

Internet's Dark Forests Subcultural Memories and Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary

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Preface

INTERNET'S
DARK FORESTS

Somewhere along the journey of my online life, I found myself in a Dark Forest. Deviating from my one path for the internet, I entered a foggy shadowland. Looking back at it is not easy, but to treat the good I found there, I must recount the entirety of it. Truthfully, I do not know exactly what led me down the path of Dark Forests. At first, it did not look like a path at all, it was only later that the nebulous online activity I was engaging in revealed itself to be patterned. Only once I had reached my destination, I realized it wasn't a place at all.

I

The internet doesn't exist...

What exists are rather internet imaginaries, mental pictures of hardware+software assemblages, the internet being a technological object as much as it is an economic, social, cultural, or even mystical one. We need language to concretise this ephemeral and complex non-object, so we immortalize these images through language, metaphors. Such language is not arbitrary, and it can be revealing of the internet's history, as well as of shared cultural meanings. The Dark Forest metaphor is one of such images.

Dark Forests can be described as sheltered digital spaces which structurally and discursively foster community formation, allow for experimentations in self presentation, and propose alternative imaginaries to the mainstream internet of platforms. Specifically, the term refers to an online subculture which originated roughly in 2019. The scene at hand is connected to the movement of post-internet art, alternative critical media production, and meme culture. If we indulge in the metaphors' visualization, the internet appears as a layered ecosystem. At the top, there is the vast sky of the Clearnet, controlled by and organized around the larger corporations. This is the web of search engines and platforms, the layer where most users remain for their whole journey throughout the internet. Meters below ground sits the parallel network of the Dark Net, protected by encrypted access, and mainly associated with sites for illegal activities. Nestled in-between, hiding in plain sight, the Dark Forest system sprawls. When trying to escape the

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increasingly controlled platform ecosystem, Dark Forests offer temporary places of refuge for the tired internet traveler. Dark Forests promise to be a space for forgiving communication, crafting alternatives to the Clearnet's data extracting practices, algorithmic moderation, and peer scrutiny. Casting long shadows over few, yet fertile corners of the web, Dark Forests make themselves visible to some. Accessible through continued interaction and decoding of subcultural dialects, Dark Forests are reachable just to the ones who follow the breadcrumbs. In an attempt to conceal their traces and remain in the shadows, the inhabitants of these spaces enrich seemingly empty symbols and create covert forms of communication. The Dark Forest system appears silent or incomprehensible from afar. But once you're in, there is nothing but noise.

The Dark Forest is only a metaphor, a way to imagine specific websites, platforms, and content streams, as well as the subcultures which they produce. Not technologically different from the rest of the web, the Dark Forest metaphor concretizes an otherwise vague digital culture phenomenon into an image. The metaphor serves two purposes. The first is a theoretical one, suggesting the existence of a mainstream web, the Clearnet, and a sheltered alternative space, the Dark Forest. As a critique of the current state of the internet, the theory indicates that digital places can reapropriate and oppose the contemporary organization of the web. If the Clearnet projects a blinding light over anything it touches, the Dark Forest attempts to counter that visibility by creating shadowlands, while the Dark Net remains untouched by remaining fully underground. The second purpose is a practical one, a name for the actual communities which inhabit alternative digital spaces. The concept summarizes the subcultural practices employed by the communities to communicate, craft alternative collective identities, and occupy digital space.

The metaphor of the Dark Forest is borrowed from the second book of *The Remembrance of the Earth's Past* trilogy by Liu Cixin. The theory is applied to the universe to give a possible explanation for the Fermi paradox, which addresses how, despite high estimation of it, there is no clear evidence of extraterrestrial life. In the sci-fi novel, the universe's silence is not due to an absence of alien life but rather because of the inherent dangers of communication. Revealing one's existence and position to an alien civilisation would call for conflict and mutual destruction, with a war inevitably being waged due to limited cosmic resources. The metaphor refers to the silence of a forest at night. Despite its quietness, the forest is full of life. Nocturnal animals inhabiting this ecosystem are aware of how, especially in the dark, sounds can be registered

and used by predators to locate them. Silence in a dark forest, and in Liu Cixin's universe, is a tactic for survival.

Most notably, the metaphor was repurposed and applied to the internet by Yancey Strickler and Caroline Busta. Strickler introduced the concept in a 2019 blog post, highlighting digital spaces as refuges from mainstream web pressures. Caroline Busta, co-founder of New Models, extensively engaged with the concept, discussing Dark Forests as online countercultures in a January 2021 essay for Document Journal.

Caroline Busta and New Models played a significant role in popularizing the term Dark Forest as a descriptor for the online communities they saw arising around their spaces. New Models, launched in 2018 as a content aggregator for information regarding Web 2 and its impact on the art, music, and publishing industry. The New Models podcast fostered an active community of listeners, facilitated by their Patreon and a private Discord server. These sheltered spaces allowed for collaboration and production of theory, media, and events related to the Dark Forest and Clearnet dynamics, playing a substantial role in the development of the Dark Forest theory.

Members of the New Models Discord server have published a collection of their own vernacular, the WebDex Y2K20 glossary, which defines Dark Forest Internet as decentralized digital spaces operating in contrast to the Clearnet's indexed, public-facing nature that's susceptible to surveillance and deplatforming¹. Dark Forests include discord servers, paid newsletters, encrypted group messaging, gaming communities, podcasts, and other message board forums². These spaces are often created because of shared niche interests, and overtime develop in-group cultures and organizational structures. Eliminating possible exposure to algorithmic moderation, employers, or irl peers, these spaces are chosen because they are less sociologically stressful than the Clearnet, promoting depressurised forms of conversation³.

For Strickler, Dark Forests appeared as a response to "the ads, the tracking, the trolling, the hype, and other predatory behaviors" of the mainstream web⁴. The internet, which was supposed to foster knowledge production, community building, and identity

1 "NM WEBDEX," NM WEBDEX, accessed June 5, 2022, <https://webdex-y2k20.new-models.io>.

2 Caroline Busta, "The Internet Didn't Kill Counterculture - You Just Won't Find It on Instagram," *Document Journal*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2021/01/the-internet-didnt-kill-counterculture-you-just-wont-find-it-on-instagram/>.

3 Yancey Strickler, "The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet," *Medium*, June 5, 2019, <https://onezero.medium.com/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet-7dc3e68a7cbr>.

4 Strickler "The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet".

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formation became under threat with its commercialization. As a consequence, there was a move towards alternative digital spaces, leading to the emergence of Dark Forests. Strickler calls this the Web² era, where users simultaneously inhabit many different internets. Dark Forests maintain the ethos of early web hacker culture, which saw the web as a public common being threatened by its privatization. Their values of freedom and anonymity persisted beyond hacking communities in websites such as Reddit and 4chan. Nestled between the light of search engines and the shadow of their communication and community practices, existing “at the fringes of an increasingly hegemonic platform economy”⁵, these spaces are in some ways the original Dark Forests of the internet.

Rather than being anchored to specific urls, Dark Forest are able to spawn wherever affordances allow for closer or more private interactions. Technically, then, Dark Forests are using the exact same cables and satellites as the Clearnet, accessing both versions of the internet through the same devices. Often, entry in these spaces is mediated by Clearnet platforms. The members of Dark Forest communities continue to participate in Clearnet spaces. It is not a binary choice but rather a complementary way of being online. While highly informative of different media practices, the Clearnet/Dark Forest remains a conceptual and permeable boundary, a divide different from the technical one between the indexed web and the Dark Net, for example.

The communities from this digital scene can be of different sizes and scopes, varying in levels of intended visibility and reach, from niche and private group chats to publicly promoted servers. There’s no map to this space, it is ever changing and fluid. Its dwellers are not anchored to one specific place. Awareness of other communities might vary, but different Forests often overlap. Dark Forests are not composed of discrete audiences, but leaky ones. The dynamics of these worlds contribute to a “murky, viscous, zero-gravity dreamscape”⁶, a sticky subcultural medium in which communities dynamically grow and exchange materials operating as an open ecosystem. Becoming “leaky and lossy”⁷ like oral language, visual and textual forms dynamically seep through the layered web. For the writers of the NM WebDex, this form of vernacular acts as “soft-resistance against processes of systematization and over-determination” of the Clearnet, since selective

5 Daniël de Zeeuw and Marc Tuters, “Teh Internet Is Serious Business: On the Deep Vernacular Web and Its Discontents,” *Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (July 1, 2020): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-8233406>.

6 Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun, “The Lore Zone: How to Read the Internet,” February 28, 2022, <https://otherinter.net/research/lore/how-to-read-the-internet/>.

7 “NM WEBDEX,” par. 4.

obfuscation allows meaning to take more sheltered pathways⁸. The type of vernacular, or internet dialect, described in the WebDex is *lore*, a form of collective memory and self-mythologization which independent researchers Tiger Dingsun and Libby Marrs see as bringing cohesion to digital communities⁹.

The Dark Forest descriptor is loose enough to be applied to many communities spanning niches and locations across the web. Dark Forests are inherently plural, not one, but many different intersecting patches of the internet, proximal yet distinct. Beyond New Models, different communities began using it to describe themselves, whether aware or not of the theories which precede it. Not all digital communities which could be seen as Dark Forests call themselves with the term. Some are less directly engaged with the creation of knowledge regarding digital culture and therefore less interested in any form of labeling. Yet, the term remains relevant and useful for researchers to operationalise and analyze a series of digital spaces and practices regardless of whether self-identification occurs or not.

What follows, is an experiential, intimate, and loosely academic navigation of the Dark Forest space. This is an invitation to join me in this speculative journey through theory and practice, and to collectively reflect on how Dark Forests construct an alternative internet imaginary. To contextualize its origins and belief system, I outline a very partial history of the internet, bridging media theories which explain the process of privatization and platformisation of the web. From this framework what emerges is my proposal of a dual image of the internet, consisting of conditions set by the Clearnet and of the Dark Forest.

I then explore prevalent vernacular practices, namely the theory of lore and the history of incollectuals, to shed light on parts of the otherwise hidden Dark Forest space. The purpose is to offer a heuristic for reflections over subversive internet behavior. I then reveal my own personal experience in Dark Forests, reflecting on the limitations of these spaces. With my contribution, I wish to draw a vague map of the space, reproducing the core of the image of the Dark Forest without betraying the ethos of an intrinsically blurry scene.

⁸ "NM WEBDEX," par. 4.

⁹ Libby Marrs and Tiger Dingsun, "The Lore Zone: Introduction: 9999," December 17, 2021, <https://otherinter.net/research/lore/9999/>.

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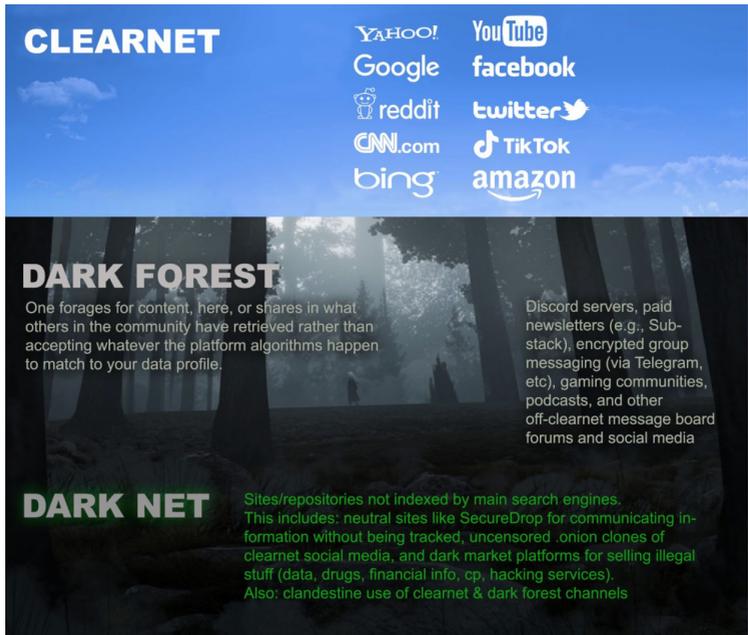


Fig. 1 *Layered Internet*. Digital image. Stolbun institute, accessed June 7, 2022.

II

A Partial History of the Internet

FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO CYBERCULTURE TO PLATFORM CULTURE

Given the multiplicity of meanings the internet can take, it might be misleading to even speak of *the* internet as a single object, raising a fundamental question: “Can we write Internet histories if we do not know what the Internet is?”¹⁰. Janet Abbate has argued that the field of internet histories research is elusive¹¹. Owing to its vast and undefined nature, any analytical frame used to describe the internet will always be partial and flawed. Yet, there is a tangible cultural reality in seeing this complex and prismatic object as one distinct global system¹². While there is no one path

10 Janet Abbate, “What and Where Is the Internet? (Re)Defining Internet Histories,” *Internet Histories*, March 28, 2017, 8, <https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.uba.uva.nl/doi/abs/10.1080/24701475.2017.1305836>.

11 Abbate, “What and Where Is the Internet? (Re)Defining Internet Histories,” 8.

12 Abbate, “What and Where Is the Internet? (Re)Defining Internet Histories,” 13.

for the internet, there are multiple, entangled points of entries from which manifold maps can be drawn. According to Richard Rogers's framework of periodization, the point of such mode of analysis is not to devise definite, subsequent, and strict temporal categories. While eras might be epistemologically distinctive, relating to different key moments of internet history, they might overlap or be interpreted differently¹³. The periodization is itself a temporary and with the potential to be rewritten¹⁴. Therefore, my approach to internet history is a possible interpretation of events.

