'GRWM': Modes of Aesthetic Observance, Surveillance, and Subversion on YouTube

Amy Lynne Hill

1. Introduction: The Shopgirls Go Online

In 1927, during the adolescent years of what is now a diverse moving image culture that dominates Western society, Siegfried Kracauer penned the essay *The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies*. Writing on the connection between the viewing habits of young women—shopgirls—and the construction of hegemonic social norms, he argues that "films are the mirror of the prevailing society" and that "to investigate today's society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries".[1] Flashing forward to 2014 finds us at the advent of a new image culture—that of instantaneous streaming anywhere, any time, on almost any screen. In this moment, Beyoncé utters the now pop-iconic words "I woke up like this" while wearing a full face of hair and makeup, an ironic naturalization of a beauty aesthetic which most recognize takes more time, effort, and money than just waking up to achieve. Leaping forward once more finds us just a few short years later in 2018, where we can listen to the confessions of YouTube and learn what it means and what exact steps, products, and techniques it takes to 'wake up like this'. With content like beauty tutorials, the universal, free, and instant streaming platform YouTube has thus made it possible, I argue, for anyone to assume whatever role or look is desired, if not in fact necessary, within a system of digital social hegemony and aesthetic heteronormativity. Though viewers can choose from a number of "I woke up like this" tutorials, an examination of this phenomenon quickly reveals that there is in fact no such thing as waking up like this. There is instead only an elaborate performance of getting ready, and no better mirror to get ready in than that of the mirror of YouTube.

Back in 1927, Kracauer's little shopgirls may have had to go to the movies after they finished getting ready to be moved by moving pictures, but today at any given moment in both the public and private spheres, a person is surrounded by multiple screens, from televisions to tablets to smartphones, most if not all of which

1 Kracauer 2004: p. 99, 102.

can access YouTube. In America, for example, the epicentre of YouTube, 77% of the population own a smartphone, nearly 75% own a desktop or laptop, and roughly 50% own tablets, according to a Pew Research Center fact sheet from 2018.[2] Given this level of Internet-ready device saturation, it is no surprise that while it may have taken decades until the cinematic screen was translated into a home version, it barely took YouTube, founded in 2005, a single decade to become a social platform with a combined billion hours of viewed footage a day.[3] These numbers do not come from a small market of users, either: As of 2018, three out of every four adults in the United States use YouTube, while that number spikes to 94% of all 18- to 24-year-olds.[4] These startling numbers then beg the question: If Kracauer's world of film was a mirror held up to society, somehow true even and especially in its failings, then what does that make the myriad mirrors of YouTube? If YouTube videos, often considered themselves to be short films, can be uploaded nearly as quickly as they can be made and edited, therefore nearly as fast as the life they reflect, what can be understood now about the mechanisms of the today's screen-driven society?

Here I argue one possible answer: by examining the intersecting YouTube beauty communities in the United States and Germany, with a focus on the 'Get Ready With Me' ('GRWM') style video, I aim to reveal that Kracauer's advice for understanding society through a screenic mirror is still relevant and necessary in the world of YouTube. Though his theory may not be as applicable to film culture today, returning to the concept of the mirror not as a direct reflection but as a lens for processing social norms is especially useful for YouTube. His example of the shopgirls going to the movies is a productive metaphor, one which allows us to draw a parallel between early film consumption and the newer media habits of YouTube, especially in terms of the production and observation of gender norms via visual media. Here the shopgirls can be both content creator and viewer, and each are turning more and more towards cameras and their products as actual, material mirrors—both when beauty YouTubers film their tutorials and use the camera as a mirror, and when audiences view their content, therefore seeing their future selves reflected in the video before they see the same aesthetic recreated on themselves. I therefore argue that YouTube presents viewers with a totalizing aesthetic: from amateur beauty vloggers to professional beauty influencers, these videos present a homogenous and flattened world in which knowing how to stylize oneself within intelligible gender binaries is key for participation within the system. They reflect a patriarchal society that necessitates a gendered subjectivity as theorized by Judith Butler with her concept of performative gender, and they

2 Cf. Pew Research Center 2018a.

3 Cf. Nicas 2017.

4 Cf. Pew Research Center 2018b.

operate as both a synoptic performance and script for observing and perpetuating this mode of patriarchal heteronormative self-presentation. Simultaneously, however, the democratic nature of YouTube affords a new visibility and accessibility to marginalized groups. Exemplary here are women of colour as well as those in queer and transgender communities, who create videos following the same style and format of mainstream beauty videos with similar yet critically subverted content. In doing so, these creators defy conformative norms of gendered beauty and challenge notions of surveillance and gender-policing, all while building communities to empower others to do the same.

To understand this dialectic phenomenon and how it operates in a Butlerian framework of subjectivity and performance, I build upon existing theory to demonstrate that while this technology may be new, the mechanisms of social control certainly are not. I first begin with Kracauer's shopgirls and Thomas Mathieson's formulation of the synopticon as a complement to the panopticon to help us better see the surveillance happening on either side of the camera. Then I turn to Jonathan Crary's theory of the observer and Lev Manovich's theory of synthetic realism in the digital age to frame YouTube as a mobilizing social agent. As the 'Get Ready With Me' video in all its forms shows us, what results is a formulaic aesthetic with the potential either to perpetuate surveillance or transgress observance, a phenomenon that Wendy Chun has recently termed the „wonderful creepiness of new media".[5]

