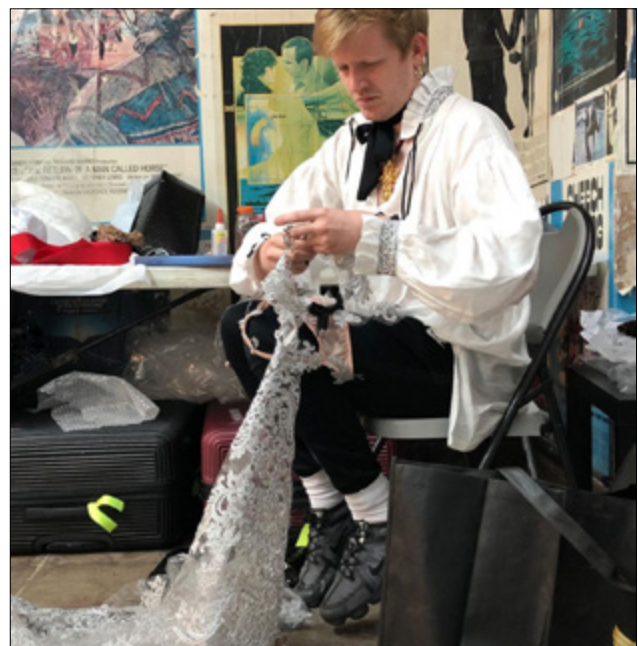


When Lone Wolves Gather

An op-ed on “spirited” online cultures

Fools are Everywhere

Recently, I've been drawn more and more towards aesthetics and narratives that I'd like to describe as “mythical.” “Mythical” might at times be substituted with “pre-modern,” “spirited” or “medieval.” In any case, my eye was caught by pop-stars dressed in deconstructed Renaissance-like dresses, drip-y, swamp-like art installations, candle-lit performances, dark jesters, cave themed environments, medieval art memes and everything cave-, castle-, goblincore.

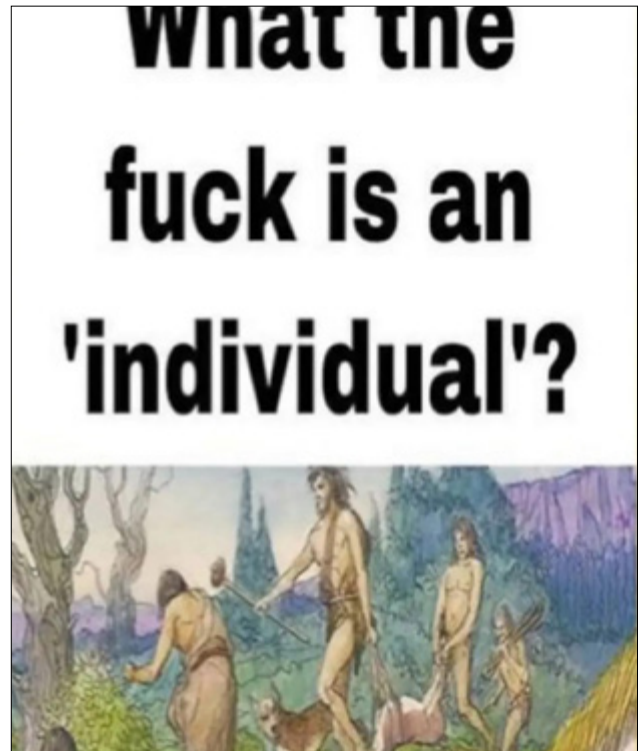


Left: Plato's allegory of the cave meme referring to Pinkydoll's NPC livestream on TikTok, [instagram.com/avocado_ibuprofen](https://www.instagram.com/avocado_ibuprofen)
Right: Stylist Matthew Josephs for FKA Twigs, [instagram.com/fkatwigs](https://www.instagram.com/fkatwigs)

However, the remixing of everything ancient world to premodern might tell us something about the general production and literacy of visual content online. I'd like to think that what happens in visual and network culture is a reflection of what is happening in the world(s) around us at a given time. On the other hand, I guess that you find what you're looking for. But if you'd ask me, I'd say that the “Assassin's Creed vibes” celebrated in online communities “are giving” total fragmentation: Historically and emotionally charged symbols and narratives are posted, appropriated, distorted, until rendered completely pointless. Understanding that, might just as well be the point. Meaning is contextual, illusionary – albeit synonymous with “truth?” “In the modern world ‘thoughts and meanings are only in our minds,’” Gregory Stackpole quotes Charles Taylor.¹ Stackpole continues: “We find ourselves devoid of human meaning (...),” creating “a modern condition in which all human meanings are simply projected.”² While western liberalism has often been declared failed, a dissatisfaction with the world might urge us to create new ones. In non-linear and multi-layered times, what is real and what is imagined, might not always matter.

Nothing is true, everything is permitted³

We don't relate to one shared reality anymore, but live multiple, simultaneous realities. I wonder whether reality has become too hard to grasp, or whether we're simply not interested in it anymore. In a secularized, "Disenchanted world" (ref. Max Weber) marked by crises, wars and a state of climate emergency, are medieval aesthetics and its likes manifestations of our desire for spirituality, ritualism, tribalism?



Memes taken from www.instagram.com/the_political_compass

Are "old-word aesthetics"⁴ our language of protest, forever ostracizing the universalization, individualization and "Ikeafication" of modernity?

The Middle Ages might always have been a place of longing and interpretation. An era between fact and fiction, the exact time period has never been historically defined and widely misconceived. Next to the relatable clumsiness of medieval paintings or the essentiality of Greek philosophy memes, it might be the epoch's non-particularity, that attracts a culture of appropriation, remixing and misrepresentation.

