



[PB]B.5 ÉAMONN FREEL X LYNISKI IN THE FUTURE, EVERYTHING WILL BE A TREND

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FOR 15 SECONDS 2024



THE ALLURE OF THE UNREAL: THE RISE AND FALL OF DIGITAL TRENDS

Gwendolyn Fässler

A seemingly endless pool of ethereal faces takes hold of the viewer through seductive eye contact. Their gaze is unfalteringly captivating and fierce. As the faces morph into each other in quick succession, they reveal otherworldly changing features, accentuated with glitter and blinding highlights – two core elements of the ever-transforming make-up on thoroughly smooth and perfect skin. Occasionally, alien-like, filigree 3D-elements draw attention to their temples and fox-eye area. The video work *In the Future, Everything Will Be a Trend for 15 Seconds* by visual artist Éamonn Freel in collaboration with make-up artist Lynski is mesmerising. It is a parade of a familiar yet elusive performance of irresistible perfection – one we unfailingly encounter as soon as we open any social media app. It is the kind of perfection that transcends its conceptualisation rooted in the real world – dazzling, digital and devastating. Coming face to face with such images of superhuman likeness is as alluring as it is unsettling – a notion only intensified by the accompanying synthetic instrumental audio that reinforces the disembodied essence of the faces staring back at the viewer through the screen. Which trends, individually indecipherable and largely non-replicable, must we follow to achieve this level of beauty? Which features are God-given, which ones have been physically tweaked and which exist only in the pixel realm? Where do the trends begin and where do they end?

The word ‘trend’ is defined as a ‘current style or preference’.¹ Something – or someone – that is ‘trending’ is ‘generating or attracting a lot of interest or attention, especially online and in social media’.² Current-day trendsetting is a decentralised phenomenon shaped by technology and transnational cultural shifts, far-removed from its original top-down mechanisms. In the 1920s, Clara Bow, the first modern ‘It girl’,³ significantly paved the way for prominent figures of the Eurowestern realm to use their image to influence (*white*) popular mainstream culture, from Marilyn Monroe and Twiggy, to Iman and Kylie Jenner.⁴ Since the late 1990s, print and television have had to give way to social media and the internet, allowing for beauty trends and body goals to become increasingly accessible – and to merge internationally as well as cross-culturally. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok have empowered individuals outside the earlier established cultural and entertainment branches to become the new ‘It personalities’ in the form of beauty gurus, influencers and TikTok stars: ‘Shooting, editing and curating images is no longer a Hollywood exclusive; it has become an intimate part of our everyday existence’.⁵ Figures from all walks of life seem to spearhead innumerable online communities with various interests and aesthetics. Their common denominator: the circulation of a desirable image that has been disciplined to perfection. It is the type of image that has

the power to recruit and capitalise on followers by prompting them to ask how – if – they can generate the same desires for themselves and their imaginary online audience. In this mechanism, best described as

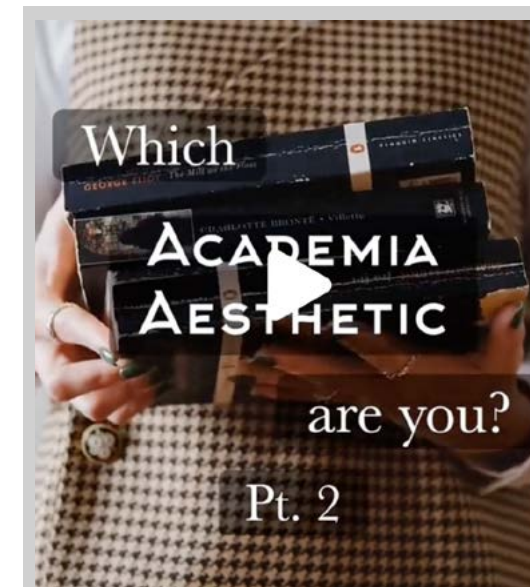
a participatory act of looking, the desire to be seen and the voyeuristic gaze merge.⁶ This mode of looking fundamentally inhabits Freel and Lynski’s work.