2. Parasocial You, Synoptic Tube

What was formerly a niche corner on YouTube has become prominent in the public consciousness in recent months: the world of beauty reviews, tutorials, and online celebrity influencers. For example, a recent *Forbes* list of "America's Richest Self-Made Women" features women like Huda Kattan, a YouTuber since 2007, and newly minted makeup mogul Kylie Jenner alongside established powerhouses like Oprah Winfrey.[6] A popular news media profile of Kattan brings the rapid evolution of this YouTube community into sharp relief, revealing that views of beauty-related content have skyrocketed from four billion views in 2010 to 104 billion views in 2017.[7] On the content side, a dataset of trending videos in the United States from November 14, 2017 to May 26, 2018 shows that *makeup* is the second most utilized tag with 7,035 instances.[8] Millions of videos have been uploaded that

5 Chun 2016: S. ix.

6 Cf. Kroll/Dolan 2018.

7 Cf. Lewis 2018.

8 Cf. Mitchell 2018.

are either product reviews, tutorials on how to use them, or so-called favourites videos in which beauty influencers tell viewers which products they have been enjoying that month. YouTubers typically upload videos in a variety of formats on a weekly basis, but one of the more popular formats within the beauty community is of a slightly different nature: the 'Get Ready With Me'. In both Germany and America, these videos feature the YouTuber, often a young woman, getting ready, either for a special occasion, a simple day of errands, or sometimes just so they can record more beauty videos later in their home. The YouTuber will indicate precisely what she (or increasingly he) is getting ready for in the title and the intro of the video. Videos which are specifically in preparation for a special event are often proceeded by an edited, sometimes professionally, montage of the YouTuber applying their makeup and carrying out a preparatory routine, such as taking a bath, styling their hair, or getting dressed—in other words, getting ready. These videos in particular help illustrate the relationship between the YouTube videos of the 21st century and Kracauer's writing about Weimar film. One such video from teen influencers Brooklyn and Bailey (5.6 million subscribers),[9] whose *Get Ready With Me | HOMECOMING 2016* video has 6.2 million views, is exemplary of this format.[10]

While a tutorial will be shot at a straight-on angle with minimal post-production work, the editing process and visual filters in Brooklyn and Bailey's video are obvious, with an array of shots from various angles filmed over the week leading up to the girls' homecoming. The video has a non-diegetic soundscape of playful and airy non-copyrighted music, and features a montage of the girls elaborately styling their hair, applying dramatic makeup, and posing for final outfit shots. A voiceover details the dresses and accessories worn, including the necessary purchasing information should the viewer feel so inclined, and the final shots are handheld vlog footage from the homecoming dance itself. This video is just one of many like it, including a German version in which influencers get ready for an *Abiball*, such as popular YouTuber DominoKati, whose video *Abiball* 'GRWM' from June 2015 has 1.4 million views.[11] Her video is similar to her American counterpart, with upbeat music overtop a mix of scenes from the makeup process, shots of the dress, and ending with footage from the event itself. The Homecoming/*Abiball* video is thus paradigmatic of this popular video format, which presents itself less as simple makeup video and more so as a short film. The 'GRWM' aligns with Kracauer's writings on the impact of film, only here the shopgirls do not have to go to the movies to be excited about prom or the *Abiball*; now they can watch from the

9 All YouTuber statistics are from 'Social Blade' and updated as of November 2018. All view statistics are from YouTube.

10 Cf. Brooklyn and Bailey 2016.

11 Cf. DominoKati: 2015.

privacy of their own homes and know exactly how to do their hair and makeup for their own special day.

Yet the girls in these videos are more like Kracauer's shopgirls than they are the stars they idolize. YouTube influencers, the name given to those YouTube content creators who have reached a certain level of success, are supposedly normal girls in supposedly normal homes, but when they present their mundane makeup routines for the world to see, they do not see the world in turn. Unlike the relationship between prisoner and guard in Bentham's panopticon, the relationship between YouTube producer and YouTuber consumer is not equally reciprocal. There is no single ominous viewer policing the self-presentation of the self-aware influencers; it is not the panopticon the shopgirls live in today, but rather the synopticon. As recorded in the annals of YouTube analytics, views, and thumbs-ups, the many are now watching the few.[12] This mode of surveillance was first theorized by Thomas Mathiesen over the course of two publications from 1987 to 1997, long before the rise of YouTube. He developed the theory of the synopticon as a parallel structure of power to Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon, and this is precisely what happens on YouTube.[13]

In this model, Mathiesen argues that due to the rise of mass media, television in particular, a 'viewer society' has arisen in which the many watch a small number of media personalities who 'shape' and 'filter' information for the audience.[14] This 'performance' takes places, he argues, within "a broader hidden agenda of political or economic interest […] behind the media".[15] While he briefly touches on the Internet in this piece, he revisits his original argument in a 2005 essay that more explicitly explores the relationship between the Internet and the synopticon. Mathiesen argues that while the Internet may be popularly viewed as a democratic medium,

> in actual practice, the Internet becomes to a considerable extent a part of the synoptical system, in as much as it is, to a substantial degree, dominated by powerful economic agents—from newspapers and television agencies to owners having economic capital to invest in sales of lucrative merchandise, including pornography. To the same degree, the structure becomes characterised by a one-way flow, from the relatively few in control of economic capital, symbolic capital and technical know-how, to the many who are entertained or who buy the products.[16]

12 Cf. Mathiesen 1997: p. 218.

13 Cf. Doyle 2011: p. 285.

14 Cf. Mathiesen 1997: p. 226.

15 Mathiesen 1997: p. 226.

16 Mathiesen 2005: p. 100.

In 2005 he is writing just before YouTube, but already he theorizes how despite their accessibility and uploading ease, platforms like YouTube remain a medium in which the majority of users are simply viewers and largely distanced from the personalities they watch, and only a small number of creators can become influencers. Though YouTube does allow for communication between creator and subscriber in the comments, this communication is persistently, as Mathiesen notes, one-directional. Subscribers and critics can communicate with the YouTuber, who may even occasionally respond, but most comments will go unanswered. The top comment on Brooklyn and Bailey's Homecoming 'GRWM', for example, has 70 replies yet none are from Brooklyn or Bailey. The subscriber will always know more of the YouTuber's life than vice-versa, with communication within the comments happening primarily amongst the audience; as such, the relationship present in 'GRWM' videos between the influencer and the viewer is one-directional.

