CORECORE: HYPER-ROMANTICISM AND THE POST-PANDEMIC INTERNET AESTHETIC[1]

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Abstract: It seems that the internet aesthetic has undergone a peculiar change since the outbreak of the 2020 pandemic. This transformation has been driven by the growing popularity of social media platforms that rely almost exclusively on video content. After the long-awaited "death of postmodernism," there is now a noticeable inclination to excessively reuse certain cultural forms whose origin can be traced back to the Romantic era. This essay explores how Romantic aesthetic practices have unexpectedly reemerged in new digital media, especially in the last three years.

Keywords: internet aesthetic, TikTok, Romanticism, Sublime, *Frankenstein,* fragment;

"Sad things can't be explained" (Alex Dimitrov, "The Years")

1. The aesthetic of "doomscrolling"

Let's say it's 1 AM and you are lying in bed, caught up in that particular "state in which exhaustion bleeds into insomniac overstimulation" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023). Staring at your screen, you mindlessly scroll through the inexhaustible, algorithmically recommended content that ceaselessly pops up on your TikTok feed. These are videos that the algorithm thinks you will enjoy, but you don't really care for any of them. Nevertheless, you apathetically consume all of it, unwilling to stop. It is a form of distraction. There is something strangely soothing in this detached consumption of "content." The "binging" of ''doom-filled

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[videos]" stops you "from taking [any real] action" (Segalovich 2023). This is the dark *zen* of scrolling.

There is a term for this condition of being caught up in the "contemporary ennui and digital overload" (Chen 2023) that has become familiar in the post-pandemic era: *doomscrolling*. The phrase describes the constant state of exposure to the "oversaturation of content that [leads] to romanticized insanity in the consumer" (Owen 2023). We are becoming more aware that the "world we inhabit is increasingly constructed [...] of media" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023), with the boundary separating our lives and social media content becoming "porous" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023). As Shumon Basar puts it, "I don't know where my doomscrolling ends and where I begin" (2022, 7).

In the post-pandemic culture, one TikTok trend aestheticizes this experience of doomscroling. It is a digital form that tries to capture the ''semantic satiation (the phenomenon whereby words [and images] lose meaning through rapid repetition)" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023) that characterizes the contemporary internet dominated by short-form videos that clutter your social media feed.

This aesthetic trend appeared in 2021, "becoming widespread" in 2022, with content creators "using the hashtag #corecore" (Owen 2023) to describe this new genre of edited video collages. Less than a year later, the hashtag accumulated "over one billion views" (Segalovich 2023).

2. "Corecore at 2 a.m."

The hashtag describes "edits" that combine fragments from "seemingly unrelated" (Chen 2023) online sources into "one-minute long videos" (Pitcher 2023). These are "amateurishly-edited clips of found media" (Townsend 2023) obtained from films, podcasts, and YouTube videos that are then "knocked together" (Glossop 2023) and ''set to [melancholic] music" (Chen 2023).

These miscellaneous fragments, joined together, conjure "a [single] feeling" (Pitcher 2023) of what it's like to live in the post-pandemic world. As one TikTok user noticed, "The combination of clips somehow summarizes everything bad about life, but I couldn't quite tell you why" (qt. in Ewens 2023).

The #corecore doesn't attempt to communicate a social commentary on the global crises that characterize the post-pandemic condition. It only recreates a sentiment all too familiar, and the users seem to engage in purely emotional identification with the content.

Scroll through any #corecore comment section, and it's a chorus of similar reactions that smack of a cry for help: "This is so real," "Man, if

only I can express my feelings, "Corecore at 2 am," "Nothing seems fun anymore," "Corecore makes me feel real but other times I feel fabricated."[2] As Colquitt and Cobb note, "It is all coagulated into a consistent vibe" (2023).