The ideological foundations behind the internet as a tool for profit making, begins in an unlikely place, the 60s Californian countercultural movements. In his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner argues that throughout the 1960s computers were seen as technologies of dehumanization, centralized bureaucracy, and rationalization of social life¹⁵. It was the countercultural movement of that period which led to the transformation of this view into the belief that ubiquitous computing was the ideal technological tool for a decentralized, egalitarian, harmonious and free society. Steward Brand and the network of San Francisco Bay-area entrepreneurs brought together by his magazine, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, were especially influential in this process. Dale Beran notes that Brand's popular slogan "We are as gods" resonated with desires to transform consciousness through technology, seeing computers as the new acid which could awaken people and transform their ways of thinking and interacting with one another¹⁶.

Brand's network brought together members of countercultural communes with the emerging technological hub of Silicon Valley. As this union and the network that Whole Earth was building became more established, computing and the developing technology of the internet also became the symbols of a new economic era. In a seemingly contradictory manner, counterculture embraced the forces of capital, technology, and the state, as the internet especially begun to be seen as a tool to build new businesses and reject traditional forms of government¹⁷. According to Beran, from a countercultural homesteader Brand had transformed into a

13 "Periodizing Web Archiving: Biographical, Event-Based, National and Autobiographical." in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, by Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (SAGE, 2018), 43.

14 "Periodizing Web Archiving: Biographical, Event-Based, National and Autobiographical." 43.

15 Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

16 Dale Beran, *It Came from Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memed Donald Trump into Office* (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2019), 36.

17 Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 8.

businessman by the mid-80s, just like “yuppies turned into yuppies”, becoming a generation more and more engulfed by consumerism¹⁸.

This apparently incongruous union is what Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron all the *Californian ideology*, in which right-wing neo-liberalism, counter-culture radicalism and technological determinism unexpectedly collide¹⁹. Neoliberal in its narratives of empowerment of the individual and enhancement of personal freedom through technologies, the Californian ideology implies that software can reduce the power of the nation state and dismantle existing social, political, and legal power structures²⁰.

As the internet became a private service, the new category of tech entrepreneurs had to figure out how to make it profitable. Monetization of access to the internet did not seem to be a sustainable system to generate continuous profit, as the dot-com bubble and its burst would soon come to demonstrate. The web had to be repurposed around a new structure which would make online activity lucrative. According to Tarnoff, the first person to successfully build a website capable of coming up with such a model, maintain this success through the dot-com crash, and still remain relevant to this day is Pierre Omidyar. AuctionWeb was a side project he quickly developed during Labor weekend 1995. The idea was to have a simple website where any user could put items for sale and sell to the highest bidder. His view stood in opposition to the dot-com corporations which seemed to see the internet as a simple storefront. For Omidyar, on the internet, individuals could be both a producer and a consumer²¹. The website quickly gained popularity, leading to increased traffic and higher hosting fees. To cover expenses, he took cuts from transactions, turning a profit rapidly. To avoid having to mediate disputes, Omidyar established a forum for user reviews, emphasizing active user participation. By 1996, AuctionWeb generated \$10,000 monthly. In 1997, Omidyar renamed his company eBay. The following year, eBay would go public and generate \$47.4 million in revenue²². The social internet was a profitable internet, a first consolidation of the neoliberal internet driven by Californian ideology.

18 Beran, *It Came from Something Awful*, 36.

19 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Science as Culture* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09505439609526455>.

20 Barbrook and Cameron, 3.

21 Ben Tarnoff, *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future*. Verso Books, 2022. 63.

22 “eBay Inc. Announces Fourth Quarter and 1998 Year End Financial Results,” accessed June 19, 2022, <https://investors.ebayinc.com/investor-news/press-release-details/1999/EBay-Inc-Announces-Fourth-Quarter-and-1998-Year-End-Financial-Results/default.aspx>.

Platform is the term which will come to define the following phase of the internet. Due to its ubiquitous use, sometimes one can forget that the concept of platform is a metaphorical one. A platform recalls characteristics of equality, of staging and elevating conversations onto an even field. The choice of such a term is not an unintentional one. Tarleton Gillespie investigated this trend of referring to companies as platforms as a substitute or in addition to “website, company, service, forum, and community”²³. If these websites could be called platforms, then they could be set apart from legacy mass media, becoming more appealing to users, advertisers, and clients alike, as well as portraying a “comforting sense of technical neutrality and progressive openness”²⁴. The rise of platforms as the primary infrastructure and economic model of the Web 2 has been referred to as platformisation, with the programmability of social media platforms marking a new phase of the web as modular²⁵. One of the main attributes of platforms are Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) which allow for user data to be easily exported and acquired by third parties, making them the tools for the construction of the data market by rendering external web data “platform ready”²⁶.

The platformisation of the web was supported by the newfound profitability of user data. Shoshana Zuboff argues that, as platforms figured out how to transform users' profiles and digital behavior into data doubles, surveillance capitalism came into full force²⁷. Revenue and market control could be produced through the prediction and modification of human behavior. New forms of communication were invented and integrated into the social web to create data from previously non existing or non-quantified types of online interactions. Internet behavior was channeled through affordances as a way to translate online activity into metrics. To boost participation, platforms programmed ways to reward user interaction, making visibility a key mechanism of Web 2²⁸. Fearing that one's content might not be considered rele-

23 Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>.

24 Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” 360.

25 Anne Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready,” *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 2056305115603080, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>.

26 Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web”, 8.

27 de Zeeuw and Tuters, “The Internet Is Serious Business,” 217, 218.

28 Taina Bucher, “Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 7 (November 1, 2012): 1175, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159>.

vant, users followed platform logics to render it as visible as possible, eventually making themselves algorithmically recognisable²⁹. Becoming principles of their own subjection, users economized the platform's function by transforming sharing of personal interests into normative online behavior, what Taina Bucher calls participatory subjectivity³⁰.

The web had become social, and the social web had become profitable. Slowly climbing upwards, this privatization reached beyond the architectural layers and began to touch its most human layer, the user. Before this phase, the ability of users to play with one's identity was embraced as one of the internet's liberating characteristics. The assumption was that the internet could actualise the separation of the body and the soul, of physical and mental locations, the virtual world being a site of experimentation where issues linked to identity would be long gone³¹. Discrimination would cease to exist once the material, raced body was not present anymore. Authentic selves could be revealed and an authentic public sphere could be formed. It wasn't long until this vision was quickly clouded. While raced bodies might be hidden through anonymity, raced institutions and cultures could not be dismantled by the web. The internet was flooded by spamming, trolling, phishing, scamming, child pornography, actively reproducing offline forms of violence or conflict, or creating entirely new, native digital ones.

The proposed solution to these issues was authenticity and real name policies as prerequisites for online participation. Platforms in particular promised to transform the problematic internet into a consumer and business friendly environment through the connection of users real identities and well defined data doubles³². In 2009 Zuckerberg had publicly denounced online anonymity: "You have one identity. . . The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. . . Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."³³ The public debate, dubbed the *nymwars*, saw on one side authenticity as a prerequisite for being online, and on the other side a prismatic view on digital identity reflecting the multifaceted nature

29 Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms" (MIT Press, January 1, 2013), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.670.4346&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

30 Bucher, "Want to Be on the Top!", 1175.

31 Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 104.

32 de Zeeuw and Tuters, "Teh Internet Is Serious Business," 218.

33 David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (Simon and Schuster, 2011), 9.

of the offline self. Chris Poole and his 4chan afforded an alternative approach by creating space for unrestricted, temporary and anonymous interaction. If Zuckerberg and Facebook represent the epitome of *face culture*, then Poole and 4chan encapsulate the essence of *mask culture*.³⁴

Face culture normalizes constructing a stable, quantifiable profile, a solid longitudinal data set that follows individuals' online behavior across the internet. Mask culture is instead rooted in a subcultural attitude of dissimulative identity play, countering the governing imperatives of mainstream platform web. The Deep Vernacular Web (DVW) is the loosely knit network of forums and sites at the margins of the platformized web which best embodies the aesthetics and imaginaries of mask culture³⁵. The DVW refuses to follow the imperatives of authenticity embedded in platforms. Instead, it understands the self through a folkloric cultural sensibility rooted in cyberspace separationism, an early internet characterisation of the self which sees the real and the virtual as radically disjunct. On a technical level, the affordances of DVW spaces allow for a sensitivity towards identity play, seeing online interaction as "constructed, malleable, and contingent"³⁶. By preventing the establishment of formal markers of identity, anonymity and pseudonymity allow users to perform their identity through discursive practices.

THE SELF AS PLATFORM READY

Much has changed from the time of nymwars. Today, having one stable digital identity is still embedded in platforms, but so is jumping between different types of online presence. Instagram supports up to five accounts on one device, enabling users to seamlessly switch and share a single account among multiple users. Visibility of one's content can be regulated through affordances such as the *close friends* feature, or through vernacular practice such as a *finsta*, or a fake Instagram account reserved for a private public. As users are given more chances to manage visibility, mainstream platforms now allow, to an extent, a kaleidoscopic form of self-representation.

As argued in *The Stack* by Benjamin Bratton, social media companies supercharged the ability to calculate targeted

34 de Zeeuw and Tuters, "Teh Internet Is Serious Business."

35 de Zeeuw and Tuters, "Teh Internet Is Serious Business," 216.

36 de Zeeuw and Tuters, "Teh Internet Is Serious Business," 221.

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micro-demographics, leading to almost an excess of identity³⁷. Strict rules of identification were inevitably met by legal troubles, making Zuckerberg's nymwars position unfit to the scale of platform's operations. Opening platforms towards alternative and parallel modes of self-representation also allows more people to be online and for longer. The more one is allowed to play around and control one's sociality, the more one can seamlessly integrate online and offline life. The more users invest into their digital self, the more users will choose to stay online. Users' digital profiles "become their personas"³⁸, intensifying the process of artificial subjectification. As platforms push and push for participation and reproduction of offline selves into a digital version, pieces of data merge into the singular image of the user.

The feeds curated by algorithms are *For You*, as TikTok's navigation page recalls. So we align ourselves to the products of algorithmic curation, personifying software. What is taking place is a subjectification for which users form identities revolving around the content presented to them, identifying with a datafied reflection of themselves. Gillespie calls this a "production of calculated publics"³⁹, as algorithmic construction of audiences shapes the audience's sense of itself. The self becomes entangled with online content production and consumption, in a recursive transformation through which online behavior becomes a form of identity creation. As the internet transformed through platformisation, and as web data became platform ready, so did the self.

Mainstream social media platforms have advanced and accelerated a constant state of identity performance. On the surface, authenticity is still the imperative of social media interaction. In practice, performance is inherent to online self-presentation. Instagram used to be the place for #brunch photos and heavily filtered landscape photography. Minimalist feeds were carefully composed to reproduce mundane offline life. As users became more habituated in their use of social media, the late 2010s marked the beginning of the era of the selfie. Encouraged by the launch of the iPhone 4 front-facing camera in June 2010, users began looking at their device as a mirror. The new trope for the constantly online millennial was the one of self-absorption, concretised in the digital-first object of the selfie.

Content published on Instagram turned from referencing *real* offline life to becoming a feed of images constructed or performed for the online world. Two events in particular can be used to pin

37 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack, Software Studies* (MIT Press, 2016), 9.

38 Bratton, *The Stack, Software Studies* 9.

39 Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," 22.

down a change in perception of the online self. Firstly, Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* performed online from April to September 2014, and secondly, Kim Kardashian's *Selfish* book, a collection of her selfies, published in May 2015. Artist Amalia Ulman used her Instagram page as a site for experimentation with her online image. She began posting mirror selfies, shopping sprees, and plastic surgery interventions, using hashtags and captions contributing to the trope of a vapid Instagram girl. Ulman performed gender and staged a persona through experimentation with what she uploaded on Instagram. These posts were all *fake* in the sense that they did not truthfully represent the irl life of the artist. They were, however *true* in the sense that they referenced narratives already present in the online world, carefully constructing a fully url persona. The work, which could be placed within the then emerging genre of post-internet art, invited to reflect on the plasticity and unreliability of online self presentation. At the time of this artistic performance, Ulman's work was a sharp and unseen challenge to the idea of online personas, as her ability to fool her audience into thinking the change in mode of posting represented a change in her offline personality⁴⁰. Online interaction was not understood as a performance yet.

Kim Kardashian's selfie book titled *Selfish* became the quintessential object of the mid 2010s influencer culture. Kim Kardashian was one of the first figures to truly establish herself as famous for the fact of being famous. Her book of digital self-representations marked the beginning of a new phase of self-branding, influencer culture, and construction of online persona. Turning her life, her image, her body into a continuous spectacle, Kim Kardashian is the epitome of online persona production and performance. Her book concretized selfies as the ultimate form of visual self-representation in the age of digital media. The face irreversibly transformed into a site for play and commercialization, a tool for construction of a persona that can be digitized, marketed, and profited from.

Today, the fictional creation of online personas is the standard, not the exception. Filters, face swaps, and masks are integrated parts of social media platforms. A fictitious presentation of one's life online the norm. The question: "is this real?" seems to matter less and less. Artificial or fictional influencers is one of many examples of this, such as the CGI model and influencer Lil Miquela, or FourFront's network of actors performing the role of influencers on TikTok. The various fictional characters played out by the

40 Cadence Kinsey, "The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands," *BBC*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160307-the-instagram-artist-who-fooled-thousands>.

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actors of FourFront read scripts analogous to what an actual influencer might say. The self is played with not only through visual modifications, but also through the embodiment of posting styles and vernaculars. Most importantly, inauthenticity is not hidden but part of the appeal: Lil Miquela is purposefully designed to fall into the uncanny valley, the FourFront's characters have followers because they are fictional.