This unbalanced directionality, however, does not make the relationship any less viable. The relationship between YouTube influencer and subscriber is parasocial, a term from psychology in the 1950s, and describes the perceived close relationship between audiences and celebrities.[17] In the social media synopticon, this relationship gives the effect of an intimate interpersonal connection between viewer and the beauty influencer. From the viewer's perspective, this means they feel as though they can identify with the YouTuber and can emphasize with and understand their personal values and motivations.[18] This leads to ritualistic viewing and a sense of loyalty on behalf of the viewers, and affords the YouTuber a degree of influence over the subscriber.[19] For the influencer, this sense of face-to-face interaction through the camera and loyal viewership results in statistics like view counts and likes, which play a key role in video monetization and sponsorships, all factors of success on YouTube.[20] Developing this parasocial relationship with audiences often requires something called self-disclosure, meaning the YouTuber will 'confess' personal information to the viewer and share private aspects of their lives, for example by uploading a video in which they get ready for Homecoming.[21] A blurring of private and public spheres in the form of self-disclosure is therefore central to YouTubers' success within the synopticon. This often takes the form of self-presentation and impression management, in which the YouTuber presents him/herself as an authentic subject by seeming likeable and competent, but also vulnerable—in other words, the movie star plays the shopgirl.[22] If done

17 Cf. Chung/Cho 2017: p. 482.

18 Cf. Chung/Cho 2017: p. 483.

19 Cf. Chung/Cho 2017: p. 483.

20 Cf. Chen 2016.

21 Cf. Chung/Cho 2017: p. 483.

22 Cf. Chen 2016: p. 234.

successfully, viewers become subscribers and a parasocial relationship develops, the many begin to ritualistically watch the few, and those few YouTubers become commercial successes. Matheisen's concept of the synopticon thus not only allows us to understand surveillance in the form of many-on-few viewership, but also the underlying mechanisms of socio-economic power which afford the few YouTubers such a great influence over the many who watch. While Mathiesen did not speak directly to the social media synopticon, many have expanded his theory by investigating how this parasocial relationship can create and perpetuate digital social hegemony.

Recent social media research shows that the synoptic gaze of platforms like Instagram and Facebook contributes to the perpetuation of dominant patriarchal power structures regarding beauty and gender. In these contexts, the selfie in particular has been studied as a disciplining agent of social hegemony, as explained in a 2016 study by Richard Kedzior and Douglas Allen. They argue in accordance with Alice Marwick, who writes that "those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture".[23] This remains true on YouTube, as Mathiesen's emphasis on the socio-economic function of the Internet synopticon has already shown. I take up Kedzior and Allen's analysis, but also push it one step further. I argue that on YouTube, the 'GRWM' video deconstructs the selfie, and by so transparently displaying the products and techniques necessary to achieve successful standards of Western beauty, gender, and status, these videos effectively demystify the hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity and serve as an invitation, initiation, and instruction further into the synopticon. This demystification is paradoxically an intensification of these hegemonic hierarchies: the more accessible the hierarchies appear, the easier they are to emulate, by both YouTubers and viewers. This can be seen most clearly in a particular format called the 'Chit Chat' or 'Chatty Get Ready With Me', alternatively also known as the 'Style & Talk' in Germany.

In this informal style video, which features minimal cuts and a basic front-on medium close up, the YouTuber faces the camera at a head-on angle and speaks directly and openly to the viewer, welcoming them with a smile and asking them to subscribe if they have not already. The basic opening script of such a video invites the viewer to sit back, relax, have a drink or even do their own makeup as they watch, so that the viewer can truly 'get ready' with the persona on the screen. In perhaps no other format of beauty video is the parasocial influence so present in the way the YouTuber positions themselves in relation to the viewer and the camera itself. In these confessional videos the YouTuber sets up their workspace such that audiences cannot see what is in front of the influencer, who sometimes

23 Kedzior/Allen 2016: p. 1898.

does not even show the products as they would in a tutorial. The mirror and the makeup themselves are rarely visible in a 'Chit Chat GRWM'; here, the viewfinder of the camera itself, often displayed on a computer monitor in front of the influencer, is the mirror, further complicating the relationship between screen, mirror, consumer, and producer. Many YouTubers use this format, but I will focus on four YouTubers from America and Germany who best demonstrate aspects of the synoptic gaze and observance of gender and power on both sides of the screen, as well as possibilities to subvert disciplining surveillance through strategic aesthetic displacement.

3. Jaclyn Hill, Mrs. Bella, and Uploading Gender

When stills of their videos are held up side by side, it is practically impossible to determine nationality based only on aesthetics between Jaclyn Hill and Mrs. Bella. Both are tall, thin, white women in their twenties, both worked as makeup artists for MAC cosmetics before pursuing YouTube full-time, and both are extremely influential in their respective beauty communities. Hill is one of the megastars of American YouTube with a worldwide following of 5.6 million subscribers and 465.3 million total views amassed since 2010. Her uploads, including her 'GRWMs', often become top trending videos on American YouTube; a textual analysis of the trending dataset from November 14, 2017 to May 26, 2018 shows that three of Hill's videos trended for a total of 27 days in the United States, while one of her 'Chit Chat Get Ready With Me' videos even trended for one day in Germany.[24] Mrs. Bella is similarly influential in the smaller world of German beauty vloggers with 1.1 million subscribers, though she only trended once in Germany for the same time period, which is unsurprising given a much smaller instance of the 'makeup' and 'schmink*' tag at just 402 usages. I have chosen these two women not just for their obvious similarities and influence, but because their videos are exemplary of this totalizing aesthetic.