A typical #corecore edit includes snippets from podcasts in which people talk about loneliness and declining mental health in young men: like Theo Von, a reality TV personality, saying "You end up being alone. [...] You can be in a family of four and feel alone as fuck" (CyberShinigami 2023), which is then juxtaposed with a movie sequence portraying an idealized image of friendship, like the scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Aragorn says to Frodo: "I would have gone with you to the end, into the fires of Mordor" (CyberShinigami 2023). Or you may see an excerpt from an interview with Jordan Peterson on the verge of tears, talking about suicide: "Don't underestimate the hole your absence would leave" (CyberShinigami 2023), conjoined with a scene from *The Truman Show* portraying Truman Burbank, a character who leads a fake life in a reality TV set, with no real friends, exclaiming: "Good morning, and in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night" (CyberShinigami 2023)–a phrase that carries an Ophelia-like, suicidal undertone. Or there would be a snippet of an anchorman talking about a woman who has been lying dead for three years in her apartment (with the television still on) before anyone checked on her, asking the audience, "How long would it take for people to notice you disappeared?" (CyberShinigami 2023).

Decontextualized clips of movie characters experiencing intense emotions are frequently present in #corecore edits. Examples include Officer K (Ryan Gosling) screaming in frustration in *Blade Runner 2049*, Jake Gyllenhaal's character in *Stronger* shouting, "Why do you even want me? I'm such a fuck up!" (CyberShinigami 2023), or the scene from *Good Will Hunting* where Sean (Robin Williams) repeatedly tells Will (Matt Damon), "It's not your fault!" until Will breaks down violently sobbing (CyberShinigami 2023). Another example is the melancholic voiceover from *Taxi Driver*, where Travis (Robert De Niro) drives aimlessly through the neon-lit city, lamenting, "Loneliness has followed me my whole life. In bars, in cars, sidewalks, everywhere. There's no escape" (CyberShinigami 2023). Additionally, #corecore edits might feature clips of influencers spouting platitudes about dating, their overlapping voices merging into incoherent noise. These are often followed by videos of young men celebrating their birthdays alone with

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[2] See, e.g., comments on @corecoreful's video (https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM6umaQhL/).

a sad slice of cake, or a rapid sequence of clips showing the vast expanse of the Atlantic garbage patch.

Thus, #corecore is an omnivorous genre, the digital recycling machine that produces content out of "the endless and random media scroll" (Chen 2023). It's the "content about content" (Ewens 2023) that symbolically repeats the logic of the algorithm by unceasingly proffering seemingly unrelated video excerpts until they turn into "stimuli shorn of meaning" (Rayner-Law, qt. in Colquitt and Cobb 2023). The "plethora of imagery" through the rapid repetition, "ends up signifying nothing" (Duncum 2021, 11). In reproducing "overstimulating act[s] of binge-watching" (Ewens 2023) and doomscroling, #corecore becomes the symbolic image of TikTok itself, which, "being pushed to the limit and running out of things to dissect, [starts to feed] on itself" (Roberts 2023). It's "the most meta of internet subcultures" (Roberts 2023).

3. "-core" as aesthetic category

For "a generation who grew up during the pandemic and have never logged off" (Ewens 2023), the term "-core" has become an "[aesthetic] modifier" (Mendez II 2023), a label that categorizes "styles, inclinations, moods, and subcultures" (Mendez II 2023) into clusters "around which people can find like-minded users online" (Mendez II 2023). A notable example is #cottagecore, a trend that flooded social media during the 2020 pandemic with images of "bucolic rural existence" (Slone 2020). Driven by "modern escapist fantasies" (Slone 2020), it generated a surge of content featuring serene country houses and neo-romantic landscapes, filled with a "nostalgia that [praised] the benefits of living a slow life in which nothing much happens" (Slone 2023). This trend represented a hybrid neo-romantic attitude that emerged as an antidote to the anxiety of the pandemic era. As if the contemporary internet is marked by "returns" to Romantic sensibilities.

In the current internet culture, the concept of "aesthetic"—with "core" as its key category—has a dual meaning. On one hand, "core" refers to "aesthetic" in the superficial sense of surface-level Tumblr-like preferences, where "This is my aesthetic" simply reflects one's preferred fashion style or music genre (e.g., #gothcore). On the other hand, "core" signifies the defining characteristic of identity—the aesthetically mediated "core" of who one is, shaped by experiences, sensibilities, and worldviews that connect users with like-minded online communities. Thus, the term "core" balances "superficiality" with "profoundness."