In the last couple of years, we have witnessed a boom in the emergence of countless online communities, whose formation and dissolution occur in increasingly accelerated cycles. Many of these digital communities encompass a person’s habitus in its entirety. And yet, what remains most important is their instant recognisability through performative aesthetics, or, as social historian Ellen Atlanta puts it: ‘Aesthetics come before everything, and it is now more important to show a beautiful life than to actually live one’.⁷ Pictorially agreed-upon core trends, ranging from fashion styles and colour schemes to hairdos and eye shapes, result in what are literally referred to as ‘cores’. These digital derivatives of a once physical subculture are, like their predecessors, ‘sophisticated enough to self-identify’⁸ – only with the significant difference that the formerly well-established cultural foundations and contexts have been happily sacrificed for the sake of appearances, maintained across platforms and feeds.



Historically, subcultures were seen as fleeting symbols of resistance to the consumption imperative of capitalism.⁹ However, global cores, from ‘Cottage Core’ and ‘Bubblegum Coquette’ to ‘Dark Academia’ or ‘Tomato Girl Summer’, illustrate how digital subcultures are rapidly reintegrated into and replicated by mainstream systems. This instant commodification by beauty and fashion brands leads to the real-time massification and commercialisation of an online niche before it has fully matured.¹⁰ The resulting cosmos of micro-crazes within the networked sphere traps individuals in a never-ending chase for new, attention-grabbing trends, driven by a constant need for reinvention so as to be able to assert uniqueness in an oversaturated digital world. Dynamic processes of appropriation and re-appropriation collapse the formerly gradual evolution of identity into a real-time system of instantaneous self-broadcasting.

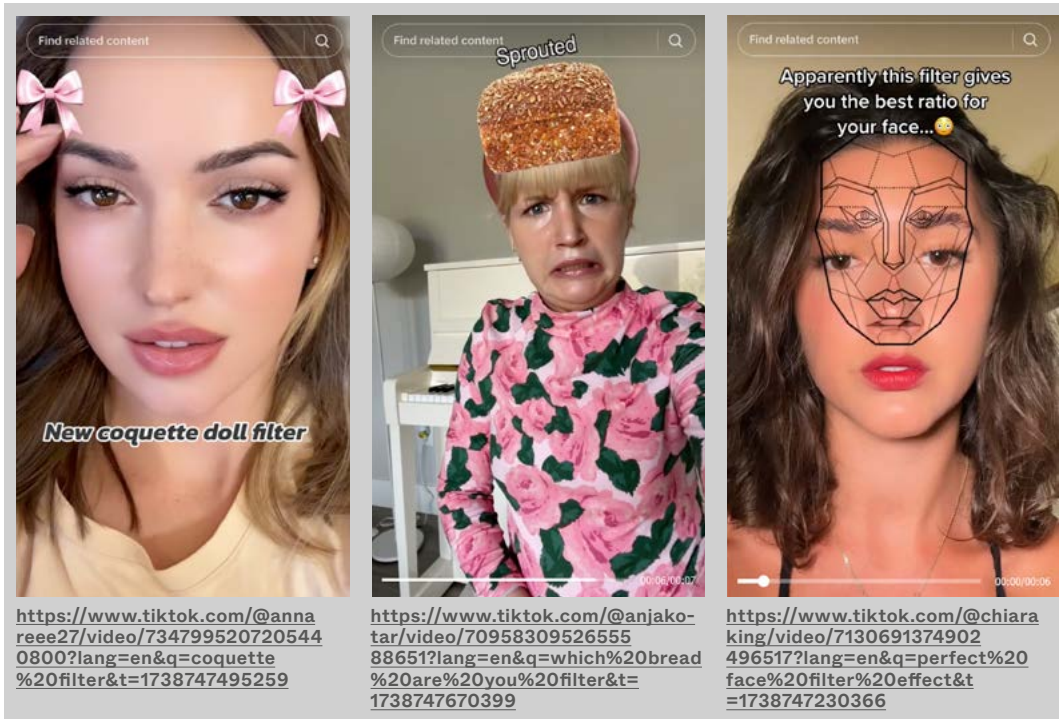
The online beauty industry holds a paradoxical position within this attention economy. On the one hand, it plays an integral part in the cultivation and control of the different trends through algorithmic hyper-categorisation such as #beautytok or #nailtok. On the other, this \$500 billion industry¹¹ contributes to the disturbing creation of a seemingly singular beauty standard, whose advent was predicted in 2019 by Jia Tolentino’s detection of the so-called Instagram Face: a cyborgian face that is distinctly *white* but of ambiguous ethnicity. It is young, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones; it has cat-like eyes with long, cartoonish lashes, a small, neat nose