Both Hill and Bella film in minimalistic spaces of white and blush tones. In the background they showcase bouquets of flowers, inspirational artwork, and candles or fairy lights. They each appear in a medium close-up either head-on or at a three-quarters angle, and always speak directly to the subscriber, making, in other words, eye contact via the screen. They invite the viewer to 'hang out' so they can do their makeup together, or as Hill says, so she can "get ready with *you*".[25] If Hill has not filmed a 'GRWM' recently, she will tell the subscriber how much she has missed their "chats", heavily enforcing the parasocial interaction of YouTube.

24 Cf. Mitchel 2018.

25 Hill 2016: 00:45.

Bella, by contrast, appears more relaxed and simply tells the viewer "ich werde jetzt einfach hier ein bisschen mit euch quatschen".[26] Their language marks the audience and not the makeup as the subject of their attention, and they chat with the viewer rather than explicitly instruct them on the techniques and products in use. While they mention and sometimes show products to the camera/user, these videos are not meant to be tutorials. Instead, Hill will, for example, break into song while Bella will use exaggerated speech for emphasis or comedic effect. Both women respond to and address topics raised in the comments left on previous videos or on other social media platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat, a practice that is especially prevalent in German 'Style & Talk' videos, where the title of the video also typically directly names the themes discussed. The conversation topics in the German context are varied and include self-care and love, family life, health, pets, education, birth control, and fitness.

The focus in these videos is less on the makeup itself, but rather the self-disclosure and self-presentation of the YouTuber, both of which are a vital part of forming a parasocial relationship on YouTube. This mode of self-presentation especially strongly echoes Erving Goffman's theory of an individual's awareness of their performance in any given social situation.[27] This self-presentation is intentional, with tangible signs, and happens through repeat performances, such as through the repeated uploading of confessional style videos on YouTube which create the effect of an authentic digital self.[28] The social situation in question here is the synoptic structure of YouTube itself, and as such, these videos serve as evidence of the YouTuber's success with their position inside the synopticon. This success hinges upon revealing precisely how they maintain their well-crafted self-presentation beyond the simple act of applying makeup, while at once attempting to appear as their most authentic selves through strategic self-disclosure of their private lives. For example, in a 'Chit Chat GRWM' from April 2018 with 2.2 million views, Hill shares which movie makes her cry in a way which "motivates and inspires" her, and thanks her subscribers as well as her "haters" for their "constant love and support".[29] Moreover she says she is grateful for the "mean" comments which led her to seek out a therapist, which in turn allowed her to know herself better.[30] The more Hill discloses of her private actions off YouTube, the smaller the discrepancy between her on- and off-camera persona seems, and the more she appears a wholly formed subject. As such, the intimate details from Hill's private sphere combined with her extended gratitude and messages of love for her subscribers

26 Mrs. Bella 2016: 00:24.

27 Cf. Goffman 1956.

28 Cf. Chen 2016: p. 234.

29 Hill 2018: 12:22-12:52, 04:48-05:20.

30 Hill 2018. 05:30-06:22

strengthen the parasocial relationship to her audience, and serve to critically stabilize the effect of Hill's authentic self.

This subjectivity, however, exists within certain parameters, as does the performance. The crying and emotional sensibility Hill discloses, for example, are behaviours typically marked female, as are many of the topics discussed in these videos and the act of applying makeup itself. The subjectivity at play is a therefore critically gendered one. Decades after Goffman's work on the performance of subjectivities, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* explains how gender performativity plays a critical role in Western modes of subjectivity. As she explains,

> categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics. These constructs of identity serve as the points of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped.[31]

This political subjectivity therefore solidifies around constellations of sex and gender which, as Butler's theory makes clear, are socially constructed and have no inherently prior substance, yet determine an individual's successful existence within society. She explains that this gendered identity is a process "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*".[32] She further emphasizes that gender is an act of "social temporality" and only gives the "appearance of substance", and also notes the difference between performance and performativity.[33] For most, this gendered performativity is not consciously performed, but on YouTube at least—one such exterior space in which gender can be repeatedly stylized—there is a critical awareness and intentional performance which begins as soon as the camera starts recording. With each 'Chatty GRWM' they upload, Hill and Bella engage in acts of stylized self-presentation, and over time and through the repeated synoptic viewing of their videos by their subscribers, they each seemingly stabilize into culturally intelligible female subjects.

It is therefore crucial to understand the subjectivity on display in YouTube beauty videos within a Butlerian framework, while Goffman beneficially allows for a conceptualization of gendered self-presentation which is strategically aware of its own performance and the stakes of appearing authentic through a repeatedly and digitally stylized self. The success of this seemingly naturalized performance is critical. On a larger scale, failing to materialize a culturally intelligible gender means failure within the system; those failed subjects, however, are as necessary

31 Butler 1990: p. 128.

32 Butler 1990: p. 140; Emphasis in original.

33 Cf. Butler 1990: p. 141.

for the system as are those who succeed. They are considered abject beings, and they are necessarily excluded to produce a "constitutive outside to the subject;" it is this outside which holds up the entire system.[34] To return to surveillance, Foucault, who Butler is in conversation with, understood the panopticon as a means of surveillance to discipline and police these intelligible subjectivities. Just as the panopticon succeeds by not knowing when exactly a subject is under surveillance, the synoptic gaze works best when the YouTuber perfects the authentic effect of their gendered performance, and acts as if the camera is not present at all and that they are merely chatting with a friend, not a viewer who is in fact an important part of the digital mechanism of control. Furthermore, even and perhaps especially when these videos are not makeup tutorials, they still instruct on how to exist successfully within a framework of intelligible gender, because viewers do not simply watch: they— we —observe.

