

It's Always Halloween Online

The internet has spawned a cursed ecosystem where copycats and fakes perform a million tiny acts of identity theft every day. Micro-celebrities and Kardashians alike are subject to a spooky wave of impersonations, duking it out in the deranged social media-sphere for a slice of users' finite attention – until they disappear without a trace.

The internet is haunted. The fact that it is simultaneously permanent and impermanent seems designed to leave everyone in a state of constant paranoia. Content is a mirage, appearing one day and disappearing the next. Accounts get cancelled, deleted, renamed, purged. Algorithms manage what we see. We're told this is for our own good. It's optimised for our taste – showing us more of what we like. This is, of course, nonsense. The Wizard of Oz is behind the curtain, pulling the strings, pushing some things, hiding others – shadow banning.

In a group chat, a friend who runs a meme page insists he has been shadow banned. He shares some engagement stats, the month-to-month decline. But I don't need to be convinced. A few days before, I noticed that the group chat didn't auto-populate in my suggested list of contacts on Instagram. Even his DMs had been buried, it seemed.

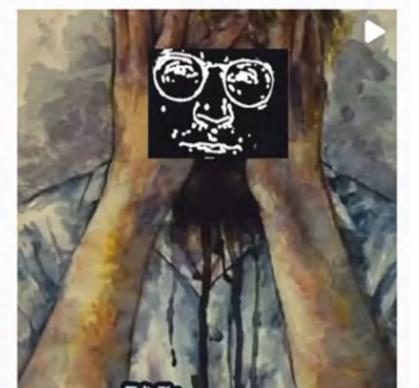
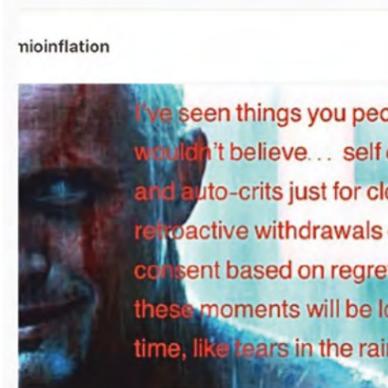
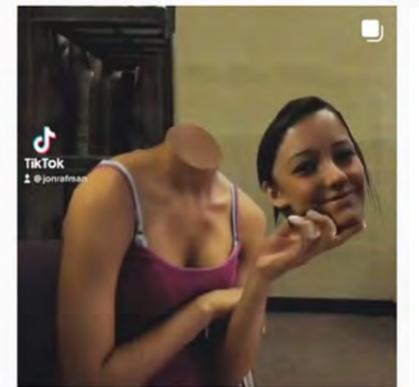
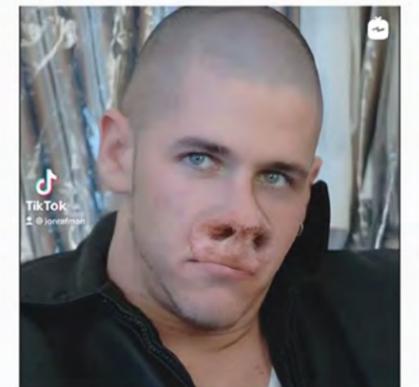
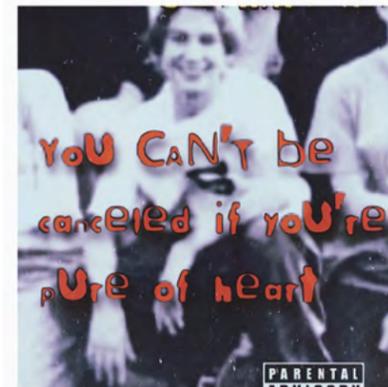
People talk a lot about the ethics of online censorship. But we rarely talk about the affect, how spooky it is. Did an algorithm do it? Did a person? Some weeks later, in June, at a sweaty, awkward rooftop party in the East Village, I met someone who worked at Twitter. He had that "company man" look, like an updated version of the Fifties meme. Dad doesn't wear a grey suit

anymore, sweetheart! His hair is still cropped conservatively – a non-specific permutated brown. He's white with thin lips, vague features, Ray-Bans with prescription lenses. His clothes might be black or navy or grey or a very dark hunter green – slim cut, maybe from Uniqlo. He's a company man in the 1950s, a man without qualities in the 30s, an NPC (non-playable character) today. Is he the one pulling the strings?

Like many people, after Covid lockdown ended, I found myself with a serious bout of face aphasia. I would misidentify people: ignoring a friend, waving hello to a stranger. In my worst instance, I mistook someone I slept with for a girlfriend's ex. The masks, of course, did not help. I'm happy they're gone and dread the possibility of their return. Some friends disagree. Many discovered a tiny bit of joy in their newfound anonymity. So I wonder about that Twitter employee's face. What must it be like to be born with a face like a mask? To be able to slip like a raindrop into the sea? To be free and forgotten?