As internet culture grew from the 1990s onward, aesthetics became "the central stage [...] of society" (Duncum 2021, 4), with everyday life being "aestheticized to a historically unprecedented

extent," a phenomenon Welsch describes as "hyperaesthetization" (qt. in Duncum 2021, 4). This new aestheticization trades primarily in feelings, not discursive descriptions. This primacy of "vibe" and "sensibility" is yet another symptom of the revenant Romanticism amid digital postmodernity.

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4. The decline of memes and the final "death of postmodernism"

Speaking of the 2022 war in Ukraine and the post-pandemic political landscape, Henry Kissinger has observed that "[w]e are now living in a totally new era" (qt. in Basar 2022, 4). As if everyone senses that "the vibe has shifted" (Davis, qt. in Bashar 2022, 4). The social media trends, as aesthetic "black boxes" of broader societal disturbances, appear to register the "change [that] keeps changing" (Bashar 2022, 4).[3]

One salient feature of the post-pandemic internet aesthetic seems to be the gradual process in which the uncontested primacy of "memes," the form dominating social media in the last fifteen years, has been challenged by the popularity of short video edits such as #corecore. This trend has been accelerated by the introduction of YouTube shorts and Instagram reels in 2020 and the rise of social media platforms that trade almost exclusively in video content, like TikTok. The meme seems to be a genuinely post-modern form since its crucial ideological attitude is that of ironic distance that is "cast over all forms of sincerity" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023). Essentially, it's an expression of being "above the situation," where every form of direct emotional engagement is restricted.

The "most authentic [content]" of memes is the "ironic limit" (Bianchino 2019, 373) itself. The depth of a meme is its very surface. If memes are the aesthetic expression of sardonic disengagement "designed to protect [us] from the nearness of things" (Morton 2013, 27), then "chaotic video edits" (Chen 2023) can be seen as anti-memes, "the complete opposite of what we consider memes" (Townsend 2023) since they are deliberately engaged with the unironic, "emotional core of experience" (Duncum 2021, 53). Video content like #corecore is characterized by "an exaggerated, unwarranted display of emotion[s]"

[3] There's a type of TikTok edits juxtaposing movie clips of Ryan Gosling laughing and dancing (from *Barbie* or *La La Land*), labeled as "me in 2019," with more somber footage of the same actor from *Blade Runner 2049* or *Drive*, appearing forlorn and despondent, labeled as "me every day since 2020." These edits capture the general sense of crisis since 2020. They're a "recycle" of a Romantic trope: the "figure of the double" (Casaliggi, March-Russell 2012, 2). Whenever you want to express unmediated emotions online, Romantic clichés emerge.

(Duncum 2021, 47): moments of grief, rage, and loneliness are juxtaposed with motivational storytelling videos (known as #hopecore) in an attempt to capture the melancholy of the human experience. The ironic distance that prevented direct emotional reactions (in memes) is abolished (in these types of edits). We are invited to be emotionally engaged.

Scrolling through your TikTok feed, you may notice something almost inconceivable ten years ago, the type of content that would be immediately dismissed as being over-the-top: people recording themselves while crying or talking in an unmediated confessional tone, compilations of movie clips with characters involved in emotional outbursts of rage and exasperation. The unironic display of emotions suddenly dominates social media. The postmodern "cynical distance" (Morton 2013, 6), exemplified in memes, no longer seems viable. Something has changed in recent years: reality suddenly appears so close. There's no point in feigning distance anymore.

5. "Real"

If "Lol" was the most common comment on social media content in 2014, and "Lmao" in 2019, then "real" is surely the most used reaction in 2023.[4] A glance at the comment section under any #corecore video reveals "hundred[s] of comments repeating [this single] word: real" (Glossop 2023). But what does "real" mean? It signifies an unironic identification with the content, reflecting a shift away from postmodern irony. “Real” expresses "one's feelings that couldn't be expressed through words“ (Townsend 2023). To type "real" under a #corecore video is to hint at the uncommunicative core of genuine experience. "Real" points to something non-discursive. It's part of the digital mystique. We resonate with the clips' aesthetic of raw, unmediated emotions that #corecore portrays ("This is what it now means to be human"), but we cannot fully explain it.

The contemporary internet culture is experiencing a revival of Romantic sensibility. This is evident in the way #corecore videos and other digital contents emphasize intense emotions and visual imagery to convey experiences that transcend language, echoing the Romantic belief in a "truer" reality beyond words.