All these experimentations are bound by the affordances of social media, to which users reconfigure themselves. As user internalize participatory subjectivity, Dean Kissick argues that the self is “key unit of exchange” in the attention economy, an era marked by the transformation of the self into “consumer brands and consumer objects”⁴¹. Clout-chasing, the pursuing of social and monetary value through onliness, inherently entails some form of platform alignment, of making yourself platform ready. These trajectories have converged to a point of internalized participatory subjectivity and almost complete platform alignment. However, there are clear signs of disruption in this seamless integration. Cracks on the screen revealed how the accelerated fusion of online and offline realities has paradoxically resulted in its divide.

III

Conditions of the Internet

To uncover how Dark Forests construct an alternative internet imaginary and the function it holds, it is fundamental to understand the core issues these subcultures find within the current imagination of the web, or the Clearnet. To do so, I propose five conditions or axioms of the contemporary mainstream internet space which Dark Forests attempt to respond to with five parallel solutions. Like many other subcultures, Dark Forests establish their subcultural ideology through differentiation from the mainstream. Hence, to imagine the Dark Forest, one must first imagine the Clearnet, explaining why these five conditions I propose are dual. Operating as a heuristic device, the axioms are abstracted from both new media theories and empirical case studies, complementing established academic work with the ones of independent and subcultural media critics working within the Dark

⁴¹ Dean Kissick, “The Downward Spiral: Persona (Part I),” *Spike Art Magazine*, October 13, 2021, par. 8, <https://spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/dean-kissick-downward-spiral-persona>.

Forest space. Thus, the proposed framework acts as a field guide to navigate the Clearnet/Dark Forest imaginary.

CONDITION 1: DATA EXTRACTION VS. ALTERNATIVE MONETIZATION SYSTEMS

The platformisation of the internet entailed the introduction of new means of monetary extraction from participation onto the social web, what Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism. Platforms disguise the price of participation onto their websites by rendering access to them free, while extracting value from digital behavioral data⁴². Such practice creates an opaque and unbalanced relationship. As social, commercial, political, cultural, and bureaucratic life have all begun to be digitized, it has become increasingly harder to opt out of being online, and hence opt out of data extracting practices.

Dark Forests instead tend to be “minimally and straightforwardly” monetized⁴³, meaning that the price to pay is upfront and explicit. Since many Dark Forests organize around independent publishers and artists, monetization often entails a form of monetary support of their work or for access to their network. Through Patreon, content creators can paywall exclusive content behind monthly subscriptions, as well as facilitate creation of a tight knit community by linking it to Discord, allowing paying subscribers access to a private server. In the case of Substack, bloggers can offer similar subscription systems, directly monetizing access rather than behavior.

Beyond Patreon, some Dark Forests are also interested in the creation of alternative systems of profit-making beyond data extraction. A notable project is the one of Urbit, which has been popular particularly amongst token-backed Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) and other communities interested in the blockchain or cryptocurrencies. Urbit is an operating system which allows single users to run their own server. Users can acquire a *planet* through cryptocurrency by running 30,000 lines of codes that create a unique network address and digital identity. Planets are fully functioning operating systems interacting with other units on a peer-to-peer network. On top of these units is a shell of chat and web publishing apps, as well as API gateways for building simple tools. All the data of a planet is centralized

42 Zuboff, “Big Other.”

43 Busta, “The Internet Didn’t Kill Counterculture—You Just Won’t Find It on Instagram,” par. 17.

and owned by the person behind such a planet, never shared with outside parties. The network is fixed sized and semi decentralized, meaning that Urbit's creators cannot change or delete planets. Urbit lets its user organize in their own communities, allowing them to grow into a "free digital republic"⁴⁴ without any top-down constraints.

Other Dark Forest communities have been working with similar ideas to propose alternatives to Clearnet platforms. For example, New Models, Joshua Citarella, and Interdependence have been working together as a decentralized media organization to build channel.xyz, a tool to accommodate post-Web 2 communities and creators. Channel was first announced in January 2022 as a plan to create a hyper-structure alternative to mainstream platforms and payment system, with the aim to act as a "pseudonymous community registry"⁴⁵. The project has currently raised financial support through the release of a founder Non-Fungible Token (NFT). The possession of the crypto-enabled memberships would grant access to content streams, distribution of subscription payments, treasury toolkit, and seamless integrations with different related services across platforms⁴⁶, essentially centralizing community formation, media consumption, and monetization into one space.

Not all Dark Forest communities employ monetization systems, especially ones not organized around independent content creators, with many even criticizing the embrace of cryptocurrencies and NFTs. Alternative monetization invites an exit from Clearnet spaces, a departure perhaps too drastic for most members of Dark Forests. Furthermore, while this type of financing provides independent media outlets the monetary incentive to constitute their audiences into Dark Forest communities, their scope is still quite limited. Even though they offered a promising alternative, the creators of Channel, for example, have not released any updates regarding its launch since January 2023, proving the difficulty in establishing platform alternatives. Additionally, Dark Forest dwellers are still subject to Clearnet data extraction practices they wish to counter. Participation in private group chats rather than public feeds does not stop data tracking from happening, no amount of private Substack reading will elude one's profile from programmatic advertising. Dark Forests can only afford partial and short-term withdrawal from the monetised and platformized web.

44 What Is Urbit?, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo4AKTCDavc>.

45 "Channel."

46 "Channel."

Fundamentally linked to platformisation is the pervasive employment of algorithms as tools for the operationalization of platform logics. They select information based on relevance metrics, help navigate through immense databases, organize interactions amongst publics, map user preferences, calculate trends, and predict discussions. Beyond organizing and indexing data algorithms suggest what there is to know and how to know it, influencing individual's participation into social and political discourse⁴⁷. Thus, algorithms have become the new key logic of how to govern information. As individual's media diets are increasingly determined and organized by them, algorithmic tools have begun to take the role of legacy institutions, especially in the case of media, culture and art. Traditional modes of curation and gatekeeping have been increasingly substituted by digital intermediaries, which has influenced the way media, culture and art are produced. As users and producers are habituated to their logics, they reshape and modify their behavior to fit the requirements of the algorithms they depend on⁴⁸.

Rather than a feed personalized through algorithms, the users of Dark Forests spaces share content which can then be *foraged* by others⁴⁹, contributing to community-based content aggregation. Such a system eliminates the need to monitor and monetise users' preference for feed optimisation or AdTech. This system works well for niche interests and subcultures which algorithms might not even fully be able to understand and predict. Content aggregation, when put in the hands of non-algorithmic curators, has the potential to produce a more nuanced, detailed, and overall interesting feed. The role of subcultural capital in Dark Forests comes into play here. Since the communities at hand are filtered ones, accessible only after demonstrating a degree of knowledge or interest or time investment, the concentration of subcultural knowledge is higher in Dark Forests than in the surface web. The type of content curation of these smaller communities obviously cannot be scaled to the wider internet. The databases which algorithms manage to organize in seconds are way too large for human curation, hence user based organization of content works best for smaller, more thematically focused communities.

47 Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," 1.

48 Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," 22.

49 "Stolbun.Institute," accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.stolbun.institute/seasons/shadowlands/framework>.

Communities which thrive in Dark Forest spaces span interests, ranging from gaming and music, to politics, art, and digital culture. Given their sheltered nature, it is impossible to give a precise map of all of the specific communities operating within the Dark Forest system.

CONDITION 3: TERMS OF SERVICES VS. COMMUNITY MODERATION

De-platforming entails the removal of an account on a social media platform for breaking its Terms of Service (ToS), the most striking example of which was the ban of @realDonaldTrump in January 2021. This measure is a fairly extreme one and almost only taken in the case of overtly hateful content promoted by individuals with large followings. Smaller accounts might then escape the risk of being de-platformed but might fall victim to softer measures such as shadow banning. Shadow banning is a content moderation practice which limits the visibility of a user's profile and posts. Literature is extremely limited on this practice. Platforms are not transparent over exactly how shadow banning works, as such companies often deny the very existence of the practice. Understanding of shadow banning remains, in many ways, anecdotal, rendering any form of assessment of it a mere "interpretation of possible motivations" by researchers or by users themselves⁵⁰. However, the practices employed by platforms to determine relevance seem to not be as distant from what users understand shadow banning to be. Following reports of suppression of visibility in autosuggestions, Twitter commented that visibility on their platform depended on relevance, a metric also calculated based on the identification of "bad-faith actors who intend to manipulate or divide the conversation"⁵¹. Users are identified by markers of authenticity (e.g., confirmed email address, presence of profile image), online behavior (e.g., follows, followers, retweets). So, while Twitter might not see this as shadow banning, these are, in practice, modes of selective visibility restriction likely present across platforms.

⁵⁰ Sarah Myers West, "Censored, Suspended, Shadowbanned: User Interpretations of Content Moderation on Social Media Platforms," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (November 1, 2018): 4374, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818773059>.

⁵¹ Vijaya Gadde and Kayvon Beykpour, "Setting the Record Straight on Shadow Banning," *Twitter Blog* (blog), July 26, 2018, para. 4, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/Setting-the-record-straight-on-shadow-banning.

Shadow banning has affected independent artists and media outlets active in Dark Forest spaces⁵², and the interest of these communities into alternatives to ToS and platform governance consolidates into community-based moderation. In Dark Forests, shadow banning doesn't exactly exist. Moderation in general is not outsourced to algorithms, as communities tend to self-regulate. On Discord, for example, moderation is both vertical and horizontal. Owners and admins of servers have the power to reprimand users who do not respect the rules established by the community. Such rules can be both explicitly stated in the server or be implicit understandings and sensibilities. In the second case, social norms become established through time, and while dynamic and evolving with the server, they often reflect the make-up of the original creators. Sometimes bots might be employed by admins to facilitate moderation, as members can use text-based commands to report others. Moderators can then review these reports and warn, temporarily kick out, or ban members if needed. Another method of moderation employed in some servers is a form of *quarantine*. Members whose behavior is considered inappropriate are revoked permission to participate in most channels and placed in a dedicated one, recalling the practice of quarantine also applied by Reddit⁵³. Such forms of moderation can be more or less tightly implemented by admins, depending on the tolerance and community norms of the server.

In general, a lot of Dark Forest spaces display less nefarious behaviors than the somewhat comparable DVW spaces of anonymous image boards. Especially if members are invested in being part of a community, breaking social norms is disincentivized. This is not to say that all Dark Forests are devoid of problematic or antagonistic behavior. Being a space for the *extremely online*, it is not uncommon to encounter edgy or subversive behavior. Dark Forests can easily become isolated, with the possibility of turning darker and darker if the consensus shifts. In general, since these spaces of conversation are “depressurised”⁵⁴, behavior that might be seen as somewhat problematic in the Clearnet is more likely accepted in the Dark Forest. Furthermore, the self-regulatory conditions of Dark Forests are not scalable to larger spaces. Community-based

52 Claudia Tilley, “Terms of Service: On Algorithmic Collapse & the Culture of Compliance Enforced by Covert Shadow Bans || Atractivoquenobello,” *AQNB*, June 3, 2021, para. 1, <https://www.aqnb.com/2021/06/03/terms-of-service-on-algorithmic-collapse-the-culture-of-compliance-enforced-by-covert-shadow-bans/>.

53 “Quarantined Subreddits,” *Reddit Help*, accessed June 11, 2022, <https://reddit.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Subreddits>.

54 Busta, “The Internet Didn’t Kill Counterculture—You Just Won’t Find It on Instagram,” 11.

content moderation can only work within smaller groups, making it ideal for Dark Forests but unfit for the Clearnet.

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CONDITION 4: FACE CULTURE VS. MASK CULTURE

Linked to moderation of online behavior is the conditions set by the Clearnet's face culture. Authenticity, real names, stable identities, and real photos of oneself are the requirements of Clearnet spaces, whereas Dark Forests often accommodate a broader spectrum of modes of self-presentation. Practices of anonymity and pseudonymity are common in such spaces, especially when accommodated by the platforms they organize in. Anonymity has been extensively investigated throughout internet history, being characterized as complex and working on a continuum rather than on a binary⁵⁵. When enacted online, anonymity is complicated by the affordances of the medium it is mediated by, as being anonymous online depends both on the appropriation of certain technologies, and on practices relating to modes of sociality⁵⁶. Employing technologies such as proxy, VPN, or Tor, aids users in achieving a degree of anonymity online. However, absolute technical anonymity is still difficult to achieve for most users, not only because of a knowledge barrier, but also because of the permeability and ubiquity of tracking systems⁵⁷. Practices of anonymity are therefore often social ones, involving the employment of online communication practices and behaviors. On the Clearnet, such practices are discouraged as demonstrated by the position taken by its representatives during the nymwars.

Conversely, masks and other pseudonyms are often employed by Dark Forest users. Usernames for platforms such as Discord or Twitch are rarely real names. As users establish themselves into a community and play with their presentation towards others, they might even create personas. Such characters have the potential to develop into wide scale phenomena. Angelicismoi, for example, is

55 Emily van der Nagel and Jordan Frith, "Anonymity, Pseudonymity, and the Agency of Online Identity: Examining the Social Practices of r/Gonewild," *First Monday* 20, no. 3 (February 17, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i3.5615>.

56 Thais Sardá et al., "Understanding Online Anonymity," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 4 (May 1, 2019): 557–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719842074>; Gabriella Coleman, "How Has the Fight for Anonymity and Privacy Advanced since Snowden's Whistle-Blowing?," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 4 (May 1, 2019): 565–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719843867>; Hua Qian and Craig R. Scott, "Anonymity and Self-Disclosure on Weblogs," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 4 (July 1, 2007): 1428–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00380.x>.

57 Coleman, "How Has the Fight for Anonymity and Privacy Advanced since Snowden's Whistle-Blowing?"; Sardá et al., "Understanding Online Anonymity."

an anonymous blogger from New York involved in the Dark Forest scene. Their Substack, gone private around May 2022, is a place in which the author anonymously discusses an array of topics such as art and culture, the *vibe shift*, micro-celebrities drama, or the revival of religion in online culture through *networked spiritualism*. Their tone is a mix of sincerity and irony, often using anti-woke language and slurs. The mask of the angel protects the author, giving them the possibility of endless experimentation, both with the pushing the limits of the Overton window and with modes of self-presentation.