4. Observing and Updating the Self

In *Techniques of the Observer* (1992), Jonathan Crary lays out a simple yet crucial understanding of the observer. To observe, he tells us,

> means, 'to conform one's action, to comply with,' as in observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices. Though obviously one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.[35]

By applying this concept of observing to YouTube, I argue that when viewers watch, they are actively, even in their passivity, participating in a system of observing social norms and expectations, or in this case modes of culturally intelligible gender. This is what Kracauer describes when he sends his shopgirls to the movies and they learn the social paradigms of Weimar Germany, such as to hope for a financially secure love, or to admire a man in uniform.[36] The little shopgirls and YouTube subscribers alike are observers of the worlds they live in, but more importantly, their observation of the practices they see on the screen serves to maintain those practices and re-inscribe gendered modes of being. When subscribers watch Hill and Bella, they observe what it means and how to 'get ready' in every sense of the word. They learn the mechanisms of society, which in this case means how to best perform gender within the system; the private spheres of

34 Cf. Butler 1993: p. 3.

35 Crary 1992: p. 6.

36 Cf. Kracauer 2004: p. 104f.

both YouTube consumer and producer are therefore instrumental in reinforcing the dominant social paradigms of the public sphere.

For example, Hill uploaded an *GRWM – Easy Every Day GLAM* video in March 2017, so now whenever and as often as they choose, viewers can watch this video and observe that wearing an everyday glam makeup look is one way to be intelligibly female.[37] They observe that this stylized act of purchasing and applying a certain type of make-up must necessarily and expertly be repeated, even if, like Hill, one is only spending the day at an amusement park with family. Or German-language subscribers can watch Mrs. Bella, who gets ready in a video from January of 2017, titled *Style & Talk - Gewicht, Fitness, FashionWeek etc.*[38] Here, as she applies a look similar to Hill, she tells her audience, statistically a young and female one,[39] about the difficulties of maintaining a healthy weight while on the pill, yet she does not reveal what she is getting ready for; it is as if the actual event is irrelevant—what matters is simply getting ready. Hence such videos carry the implicit message that one must be ready and present as a readily intelligible female subject before entering the public sphere regardless of the occasion. And so subscribers emulate their favourite YouTubers, those who are so adept at observing and existing within the synopticon that other people avidly watch them do so. Hill and Bella are therefore the shopgirls after the movies, gone home to the synopticon to show the world all they have learned.

And the ultimate lesson of the shopgirls, influencers, viewers alike is to be happy, a sign of total conformation within the synoptic system of gender and power. Even when addressing serious issues like anxiety and birth control, Hill and Bella do so with a smile and looking conventionally beautiful. In Bella's video *Privatsphäre als Influencer? Style & Talk* from October 2018, for example, she discloses that viewers had correctly noticed she had been unhappy in her private life the past year, but that now "ich bin wieder ich selbst".[40] Amongst talk of designer clothes and the success of her newly published book *Contour & Confidence: More than just makeup,* she says there is always a way out of unhappiness. To this point she also later shares she is very happy that her book has reached the *Spiegel* bestseller list. Here the concepts of happiness and the socio-economic influence of the parasocial relationship clearly intersect, especially as the links for Bella's book, as well as her makeup product collaboration (used in the video) are all provided in the info box below the video. Happiness is therefore not just shown in the influencers' easy affect, but also in their personal effects: happiness is present in the material goods that saturate their lives and in turn their viewers' lives, such as the same

37 Cf. Hill 2017b.

38 Cf. Mrs. Bella 2017.

39 Cf. Blattberg 2015.

40 Mrs. Bella 2018: 04:20-04:33.

luxury makeup brands both Hill and Bella use and promote or the omnipresent flowers and clean, neat curated private spheres they disclose to the world. Bella, for example, revealed her all-white apartment in an apartment tour video, while in a similar video Hill covers many topics, including: details about the humiliating experience of filming with Kim Kardashian in a video not well received by most, her anxiety regarding her husband's seizures, as well as the purchase of their custom-designed luxury home, which includes an in-home office and makeup room, as well as a customized walk-in closet.[41] YouTubers' private consumption, disclosed in such videos, is not just a sign of their success, but is moreover an intelligible sign of happiness. These spaces are markers of a highly capitalistic sort of Western happiness, the kind that Jean Baudrillard writes should be "measurable in terms of objects and signs […] evident to the eye in terms of 'visible criteria'".[42] The products Hill and Bella use and link to in their videos are another such sign of happiness in the 21st century. With each video they post, they list the products used in the box below the video so the viewer can carefully observe and then buy those products themselves, thus ensuring future happiness, one of the most powerful signs of an intelligible subject.

