

## The Health Goths Are Really Feeling Zip Ties RN For Some Reason

Memes: Joelle Bouchard, [@namaste.at.home.dad](#)

Text: [James Payne](#)

*Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the thickets of long ago; it's a tiger's leap into the past. Only it takes place in an arena in which the ruling classes are in control.*

- Walter Benjamin, [Theses on the Philosophy of History, XIV](#)

[I thought Dylann Roof was in Iceage.](#)

- James Payne

Health Goth is a youth culture aesthetic formulated by the Portland trio of Chris Cantino, Mike Grabarek, and Jeremy Scott. Cantino is a video artist, while Grabarek and Scott make music as [Magic Fades](#). In 2013, the three started a Facebook page dedicated to building the syncretic vision of Health Goth, which, as they say in an interview on *Vice's i-D*, centers on "sportswear, fetishization of clothing and cleanliness, body enhancement technology, rendered environments, and dystopian advertisements."

A February 17th, 2017 post on the same Health Goth Facebook page is composed of three photos of black clad police officers holding zip ties used to hand-cuff protestors. In one of the three pictures, a protestor is being held to the pavement awaiting arrest. The cops surrounding him are wearing Under Armour gloves with prominently displayed logos. Coincidentally, the FB avatar for Health Goth's page is the Under Armour logo, but with smoke coming out of it, so one can tell it's

countercultural, not corporate. It would be bad, after all, for Health Goth to be confused with Under Armour, whose CEO Kevin Plank has [praised President Trump](#) by saying, "To have such a pro-business president is something that is a real asset for the country. People can really grab that opportunity." The image of the protestor's arrest was sourced from a [Telegraph picture gallery](#) documenting the 2011 crackdown on Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park. And what was the Health Goth FB admin's caption for this photo-set?

"Really feeling zip ties rn for some reason."

For some reason indeed. Another recent Health Goth FB post includes the logos of corporate sports apparel brands placed in the "Expanding Brain" meme format. Adidas, a company started by an early Nazi party member whose factory manufactured *Panzerschreck* - anti-tank bazookas that killed Allies - is positioned, ironically or not, as the height of consciousness. "Adidas" is a portmanteau of "adi," for Adolph, and "das," for Dassler, the name of the founder of the company. That is to say, when one wears "adidas," one is wearing the name of a Nazi.<sup>i</sup> While the Expanding Brain meme is one of mixed messages, the unequivocal devotion to adidas, perhaps Health Goth's largest mark on street fashion, can be seen in bars and clubs from Berlin to Brooklyn. It's a natural pairing that led to the trio developing a working relationship with the brand, which they described in a 2014 [interview with Vice](#):

#### **What's going on with Adidas?**

We just had a meeting with Adidas at the Portland headquarters. A lot of times these companies can't really connect to their ads - they don't realise what they're doing. So I guess that's where we come in.

#### **Has there been a backlash since the Adidas thing?**

People's reaction is gonna be what it's gonna be, but we're not trying to do something stupid for a quick buck. There are thirsty people out there, but that's not us. We all do pretty well in our normal lives. If we can put something out that's cool, then that's great - selling out is awesome.

Remember: it's never false consciousness if it's your own falsity.

Beyond sportswear, Health Goth's FB offers [several](#) recent posts inspired by even more riot police gear. It's no wonder Mark Leckey refers to this look as "Athparamilitary." What Susan Sontag wrote about the sexualization of SS uniforms in her 1975 essay "Fascinating Fascism" is equally applicable to Health Goth's recurring fetishization of riot police gear:

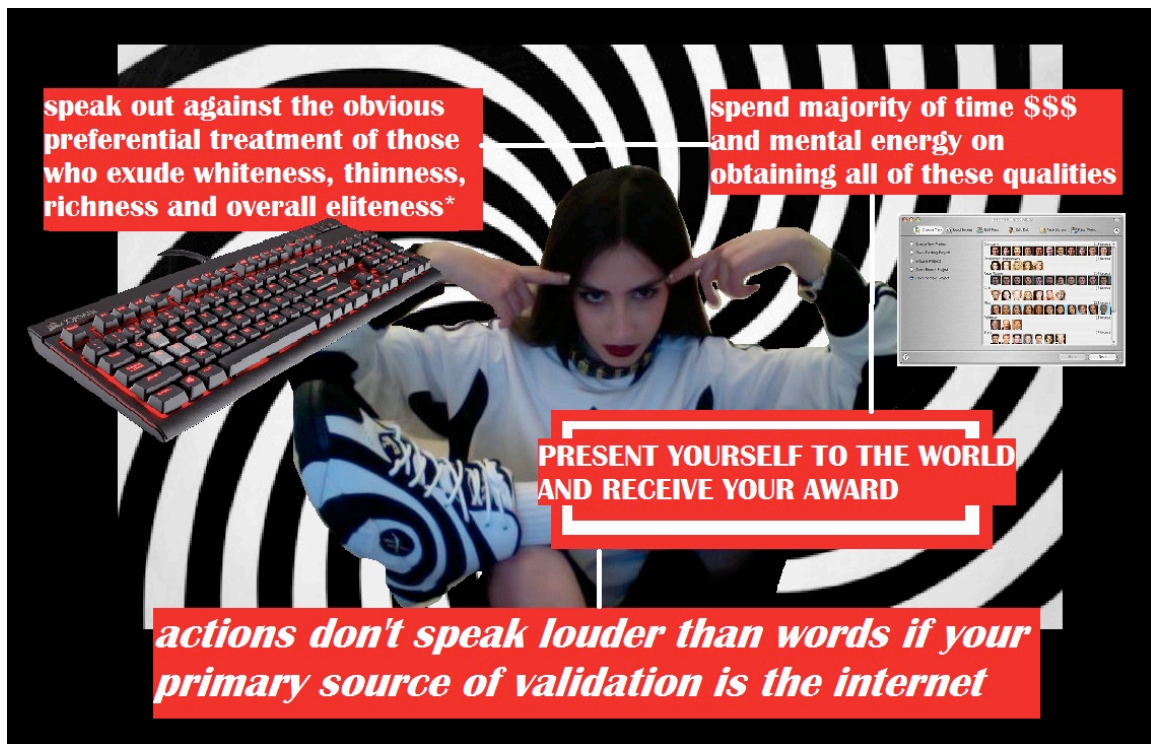
There is a general fantasy about uniforms. They suggest community, order, identity [...] competence, legitimate authority, the legitimate exercise of violence.

Health Goth, in general, is a black and white world, inspired by black and white worldviews. Like all strong aesthetics, its visual vocabulary is narrow and deep,

rarely moving far beyond the spheres of athletics aesthetics, corporate/technology aesthetics, and law enforcement aesthetics. These three spheres are logically consistent with one another: perhaps only free-market capitalism valorizes competition as much as athletics does. And capitalism could not function without the police, who, through physical violence - pantomimed and socialized in sports - ensure capitalism's "competition" continues.

Health Goth's visual world, then, for all its countercultural trappings, is not a subversion of those three spheres as much as it is an aestheticization of their power processes. The delivery mechanism of Health Goth's aesthetic - the Internet, social media, DJs, fashion - invites the Left to view it as a disaffected critique of capital, but the Right can still see it for what it is on its surface: the promotion and approval of state and corporate power at the expense of the citizen-subject's personal self-esteem. As the progenitor of a rival strain of Health Goth centered on being a goth in a gym, Johnny Love, puts it: "Do you want to be Deathface or Fatface?"

Love's media rise is reminiscent of the way many Alt-Right figures have used an Internet phenomenon that exists mostly in theory as a vehicle for their personal opportunism. And his quote works like much of the Alt-Right's rhetoric - by plausible deniability. Love DJs as "Deathface," so of course he isn't asking if you'd rather be dead or fat, or if you'd rather be the face of power or fat, but the question is open to polysemic readings of just that, and he knows it. Even its most anodyne meaning positions "fat" as negative. This fat-shaming, coupled with Health Goth's obsessive emphases on cleanliness and power, underscores the latent metaphorical fascism at its heart. That latent fascism is the absent center of much of the online discussion about Health Goth, although it does occasionally break to the fore. One adherent in an [explainer video](#) produced by Red Bull states, "Health Goth is really about still being better than everyone else." The original Portland trio, in the aforementioned *Vice i-D* interview, describe Health Goth more subtly as being about transhumanism's "ideal of pursuing perfection."



"The pursuit of perfection," coincidentally, is an apt summation of Nazi aesthetics, which revolved around young, muscular "Aryan" bodies that betrayed little in the way of poverty or age's depredations. (Ironically, few in the Nazi leadership, besides, perhaps, Hess, Rommel, and Speer even approached having average looks.) This tendency to exalt "peak performance," as the meme would have it, is epitomized in *the Great German Art Exhibition (Die Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung)* that the Nazis organized in 1937 as a counterpoint to their exhibition *Degenerate Art (Entartete Kunst)*, which showcased banned artwork by modernists like George Grosz, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso. Arno Breker's *The Winner (Der Sieger)* (1939) is typical of the ideal figure in Nazi art: fit, isn't he? Nary a "layer of lard" present, to borrow a phrase from the Health Goth Fitness Bible. Breker's sculptures, and many that were shown in the *Great German Art Exhibition*, are daft, anachronistic neo-classical reiterations of the same Greco-Roman figuration that vaporwave aesthetics, a kissing cousin of Health Goth, is fixated on.<sup>ii</sup>