The mask culture of Dark Forests is not as extreme as perhaps the one of the DVW, as it is much easier to create a stable persona on websites such as Twitch, Discord or Instagram than it is on 4chan. Furthermore, the mask culture of these places does not produce impersonal spaces. On the contrary, it almost seems that some of the members of these communities find safety in pseudonymity, leading to the creation of spaces in which users might share deeply personal and private conversations. While these are essentially conversations between strangers, the medium of a Dark Forest allows these relationships to be more similar to friendships. Especially on Discord, the format of a group chat leads to the establishment of fairly stable relationships amongst users. These are not the illusionary, parasocial interactions audiences establish with, for example, the content creators of the Clearnet. But they are not transparent or equal friendships either, as they are mediated by the presence of a pseudonymous mask. What emerges in these spaces is a culture of collectivity and friendship through veiled identities, in which the mask is not seen as a way to deceive but as a tool for more private and hence sincere interactions.

CONDITION 5: PLATFORM VISIBILITY VS. SHELTERED SPACES

Reflecting on the previous conditions, what seems to be the crux of the distinction between Clearnet and Dark Forests is the idea of visibility. In particular, the relation between visibility, communication, and conflict. Bogna Konior, author of a 2020 article on the Dark Forest theory, argues that to enter digital spaces, we are asked for a “passport” built on “communication, screening the self, telling the truth about ourselves, revealing or concealing our coordinates”⁵⁸. The chaos created by an excess of

⁵⁸ Bogna Konior, “The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet,” *BLOK MAGAZINE*, July 6, 2020, 14, <http://blokmagazine.com/the-dark-forest-theory-of-the-internet/>.

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otherness leads to a lack of trust, and so “epistemological paranoia settles in: what is true? Who is on my side? Where is my side?”⁵⁹. The solution to the endless search for truth online is a growing and unyielding need to communicate, with users feel the need to signal a safe sociality, as according to Konior, exchanges are “designed for maximum clarity to pre-empt interrogation but require endless disclaimers nevertheless”⁶⁰.

While communication, as established by Liu Cixin’s theory, inevitably leads to conflict, users of the social web still feel compelled to share online. Believing perhaps that what is missing is contextualisation, clarifications, and good intentions, the solution is a form of correct communication able to resolve conflict once and for all. If everybody makes themselves known, if everybody truthfully shares their identity, if the Clearnet and its users can read one another, then benevolence would prevail over conflict⁶¹. However, Konior suggests that online, the more one is visible, the easier it is to become a target, and the more detailed the descriptions of oneself are, the easier it is to be governed.

In an ever-ending loop, communication and conflict seem to feed into each other. The ultimate beneficiaries of this accumulation of noise appear to be the platforms which afford, monitor, and encourage communication in the first place, ultimately affording, monitoring, and encouraging conflict.

The visibility afforded by Dark Forests is much more partial than in the Clearnet, and the absence of platform logics eliminates algorithmically incentivised participatory subjectivity. Hence, communication is not promoted for the sake of engagement and profit. This is not to say that these spaces do not promote increased user interaction and amplification of emotions. On the contrary, these socially rich spaces often require members to be constantly logged in to keep up with the community. In group chats and servers, the conversation amongst members can be relentless, especially during events such as voice chats or livestreams. Hundreds of messages can be exchanged in just minutes, making catching up with a community quite complicated. The *you just had to be there* meme trope refers to the vast amount of time one is required to invest in such groups, being constantly online to make sure not to miss out on any important conversation. Conversely, the invitation to log off, or *touch grass*, indicates how being extremely online or too invested in these spaces is ultimately unhealthy. So, while Dark Forests’ sheltered nature might reduce

59 Konior, “The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet,” 7.

60 Konior, “The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet,” 17.

61 Konior, “The Dark Forest: Theory of the Internet,” 15.

the conflictual implication of communication, it might also create endless participation loops, keeping extremely online people online for even longer.

INTERNET'S
DARK FORESTS

CONCLUDING REMARKS: A LAYERED IMAGINARY

What emerges from these axioms is a dual image of the internet. The layer of Clearnet as a place of control, surveillance, and automation, in which non-transparent governance leads users to feel dangerously visible, hence devoid of privacy and of nuance, governed by the logics of technological determinism and surveillance capitalism.

In the Dark Forest one can instead elude some of such processes. This layer is one for forgiving relationships, close connections, and community building where pseudonymous sincere interactions can occur without fear of unmasking. A space conducive of cultural production and media critique, as well as of humor and distraction. A place in which one does not simply imagine alternative worlds but creates them discursively and practically.

How can Dark Forest dwellers survive within this dual and oppositional ecosystem? What are these practices which actualize the imaginary? Having detailed the theoretical dimension of the Dark Forest imaginary and of its binary relation to the Clearnet, I will turn to the second purpose of the Dark Forest metaphor, addressing these questions. In the following section, I concentrate on how the community dynamics of Dark Forests employ innovative forms of vernacular to make space for themselves online.

IV

Into the Lore

The Dark Forest internet is not easy to navigate. While certainly not as technically challenging as entering the Dark Net, the “murky zero gravity space”⁶² Dark Forests are tactically gate kept by its dwellers. Resisting the Clearnet’s visibility imperative, the communities of this layer of the internet employ a number of practices to remain in the shadows. Paywalls, exclusive newsletters, and private accounts are some of the ways in which content can be protected. Overall, however, *subcultural capital* is the largest barrier to entry into these spaces. The community backrooms of

62 Marris and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022.

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Dark Forests remain hidden to most. In this chapter, I navigate a possible path to entry, exploring the non-gravitational imaginary through the lens of a particular form of subcultural vernacular: lore.

Independent researchers Tiger Dingsun and Libby Marrs theorize that what brings cohesion in spaces such as Dark Forests is lore, a form of collective memory and self-mythologization. The authors are part of Other Internet, a decentralized research organization involved in the study and production of social technology regarding Web 3 communities and Dark Forest spaces. Their essays from *The Lore Zone* series engage with the folkloric dimensions of digital culture by updating our understanding of how oral cultures have transformed through technology. Such approach indicates a return to early cybertheory which saw cyberspace as a “locus for a primary oral culture and its attendant humanity and sociability in a simultaneously textual environment.”⁶³

Online practices in early cyberculture have been seen as attempts to maintain traditional forms of oral communication while also embracing technological change, layering forms of communications⁶⁴. Understanding early online spaces as intimate and private and as places for the creation of communities, folklore served to authenticate an identity which could not be verified through blue ticks or real-name policies. It was the knowledge local to specific web spaces that functioned as a token of belonging. Such characteristics of oral culture, as well as its evanescence, inaccuracy, and reproducibility are now visible in the vernacular meme culture of the internet.

According to Marrs and Dingsun, lore is a collection of memes, jargon, behavior, knowledge, aesthetic sensitivity, personas, narratives, but also simple motifs, words, images, grammatical patterns. Similarly to research characterizing memes as cultural capital, the authors find that these media artifacts compose a body of in-group knowledge and contribute to community formation⁶⁵. Lore pieces function as a sort of mnemonic device to remember a collective history established through a prolonged and communal digital proximity⁶⁶. Marrs and Dingsun argue that producing and distributing lore is a process of self-mythization, in which empty signifiers acquire weight through layering of meaning: like small but heavy objects, elements of lore structure and signal group

63 Jan Fernback, “Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-Mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture,” *New Media & Society* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444803005001902>.

64 Fernback, “Legends on the Net.”

65 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” December 17, 2021, par. 13.

66 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022, par. 6.

culture. As groups synthesize their culture and memory into lore, they contribute to an ever-evolving subcultural canon. Marrs and Dingsun see lore as formed amid trolling and sincerity, standing in contrast to the more formal requirements of mainstream digital media lexicons.

Memes often feel like they reference larger stories. They indeed frequently originate in places where collective world-building is much more accommodated⁶⁷. Pieces of lore can potentially form out of anything, even in the temporary and fluid proto-community of a TikTok livestream⁶⁸. The more sheltered and ephemeral the space is, the more its dwellers will try to establish ways to maintain a common language and identity. The affordances of platforms hence greatly influence the dynamics of lore production. Ones that promote collective experiences will more likely be conducive of lore creation than ones inviting inward-facing ones.

Through time, pieces of lore become a lexicon, and a semio-sphere begins to form⁶⁹. The vocabulary, attitudes, or visual sensibilities of the group compose a community based semiotic universe. Any new piece of information has the potential to be interpreted through that lens. In a process of individual calibration to the group dynamics, members “personalize their brain”⁷⁰ and begin to perceive the world through the frame of lore. Lore is a form of myth making, hence of meaning-making too, contributing to the formation of identity and belonging by elevating individual fragments of media into collective narratives. Importantly, lore is a common sensitivity apparent across disparaging communities within the Dark Forest internet, building a belowground rhizomatic network of communication pathways that bridges seemingly dispersed subcultures together.

Lore works by excluding the unintended readers, allowing for information to be shared even in Clearnet spaces while avoiding its algorithmic or peer scrutiny. Following its digital breadcrumbs all the way to a Dark Forest, lore can be pieced back together to its shadowy origins. This vernacular form of communication can create alternative paths for information to flow undisturbed, circumventing and challenging Clearnet logics.

67 Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, “Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan’s /b/ Board,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 4 (April 1, 2017): 483–501, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614444815609313>.

68 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” December 17, 2021.

69 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” par. 5.

70 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022, par. 33.

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Whether intentionally or not, pieces of lore are constantly informed by previous media artifacts. As the mode of lore circulation within leaky audiences of Dark Forests is an untethered one, distinct but proximal communities often encounter the lore of others. Bumping into each other, mixing and remixing, cultural artifacts and histories are modified through this dynamic and unindexed mode of circulation. While knowledge of previous lore text might unlock secondary meanings, possible mistakes in a precise reading of the lore do not matter since lore circulation implies a constant process of re-writing⁷¹. Lore is not a stable object, but an empty one meant to be continuously refilled by any group. More than knowledge of specific references, what holds communities together is a shared attitude and understanding of the way lore functions. This sensibility across various subcultures is a tacit and implied one, which makes proximal communities able to reference each other despite granular vernacular differences. Occasionally, distinct communities might even end up sharing similar symbols or memes in parallel, imbuing those symbols with even more meaning.

Even the repetition and dissemination of a pattern or reference can be enough to transform lore from passing whispers to large scale mythologies. If it looks like the artifact is referencing a wider conversation, then it has the potential to be seen as relevant. It does not matter whether that element is actually part of an already established canon, it will work as long as it looks or sounds like it is. An example of this dynamic is the claim made by artist and digital culture researcher Joshua Citarella of having *planted a meme* through a secret 18-month long project aiming to “infiltrate and positively influence radical online Gen Z communities”⁷². Citarella, who was running several anonymous meme pages, planned to introduce a “progressive and politically rehabilitative idea”⁷³ within what he saw as at-risk communities he had previously profiled as Politigram⁷⁴. Seedling a meme from within the memetic communities he was targeting, he supposedly was able to nudge users towards new political ideas which they would subsequently amplify organically. Citarella’s ultimate project was the *memefication* of Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* for which he had already taken partial credit in a 2021 podcast episode⁷⁵.

71 Marris and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022.

72 Joshua Citarella, “How To Plant A Meme,” *Do Not Research*, April 11, 2022, <https://donotresearch.net/posts/how-to-plant-a-meme>.

73 Citarella, “How To Plant A Meme”.

74 Joshua Citarella, *Politigram & the Post-Left*, Short Version (Self published, 2018).

75 *Memes as Politics: Episode 8: How to Plant a Meme*, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://soundcloud.com/joshuacitarella/memes-as-politics-episode-8-how-to-plant-a-meme>.

Regardless of whether Citarella's meme planting claims are true or not, he presents some strategies on how to manufacture relevance and mythology within subcultural spaces. He lists various techniques to artificially impose subcultural virality onto memes. The first step is to embed oneself in these cultures and communities, mastering their subcultural codes and establishing oneself as a trustable source of content. Then, one can lead people to a new framework of thinking through a reference chain, "creat[ing] the appearance that you are reposting someone else's original content"⁷⁶. In practice, this means manufacturing images to look as if they are a screenshot of someone else's post, poorly cropped reproductions of conversations already happening in other places. The reason why an image's value can be inflated through its perceived relevance in other spaces indicates that lore works best when reading it intertextually. By referencing other conversations, the suggestion of lore mythicizes images through mere association, regardless of whether that connection is real or not.

ILLEGIBILITY

While lore has the potential to come from anywhere, the more mysterious, protected, or illicit the culture it originates in, the more exciting it becomes⁷⁷. On a practical level, the illegibility of lore functions as a gatekeeping tactic. For a Dark Forest, but for subcultures in general, gatekeeping is a necessary form of preservation. As networked media's context collapse leads to multiple disparate audiences looking at the same piece of media, subcultural literacy acts as a barrier to entry to unwanted eyes, creating the artifacts and its modalities that produce it illegible. Whether that illegibility is manufactured or not, communities below the radar use lore to infuse various internet artifacts with in-group mystery and subcultural meaning.