But this highly visual and aesthetically pleasing happiness presented to audiences in the mirror of YouTube is rarely what viewers see reflected in their daily surroundings. It seems that because these videos can be produced quickly and uploaded even on the same day they are filmed, that perhaps they are less a mirror which reflects the current state of things, but more a means of looking and moving forward. 'GRWMs' in particular do not show things the way they are, but rather as they should be and will be if the practices within them are observed by enough people across the patriarchal Western societies which consume them. When YouTubers get ready, they are literally looking forward, not just to their day but to a future they are helping to materialize in doing so, as implied in the very nomenclature of these videos. It is already, for example, impossible to distinguish aesthetically between Germany and America in the videos of Hill and Bella, as the products they use and spaces they create imply an already more globalized Western world than the one they actually live in. Perhaps this is what Kracauer means when he writes that the more incorrectly a film projects the present, the more correctly it reveals society. To better understand this fundamental dissonance, I will now turn to the specifically digital screen of YouTube and synthetic realism in the age of the Internet.

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich analyses the synthetic image and new modes of realism in the age of digital media. He defines the synthetic image as the product of computer generated graphics; he posits that these images,

41 Cf. Hill 2017a.

42 Crary 1992: p. 11.

rather than being photorealistic, are in fact "too perfect" and "too real", capable of producing images beyond the limits of human eyesight and traditional photography.[43] This does not, however, mean that they are inferior representations, but that they are "*a realistic representation of a different reality*", namely a reality of a "more perfect than human" cyborg vision yet to come.[44] Manovich concludes that "if a traditional photograph always points to a past event, a synthetic photograph always points to a future event".[45] The challenge then of creating a synthetic image that is realistic to audiences is in finding a balance between this futuristic synthetic perfection and the imperfection of traditional image. Manovich's example is the blockbuster film *Jurassic Park*, whose at the time cutting edge integration of CGI dinosaurs succeeded in creating a realistic effect, because the synthetic images had been made imperfect and "diluted" to match the graininess of the film.[46] Finding the connection between the CGI raptors of *Jurassic Park* and the beauty influencers of YouTube is fairly easy: due to the growing accessibility of DSLR cameras and professional editing software, even YouTube beauty videos can be understood as synthetic images. Many tutorials exist on how to film not only with professional lighting, but also with strategically adjusted sharpness to create too-perfect skin,[47] and how to adjust colour, exposure, and saturation to digitally create a synthetic too-real representation of the influencer.[48] Yet they too must match the imperfect reality by not making their filming and editing tricks too obvious, lest they risk failing to appear authentic.

In both *Jurassic Park* and the 'GRWM', the result is a synthetic realism which operates by blending imperfect realities and perfect futures, an aesthetic which Manovich locates historically in the art of Soviet Socialist Realism. According to Manovich,

> Socialist realism wanted to show the present by projecting the perfect world of future socialist society onto a visual reality familiar to the viewer—Socialist realism had to retain enough of then-everyday reality while showing how that reality would look in the future when everyone's body would be healthy and muscular, every street modern, every face transformed by the spirituality of communist ideology.[49]

43 Cf. Manovich 2001: p. 199.

44 Manovich 2001: p. 202; Emphasis in original.

45 Manovich 2001: p. 203

46 Cf. Manovich 2001: p. 202.

47 Cf. Ebreo 2017.

48 Cf. Shameless Maya 2017.

49 Manovich 2001: p. 203.

While it may seem incongruous to draw a parallel between the ideological visual art of this movement to the synthetic images within Western capitalism, it is not the overtly political aims of Socialist Realism which interest Manovich, but rather the mechanism of blending temporal realities—one existent and imperfect, one desired and perfect—which finds traction in his theory of synthetic realism. Indeed, YouTube did not exist in Stalinist Russia, but in the world where YouTube subscribers get ready national borders still play an important role, and homelessness, poverty, joblessness, police brutality, gender and sexual inequality as well as economic disparity persist at alarming rates. Yet this is not the world in which audiences observe beauty influencers get ready on YouTube. That world is beautiful, clean, and harmonious—it is a world of synthetic realism, aided by curated spaces and created using digital cameras and editing software which filter out pores and smooth skin just enough to still seem authentic.

So why do Hill and Bella produce these videos and why do audiences consume them if they do not reflect a current reality? In terms of Manovich's argument, the analogous question asks why the Soviet Union invested so many resources in the Socialist Realism movement. As he explains, "the idea was not to make the workers dream about the perfect future while closing their eyes to the imperfect reality, but rather to make them see the signs of this future in the reality around them".[50] Ideology aside, this mode of viewing also exists on YouTube. If viewers choose not to watch these videos, the world is nonetheless troubled and imperfect. However, if they do watch Jaclyn and Bella get ready and believe the successful influencers are just like them—that all the little shopgirls are getting ready for the same future—then viewers can observe the simple signs of happiness that alleviate worry and inspire hope. In turn audiences add to the visible happiness of the world by buying the same products, adapting the same aesthetic to their own homes, and learning to smile through their own personal struggles. The crux of the problem, however, is that the future being simultaneously projected and constructed on YouTube often serves to maintain the imperfect present masked by the material happiness. Rarely is the 'GRWM' instrumentalized as a platform to advocate for social or political movements which might affect policy change. This mode of synthetic realism instead projects a perfect future of material, consumer happiness while failing to address the invisible signs of imperfection which exist beyond the camera, such as poverty, institutionalised racism, or the global refugee conflict.