Leni Riefenstahl, however, is the Nazi aesthetician most associated with the notion of an ideal beauty predicated on "being better than everyone else." As Riefenstahl herself explained, "I am fascinated by what is beautiful, strong, healthy, what is living." Riefenstahl's propagandistic documentaries *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) were funded by the Nazi government with the intention of conveying the supposed racial superiority of the German people by associating them with the very attributes, like health, that "fascinated" Riefenstahl. *Olympia* is divided in two parts: *Festival of Nations (Fest der Völker)* and *Festival of Beauty (Fest der*

*Schönheit*). *Olympia*'s "Festival of Beauty" subtitle equates the athleticism of the 1936 Olympics with beauty writ large, an aesthetic paradigm that necessarily alienates the majority of any nation's population from being aesthetically validated. Nazis, of course, didn't stop at promulgating the aesthetics of athletic beauty, but instead took the logic of that value system to its extreme conclusion by systematically murdering the mentally disabled, physically disabled, and the ethnic minorities who did not fall under their beautiful, strong, healthy - "fit" - ideal.

The overvalorization of "health" and "beauty" was a necessary precondition for the Nazis to establish a justification for liquidating those they deemed to be "unfit" and "degenerate." "Fitness," in general, is a convenient social marker for fascists, who establish the concept only to use it as a cudgel against those who do not fit their standards. This dynamic is why, for Milo Yiannopoulos, it's imperative not to argue that trans people just don't have a legal right to use the bathrooms of their choice, but to establish that trans people have "psychiatric disorders" and that they are "disproportionately involved in sex crimes." If Yiannopoulos and his Alt-Right brethren can pathologize and criminalize trans people in the eyes of the American public, then they know there's no end to the oppression they can apply to them. After all, if they do have psychiatric disorders, then they're not fit.

The Nazis' social Darwinism and deliberate misinterpretation of "survival of the fittest" to mean those who are the strongest, and not those who reproduce the most, matches the fallacy of "might makes right" in Western culture at large, and in the cult of physical fitness in contemporary U.S. culture specifically. It is a cult that only grows as the need for physical strength in day-to-day life dwindles. For fitness fanatics, their strong, useless bodies, are ornaments of class and moral superiority. Their very physical beings display their access to wealth, time, [selective food](#), and the mental and social ability to prioritize exercise.

It's no wonder then that the fascist Alt-Right draws figures like Mike Cernovich, who, besides from being a latter-day Tucker Max and a rape apologist, markets fitness books, juicing recipes, and non-FDA approved nootropics. Cernovich came to fame during the 2016 presidential campaign for casting conspiratorial aspersions on Hillary Clinton's health under his #HillarysHealth hashtag. When Clinton, with pneumonia, lost her balance exiting a 9/11 memorial ceremony, Cernovich, and many others, including some in the mainstream media, used it to question Clinton's fitness to be president. Undergirding Cernovich's criticism was a thick misogyny which asserts that women are naturally weaker than men, and therefore unfit for "men's work."

This link between physical fitness and a human's validity is an integral part of the fascist mind-set. Even objectively unfit figures in the Alt-Right, like Alex Jones, feel the need to peddle the same reactionary fitness theology as Cernovich - a theology not strikingly different than that of Health Goth's Johnny Love. This link between fitness and validity is why, during his presidential campaign, Donald Trump's personal doctor didn't write that Trump was simply in fine health, but that his

"strength and physical stamina are extraordinary" and he would "be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency."

***"why do you always wear athletic gear if you don't care about sports or your health?"***



However, many would position Health Goth as being inherently opposed to "fitness bros" like Cernovich. Take, for instance, this Health Gothie who defined Health Goth for Red Bull:

... a counterculture community. It's not what you'd normally see with the fitness bros. It's about, you know, the underground. Imagine going into a fitness studio filled with people dressed in black, working out, and sweating on each other listening to dark ass music.<sup>iii</sup>

Beyond the specious rationalization that being "dressed in black [...] listening to dark ass music," is necessarily oppositional, it's unclear what Health Goth's aesthetic system does other than re-cool what were long understood by the Left to be fascist cultural values. To paraphrase Shakespeare, a fitness bro by any other name smells the same. This is not to say that the proponents of Health Goth, nor its trendies, are Alt-Right fascists - far from it. Johnny Love, for one, reads as a likely socialist who often tweets Antifa sentiments. But Health Goth, and the other Internet-derived youth cultures of the Obama-era, did knowingly throw rightfully verboten values into the cool-making cycle of the cultural Left, and laundered them ready to wear for an ascendant Art-Right.<sup>iv</sup>