<https://www.tiktok.com/@cosyacademia/video/7057302912053218607?lang=en&q=dark%20academia&t=1738747416693>

| Tomato Girl Summer | |
|--------------------|---|
| Other names | Tomato Girl |
| Decade of origin | 2020s |
| Key motifs | Tomatoes, roses, beaches, Mediterranean cuisine, summer life, picnics |
| Key colours | Red, white, green |
| Key values | Glorification of Mediterranean summer and cuisines, escapism, tourism |
| Related aesthetics | Boujee Cherry Emoji Twitter Coastal Cowgirl Farmer's Daughter Grandparentcore New Spanish Catholic Girl Romantic Italian Scandi Girl Winter Summer Tropical Vacation Dadcore Autumn VSCO Wanderlust |

https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Tomato_Girl_Summer



and full, lush lips.¹² The features of this face evidently appear in *In the Future, Everything Will Be a Trend for 15 Seconds*. Such features are prized for their photogenic qualities – a new kind of ‘bodily capital’, measured via engagements and likes. With the right kind of effort, be it physically through Botox, injectables and plastic surgery, or digitally through Photoshop, FaceTune and filters, this face can perform better and better over time.¹³ Today, Instagram Face is a fixed phenotype in our offline reality. So much so that it birthed new medical phenomena, such as ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’ – a person’s desire to bring their digitally augmented and filtered version of themselves to life.¹⁴

Expanding on this idea, Freel and Lynski conjure up a dystopian image flow in which individuals perform the latest beauty trends in real-time through augmented reality (AR) filters. This vision has almost become reality in the present day, given the recent evolution of filters, from overt and silly to scarily undetectable. EffectHouse, TikTok’s platform-internal AR tool reports: ‘To date, more than 450 effect creators have published effects on TikTok, inspiring the creation of more than 1.5 billion videos and garnering over 600 billion views globally.’¹⁵ While filters such as ‘Which Bread Are You’ feel like a whimsical addition to the ‘Farm Core’ trend, the ‘Perfect Face Filter’ and the ‘Skinny Filter’ tell a different story. Freel and Lynski’s performing faces undeniably conform to the rules dictated by online perfection and yet, they try to resist by maintaining a sense of unique self-expression through beauty trends, personified in unglitching technolo-

gy. It’s a Sisyphean task that obliterates the lines between short-lived vogues and long-term identity-building as well as the distinction between physical appearance and technological self-imaging. It’s an impossible race against the trend circuit, always chasing the next viral aesthetic, face or body shape – no matter how much cutting, slicing or stretching will be required to keep the screen and its audience captivated. And, if you’re still unsure where to start, how about canthopexy, also known as fox-eye-surgery?

[1] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trend>

(all URLs accessed January 31, 2025).

[2] Ibid.

[3] The actress earned the nickname after starring in the eponymous movie *It* (dir. C.G. Badger, 1927).

[4] See Ellen Atlanta, *Pixel Flesh: How Toxic Beauty Culture Harms Women* (New York: St. Martin’s Publishing Group, 2024), 17.

[5] Ibid., 185.

[6] See Derek Conrad Murray’s remarks on cinematic spectatorship in: ‘On Photographic Ubiquity in the Age of Online Self-Imaging’, in *Ubiquity: Photography’s Multitudes*, ed. Jacob W. Lewis and Kyle Parry

(Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021), 182.

[7] Atlanta, *Pixel Flesh*, 198.

[8] Gregory Snyder, quoted in Luke Ballenstein, ‘Researching Subcultures, Inc.’, *Research Matters*, 25 October 2017, <http://socialresearchmatters.org/researching-subcultures-inc/>.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Xi Cai, ‘The Evolution and Mainstreaming of Subcultures: Challenges and the Pursuit of Harmonious Coexistence’, in *Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies* 1, 9 (2024), <https://www.deanfrancispress.com/index.php/hc/article/view/1564/1334>.

[11] Predicted to grow by more than 50 per cent by 2025, according to Forbes. See Atlanta, *Pixel Flesh*, 7.

[12] Jia Tolentino, ‘The Age of Instagram Face: How Social Media, FaceTune, and Plastic Surgery Created a Single, Cyborgian Look’, *The New Yorker*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face>.

[13] Ibid.

[14] The term was coined by Dr. Tijion Esho. See Atlanta, *Pixel Flesh*, 203.

[15] See https://effecthouse.tiktok.com/latest/news/welcome-to-effect-house/?enter_method=homepage.