Beyond lore alone, the techniques of gatekeeping which safeguard Dark Forests' private character can be seen in the context of "subversive, risky, and hidden practices on social media" belonging to wider "under the radar" cultures⁷⁸. Crystal Abidin defines these cultures as *refracted publics* which involve "analogue and algorithmic manipulations of vision and access"⁷⁹. She locates the origin of refracted publics as a response to 2010s media cultures of perpetual content saturation, hyper-competitive attention economies, gamified and

76 Citarella, *Politigram & the Post-Left*.

77 Marrs and Dingsun, "The Lore Zone," February 28, 2022.

78 Crystal Abidin, "From 'Networked Publics' to 'Refracted Publics': A Companion Framework for Researching 'Below the Radar' Studies," *Social Media + Society*, January 21, 2021, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984458>.

79 Abidin, "From 'Networked Publics' to 'Refracted Publics'".

datafied metric cultures. The reason behind this type of manipulations is to avoid detection by both human and algorithmic scrutiny, facilitating the dissemination of targeted messages to targeted audiences. Communities can play with visibility and invisibility to the radar, effectively gaming social media logics to direct attention towards or away from the content they share.

In this schematic, Abidin finds *social stenography* essential to refracted publics and influencer cultures. Social stenography is the “encoding and embedding layers of meaning and subtext into an integrated piece of content”⁸⁰ such that different audiences can understand in different ways. While appearing to mean something else on the surface, such content is intended to be read differently by a targeted public. These practices of “dog-whistling and parallel literacies”⁸¹ have often been seen in memetic warfare. The “extremely online” alt-right of 4chan managed to add an additional layer of stenography by coordinating fake layered meaning. Through culture jamming, 4channers tricked the “lamestream media”⁸² into believing that certain memes or gestures, such as Pepe and the OK sign, were covert symbols of white supremacy while actually being “bait”⁸³.

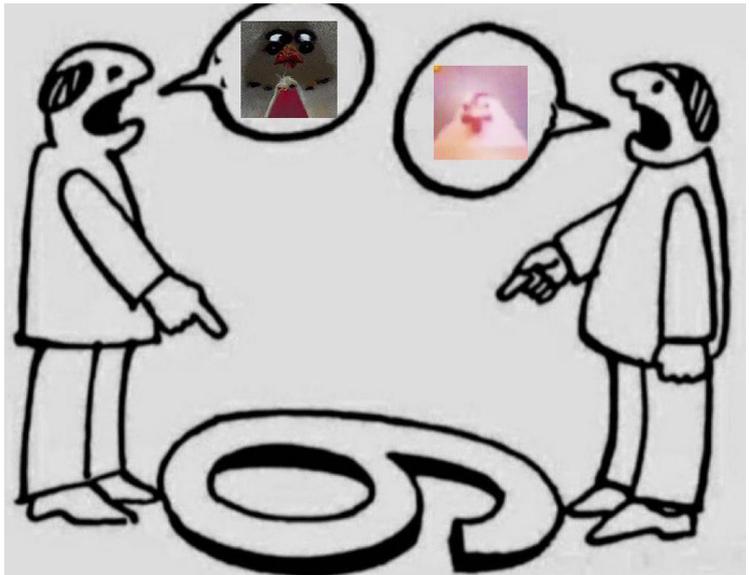


Fig. 2 *Chikin*. Digital image. Anonymous Instagram meme page, accessed June 7, 2022.

80 Abidin, “From ‘Networked Publics’ to ‘Refracted Publics’” 8.

81 Abidin, “From ‘Networked Publics’ to ‘Refracted Publics’” 8.

82 Andy King, “Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare,” in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw, vol. 15, INC Reader (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 221, <https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CriticalMemeReader-1.pdf>.

83 King, “Weapons of Mass Distractio”, 226.

Lore, then, is legible only to some. Outside observers and unintended audiences struggle to fully understand the references and lexicon of under the radar communities, while its members can decode and even contribute to it. Lore's partial illegibility is therefore an essential aspect of niche communities such as Dark Forest ones, because its successful decoding is rewarded with in-group inclusion. So, while unreadable, lore points to a place online in which one has the potential to find the tools to read it, or even to contribute to that body of knowledge. Lore is like a joke with a hidden punchline, legible only after prolonged immersion into the abyss of a Dark Forest, making the process of discovering lore exciting and gratifying.

Lore, while purposefully hard to read, is meant to be discovered and understood. Different clues guide participants through such discovery, leading to the spaces where it potentially originated. Marrs and Dingsun explain:

If Googling the idioms and retrofitting them to existing textual models doesn't explain their niche usage, you simply must follow the lore — you nudge your e-body into its current and float along its path. As it takes you from site to site, a story unfolds in real time. You read its words as if you're hearing them momentarily reverberate through the air, because they'll never reappear in quite the same way again. If you're not there to hear a certain version, you're too late.⁸⁴

While discoverable, not everybody has equal access to the meanings and histories hidden within lore. The trope of *you just had to be there* perfectly summarizes the way in which lore can be unpacked and understood, which is through a perpetual online presence. There is no one way of deciphering lore, anything from clicking through tagged accounts, joining random Discords, noting aesthetical patterns, reading comments to scrolling through hundreds of posts could lead to their discovery. But once you get it, it functions as an anchor onto which you can hold on in a process of continuous myth discovery and creation. Marrs and Dingsun show how the cultural artifacts that compose lore ground an otherwise highly chaotic and ethereal experience. Like beacons in a Dark Forest, the authors see lore as providing light and guidance into the murky and non-gravitational subcultural spaces where it thrives.

The creative forms of communication which form under the umbrella of lore can be understood as techniques to create alternative routes for meaning to travel through. Reminiscing of the fluid, ephemeral and non-indexed characteristics of oral communication, the form of

84. Marrs and Dingsun, "The Lore Zone," February 28, 2022, para. 21.

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vernacular employed in these communities is a form of “selective obfuscation” which allows meaning to be “smuggled through the media pathways of our contemporary, information dark age”⁸⁵. Indecipherable by the machines operating behind the Clearnet, the language of lore can target specific publics and evade unwanted attention. As such, Dark Forests act as a form of *refuge from* and *refusal of* platform logics, carving out a place for themselves in a hegemonic ecosystem.

READING LORE

Since lore is built through collective reading and writing practices, it can be seen as what Marrs and Dingsun identify as a networked narrative⁸⁶. Given the ephemerality of many digital spaces where Dark Forests thrive, visual patterns, sentence structures, sound bites, or any other type of reference is used as a way to recall a collective experience. Shared memory allows communities to collectively create and read lore. Even though mnemonic devices such as memes are used by in-groups for stability, it would be wrong to impose any sort of concrete story onto these objects. To read the internet, one must learn to recognise its patterns, following their breadcrumbs into “hyperlinked, branching rabbit holes of lore”⁸⁷. Specific signals, users, or accounts can be entry points into a rich lexicon, but one must first of all be close to where the language is first created. No amount of googling or of *knowyourmeme* research will be enough for reading the fragments of lore floating through the internet. Being in the right place at the right time is all it takes to begin to grasp the shapes and sizes of subcultural lore. But most importantly, argue Marrs and Dingsun, is to understand that at its core, there is nothing to get. The essence of many Dark Forest communities is much more often a *vibe*. Any form of interpretation, whether from inside or outside the group, is just one version of lore. The blurry picture and messy empty signifiers are all there is to get.

To read the internet, then, one must not assume or impose linearity. There is no *one path* for the internet⁸⁸. Or more specifically,

85 “NM WEBDEX - Introduction,” NM WEBDEX, accessed June 5, 2022, <https://webdex-yzk2o.newmodels.io>.

86 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022, par. 3.

87 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” par. 5.

88 “One path for the internet” is a meme shared on Twitter by Dean Kissick which Marrs and Dingsun, following critical reflections by substack blogger Paul (from bible), use as example of how mapping the internet and imposing linearity cannot work.

given the contingent nature of much of the web's content, there are as many entry points into any networked narrative as there are users. Marrs and Dingsun point out that there is, however, one unique trajectory for each reader. The order and context in which one encounters pieces of lore will contribute to a subjective image of the digital subculture at hand. Marrs and Dingsun claim that our "gestalt-pilled brains"⁸⁹ will attempt to impose a pattern, a system to the chaos, a linear genealogy to the signifiers we encounter. However, they argue, this narrative or shape can only be an approximate one, which will act as a mirror of our own personal frame of reference.

While there are as many interpretations or understandings of lore as there are readers of it, in places where the difference amongst narratives is minimal, tight communities can form. Such places are socially rich, with layered communication making each user feel less lonely in their digital journey towards lore literacy. The investment of time and effort into being there in real-time produces online friendships, solidified by the shared ability to read the chaotic language of the internet. These relationships are elaborated through a common language, common histories, and common sensibilities. Such is the power of lore: establishing a narrative out of a fragmented internet. This aspect of mythicization doesn't escape the communities of Dark Forests. However, sometimes there might be too many *tiny mythologies* to follow. The authors recognise that the speed and contingency of lore formation can make it difficult even for insiders to keep track of the granularities of in-group culture. Then, communities give up on maintaining consensus, deciding to simply embrace the ambiguity and chaos, and "celebrate the collapse of shared understanding, accelerating into our own incomprehensibility"⁹⁰.

89 Marrs and Dingsun, par. 18.

90 Marrs and Dingsun, par. 34.

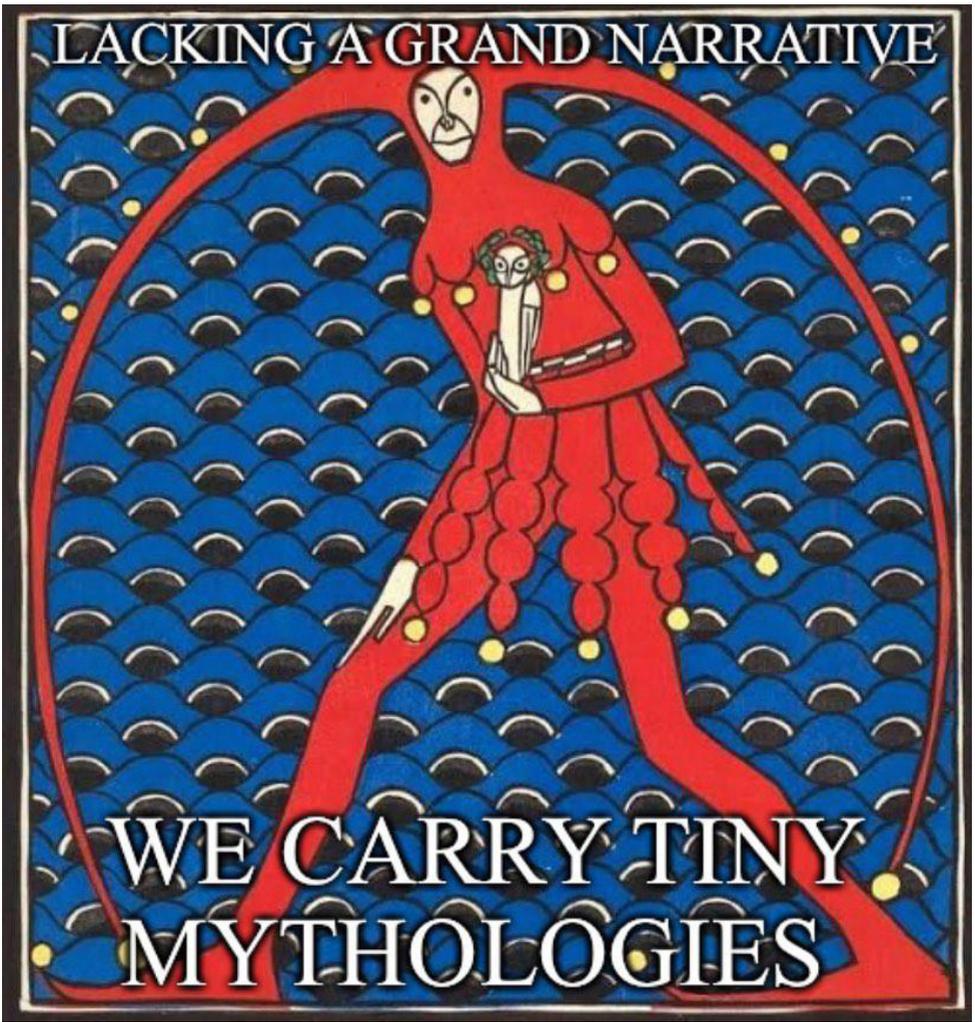


Fig. 3 *Tiny Mythologies*. Digital image. Anonymous Instagram meme page, accessed June 7, 2022.

Incellectualizing the Clearnet

INTERNET'S
DARK FORESTS

Accelerating incomprehensibility perhaps best describes the practices of this next case study, the Instagram meme page phenomenon of Incellelectuals. In the previous chapter, I investigated the language of Dark Forests. Lore brings to niche communities a form of collective history which gives meaning to fragmented media artifacts. Such a vernacular form offers a way for information to be channeled to specific audiences only. Providing a sheltered pathway for communication, lore allows targeted transmissions to happen even in the most visible parts of the internet. This is important because there are no purely Dark Forest or Clearnet spaces. The barrier between the two is permeable, for solid boundaries cannot be placed between leaky digital communities. The two imaginary layers of the web are always in communication, exchanging materials like in an open ecosystem.

Instagram is one of such canonically Clearnet platforms onto which one can find traces of Dark Forests. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, on a biographical level, the Clearnet always precedes the discovery of a Dark Forest. Users are most likely to find the link to the private conversation through a Clearnet gate, given that that is where most people are online anyways. As suggested by Marrs and Dingsun, by “nudging ones e-body”⁹¹, internet travelers can follow lore through “hyperlinked branching rabbit holes”⁹² which leads back to Dark Forest, to the discovery of a larger narrative happening in a “digital other-world”⁹³.

Secondly, as already discernible from the framework of lore, memes play a hugely important role within these digital communities. Instagram’s dominance as the social media for visual communications makes it the perfect platform for memes to be produced and consumed. Instagram allows for the sharing of any form of digital content. Photos, videos, and text-based posts are all accommodated by the app. Users have a plethora of options when choosing the format in which to put out content, as Instagram affords the upload of posts, reels, carousels, and stories. All content is organized under one single account, a handle, which brings an archival and curatorial dimension to the content. All of the

91 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” par. 21.