Theorists of Health Goth write themselves in circles to avoid explicitly recognizing the latent metaphorical fascism churning in its cool-making cycle.<sup>v</sup> But at times, they even say it themselves. Wyatt Schaffner writes that Health Goth is a "...proto-narrative of returning to a paradise lost..." that "...requires clinical sterility from pervasive human contact." Or here is Adam Harper in his essay "What Health Goth Really Means,"

...Health Goth is part of this wider interest in hi-tech worlds and signifiers, together with the dystopian accelerationism that so often accompanies it.

"Hi-tech worlds" and "dystopian accelerationism" aptly describes Trump's transition adviser Peter Thiel and his coterie of New Zealand tech-millennarians; Nick Land's cyberpunk and anti-democratic Dark Enlightenment thought; and Internet Art-Rightist Deanna Havas's gnomonic contrarianism, which William Powhida has characterized as "...part accelerationist, part collapsitarian, part alienated, seeming to out-flank the left by going all the way back around to the right." The cultural staying power of Health Goth - and the 28 mutual FB friends I somehow have in common with Havas - proves Powhida right when he concludes, "This may play well with some segments of the art world's theoretical academic revolutionaries out there comfortably in the sheets."



Health Goth, though, is just an example of the overarching trend in recent fashion trends.

What Health Goth shares with Normcore, American Apparel (RIP), and the [corporate aesthetics](#) of *Dis Magazine* and net art, is the subsumption of the Left individual, since the Great Recession, into the undifferentiated, conservative mass. In other words, the Left's surrender of aesthetic individualism to the Right.<sup>vi</sup> This transfer was made possible by URL social media accounts with massive follower counts, which fulfilled the need for ego gratification that used to drive innovation in personal style. IRL, who needed - or wanted - to be distinctive? As the discourses of white privilege, toxic masculinity, and the tyranny of the cishet garnered mass recognition, many in the countercultural elite didn't see the appeal of emphasizing their politically suspect subject positionalities. Normcore, for instance, as Schaffner writes, was where "art school pretense collided with the desire to efface difference and individualize one's self AS the crowd."

Or, as another creative named Donald J. Trump told his RNC crowd, "I am your voice."



Some, operating under the capitalist lie that Communists all had to wear the same clothes, and that the fall of the Berlin Wall was due to GDR kids really wanting to wear Levi's, would argue that this shift toward uniformity and the crowd was part and parcel of the growing saliency of socialism in the United States. But democratic socialism only expedites the ability of all to fulfill their individual desires by mitigating the choice-killing oppression produced by the misallocation of society's resources under a capitalist regime. Uniformity, like in school uniforms, is a right-wing, authoritarian aesthetic, as is mass-market identification with corporate branding. While aesthetic normalcy could serve as a Trojan Horse for radical ideologies - take the Nation of Islam or Jehovah's Witnesses - Normcore had no propagandistic role to play for its adopters.<sup>vii</sup> Instead, as [K-Hole theorized](#), Normcore centered on the abstract concepts of "adaptable," "situational," "post-aspirational," and "empathy" over "authenticity." K-Hole, in its description of Normcore, might as well have been describing Woody Allen's character in *Zelig*, who is afflicted with a conformity pathology and is temporarily lost when inevitably drawn into the Nazi movement:

Normcore wants the freedom to be with anyone. [...] This is the new world order of blankness. [...] ... now you have to respond appropriately, meet every situation head on. (This is why it's Normcore to be Mass Indie in Williamsburg.)

As a countercultural impulse, foregrounding adaptability within an overwhelmingly right-wing context, like that of US politics, will inevitably produce a result that regresses to the conservative mean. Surrendering difference, surrenders a different tomorrow.

This overarching change in fashion started when the economy imploded in 2008. Along with the loss of millions of homes and trillions of dollars, the economic crisis killed the era of consumer-oriented activism. That activist-era was typified by Kalle Lasn's magazine *Adbusters*;<sup>viii</sup> books like Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999) and Alissa Quart's *Branded: the Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (2003); figures like [Anne Elizabeth Moore](#), Douglas Rushkoff, Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir, and the Yes Men; documentaries like *The Corporation* (2003); and projects like Buy Nothing Day. This period of activism now seems so remote, that, in response to the question, "Without revealing your actual age, what is something you remember that if you told a younger person they wouldn't understand?" *Mother Jones* reporter Shane Bauer tweeted: "Starbucks being the evilest thing in the world."