Consider the afore mentioned video game Assassin's Creed: Based on the historical Knights Templar that were involved in the Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries, the game is popular amongst white supremacists and Islamophobes. Although "the assassins" are based on the historical Hashashiyins, an order of Ismaili Muslims founded by Hasan-i Sabbah. His last words supposedly were "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." A maxim mentioned in Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut*, from which it is said to have been picked up by the Assassin's Creed video game makers. Anyhow, the sentences origin can be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra."⁵ We're opening up layers upon layers of appropriation here.

While imperialistic narratives of the so-called Dark Ages lead to the systematical editing out of people of color on the European continent during that time period, the manipulation of historical fact disguises racist and fascist ideology as irony or game play. A visual manifestation: Jacob Chansley a.k.a the “QAnon shaman” looking like some kind of Night-at-the-museum-horned-fury-Nazi during the so-called Storming of the Capitol.



“QAnon Shaman” meme, via www.imgflip.com

Political affiliation has become an experiential performance, a Live Action Role play. Narrative becomes a key factor in the framing of political identity. Breaching into real life on January 6th 2021 or in form of a bizarrely soothing NPC Trend. This “glitch” might be what the Cade Diehm describes as “the Para-Real:” “an intimacy between the individual and the digital/real spaces around them.”⁶ Narrative clouds surround shared identities and their iconographies: We describe our personalities, aspirations and affiliations in vibes and eras. We place ourselves on a system of coordinates.⁷



Left: “Political compass” based on Assassin’s creed and other (fictitious) characters, www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedMemes
 Right: Meme via www.instagram.com/simoneweilfooddiary

While political parties, especially on the left, seem ineffective in the framing of socio-political alternatives (Ref. Berardi, Stacey), online communities invent their own vocabulary and political identity. An example of which, is the Instagram community *Politigram* that has been researched thoroughly by author and artist Joshua Citarella. In *Politigram and the Post-Left* he describes Politigrammers as “ideologues and trolls, (...) trying on new world views.”⁸ Today, we ascribe to multiple and interchangeable political identities. As popular among Cyber-Nihilists, Anarcho-Primitivists and white supremacists alike, extremist-turnt-cult-like personalities like Ted Kaczynski, the Tradwive trope or Accelerationist ideology, might be visible examples of the dissolution of the political left-right binary. “For many members of this group, the political left soon becomes a more loathed enemy than the right,” Citarella writes.⁹



Medievalist meme via www.instagram.com/simoneweilfooddiary

Dark Jesters Hiding in Plain Sight ¹⁰

The far-right, video gaming giants and Big Tech corporations seem to have profited from the internet's initial promise of connectivity, making it seem like the space for alternatives has literally been bought up.

But Cade Diehm writes: “If the billion dollar effort by California’s finest misses the point, then who sees the possibility?”¹¹ Diehm finds the possibility to build alternatives precisely in the previously mentioned moment of the “Para-Real,” stating: “The afro-futurists, the modders, the furies, the speed-runners and the post-gender movements all find themselves and each other through the para-real’s affects, harnessing its fleeting moments for self, support and solidarity.”¹¹

While far-right groups translate the dialectics of myths, tales and rituals into conspiracy theories, “Feindbilder” (Concepts of enemies) and so-called “alternative facts,” being part of a cult might just be our survival strategy. Can we inspire political resistance through shared identities through narratives, stories and fictions?

“Our myths are not just anecdotes that we tell in order to point to an overall pattern. Telling the stories that fill us with rage or make us cry is a way of telling people who we are (...) . They are also a way of reminding ourselves that we are alive. To challenge Descartes, ‘I cry at this, therefore I am’”¹². I understand my own existence in relation to the stories that elicit certain emotions,” Timothy Stacey writes in *Saving Liberalism from Itself*.



Left: Meme via www.instagram.com/simoneweilfooddiary

Right: Screenshot YouTube video, uploaded by the self-acclaimed right-wing “activist” Brittany Sellner

Footnotes:

1. *Charles Taylor on Disenchantment*, Gregory Stackpole, www.intotheclarities.com/2014/08/23/charles-taylor-on-disenchantment
2. Ibid.
3. *How Hate Groups Are Hijacking Medieval Symbols While Ignoring the Facts Behind Them*, Becky Little, www.history.com/news/how-hate-groups-are-hijacking-medieval-symbols-while-ignoring-the-facts-behind-them
4. *Middle Ages Modern Is a New Aesthetic for Our Increasingly Medieval Times*, Dana Covit, www.architecturaldigest.com/story/middle-ages-modern-medieval-design-trend
5. *How Hate Groups Are Hijacking Medieval Symbols While Ignoring the Facts Behind Them*, Becky Little, www.history.com/news/how-hate-groups-are-hijacking-medieval-symbols-while-ignoring-the-facts-behind-them
6. *The Para-Real: A Manifesto*, Cade Diehm, www.newdesigncongress.org/en/pub/the-para-real-manifesto
7. Reference to *The Political Compass*, www.politicalcompass.org/
8. *Politigram & the Post-left*, Joshua Citarella, 2021
9. Ibid.
10. David Garcia, *Dark Jesters Hiding in Plain Sight In: Fiction as Method*, Sternberg Press, 2017
11. *The Para-Real: A Manifesto*, Cade Diehm, www.newdesigncongress.org/en/pub/the-para-real-manifesto
12. Dr. Timothy Stacey, *Saving Liberalism from Itself – The Spirit of Political Participation*, Bristol University Press, 2022