92 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” par. 5.

93 Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (Julian Dibbell, 1998), 12.

web seems to end up on Instagram, which almost works as a drain for the internet, collecting all of the detritus produced by digital culture. This facilitates the presence of Instagram meme pages, arguably the primary way in which memes are currently shared. No analysis of Dark Forests could be complete without addressing its memes. Dark Forests are lore productive, hence they are meme productive. As a tool for reflections over subversive reappropriation of the Clearnet, in the following section I unravel the history and lore of Incellestuals, perhaps the most influential Instagram meme page of the current Dark Forest age.

MULTI-ADMIN-ESOTERIC-SHITPOSTING-CONTENT-AGGREGATING MEME PAGE

Intellectuals was a meme page created around 2020, stemming from a previous page called Meaningful Images Only. The name is a word play, combining *intellectuals* with *incel*, slang for *involuntary celibate*. While both those pages have been deleted long ago, their impact on digital subcultures is still visible to this day. Incellestuals, a “shitposting conglomerate”⁹⁴, fundamentally influenced subcultural meme page culture by popularizing multi-admin esoteric shitposting, and by creating the idea of clone *minion pages*. The history of these accounts is complex, messy, partially hidden or deleted, and still developing. It’s a story of humor, lore, but also of playful and subversive contestation of the conditions set by the Clearnet. In 2022, two admins from the current iteration of Incellestuals (@incellestuals8) were interviewed by Knowyourmeme, which is the only public documentation of the page’s history, and is the basis for my analysis.

Meaningful Images Only was created sometime around 2019, mainly as a place to post content originating from a private Instagram group chat, which was created randomly, likely a mix of irl friends and url ones. When Meaningful Images Only was *zucked*⁹⁵, the next iteration of such group chat setup the Incellestuals page. Since then, the page has been suspended or deleted several times. Through the suspensions and deletions, the composition of the group chat of admins also has been continually changing. The login information of the account was shared with

94 Anonymous admins, Meet The “Incellestuals”: Giving A Voice To The Anonymous Shitposting Conglomerate, January 2022, para. 2, <https://knowyourmeme.com/editorials/interviews/meet-the-incellestuals-giving-a-voice-to-the-anonymous-shitposting-conglomerate>.

95 Internet slang for deleted, derived from Mark Zuckerberg’s name. Also spelled *zucc’d*.

all of the users in the initial group chat, making the page available for 32 users, the limit set by Instagram for its group messaging. Furthermore, due to an Instagram bug, there was a time at which an account could create a group chat with oneself. With up to 32 admins on the page, the group chat functioned as an additional backroom, where its owners could interact anonymously without any personal handle. These technicalities allowed the page to post virtually every hour, drawing content from any place on the internet, including their own admin group, as well as being able to drive up engagement by constantly interacting with followers.

It remains unclear, even to the admins, how the page gained its following. The page's content were derivatives of private conversations between the admins, so it was odd that its content would be of interest to those outside this private group. However, it was precisely the mystery of the content that drew people in, the memes suggesting a social space in which the private jokes made sense. In the interview, the admins speculated that the key to the success of the page was being constantly online and active, both in the feed and in private messages. Users interacting with the page did not know with which or with how many admins they were interacting with, adding another dimension of mystery to the page.

As the account posted esoteric references to older content, the memes began to form a subcultural semio-sphere, a vernacular of shared memories. The jokes were “absurd” or “confusing” or “not funny”⁹⁶ for anyone who was not familiar with Incellestuals and its lore. Such mode of posting in which older references are the main content of a meme page, is typical of the *shitposting* style. Shitposting could be generally defined as a style of online interaction in which humor, irony, trolling is employed to derail conversations. When it comes to meme pages, the implication of shitposting is that one is uploading content continuously, tens if not hundreds of posts per week. This practice is somewhat related to *schizo-posting*, a term used to describe an unfiltered, chaotic, and often incomprehensible style of online posting⁹⁷. Both techniques increase the posting rate of a page, leading their content to flood their followers feed, and overall increase in engagement.

The Incellestuals style of shitposting entailed various things, for example posting the same exact image or video repeatedly, with minimal variation of it. The value of any image could be inflated through sheer repetition, as followers might feel like there was a reason why that piece of content had to be reposted so often. Other

⁹⁶ Anonymous admins, par. 5.

⁹⁷ “Urban Dictionary: Schizo-Posting,” *Urban Dictionary*, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=schizo-posting>.

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practices typical of this page were the ones of marking specific posts with an admin signature, which would create a linear, recurrent narrative. While the cultural practices of these meme pages are interesting, the primary and most important point of these pages is humor. Better said, in many cases, there was almost no point in posting. These images were *meaningful* insofar as they are not meaningful at all, and its emptiness was what followers found enticing. The emptiness of the images could signal the presence of lore, a locked joke whose key is hidden behind prolonged interaction. The emptiness also rendered the memes easy to riff on, allowing more meme making. And ultimately, the emptiness made the memes ironically funny because of the very lack of a punchline.

CONTENT MODERATION

Meme pages such as Incellestuals are constantly confronted by the Terms of Services and content moderation practices of Instagram. For Incellestuals, issues of ownership and copyright infringement were most relevant during the first waves of suspensions, alongside the posting of problematic content. In the interview, the admins explain how there was an initial sense of defeat when Instagram suspended their account for the first time. But through time, being zucked, in these spaces, became a meme in itself, if not a badge of honor. If the page was deleted, it was because its edginess was not welcome on the mainstream. Over a period of time, practices evolved to maintain stability despite the constant possibility of shadow banning or deletion. Such meme pages ask their audience to *follow the numbers*, linking backup accounts in their bio which maintain the handle of the account plus a number indicating a new iteration (e.g. @incellestuals8's backup is @incellestuals6). At the moment, the admins of Incellestuals explain, there seems to be a "zen state" of constant reinvention⁹⁸, as accounts get deleted and resuscitated cyclically. Perhaps it is exactly this constant reinvention which has maintained the -cellestuals trend alive for so long.

The preventative establishment of a backup account signals an awareness of the possibility of deletion. Admins proactively maintain and promote these less active, but nonetheless operational parallel pages to transfer to in case of deletion. Moreover, the existence of backrooms such as private group chats or Discord servers helps maintain conversations online, particularly at times of deletion. Importantly, these groups foster a sense of camaraderie

amongst meme creators especially since the experience of shadow banning is common in this scene. The attitude is shared also by followers, which helps maintain a strong and tightly knit cross-promotional network that can repost new or resuscitated pages when needed.

It would be wrong to assume that these pages are passive victims of the content moderation powers of Instagram. Contrarily, Incellestuals has actively engaged in practices which could hinder their own popularity or even lead to deletion. A recurring meme amongst these pages is to select a random follower from comment sections and block them. Mixing trolling and subversive play, the admins of the page openly contest the logics of social media platforms. While not taking their actions as serious attempts to counter Clearnet governance, the meme page admins are wholly aware of the critical undertone these practices, an ethos not so different from the one of the DVW. As put by one Incellestuals admin, this behavior is openly “antithetical to Instagram’s vibe” and of the platform’s “follower-gaining and branding-yourself kind of philosophy”⁹⁹. The subversive practices are a challenge to the Clearnet logics, proposing a form of critique by transgressing them so openly. Often these meme pages would post images they knew would trigger the algorithm and get them suspended or deleted. When it was decided that the page should have a “clean break”¹⁰⁰, the admins began posting ISIS flags and shock images, waiting for Instagram to flag and delete the account. Through shitposting, Incellestuals orchestrated its own death.

REPURPOSING AFFORDANCES

In the interview with Knowyourmeme, one of the admins explains how the origin of the minion page phenomenon can be traced back to an attempt to circumvent the limits of Instagram group messages. Likely following the solving of the bug which previously allowed accounts to create a chat with themselves, the admins optimized how multiple people could be logged into a single, multi-admin account but still be able to send direct messages to each other in one chat. The admin recalls:

So you can only have 31 people in a group chat, right? But you can technically have way more people in the group chat if there are a lot of people signed into each account. So we were like,

⁹⁹ Anonymous admins, par. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous admins, par. 11.

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"What if we made a bunch of Incellestuals accounts where a lot of people have each password and then they're all in group chats? And it's like hundreds of people talking to each other in a chat.¹⁰¹

Hundreds of new pages emerged, riffing on the name and re-using the same profile picture of the original, often modified to fit the theme of the new page. As people began to create these accounts, they were added by the original Incellestuals into group chats. Some of these pages publicly shared their passwords, creating a conglomerate of multi-admin pages. Knowyourmeme's entry for Incellestuals explains that users were likely to be recommended other minion pages by the Instagram algorithm which would pick up on the name and profile picture similarity and nudge users to follow this wide array of pages¹⁰². In repurposing the group message affordance, Incellestuals exponentially expanded the carrying potential of a single Instagram group chat, also increasing the collective pool from which content could be drawn, as well as the pages cross-promotional network or following.

It is not clear which pages were created when. Some gained tens of thousands of followers and still exist, either in their original form or in new numbered iterations. Others were zucked and never resuscitated. Some pretended to be the new version of the original Intellectuals, some instead picked extremely small niches and developed their own separate audience. In a sense, then, the -cellectualization of Instagram basically turned the meme page into a meme of its own. Likely, many of the -cellectuals pages were unaware of the origin, meaning, or significance of the moniker, using it as any other meme template. Still, the subcultural practices developed by the original Incellestuals page were maintained and played with by its many minions. The content that was created referred to previous lore, stacking up references over references to the point of creating new collective archives and collective memories. While accidental in its origin, the spread of this type of multi-admin meme page which engages in esoteric shitposting signals a type of subcultural sensitivity which is not accidental at all. The people curating or creating content on these pages challenged the expectations of posting on Instagram, both vernacularly and aesthetically. By subverting its Terms of Service, Incellestuals and related meme pages exploited the logics of Instagram. Pushing affordances to their limit and piggybacking

¹⁰¹ Anonymous admins, para. 12.

¹⁰² "Incellestuals | Know Your Meme," accessed June 21, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/incellestuals>.

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While the intense and esoteric feed of these meme pages might appear to be the opposite of curated, shitposting is its own style of content curation. If the influencer culture of Instagram nudges users to standardize one's own account, maintaining order and a clear style throughout all posts, the meme culture of the Incellestuals scene prefers a much more casual and chaotic approach for their Instagram presence. The drain-like quality of Instagram aids in the adoption of such general aesthetic sensibility which relates to the concepts of "internet ugly" and "poor image". This style present in digital culture involves the accidental or purposeful degradation of images online. Poor images subvert expectations of sophisticated and polished images one might expect to see on the internet, "mock[ing] the promises of digital technology"¹⁰⁴. Practices of intentional lowering of quality of images, or amateurish editing evolve and change through times, with new canons and tropes becoming the new forms of internet ugly¹⁰⁵. Central to the dissemination of such visual vernacular is how easy it has become for everyday internet users to screenshot and edit images. As the fundamental characteristics of memes is their reproducibility, meme creation is inherently linked to such democratization of visual content creation.

Instagram makes this type of meme creation easy. An image can be uploaded in the story editing section, overlaid with other images imported from the camera roll, bracketed with top and bottom text. Different -cellectuals pages can modify others' content and memes to fit their niche in seconds, creating images poor in visual quality but rich in subcultural capital. As explained in an article by Sean Monahan on Spike Art magazine, these -cellectuals pages are constantly making "content out of content"¹⁰⁶. In an endless cycle of memetic repurposing, any piece of the internet can be refit and -cellectualized.

An important aspect of the -cellectuals style of posting is how they often tend to refer to previous posts, or to events, people, or objects talked about in the private group messages or Discord servers behind the page. The meaning of the content is often unclear unless one has been part of this meme scene, either as a lurker, but preferably as a more active or engaged member of the community. Incellestual-esque memes are empty ones, superficial references to ongoing conversations happening elsewhere. They are images

104 Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit," 10.

105 Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914544516>.

106 Sean Monahan, "It's Always Halloween Online," *Spike Art Magazine*, Autumn 2021, 60.

taken from private conversations, videos referring to other pages zucked weeks ago, Discord personas writing Substack blogs, jokes without punchlines, memes edited to the point of no recognition. They are breadcrumbs which are meant to be followed back to the source, digging through piles of posts which barely receive any likes.

However poor or ugly, these detritus-memes still work. At their peak of popularity, -collectuals pages have tens of thousands of followers, even though in these spaces reach does not equate with influence¹⁰⁷. While visibility and popularity are the enemies for a lot of these accounts, as it increases possibility of being reported, it is still notable that *empty* memes attract a devoted and active following. The reason why these memes are effective relates back to lore. Through prolonged interaction with these pages, a body of in-group knowledge emerges. Collective memory is much more stable than pages subjected to constant threats of shadow banning, suspension, or deletion. Memes and references then function, as theorized by Marrs and Dingsun, as mnemonic devices to evoke common mythologies. The ability of memes to come together and form larger narratives makes them a vehicle for community and identity formation, one which cannot easily be co-opted or reappropriated by the hegemonic Clearnet.