Left activism's libidinal investment shifted away from consumption choices toward the inability of many to consume at all. Instead of harping on the ethics of buying lattes from Starbucks versus fair trade coffee at a locally-owned café, Leftists now focused, correctly, on the inability of many to simply purchase services like a cup of coffee. This turn away from consumer activism, or as Anne Elizabeth Moore termed it, "Brandalism, Copyfighting, and Mocketing," opened a space for the champagne socialists of the cultural sector to play with corporate branding without needing to

append a sincere activist agenda to their artwork. Even "activism" as such became a material for some prominent net artists, to be employed as ironically as the logos of Nike and adidas.

For the net art contingent pouring out of RISD and SAIC, the recuperation of corporate symbols fulfilled a need to salvage the memories of their privileged, branded *Only 90s Kids Will Understand This* childhoods, and the remnants of the anti-consumerist activism of their high school and undergraduate rebellion during the Bush-era's corporatocracy.

The cultural Left's new libidinal investment in debt, [currencies](#), [markets](#), and [economic inequality](#) allowed these rich kids turned temporarily precarious student-loan subject the cover to take the culture jamming techniques of *Adbusters*, deracinate its politics, and turn it into pure aesthetic, cashing the checks of the very companies whose logos their predecessors once détourned. The resulting artwork, its visual consumption, and the ensuing promotion of these once nefarious companies became reorganized in the Left's hive mind, somehow, as a critique of them. Go to any club worth going to and you're liable to find the same type of people who would once have been leaf-letting about sweatshops, donned in swooshes and expecting you to find them smarter for it.

Prior to the Great Recession, Left youth cultures ran on co-opting working-class authenticity (PBR, Old Style, trucker hats, key carabiners, cigarettes, flannel) or appropriating from other cultures (dreds, keffiyehs, Native American designs, piercings, tattoos). After the Great Recession hit, immiseration deironized working-class aesthetics. No longer was it desirable to be mistaken for being poor; that frisson evaporated as poverty's "authenticity" enveloped the country. Meanwhile, the heightened mainstream consciousness of cultural appropriation in the age of Obama stymied bien-pensant whites from freely pulling from other cultures - unless they were too entitled to care.

The answer for NYC's art elites to the problem of source material was to ironically employ the Right, whose values were a closer fit to their social position than they might have been conscious of, and inject it into their lifestyle art and their art lifestyles. Left youth cultures in the Obama-era felt comfortable, due to liberal stasis, but also due to a lack of real politicization, to reterritorialize conservative, corporate, misogynist, racist, and fascist aesthetics: from the *fashy high and tight* haircut, to the *short bangs* pulled from skinhead Chelseas; from colonialist all-white outfits to sweat-shop Nikes; from American Apparel's Dov Charneyism to *Vice's Proud Boys Gavin McInnesism*; from [£185 DHL](#) shirts, to Normcore's Seinfeld aesthetics, drawn from the height of US cultural and economic hegemony. The latest, *Vetements'* camo, should prompt us to ask which fashion icon we are now channeling: the US Army and its imperialism; right-wing militias and their white ethno-state; or just the look of Trumpian suburban and rural hunting cultures?

*literally every streetwear brand:*



*"get ready for the most fucking revolutionary thing to ever hit streetwear fashion. like seriously fucking prepare yourself for the surprise of a lifetime cuz this youre about to OD on dopeness"*

**its.... BASIC ASS  
CAMOUFLAGE  
PRINT.. WITH  
OUR LOGO ON IT!**



The Left's appropriation of right-wing aesthetic paradigms, delaminated from their political moorings, opened the aesthetics of the Right to being read positively, yet for opposite meanings, by diametrically opposed political ideologies. This dynamic opened a space of semiotic confusion where even fascism had a conceivable claim to the language and social cachet derived from cultural Left communities like Alt-Country, Alt-Lit, and alternative comics. This was possible due to the innate slipperiness of aesthetics. While aesthetics do not necessarily contain their user's politics, they do retain the politics of their origins. The user of an aesthetic either employs its origin sincerely, or ironically, but neither tack depletes the aesthetic of its referent. In fact, the strategic user depends on the aesthetic retaining its referent for ironization or cognitive dissonance to be able to make its meaning. But once irony allows coolness to attach to a Nazi haircut, which clearly retains its referent - even in its name - there is a problem.