Furthermore, the imperfect world of the now which these YouTubers inhabit is dominated by the kind of new media described by Wendy Chun in *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016). She begins with a central question and an immediate answer:

50 Manovich 2001: p. 203.

> Why does the Internet evoke such contradictory passions? Its answer: new media are so powerful because they mess with the distinction between publicity and privacy, gossip and political speech, surveillance and entertainment, intimacy and work, hype and reality. New media are wonderfully creepy. They are endlessly fascinating yet boring, addictive yet revolting, banal yet revolutionary.[51]

The Jaclyns and Bellas of the world are the sorts of uniformly beautiful women who have always existed, but the power of new media is that their privacy is now very intimately public, despite their lack of traditionally understood celebrity status. Audiences watch their casual conversation and 'gossip' about topics such as birth control, mental and physical health, marriage and divorce, and this becomes in many ways the gender and social politics of viewers' lives, a framework they can observe as they get ready for their own day. The influencers submit themselves synoptically to the surveillance of their audience, gaining success by blurring their own boundaries between privacy and publicity to cultivate parasocial relationships with their viewers. By then subscribing, audiences allow these intimate moments of getting ready to become not just social but economic capital: the most successful influencers earn allegedly as much as $60,000 for one sponsorship.[52] Therefore when audiences believe the hype of the influencers' realities, specifically their synthetic realism, views turn into profits—and ultimately, a digital social hegemony that imposes a system of patriarchal gender binaries through the observation of culturally intelligible female subjectivities.

The wonderful creepiness of blurred boundaries between public and private is only the beginning of Chun's analysis: the true impact of this new media, and where this theory intersects with Mathiesen, Butler, Crary, and Manovich, is that social media platforms such as YouTube are no longer new, but have become habit. In analysing how new media have become such an integral part of daily life in many Western societies, Chun claims that these new media habits, such as the addiction of constantly updating in order to remain the same, have become a performance over time, or as she says: "to be is to be updated"[53]. To succeed, YouTubers repeatedly and habitually update their social media presence to give the effect of a stabilized authentic self. One key way they do this is by uploading videos like the 'GRWM', and by habitually watching these videos, audiences engage in a digital Butlerian performance of gender identity through the parasocial connections forged with influential YouTubers, whose private and public lives are blurred by

51 Chun 2016: p. ix.

52 This number has been reported in popular news outlets, for example *Vox*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Verge*. *Insider* and *Huffington Post* have reported YouTube earnings of $85,000 for a single sponsorship.

53 Chun 2016: p. 2.

new media. Subscribers and influencers then repeatedly and habitually observe the norms perpetuated in videos like 'GRWMs', an act which in turn re-inscribes social hegemony and gendered subjects within a Western framework of power, constructed overtime on YouTube through synthetic realism. While these converging factors ultimately comprise only the 'creepy' part of new media in the examples of established, heteronormative influencers like Jaclyn Hill and Mrs. Bella, the wonderful part—the blurring of banal and revolutionary—comes next.

5. Conclusion: Gender Dis-identification and Destabilizing Bad Habits

As initially stated, despite its totalizing potential, YouTube nonetheless creates spaces in which marginalized groups have significantly extended their representation. Many influential YouTubers in America are women of colour, like Jackie Aina (2.8 million subscribers), or non-binary men like Patrick Starrr, a Filipino-American with 4.2 million subscribers. YouTubers of colour deserve a study dedicated solely to the unique intersectionality of their presence and success on YouTube, an endeavour which I do not have the space to undertake here. I am therefore concluding with two examples of YouTubers analogous to Jaclyn and Bella who have found new media success by creeping into the blurred spaces between traditional binaries, like that between man and woman.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler recognizes the power of this strategy when she cites drag performances as a way of subverting and destabilizing gender; the imitation of gender reveals that gender itself is an imitation and the construction of an empty category.[54] Yet there are more accessible ways of disrupting gender performativity short of drag. Butler returns to this concept in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and writes that "it may be precisely through practices which underscore *dis*identification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized"[55]. In this way, those beings which are abjected in Western power systems for not observing intelligible gender norms may in fact be empowered to strategically problematize and challenge societal conventions. While drag achieves this, something as simple as an awareness of the performative nature of gender can also enable protest, and as YouTubers' success hinges on intentional self-presentation, they are arguably aware of this already. As I will now demonstrate, on YouTube gender can be destabilized through dis-identification with patriarchal regimes of subjectivity and the transgressive displacement of hegemonic aesthetics onto non-hegemonic bodies. As they are the excluded category which enforce the limits of intelligible subjectivity, and as

54 Cf. Butler 1990: p. 137.

55 Butler 1993: p. 4; Emphasis in original.

new media is apt to blur boundaries already, it may be that these non-binary influencers can productively blur the limits of intelligible gender.

First is Jeffree Star: he is a YouTube phenomenon and indie makeup mogul who has gained 11.4 million subscribers in just two years and was subsequently named by *Forbes* as one of the most influential beauty YouTubers.[56] Though not a figure without controversy, as we will see, his success is significant given his fully tattooed body, frequent use of medicinal marijuana on his channel, and his androgynous appearance which defies any notion of a set gender binary. While Star flouts societal standards of beauty and masculinity in his 'GRWM' and other videos, he does so without explicitly thematising his sexual or gender identity as something that should set him apart from other influencers—he dis-identifies himself as the limit. His videos feature brightly coloured backgrounds instead of the hushed white tones of Hill and Bella, but he otherwise follows the same format: he speaks directly to the viewer, uses the same products and tools, and creates the same if not slightly more dramatic makeup looks considered examples of hegemonic beauty were they on Hill or Bella. Displaced on Jeffree, however, what results is a projected future in which men do not have to strictly identify with essentialist views of intelligible masculinity, and can wear 'glam' makeup without the expectation of a trans identity or drag performance. In this future, they can be open with their non-binary gender identity or non-heteronormative sexuality without having to explain or defend themselves.

