot simply be through the re-articulation of abstraction; an aesthetic practice which seemingly characterizes post-cinema. Using ideology against itself, in this instance, would not be entirely productive; Adorno and Horkheimer would also undoubtedly agree.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry*. Routledge Classics, 2001.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Boltanski, Luc, and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso Books, 2018. *Centre Jenny*, Directed by Ryan Trecartin. 2013. USA. Digital
- Denson, Shane. "Introduction: Discorrelation and Post-Cinema." *Discorrelated Images*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2020, pp. 1–21.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, UK. 2009.
- Foucault, Michel. "Chapter 9: 14 March 1979." *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at The Collège De France, 1978-79*, translated by Graham Burchell, Palgrave MacMillan, London, UK, 2008, pp. 215–239.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995, pp. 75–86.
- Hill, Wes., "The Automedial Zaniness of Ryan Trecartin". *M/C Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, Apr. 2018, doi:10.5204/mcj.1382.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Perks and Mini. "HEAVEN by Marc Jacobs." P.A.M. (Perks and Mini), 2023, perksandmini.com/collections/heaven. *Playboy / Positions*, Directed by Samuel Ibram. 2023. USA "Prosumer Business Model." Business Model

- Navigator, 2023, businessmodelnavigator.com/pattern?id=60.
- Playboy / Positions*, Directed by Samuel Ibram. 2023. USA
- “Prosumer Business Model.” *Business Model Navigator*, 2023, businessmodelnavigator.com/pattern?id=60.
- Shaviro, Steven. “Introduction.” *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Zero Books, Ropley, UK, 2010, pp. 1–11.
- Trecartin, Ryan. “Ryan Trecartin.” *Artforum*, 2012, www.artforum.com/events/ryan-trecartin-2-193363/. We Got Good. “There Is No Planet B Shirt Earth Day Shirt.” Amazon, 2023, www.amazon.com/There-Planet-Shirt-Earth-White/dp/Bo7PWFVBLT/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=there%2Bis%2Bno%2Bplanet%2Bb%2Bt%2Bshirt&qid=1702240467&sr=8-3&th=1.
- We Got Good. “There Is No Planet B Shirt Earth Day Shirt.” *Amazon*, 2023, www.amazon.com/There-Planet-Shirt-Earth-White/dp/Bo7PWFVBLT/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=there%2Bis%2Bno%2Bplanet%2Bb%2Bt%2Bshirt&qid=1702240467&sr=8-3&th=1.
- Wenger, Stephanie. “Pamela Anderson and Doja Cat Star in New Heaven by Marc Jacobs Campaign — See the Pics!” *People*, 9 Sept. 2022, people.com/style/pamela-anderson-and-doja-cat-star-in-new-heaven-by-marc-jacobs-paign-see-the-pics/.
- Åkervall, Lisa. “Networked selves: Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch’s postcinematic aesthetics.” *Screen*, vol. 57, no. 1, 11 Apr. 2016, pp. 35–51.