During the Obama-era, the same recuperation of the Right that occurred in fashion took place in Left consumption patterns across the board. In food, vegan restaurants disappeared and were replaced by locavore meat fetish joints. Same with alcohol, where working-class beers were supplanted by a bourgeois culture of craft breweries that spackled the pseudo-intellectual language of wine aficionados over the once-comforting dive-bar experience. In entertainment, Rick Alverson and Tim

Heidecker's dark, non-PC, non-satire of white masculinity *The Comedy* (2012) opened a nether space between anti-comedy and fascism that Comedy Central paid *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* to fill - until, we're asked to believe, they caught on to the meaning of their own program. And in decor, DIY cultural spaces moved from the suffocating maximalism of Fort Thunder, to the de rigueur clinical minimalism of [Skylab Gallery](#) and so many others.

This reterritorialization even extended to manners. The Left, which once saw fucking and saying "fuck" as emancipatory, is now the face of respectability politics and the classist, so-called "meritocracy." Meanwhile, the party of the "Moral Majority" curses, insults, and womanizes its way through the rituals of power, which its leader delights in discrediting. Perspicaciously, Angela Nagle, writing in *Jacobin*, traces the Alt-Right's genealogy not just to various fascisms, but to May '68's Situationist sloganeering (*Il est interdit d'interdire*), the Marquis de Sade's libertinism, and Antonin Artaud's transgressive Theatre of Cruelty.

isn't it interesting  
how my obsessive & all-encompassing desire  
to remain a true individual



lead me to surround myself with a  
group of other true individuals that  
all think, act, and share all of the  
exact same interests as i do?

In the style vacuum the Left created, conservatives picked up the mantle of aesthetic individualism.<sup>ix</sup> For instance, long-time Trump advisor Roger Stone sports a [tattoo of Richard Nixon's face](#) on his back and runs a flamboyant [fashion blog](#). Street Art is now the province of real-estate gentrifiers and Wall-Street PR firms. And whole demographics, like suburban moms, underwent a radical shift and can be seen with pink and black hair, dramatically shorn in spots, long in others. Health Goth's Johnny Love puts it this way,

How many middle-aged women do you see now with green, blue, and purple hair?" he asks genuinely. "Back then, this was a sea punk look and it was a total rarity. It was an identifier. If you saw someone with that hair, you could comfortably go up them and ask, 'Hey, are you a raver? Do you go to shows?' Now, you go up to those people and they'll tell you they listen to Pitbull.

Accordingly, Mike Cernovich's favorite insult in his *New Yorker* profile isn't "punk" or "hippie" - it's "basic bitch."<sup>x</sup> As *Infowars*'s Paul Joseph Watson tweets, "Conservatism is the NEW counterculture. Conservative is the NEW punk rock."

Nagle reminds us that the Alt-Right's use of the "completely bankrupt language of counterculture and transgression" should "serve as a reminder of how empty those ideas have now become." This is especially true because guitar crunch really *is* the sound of white-supremacy, and prior to a PR tiff, the "indie" festival SXSW really *did* have a Trumpian immigration policy. Tellingly, estranged DIY punks and art school kids now identify with capitalist pop stars like Beyoncé, Drake, and Rihanna - as well as electronic musicians who emulate pop stars, like Grimes and PC Music. For example, the songs blaring from the protest PAs at the Berlin 2017 International Women's Day March were not by Le Tigre, Sleater-Kinney, or X-Ray Spex, no, the songs were Iggy Azalea and Rita Ora's "Black Widow," Rihanna's "Bitch Better Have My Money," and Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody." As the poet Ben Fama tweeted, "Me: Partied at questionable punk spaces in the past. Me to me: Now you listen to Justin Bieber." In fact, the figure of the countercultural Bieleber is so ubiquitous, they're being satirized as "cuckbois" by *Mel Magazine's* Alana Hope Levinson, who writes that the cuckboi "...wants you to know that while he listens to Justin Bieber (ironically), he also reads Maggie Nelson (very seriously)."