Their intertextuality renders meme formats readable across niche, yet intersecting audiences, which play with others posts to personalize them. An initial illegibility projects onto these artifacts a subcultural and mysterious ethos inviting publics to follow the breadcrumbs. Moreover, these digital objects contain discoverable hints to the origin of the conversation, lore allows lurkers to find their way to hidden messaging groups, discord channels, and private Substacks through sheltered roadways. Post by post, then, the lore of these memes and meme pages “elevates the fragments it links together above the surrounding sea of discrete, atemporal content populating your social media feed.”¹⁰⁸ Shared cultural memories create narratives and maps for the internet and even the most arbitrary or seemingly unimportant cultural product or cultural practice has the potential to become canon. This was the case for the birth of minion pages, an accident turned into widespread subcultural practice. The communities of the Dark Forest system and the attitudes they cultivate outside of it are engaging in a type of literacy and world building parallel to the mainstream, transforming pieces of nothing into tight knight communities.

107 Citarella, “How To Plant A Meme,” par. 8.

108 Marrs and Dingsun, “The Lore Zone,” February 28, 2022, par. II.

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The interviewer from Knoyourmeme interestingly points out that Incellestuals “lacked a definable personhood”¹⁰⁹. Anonymity is of course a highly relevant element at play within the -cellectuals scene. The backbone of the original pages, Meaningful Images Only and then Incellestuals, were anonymous conglomerates. A multi-admin meme page allows individual password holders to all gather or hide behind one single, pseudonymous handle. The page hence lacks a definable personhood from the inside, as the internal group chat with the account allows all admins to anonymously message each other without links to personal accounts. The page also lacks a definable personhood from the outside. The type of interaction with the audience in private messages or comments made it so that users could be talking to one, three or thirty unknown people at once. In the interview, the admins mentioned how what must have felt like “talking to a schizophrenic”¹¹⁰, which contributed to the enigmatic allure of the page.

The minion pages also accelerated this separation from subjectivity. In fact, many of the -cellectuals pages are dedicated to specific figures, personalizing the handle to their name. Post-internet artist Jon Rafman became @jonrafmancelectuals, author Tao Lin became @taolincelectuals, podcast Wet Brain became @wetbraincellectuals, the controversial Substack blogger Angelicismor became @angelicellectuals and so on. The figures chosen are not random, but always somehow related to the meme digital scene at play, signaling possession of subcultural knowledge.

Going back to the reflections of Kissick regarding the state of identity and online self-presentation, he observes that -cellectuals meme pages appropriate other’s faces. They perform others through the meme mask, allowing authorship to be hidden but still characterized and personalized, whilst also virtue singling towards a specific group of people by aligning themselves, often ironically, to a subcultural figure. As new characters or objects enter the scene’s semio-sphere, it is not hard to just create a new -cellectuals account, get reposted in its network of other pages, and gain a following. Kissick sees the phenomenon of Angelicismor and of Incellestuals minion pages as “an attack on the cult of the individual”, as they “open[ed] a space in which the individual was not important”¹¹¹. For Kissick, the -cellectuals mode of shitposting

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous admins, Meet The “Incellestuals,” par. 2.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous admins, Meet The “Incellestuals,” par. 6.

¹¹¹ Dean Kissick, “The Downward Spiral: Persona (Part II),” *Spike Art Magazine*, November 10, 2021, para. 14, <https://spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/dean-kissick-downward-spiral-persona-2>.

makes fun of the millennial model of online behavior, proposing an alternative perspective on what it means to participate into online social life. Kissick also revisits a cyber-separationists belief, citing his Spike magazine colleague Monahan's conclusion that "what we Washed Millennials long ago forgot in our dogged pursuit of personal brands: the internet is magic when it's not real life"¹¹².

Illuminating the process through examples both from celebrity culture and digital subculture, Kissick argues that we are witnessing the beginning of the destruction of identity itself. Relinquishing their identity is done through masks and veils, through refusal of subjectivity. The process is most visible in subcultural spaces, and Kissick argues that Incellestuals and Angelicismor promote a condition of facelessness. The face, which platforms conditioned us to be seen as the monetary unit of today's digital market, becomes a found object to be toyed with, a tool for ironic play. For Kissick, in and beyond the art world, the greatest form of transgression comes from the relinquishing of the individual. In a similar vein, Busta contends that "to be truly countercultural in a time of tech hegemony one has to, above all, betray the platform", "divesting from your public online self."¹¹³

The aesthetics employed by the -cellectuals scene indicate this betrayal. Two properties in particular highlight this characteristic: *enhancement and erasure*. Through lamination of filters, masks, face swap, one can slowly erase the material face, removing identity layer by layer. The original face is nothing but a photo to edit, enhancing features of yourself until that very self turns into something else entirely. In between irony and sincerity, the process of enhancing one's face to the point of no return does something to the face itself. The blur, the glow, the perfectly smooth skin and spotless clear eyes erase any sort of defining personal features. The face is not a face but an aestheticized version of it. In maximizing the enhancement of features, those very details are erased. With them, the very idea of the individual face is erased too. The selfie, which is the ultimate object of self-branding and individualistic digital presentation, transforms into a subcultural mask, worn conspicuously and collectively.

The process of erasure can heighten contextual communal meanings. Shared subcultural understandings become all there is to erased images. This is also visible in the trend of redacted memes in which the text of popular image macros is blocked out.

112 Monahan, "It's Always Halloween Online," 75.

113 Busta, "The Internet Didn't Kill Counterculture—You Just Won't Find It on Instagram," par. 6.

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Leaving nothing but the shared cultural understanding of the meme, the erasure of specific features heightens the importance of communal understandings and subcultural literacies. Identity, through its erasure, becomes community, becomes totality. The subject becomes a group, the single voice joins a choir. The reciprocal process of erasure through enhancement and enhancement through erasure brings forth a new mode of self-presentation antithetical to the one mainstream face culture. Clarity, real names, and real faces are met with obfuscated messages, masks, and filters. Through an aesthetical challenge to processes of overdetermination and normative self-presentation, once again Dark Forests and subcultures adjacent to them propose new ways of appropriating Clearnet spaces and subverting its demands. While perhaps ineffective at rupturing the Clearnet system, these vernacular experiments suggest new possible relationships to online collectivity, and the potential power that such practices can enact upon digital hegemonic spaces.

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The idea of what a meme is supposed to look like has been expanded to the point of no return. If early meme theory claimed that anything on the internet, no matter how tragic, violent, or seemingly meaningless, had the potential to become a meme, Incellelectuals demonstrated that a meme page could itself become a meme. While seemingly accidental, the development of this online scene of multi-admin meme pages points toward the existence of an attitude or sensibility opposed to collective expectations of Instagram. The subcultural ethos which seems to run through much of the -cellectuals space is a counter-hegemonic one. While perhaps not always explicitly, the discursive, vernacular, and aesthetic practices of these communities propose an alternative mode of being on the Clearnet antithetical to its expectations.

In a constant game of reclamation of space and playful, un-serious, meaningless yet necessarily counter hegemonic actions, -cellectuals display critical subjective dispositions and modes of sociality. Anonymity plays a big role in this type of subversive acts, users constantly and collectively experimenting with elements of self-presentation. Such aesthetic and vernacular phenomena demonstrate a new relation to the cult of individualism which seems to be at the center of the platformized web. In a continuous ironic process of erasure and enhancement, digital subcultures are



Fig. 5 *Meta selfie*. Digital Image. Anonymous Instagram meme page, accessed June 7, 2022.



Fig. 6 *Redacted memes*. Digital Image. Anonymous Instagram meme page, accessed June 7, 2022.

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enacting a redefinition of the self, achieving “ego death through posting”¹¹⁴.

In an “increasingly hegemonic platform economy”¹¹⁵, vernacular subcultural practices offer the possibility to sneak through the tightening grip of the Clearnet. Beyond Instagram, looking at other Dark Forest projects one can see how the cultivation of parallel languages and attitudes alone brings a new character to otherwise mainstream spaces. Take Substack, for example. There is nothing inherently subversive or subcultural about the newsletter and blogging service. Yet, subversive and subcultural projects like *Angelicismoi* enrich the space with new meanings, proposing new imaginary, yet real, desirable visions of the platform. The phenomenon of Incellestuals is symptom of a dire need within the contemporary internet ecosystem to create alternative sheltered pathways leading towards smaller, cozier webs; towards spaces for play away from constant scrutiny, value extraction, algorithmic governance. While esoteric shitposting might not be enough to truly counter the seemingly ever-expanding powers of platforms, it is fun to intellectualise the Clearnet.

VI

To be Online is to Cope

Dark Forests might invite alternative and counter hegemonic modes of being online. However, the perpetual onliness required to keep up with their developments ultimately benefits the platforms which mediate or supplement access to Dark Forests themselves. Lore especially invites constant interaction with the internet, being logged on at all times so not to miss out on anything. Active Dark Forests communities are like rivers in full flood, and one must be online as much as possible to be part of all of the ever-evolving mythologies. Dark Forests seem to be continuously creating so much noise, lore being more about the process of collective memory creation than about the granularities of the memories themselves. Establishing common languages and histories for the sake of collectivity demonstrates an unyielding need to feel connected. The machine of Dark Forest is always on, constantly updating its vernacular, memes, references, constantly online, constantly logged in, constantly falling into the trap of interaction set out by platforms.

¹¹⁴ Kissick, “The Downward Spiral,” November 10, 2021, par. 22.

¹¹⁵ de Zeeuw and Tuters, “Teh Internet Is Serious Business,” 214.

Furthermore, because Dark Forests are so stretchy, unanchored, and leaky, it is tough for some of its aspirations to be actualized. The structural and infrastructural elements of the internet which they see as unfavorable or exploitative cannot be tackled by Dark Forests alone. Dark Forest dwellers remain subject to the processes of data extraction and surveillance logics even when enacting subcultural strategies of avoidance. The attitudes and approaches embedded in Dark Forest cultures are merely coping mechanisms or forms of resistance to the Clearnet, their reach being too limited to effectively overthrow their power. Visibility, the crux of the original Dark Forest theory of the universe, is only partially negotiated through a subversive use of available tools, as complete shelter from peer and platform eyes cannot be achieved.

The Dark Forest's modes of negotiation and resistance will always remain partial solutions to the problematics casted by technological hegemony. As a dominating force, the Clearnet will continue to maintain and reproduce mechanisms of dominance over the internet. Subcultures can negotiate this through various means, appropriating spaces by marking out territories through gatekeeping, developing their own rituals and mythologies, adopting and rejecting vernaculars and aesthetics. Memes, tropes, and personas culminate in a collective subcultural memory. Yet these will remain mental images of the internet, immaterial solutions to material concerns posed by the Clearnet. Dark Forests, then, are most effective on a symbolic level. A level which always runs the risk of being appropriated by the mainstream and by the commercialization forces which might want to profit from the trusted networks these communities have established. An example of this risk comes from a marketing strategy predicted in a 2020 column by brand strategist Colin Nagy. He notices that brands see a "business opportunity in making conversations feel more intimate and personalized", as trusted one-to-one interactions and micro-communities of Dark Forests might become the new site of branded content¹⁶. In a constant process of appropriation and re-appropriation of spaces and symbols, how can Dark Forest survive the seemingly ever tightening grip of the Clearnet?

In my research, I aimed to answer the question of how Dark Forests construct an alternative imaginary, exploring its function and contents. I began by exploring specific histories of the internet connected to the imaginary at hand. Such analysis concluded that at the origins of the current state of the Clearnet was the need to render the newly privatized internet profitable. Experiments

116 "Comment: The Dark Forest Theory of the Internet," *Courier*, September 4, 2020, <https://mailchimp.com/courier/article/comment-dark-theory-internet/>.

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such as AuctionWeb demonstrated that the social nature of the web could generate traction around this new and developing technology. What followed was a process for which the metaphorical idea of a platform began to dominate the internet. With it came new mechanisms of monetization and governance, and as platforms expanded onto the web, users also aligned themselves to their logics.

Accelerating artificial subjectivity, practices of performance are now fully embedded into the platform experience. Their mechanisms supercharge the individual and the data double, creating one single multifaceted content stream subject. Through selfies and filters, the online leaks into the offline, material, and digital elements melting into each other. Over the course of the past years the self has become the ultimate form of monetary value. Finally, as Pierre Omidyar had wanted, everybody is now a consumer and a producer, identity becoming the object sold to the highest bidder. Users align themselves with the content presented by algorithms, believing that the internet acts as a mirror. However, the image that it presents in this mirror is a fragmented one, a broken screen refracting one's reflection as shattered data traces. All of the internet is a stage, performances for audiences and algorithms, scripted through casual photo dumps, set on the stage of our feeds, waiting for a double tap applause. Online personas are becoming the only currency left for people to accumulate. This is the Clearnet which Dark Forests aim to propose an alternative to. The axioms which constitute the imaginary are dual, with each Clearnet condition being met by a Dark Forest one. Such conditions regard data extraction and alternative monetization systems, algorithmic and community curation, terms of service and internal moderation, face and mask culture, visibility and sheltered spaces. Together, these elements construct an imaginary of desirable and undesirable futures.

The employment of lore helps Dark Forests elude or reappropriate Clearnet mechanisms. Developing communities through such forms of vernacular produces a form of resistance against the deterministic logics of platforms. Returning and renewing forms of oral communication, collective mythologies carve space into the internet's shadowlands. In a collective process of embracement of the leakiness and intangibility of the internet, connections are forged with who speaks the same subcultural language. Lore is able to create alternative paths for information to travel through, untouched by the mechanisms of platforms. Ultimately, it acts as the glue for a leaky mediascape, providing a composite narrative from fragmented artifacts.

Similarly, the case study of Incellestuals provides further examples of how subversion and reappropriation can win hegemonic space. The meme page phenomenon also contributes to the understanding of identity and self-presentation. Through anonymity, masks, collectives, clones, aesthetics, enhancements and erasures, these communities are enacting a new form of separation between the individual and its data double. Even though ego death through posting might not be enough to overthrow the powers of megalithic platforms, it might slowly chip away some of its elements, redefining and reclaiming both individuality and collectivity through such processes.