Jeffree Star is such a global phenomenon and symbol of empowerment for many in the LGBTQ+ community that his products make an appearance in the videos of German beauty influencer Jolina Mennen. She is a transwoman who has recorded her life and transition on YouTube in vlogs and makeup videos since 2008. She is, like Hill and Bella, a former MAC makeup artist and is now a university student in Bremen and a rising YouTuber with 263.8 thousand subscribers. In front of the same curated white background as Becca and Hill, Mennen has recorded her transition in honest detail, uploading videos detailing her responses both physical and emotional to hormone therapy, the daily struggle of being transgender, and her husband's reaction to now being married to a woman, despite his own identification as a gay man. In a 'Style & Talk' from September 21st, 2017, for example, she discloses her frustration about the long and drawn out legal battle of changing her name as she tries out a new foundation.[57] Her most striking video, however, is not labelled a 'GRWM': on March 10th, 2017 she uploaded a video that, while conforming to the traditional aesthetic of the beauty genre on YouTube, does not fit into any conventional format. It is a "first impression makeup" video of her 'new' face, in which she chats with the viewer as she applies

56 Cf. Eksouzian-Cavadas 2017.

57 Cf. Mennen 2017a.

makeup for the first time after her facial feminization surgery. She admits that it has been a struggle getting used to the new planes of her face and that she is still in minor pain, but she assures her viewer: "wir kriegen das schon hin".[58] In such videos, Mennen refuses under the synoptic gaze to be complicit in perpetuating hegemonic definitions of either essentialist sex or biological feminine beauty by displacing that very aesthetic onto her transgender body. In the end, she provides visual proof of her happiness not through the tools of her craft, but instead through her self-described tears of joy once she finishes getting ready and sees her new self in the camera.

Part of the future Jolina and Jeffree are creating has already materialized. *CoverGirl* designated the teenaged beauty guru James Charles as their first male Cover Girl, while in Germany Marvyn Macnificent (816.5 thousand subscribers) has collaborated with BH Cosmetics, who also work with Bella. Yet none of these gender-nonconforming influencers' *dis*-identification within the system of power, while productive in destabilizing gender, necessarily undoes the patriarchal observation in the more heteronormative videos within the community. There is also the chance that their videos run the risk of submitting men to the same repressive regime of beauty currently imposed upon women, while rampant consumer capitalism still looms large in all these videos. Using Chun's language again, the wonderful creepiness of the 'GRWM' is that these videos can be contradictory. Although when understood from a Butlerian perspective, their displacement of hegemonic beauty is strategic, viewing their videos without this lens—as likely many subscribers do—means their aesthetic can be simultaneously conformative. The ambivalence is precarious, but also according to Chun, inherent to the nature of new media as yet another boundary blurred.

Perhaps, however, the most troubling of the destabilized binaries of new media is that between privacy and publicity, further stressed by synoptic surveillance. Success within the YouTube synopticon, regardless of the influencer's position to heteronormativity, relies upon the disclosure of private content on a very public platform. The YouTuber's privacy becomes the publicity through which they market themselves and the products they create. This can and has led to breaches of their privacy to which they did not consent. In her October 2018 'Style & Talk', Bella discloses the "unangenehme" experience of having candid photographs at a private pool leaked, and says she is aware she is always being observed, "auch wenn es nur ein paar Augen sind".[59] Jaclyn Hill, on the other hand, was involved in a public dispute with another YouTuber, Marlena Stell of Makeup Geek, when private business emails were leaked describing a product collaboration which fell

58 Mennen 2017b: 01:56-01:58.

59 MrsBella 2018: 10:40-13:19.

through between the two.[60] This act is called 'exposing', in which YouTubers' private communications are leaked and published online by YouTube 'drama channels' to 'expose' the influencer's allegedly inauthentic persona. Jeffree Star and his former collaborator Laura Lee have both had past racist online content 'exposed', begging the question if and to what extent an influencer's past activities outside of YouTube should reasonably be considered private. Moreover, 'exposing' itself has become lucrative, as 'drama channels' gain enough subscribers to be financially viable, thus removing to a certain degree the influencers agency in how their privacy becomes publicity. Finally, exposing can sometimes lead to doxing, the potentially dangerous leaking of YouTuber's private addresses; regardless of how much of their private domains they disclose, influencers use P.O. boxes to protect their physical privacy, but some, such as the aforementioned Jackie Aina, have been victims of doxing. Though harassment and cyberbullying are against YouTube's policy, instructional videos not unlike beauty tutorials exist on how to dox.[61]

While practices such as doxing and 'exposing' remind us of the threat of surveillance to privacy, and despite the precarious ambivalence of non-hetereonormative influencers, the considerable socio-economic impacts of beauty YouTubers and especially the success of subversive influencers demonstrate that how audiences watch and therefore observe something as supposedly trivial as YouTube should be investigated more closely. Such an examination reveals the wonderful creepiness of new media and how it impacts not just who we are, but how we get and stay that way – in other words, how we get ready to exist within society. Though the future projected on YouTube is still under construction, the tools to deconstruct this mechanism of synoptic surveillance and hegemonic observance already exist. From Kracauer, to Baudrillard, to Foucault and Mathiesen, Butler, Crary, Manovich, and Chun, it is already possible to understand and potentially renegotiate the habitual observation of these videos as it relates to our subjectivity. By doing so, audiences, YouTubers, and readers alike can see beyond the possibility to conform to and perpetuate oppressive intelligible gender, and look instead to the potential to subvert and destabilize the limits of the system. If shopgirls can watch YouTube instead of going to the movies, then who is to say they cannot be shopboys instead, or something else entirely, if indeed, they have to watch at all?

60 Cf. Robin 2018.

61 Cf. Hacker Show 2017.

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