### *which false idol wore it better?*



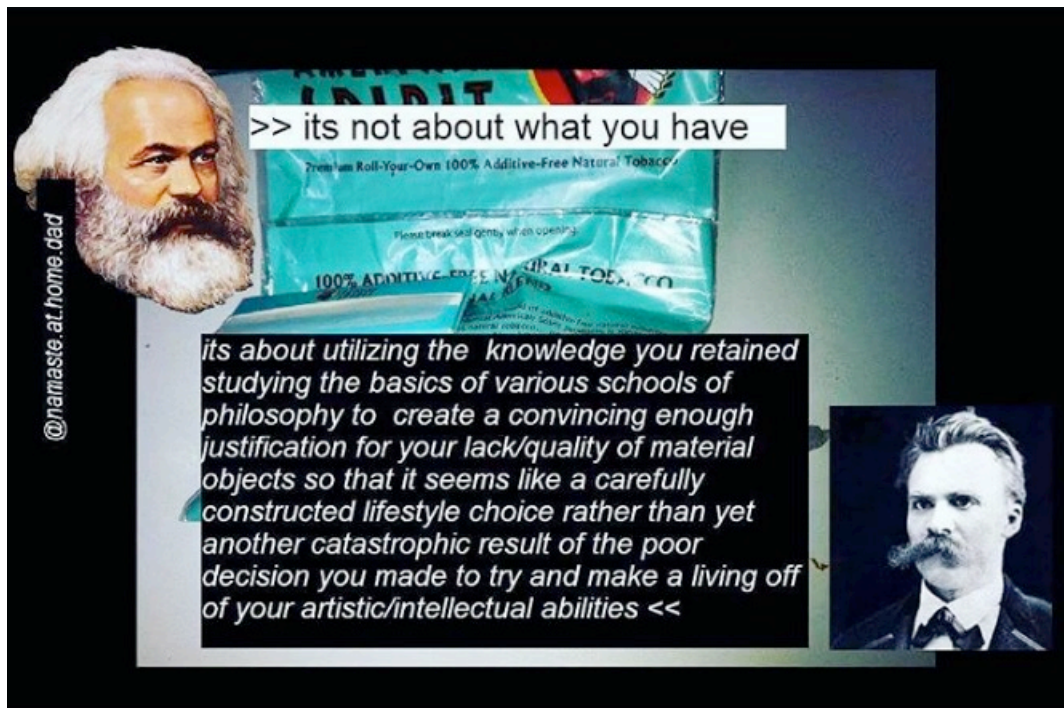
**INFOWARS**

The mainstream culture/counterculture flux has captured figures like Azealia Banks, Cassandra Fairbanks, Kanye West, and Slavoj Žižek in a cultural non-space: not left, nor right; only confused, and confusing. In the same timeframe West met with Trump, *032c* published an issue prefaced by an anti-Trump editorial, yet anchored by a West art-directed Yeezy spread. This dissonance has become all too common. Whether it's London art galleries hosting *VDARE's* Peter Brimelow, Milo Yiannopoulos's past life as a poet, Richard Spencer's master's thesis on Adorno, Andrew Anglin's high school years as a militant vegan and Crass fan, Steve Bannon's

post-modernism, Martin Shkreli's Wu-Tang fandom, or the fact that Trump's government seemingly has more connections to the art world than any previous administration, culture can no longer be so easily politically categorized. Culture is now perversely imbricated, a clusterfuck of fugitive ideologies.

In this new context, an extended Sontag quote from "Fascinating Fascism" is needed:

Fascism may be merely fashionable, and perhaps fashion with its irrepressible promiscuity of taste will save us. But the judgments of taste themselves seem less innocent. Art that seemed eminently worth defending ten years ago, as a minority or adversary taste, no longer seems defensible today, because the ethical and cultural issues it raises have become serious, even dangerous, in a way they were not then. The hard truth is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established. Taste is context, and the context has changed.



Knowing that "tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting when they become more established," one wonders why the cultural Left isn't more self-critical about what attracts it to certain signifiers. And, more importantly, what mainstream futures those signifiers augur if they do reach a popular context.

Žižek noted in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (2002) that prior to 9/11 the American imaginary, in the form of blockbuster films, had been playing through disaster scenarios in order to prepare for the WTC attack:

[...] the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*

While many will regard the election of Trump as an instance of punctuated equilibrium, it wasn't. The devolution of the superstructure had long been underway in order to prepare for his arrival, and this was visible in the mass unconsciousness of culture if one knew how to see it. If we had been able to fit an individual absurdity like punks fetishizing adidas into a larger ideological picture, we would have realized that, since the recession, cultural workers in the United States had been immersed in a premonitory dream of a fascist disaster to come. The 2011-era Hitler Youth haircut would have perturbed all of us who were idling about with our Cultural Studies, Fashion, and Fine Art degrees - if we had possessed even an ounce of political imagination. Instead, we went to the barber.

But now, *Washington Post* headlines like "Does This Haircut Make Me Look Like a Nazi?" have to ponder this conundrum of appearances and reality for a mass audience. This conundrum was best related in this exchange from Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 Nazi-spoof *To Be or Not to Be*, a film about a troupe of actors in the Warsaw Resistance who are Nazi impersonators:

[*Stage Manager calls over Make-Up manager, unsatisfied with the actor's appearance*]