The conditions of the Clearnet which have been often criticized in media theory can be and have been contested from below. There are places on the internet which discursively, vernacularly, or aesthetically counter platform hegemony. The subcultural scene of Dark Forest internet does this by crafting an alternative imaginary. Rather than taking at face value the metaphor of the platform, it proposes another one, actively engaging with wider discourses of media critique. Enriching certain digital spaces with subcultural meaning, developing parallel literacies, cultivating attitudes antithetical to the Clearnet, and subversively appropriating digital infrastructures, Dark Forests build their own digital other worlds. These, however, are only temporary solutions to the hegemonic hold that platforms appear to have on the internet. Dark Forests run the risk of getting lost in their own isolating and unintelligible noise, as well as of being reabsorbed into the machine of the Clearnet. The spaces will need to constantly reinvent themselves if they want to survive. Still, their efforts remain important starting points to reimagine the internet as a whole.



Fig. 7 *Babe My Mind*. Digital Image. Anonymous Instagram meme page, accessed June 7, 2022.

Notes from the Shadowlands

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Dark Forests do not really exist. What exists, is an internet imaginary captured by the metaphor of a dark forest. An imagined layering of the internet, which divides the web, an intangible and boundless object, into distinct categories. While Dark Forests and the Clearnet do not exist in a definite or material way, they do exist in the sense that they are one version, one view, one imaginary of the internet.

My journey through the Dark Forest was, as it always is, non-linear, rhizomatic, accidental. I had been following a few Dark Forest-y spaces for a while, without ever getting involved. I would listen to their podcasts, see their memes, encounter the various forms of content they produced in different mainstream spaces, but I only ever felt like an observer. These spaces felt ripe with hidden activity and inside jokes, as well as potential for artistic and critical expression. At the time of the global increased onlineness brought by the pandemic, those corners of the internet began to feel much more important. Articles like Caroline Busta's made me curious to delve deeper in the communities I had only watched from afar. So, when sometime in the end of 2020 a meme page I liked shared a Discord server invite, without thinking too much of it, I downloaded the app and created an account. It took days before I could understand and navigate the interface, weeks for me to feel confident and send a message. I likely sent my first one in the *counting* channel where users would send a found image, gif, original photo, or simply text the number following the one that was just previously sent. I started messaging more and more, having gained confidence over the general vibe of the server. After a few days of continued interaction, I began feeling like I was somehow contributing to the server. In the span of weeks, I established myself as part of the community. I stayed active on the server for approximately three months. While it had begun as an attempt to collect some form of insight for my analysis, it turned into a much more genuine, and hence scary, form of interest for the group.

I cannot recall an exact timeline of my participation with the server. In Dark Forests, time moves in a much less linear way than in other online spaces. Discord, specifically, is both ephemeral and archivable. Yes, one could technically search for specific messages of specific members, but if you're not online at the right moment you might miss historical events for the server. Retelling a perfect

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story of my journey throughout this space would be a betrayal of my actual experience, of the subcultural memory the Dark Forest affords. All I can present are fractions, events, anecdotes.

My initial impression of the server was chaos. Soon after I joined the server, the discord underwent a drastic change of its structure. Likely following some joke, the admins orchestrated a rebranding. The server had entered their medieval paradigm. Messages were now exchanged in ironic attempts of old English, channel, avi's and usernames were on the theme of peasantry, and an odd turmoil which lasted for days. The public meme page on Instagram was now posting and making references to this subcultural event. I would later experience several similar paradigm shifts, sometimes motivated by an excess of channels and need for organization, sometimes for no apparent reason.

As I observed the conversations occurring in the various channels, I began to mentally map the composition of the server. Some users were admins of the meme page, others were loyal followers of it, some just friends of the original creators with no connection to the Instagram account. Some were constantly online, some were old legends from previous phases of the server who would come in occasionally and be praised for their sparse but always illuminating words. People would come and go, sometimes creating a lot of activity and noise, sometimes going absolutely unnoticed. Trolling and nefarious behavior did not happen so regularly, when it did there were measures such as the *quarantine* channel to reinforce community boundaries. Overall, the environment was a fairly tame, sincere and friendly one, which surprised me given the assumptions I had about some of these subcultures. In later explorations of other hidden digital spaces, or in moments of infiltration of odd users, I caught a glimpse of the more controversial behaviors the DVW has been associated with. But most Dark Forests attempted to maintain a degree of decency even while engaging in highly ironic, edgy, and (what outsiders or normies could read as) problematic conversations.

Reason for this was the pseudo-social relationship fostered by this space. Within a few days of active participation, I began to feel like, when I was chatting, I was chatting to *friends*, or at least online friends similar to the ones I had made as a teenager with unsupervised internet access. Rather than a para-social relationship, the connections made on the server were to a certain extent mutual. Mediated by degrees of anonymity, the types of online friendships forged on the discord were community based, contingent on the simultaneous presence within what basically operated as a complex, branched group chat. Multiple parallel and occasionally intersecting conversations could occur at once between different niches of

the group, exchanges of images, links, gifs interwoven into fast paced chatting. The server felt the most alive during livestream and voice chats. Some sessions were planned, some happened organically, some included just a few members, and some were joined by almost the whole server. There were movie nights in which a film was streamed and watched *together* online. Some users would just join on mute, listening in to the chatter.

I could have not imagined the depth I would eventually reach within the Dark Forest system. After exchanging jokes about different meme pages, I and one of the admins of the server came up with the idea of a -cellectuals meme page on a podcast fairly big in our shared subcultural milieu. In a few minutes, he had created the page and shared the password on the server. Together with a few more admins, we began shitposting, uploading the same image a dozen times, establishing ourselves as a meme page quickly through our association with the main meme page of the server. Our follower count grew fast and high for subcultural standards. I was tempted to out myself and betray the unspoken but necessary rule of anonymity and claim authorship of the memes that did well. Enticed by the possibility of gaining clout from my posts being shared by Joshua Citarella or Brad Troemel, figures whose approval felt like the ultimate badge of honor within the meme space. At the same time, outing myself as part of a shitposting meme account was not exactly something I wanted to do. And it was not something customary of the space either. But especially when our page gained enough subcultural hype to be added to the infamous Meaningful Images Only (MIO) group chat, I was glad to have not given any personal connections away.

This was the latest version of the MIO/Intellectuals Instagram group chat I had been researching. At the time, access to such an exclusive space felt like a real achievement, a corner of the forest that as a researcher, I thought I could never reach. The group chat was a much darker, faster, and confusing space to navigate. The vibes were not nearly as sincere as the (now, to me, clearly much more) safe space of my discord server, as in-jokes were mixed with the occasional gore. I felt much more uncomfortable sending any text, a poser infiltrating the core of the scene. I do not remember much from the group chat, I did not invest too much time in it, overwhelmed by the intelligible conversations I had no way of decoding. The Instagram group chat is just a stream of texts, no channels to read through like on discord. I do remember though having the feeling of realization of what it meant to be lost in the collectivity, to become a voice in a choir of angels. It was both scary and exciting.

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To travel through the Dark Forest space, I had to lose my on-line self to truly find it again. I had to give up my online persona and build a new one. I had to recognize that what I thought was my real online self wasn't real at all. I had to drop my name, my picture, my email, my longitudinal data set. I had to adopt a pseudonym, an avi, a parlance. I had to give up on being recognized as one, to give myself into the collective. I had to renounce the urge to tell the Clearnet that I was part of the Dark Forest and I had to renounce the urge to tell the Dark Forest how to find me on the Clearnet. I had to give into the collective mask, but soon enough I felt like I was getting lost. The excitement of my meme being reposted by a subcultural celebrity did not last too long. In general, the excitement of becoming part of the Dark Forest system faded away. Slowly, and then all at once, I began disinvesting from these communities as a whole. Partly due to changes of the make-up and vibes of the server, partly due to a feeling of cloudiness in my head for indulging into too much onlineness. Offline, the social distancing measures of the second lockdown were starting to be lifted. Spring was coming, and I was ready to *touch grass*.

The Dark Forest operates at a frequency that might be easy to find, but hard to tune into. Being part of some of these groups requires a lot of time, effort, and mental energy. I can still recall the physical sensation of being online for too long. The grogginess, fatigue and headache that only prolonged virtual embodiment can give you. Onlineness can take up a lot of mental and physical energy. The way I imagine the internet is as some sort of parallel universe, an alternative reality, a radio frequency buzzing in the air. The internet exists, within our minds, at all times. Onlineness, beyond a few necessary physical connection points (unlocking your phone, opening your laptop) is an intrinsically mental exercise of imagination. The hypermediated world leads to the internet existing within our head at all times. Even when we are not physically connected, we are aware of this nontangible reality. Reminded of its constant flux through push notifications, echoes of unfinished text conversations, mental notes of what to post next. There are few places and moments which to an extent escape hypermediation. But even in those cases, it is not as if the parallel digital universe disappears. There is no offline, or at least not in the sense there was before the invention of the internet. Offline exists only in relation to the online. Online is not a place we go: it's a place we cannot leave. Once the internet virus had entered our brains, our world became a post internet one, not in the sense of having surpassed it, but in the sense of everything becoming intrinsically processed through this net. We are living with a second, expanded

consciousness. And this requires a lot of work, a lot of energy, a lot of effort, even if we might be now used to it.

The consequences of the mental work we are doing to tune into the digital frequency are manifold and still largely unknown. I suspect that the prolonged exposure to especially some virtual spaces, combined with conditions set by current neoliberal order, have led to processes of socialization and misperception of (healthy) social interactions. Especially from my vantage point of a researcher living in an affluent European metropolis, I could see that many of the most active individuals of the server displayed clear signs of social in-adeptness. Since spring 2021, I have superficially checked the discord a few times. Through these months, the original admins and original central social players of the server changed. The ones who stayed the most active eventually took over the administration of the server. They were the ones who, in moments of sincerity and openness, had seemed to be the most lonely ones irl. Their investment into their niche community appeared to be a symptom of isolation, of inability to forge real life friendships, using the internet as a crutch to form pseudo and para social relations.

While the spaces I frequented were part of the meme scene, in many cases, Dark Forests operate with artistic, cultural, or knowledge production aims. Especially concerned with investigating the very environment they operate in, aka the digital world, communities are built out of a need to find others with which to share and create cultural objects. And in more than a few instances, Dark Forest materialized such work in gallery group shows, film screenings, club nights. Especially when it comes to micro-pop internet culture and meme subcultural knowledge, it is rare to meet someone irl who knows who and what the hell you are talking about. And it is almost impossible to have a whole irl community of people based around that culture (unless you live in Dimes Square, of course). If I am being honest, I do sometimes miss the rare feeling of community which I partially found online, but for which I actually long for irl.

The Covid19 pandemic was undeniably part of the reason for the explosion and heightened importance of these communities, given the type of sociality which became normalized through the lockdowns. It wasn't only the niche that explored smaller internet spaces. The mainstream logged onto cozier webs too: group calls, streaming, club houses, everyone seemed to be logged in at all times. The sprawling environment of specifically the Dark Forests signaled a need for finding community, belonging, organization around subcultural interests. While the internet brought about the possibility of creating hyper-active hyper-niche interest groups,

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we have to question the extent to which these para/pseudo social conformations are functional communities. Has the community become trivialized? A meme? Defeated and powerless? Have we lost the ability to create these communities offline?

It is not new that late-stage capitalism has created conditions for which solidarity has become much more difficult to arise. While the demands of this world are too much to be borne as an individual, we are left utterly alone, and hence we find connections through digital doubles. And even though we might be able to give up our single atomised identity for a group one, even though it feels like we are canceling our individual borders of identification and losing ourselves into collectivity, this collectivity will almost always remain purely digital. The efforts of different Dark Forests to de-virtualise, at least from afar, feel insufficient in bridging the gap created by digital life – online friends cannot substitute irl ones. But what do we do with all this energy? What do we do with all this will to come together? To build collectivity? Are online versions of this a suitable temporary alternative/complementary mode of organization? Or are they distracting endeavors?

Thank you

To Cate, Tom and Elena. To my irl friends. To my online ones. To the Dark Forests which have allowed me to inhabit them. To the Dark Forest dwellers I have encountered through the years: whether our exchanges were brief or purposeful, your influence has been woven into the fabric of this text. To Daniel for the support in the stage of this text as a thesis. To Tripta for guiding me in turning it into something different.

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In this book, Marta Ceccarelli sheds light over the partially hidden shadowlands of the internet's Dark Forests. The author proposes a possible reading of the history of the (social) internet. Starting from the transformation of the web into a tool for profit rooted in Californian countercultural movements, all the way to the modes of monetization and persona crafting epitomized by Kim Kardashian. Evoking the theory of lore, Ceccarelli explores the depths of the logics that govern the Dark Forest space, proposing heuristic tools to read the complex and interconnected geographies of the internet. She presents a sketch of @intellectuals to reveal the rich vernacular and memetic practices that demand and produce temporary subversive digital spaces. Constructing newer vocabularies of meaning and memory making, Dark Forests challenge the Clearnet's claim over our *irl* and *url* selves. The author's own experiences of finding refuge in the Dark Forests is an intimate account of the urgency and exhilarations of seeking collectivity. The text invites the reader to follow the breadcrumbs left by Ceccarelli, embarking on a journey into the internet's shadowy paths that lead to new modes of being online.

Marta Ceccarelli was born in 1999. She is an independent writer, blogger and researcher living between Italy and the Netherlands. Marta graduated with a Masters in New Media and Digital Cultures at the University of Amsterdam, and her academic practice is defined by an interest in internet (sub)cultures, memes, post internet art, music and club scenes. Her Substack, *blogreform*, is the place where her interests culminate through cultural analysis, experimental auto-fiction, and more.

INC network notion #2

Internet's Dark Forests:
Subcultural Memories and
Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary

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