Not everyone wants to be free and forgotten. Some people are possessed by their phones. Walk down a busy Manhattan street and see them dodge exasperated cabbies, necks hung low,

By
Sean Monahan



@collectuals Instagram page, 2021

With social media, we create our own demons, engineer our own demise. This was an inevitable part of its design.

contorted as they burrow into their feeds. In the occult, the practice of scrying involves looking into a crystal ball – or a black mirror – with the intent of divining the unknown. Hence the popular British sci-fi show on Netflix, *Black Mirror*. Its name is not only a statement on the design of our digital devices, but also our expectation that they contain revelations about the future.

As we tap and scroll and share, some force pulls us forward. What is it? In a *Paris Review* essay

“Objects of Despair: Mirrors”, Meghan O’Gieblyn claims, “A Chinese myth once held that images in the mirror were actually demonic beings who were pretending to be our reflections, while silently plotting our deaths.” This is a sentiment shared by Twitter users with anime avatars – that our phones are portals to another world. When they call it a hellsite, they’re being as literal as the conspiracy theorists who believe that the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Switzerland has opened a portal to the underworld.



@collectuals meme of unknown origin, 2021

With social media, we create our own demons, engineer our own demise. This was an inevitable part of its design. People have long misunderstood Marshall McLuhan’s “global village”. In the popular imagination, the term conjures the cast of characters from “It’s a Small World”, arrayed

small child in eerie blue CRT light was not how I remember my early digital experiences on the Dell family PC. My memory is echoed by the Christian illustrator Owen Cyclops. He tweets: “people used to really really like the internet spaces they inhabited and they felt an intense camaraderie with the



@collectuals meme of unknown origin 2021

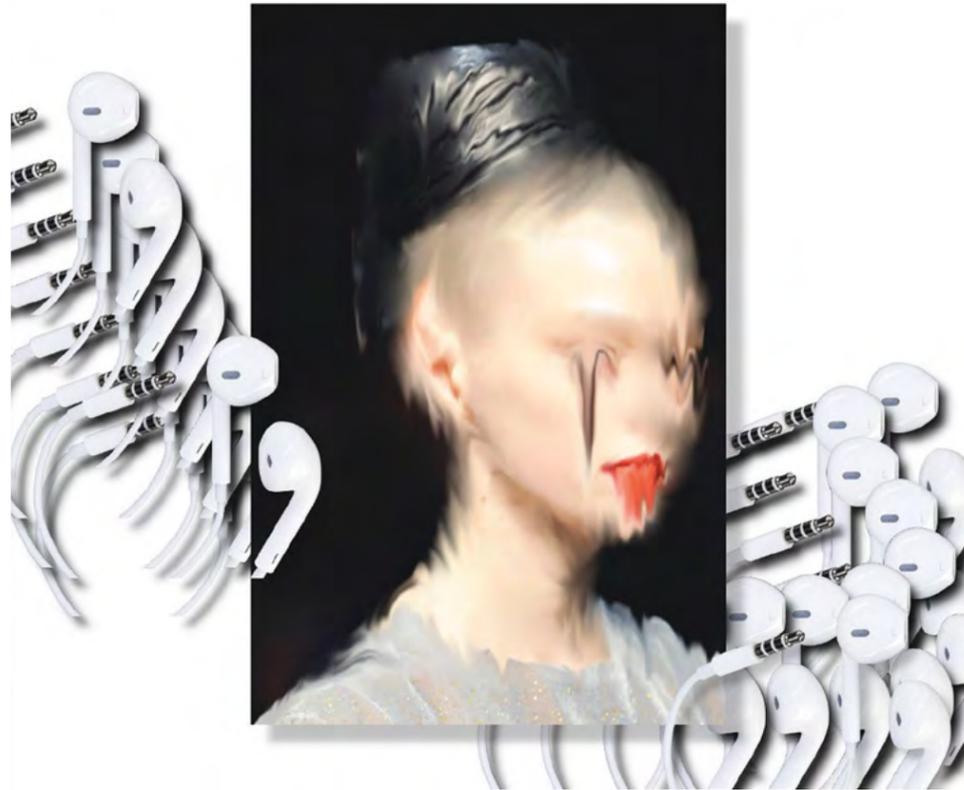
like paper dolls around the Blue Marble. But McLuhan said that “the global village is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations. Instantaneous, universal communication is at least as likely to breed nationalism, xenophobia, and cultism as it is to breed harmony and fellow-feeling.” Sound familiar?