**Makeup Man:** What's wrong with it?

**Stage Manager:** I don't know... it's not convincing. To me, he's just a man with a little mustache.

**Makeup Man:** But so is Hitler.

The reality of appearances first clicked for me when Dylann Roof's *Last Rhodesian photos* surfaced, that peculiar photo-set of timed selfies taken at white supremacist heritage sites. It was 2015 then, four years after I first saw Iceage, a punk band of Danish youths whose crypto-fascist zine spurred a controversy that *Vice* had covered. *Vice*, of course, downplayed the issue, itself a media brand co-founded by fascist Gavin McInnes, who, for years, defined hipster fashion through *Vice's* *Dos & Don'ts*.<sup>xi</sup> Iceage was the face of punk in 2011, a band that united DIY hardcore heads and the *Pitchfork* indie crowd without damaging their appeal to either. Part of their buzz wasn't that Iceage was fascist, no, rather, it was that there was a *question* of whether Iceage was fascist - a dynamic that repeatedly playing out in the Obama-era. Seeing Roof's bowl-cut, not unlike Hoops, and his patches, rolled-up jeans and black ankle boots, was startling. Roof didn't look Timothy McVeigh, with his country bumpkin buzz-cut, nor did he resemble David Duke, Jared Loughner, a KKK hood or a member of the Michigan Militia. He looked like he was in Iceage. He looked like my friends who looked like they were in Iceage.

He looked, to most people, I'm sure, more or less like me.



If we had wanted to see our future, or rather, our no future, we should have looked in the coke mirror.

Or in the FB aesthetics page.

We still should.

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<sup>i</sup> "Puma" similarly derives from Adi's brother Rudi Dassler's name, and was originally "Ruda" before switching to Puma.

<sup>ii</sup> Vaporwave has been appropriated by fascists and retooled as "fashwave." Prominent fashwave artists include Cyber Nazi and Xurious. *The Daily Stormer's* Andrew Anglin calls synth "the Whitest music ever."

<sup>iii</sup> A countercultural community with the same fashion sense as the President of the United States of America.

<sup>iv</sup> My first Health Goth experience, a 2014 house party on Ohio State University's campus, demonstrates this cross-political confusion. The party was held at a wannabe frat-house, which was having a concurrent party attended by "fitness bros" organized around a game of beer pong. About twenty of us represented the Health Goth segment of the party, but as the night went on, it became harder to tell what exactly the difference was between my art acquaintance Ashley with her black football shoulder pads and the *actual* padless football players. After all, Communists and Trumpists though we may have been, we were all drinking the same beer, passing poppers, listening to radio rap, on campus, in the middle of Ohio - weren't we?

<sup>v</sup> The word "Goth" itself, which channels the Goths - Germanic Arian tribes - whom the Nazis, through a misinterpretation of the ethno-linguistic classification "Aryan," recast as part of a *Herrenvolk*, or master race, has a charged meaning for fascists that may go unnoticed to others. It shouldn't be surprising that Richard Spencer sees the pop-goth Depeche Mode as "the official band of the Alt-Right" and New Order as the "fashioniest 80s electro-pop band." Or that the most prominent band associated with fascism, Death in June, is gothic neo-folk.

<sup>vi</sup> An image from the writer Rachel Bell's private IG captures this cultural palimpsest: it's of a white adidas shirt, with its three slanted black bars, and just beneath it one can make out a Black Flag logo, its four black bars peaking through.

<sup>vii</sup> I took notes for a tactic called "[Radical Normalcy](#)" in 2010 that did just this.

<sup>viii</sup> It's odd that *Adbusters* birthed Occupy Wall Street, which, via the Sanders campaign, has dominated Left and mainstream discourses since 2011, even while *Adbusters*, the magazine, has receded in importance.

<sup>ix</sup> Like Warhol's wig and flat affect, and Dali's mustache and quirk, Trump's peculiar hair and "businessman" performance art, which daft detractors view as a liability, aides him, and is as responsible for his success in the public eye as anything else. And it's purely individual aesthetics.

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<sup>x</sup> For an idea of how quickly this insult-concept flipped, I co-hosted a group painting show titled *Basic Bitches* at Skylab Gallery in November 2014. Unrelatedly, I also co-curated an [alternative comics show](#) featuring Matt Furie's now-infamous Pepe character at Mahan Gallery in 2009. To quote Richard Spencer, "Pepe, it's sort of become a symbol..."

<sup>xi</sup> Though McInnes [left \*Vice\*](#) in 2008, his voice - hate-speech masquerading as ribaldry - is imprinted on the media brand's DNA. There's no shortage of examples, but a recent article titled "[I Smashed a Bunch of Stuff To Get Over My Ex](#)" gives one an idea of how *Vice* has retained McInnes's Proud Boys-ism while cutting it with a woke facade to track the change in Millennial tastes: a woman, not a bro, wrote the article about responding to a partner's actions with physical aggression. Don't take my word for *Vice*'s politics though, listen to their [employees](#).