Maybe we became confused because in the early days of the global village, things did seem sunny. At the turn of the century, the internet did feel good. It had a certain benevolent magic, despite what fearmongering magazine covers had to say. The stranger danger that emanated over a

people there [by default]”. But something changed, and McLuhan’s premonition came true. Or, as Owen Cyclops would say, “it has something to do with the flattening of formerly isolated spaces, thus forcing people that [shouldn’t] be together into one cage, one room”. When the internet went from webpages to social platforms, we got the true global village, the cage match.

The first time I came across a -collectuals page was about a year ago. It was at the peak of Jon Rafman’s cancellation. Someone forwarded me a post about it from one of the anti-meme meme

PETRA CORTRIGHTS MATTER



@petracollectuals meme
2021

pages. Did they stan Jon? Were they cancelling him? Were they just shitposting? Unclear. They were making content out of content. Accelerating the ugliness of Instagram's interface. Hastening the collapse of the already doomed aesthetic from the late 2010s. If the meme account hadn't since been banned, I could go back through my DMs and give you more details than this vague recollection, but it vanished, so I can't.

I share the first draft of this essay with friends. They told me I had the lore wrong and promised to introduce me to the original @intellectuals admin team, based on the original @meaningful.images.only account creators. These accounts are all banned, of course. Checking back at the group chat where I spoke with the admins, those accounts have been deleted as well. They schematize that they are the originators of -collectuals

The origin point was the handle @intellectuals: a portmanteau of the epithet "incel" and intellectual.

– the admins. The scattershot of imitation accounts are staffed by minions; some known, some anon. It's an occluded, partial view of the past. It comes whispering in the DMs and disappears. Maybe this is why the internet has no history, only lore.

The -collectuals pages share a common visual repertoire: the Impact font, Whisper app imagery, chopped and screwed collages, an overload of Photoshop effects, JPEGs blown out until they look like graphite sketches or badly registered CMYK screen prints. The origin point of the accounts was the handle @intellectuals: a portmanteau of the epithet "incel" and intellectual. The admins are anonymous, though I would guess they are mostly white, mostly male, mostly Gen Z. Though they have a cadence that seems descended from the original post-internet meme artists – Brad Troemel and Joshua Citarella – their tone feels generationally distinct: more ironic, harsher, but less serious.

The -collectuals meme about memes and meme about meme-makers. They're broadly concerned with the Dimes Square Expanded Universe and the internet personalities that inhabit it: Caroline Calloway, Dean Kissick, Dasha Nekrasova, Eugene Kotlyarenko, Peter Vack, Petra Collins, Gutes Guterman, et cetera. It serves as a layer of meta-commentary to the bread and butter of Downtown: podcasts. The @ioncollectuals account (RIP) memed the Ion Pack podcast. @howlonggonecollectuals memes Chris Black and Jason Stewart's quarantine break-out hit, *How Long Gone*. @wetbraincollectuals emerged the same day model caster Walter Pearce and writer Honor Levy announced their new call-in hour, *Wet Brain*.

I know two washed Millennials – people my age – who have crept into the -collectuals scene. It makes me question who is behind these accounts. Are any run by their namesakes? One invited me into

Is it a joke? Or is it *Single White Female*?



@petracollectuals meme, 2021

The -collectuals accounts seem to understand what we washed Millennials long ago forgot in our dogged pursuit of personal brands: the internet is magic when it's not real life.

an Instagram group chat with some other accounts. It's where I picked up the term "the -collectuals scene". It—like the Dimes Square scene—is as much a fiction as a reality. But people need something to believe in, right? The handy formula of SCENE-STER+CELLECTUAL comes with a built-in audience of sorts: the people that follow these accounts, and the people that run them. Occasionally, though, higher follower counts (like @jonrafmancelectuals at 5,614) are ultimately achieved like all things on Instagram: through posting prowess.

A friend, the wife of a -collectuals target, asks me if I'm in Joshua Citarella's Discord. I tell her I am, but I no longer check in. It's too fast-paced and deranged. She calls it "another interesting circle of hell". She is amused and horrified. "They're constantly trying to understand the dynamics of the Downtown scene." They're young. Most are probably not living in New York. Yet, they want to know: who is friends with who, who is feuding with who, who is roommates with who. There is a funny inter-generational interplay going on, with the targets of the memes—and their friends—amused and unnerved by the attention. Is it a joke? Or is it *Single White Female* (1992)?

Meme page admin Tom Tuna tweets: "For some of these collectual accounts are better at posting 'you' than you are posting yourself. Lol fuck." Dean Kissick quote tweets: "Media and culture continues to be dominated by the impulse to self-narrativize. However there's also an emergent trend of narrating, or performing, the lives of others; of using the lives of others as raw material."

The -collectuals accounts are the emergent response to what the media has dubbed Main Character Syndrome: the increasing tendency of many posters to use Instagram Stories as if they were a protagonist in blockbuster film. Like most things, Main Character Syndrome comes in both cringe and based flavours. On the cringe end: if the

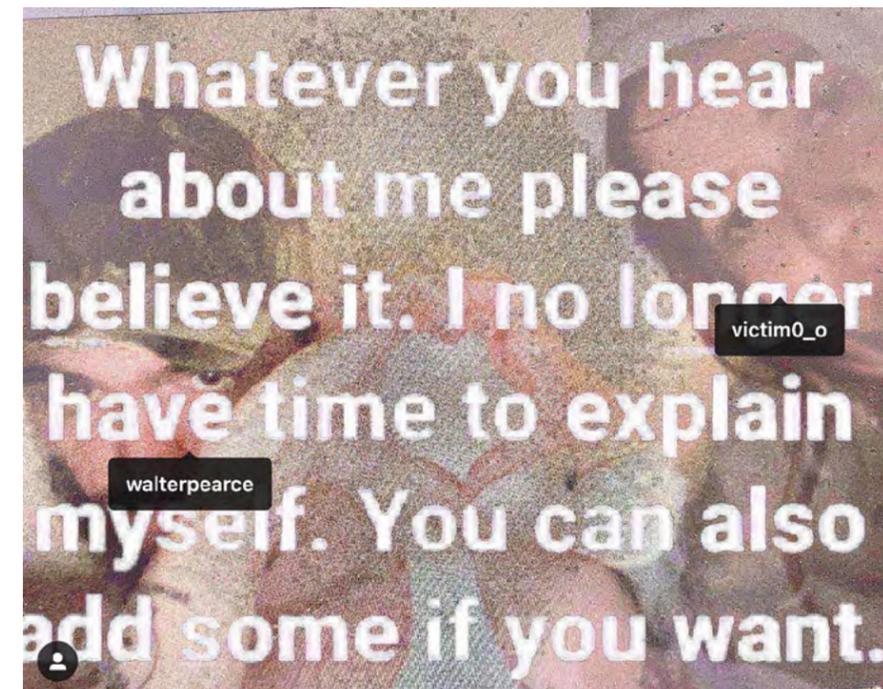
Instagram aesthetic died in the grid, it lives a zombie half-life on TikTok. We watch a cute NYU student detail her perfect self-care day in New York: pancakes at Soho Diner, a manicure at Chillhouse, shopping for bucket hats at Kith, a staycation at the Arlo, topped off with an UberEats dinner in the lobby. On the based end: an eighteen-year-old gay sugar baby inherited daddy's fortune and hires TaskRabbits to film him while he ambles around the city touring bigger apartments and shopping at the Gucci x North Face pop-up. But what to do if you would prefer to be neither? What do you do if you can't be either?

Last fall, I released a report called *Gonzo Culture*. My hypothesis was that social media had turned the individual into a media object. We were no longer so much ourselves, as the effervescent content that trailed us through our lives. We had become the demon in the mirror. The big winners in this were, of course, internet personalities: the streamers and memers and influencers and gamers who thrived by narrating their everyday lives. In the 70s, gonzo journalists like Hunter S. Thompson inserted exaggerated, subjective, and fictionalised versions of themselves into their writing. Today, internet personalities apply those same principles to the digital space.

The model makes sense when you look at the wider culture. Porn studios die as OnlyFans thots rise. Media companies wither as writers flee to Substack. Cable news viewership declines as audiences shift to YouTube. For people like Kylie Jenner, this has been a boon. But what about her fans? The internet personalities blast off, and we see a million abortive attempts to imitate them. Like a never-ending Hans Eijkelboom photo series, a thousand Kardashians bloom in the California desert. It is personality, scaled. Consciously or not, for those who lack the money or power or time or creativity to craft an individual personality, why not simply adopt someone else's?

The -collectuals accounts seem to consciously understand this. And rather than politely mime, they choose to actively fuck with stuff. They treat their targets like Halloween masks. Who you choose to dress up as has less to do with your affinity for the personality the latex is moulded to represent, and more to do with improvisation in the moment. What would be funny to me? What would

People obsess over things they love and things they hate. Oftentimes, it's impossible to disentangle the two. Recently, I re-watched *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Hannibal Lecter, the aesthete and cannibal, tells Clarice: "We begin by coveting what we see every day. Don't you feel eyes moving over your body, Clarice? And don't your eyes move over the things you want?" Who



@wetbraincollectuals meme
2021

be funny to my friends? Who would it be fun to impersonate at a party? It's not only about the symbol—but also about how the symbol performs in a specific group dynamic. The -collectuals accounts seem to understand what we washed Millennials long ago forgot in our dogged pursuit of personal brands: the internet is magic when it's not real life.

do we see every day? The accounts we follow. What do we want? Their lives.

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