The Romantics believed that the deepest experiences have "a *je ne sais quoi* [quality]" (Berlin 1999, 60), where language itself reaches its limits. This idea is evident in *Frankenstein*, a foundational Romantic text.

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[4] See, e.g., @hulkamania_stanley's video (https://vm.tiktok.com/ZM6C6uvoH/).

The novel begins by invoking Romantic tradition, with Robert Walton referencing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "I am going to [...] 'the land of mist and snow'; but I shall kill no albatross" (Shelley 2001, 23). But once this Romantic scenery is established and the great tradition invoked, Walton proceeds to define the core of Romantic identity: "There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand" (Shelley 2001, 23). This is the crucial poetic element of Romantic ideology: the most authentic layer of experience is the one that cannot be discursively expressed but only felt.

The deepest truths about the world and ourselves can only be experienced through dynamic, overwhelming emotions, and approached intuitively, but never fully described in words. Romantic texts often seek to discover a pre-linguistic authenticity–a truth in powerful emotions that represent a pre-cultural, original experience that can't be mediated by a shared language. Consider again Frankenstein's creature. Even as he begins to speak human language, there remains a melancholic insufficiency, an inherent inaptitude to convey the most authentic feelings: "I felt sensations of [an] overpowering nature [...] such as I had never before experienced, [...] and I withdrew [...], unable to bear [them]" (Shelley 2001, 104). This is emotional excess that breaks down and overpowers language itself: the truest expression of strong emotions isn't words but "speechlessness"—like the howling of wild animals. Without the sanitizing effect of language, we're left with overpowering emotions, the bare "truth" of experience—*the real*. "Real" is untamed by descriptions, conveyed by raw visuals we can only silently identify with. It expresses a complex sentiment that cuts deep: something we feel but cannot fully articulate.

This conviction that writing is "a poor medium for the communication of feeling" (Shelley 2001, 21) makes Romantic poetics essentially "visual." Morton even theorizes "that cinematic flow,“ the edited stream of images fluxing with one another, ''had already been anticipated in the Romantic period," with Wordsworth as "the first cinematic artist" (2013, 72). Romanticism is proto-cinematic because, at its core, it features visual representations that escape "discursive understanding" (Swift 2012, 249). Romanticism marks the start of contemporary culture, with the photographic image becoming the dominant, "iconic" form of expression. This tendency can be traced from Romanticism and the early days of photography and film to the current digital culture.

However, there is an "evil demon of images"—to use Baudrillard's phrase—a unique "melancholia," "a profound despair over [the meaning] of representation" (Swift 2012, 249). Images are

overwhelming; the constant generation of images in contemporary culture produces a semiotic excess that cannot be fully translated into language. Melancholic experiences are always cinematic, like the vast, unreal landscapes of *Paris, Texas*—an America of fantasy with neon gas stations, motels, diners, liminal parking lots, and distant highways that promise an elusive escape—or the neon-lit, hypnotic nighttime of New York in *Taxi Driver*—the mirage of the "city that never sleeps," the manifestation of the eschatological desire for ''the celestial city,'' enticing us with its allure of a different, greater life, neon salvation we could never fully achieve. It's as if only images can be romanticized, carrying an almost phantom quality of unreality, the ectoplasms of desires—a life that cannot be attained, dreams that remain unfulfilled, allowing the mind to explore countless unattainable possibilities. There is no proper language for describing images–this is the crux of Romantic aesthetics. Cinema (with the essential melancholy of visuals) is where the specter of Romanticism survives.

The Romantic sensibility also persists in today's internet aesthetic. Overwhelming emotions pointing to the most authentic, incommunicable core of human experiences cannot be fully articulated through language alone. Instead, these emotions are evoked through imagery, creating a constant stream of visual representation (the FYP) similar to the rapid eye movement stage of sleep. The fading of the postmodern ironic attitude that made memes popular signals the death of postmodernism (which finally occurred during the 2020 pandemic). The shift towards emotionally charged hyper-edits over ironic meme-like images is a key indicator of this cultural change. What is occurring now is a strange return to Romanticism and its unique sensibility.

This new digital afterlife of the ''eighteenth- and nineteenth-century [cultural form]" (Coyne 1999, ix), as a "mutation of the original stock" (Larrissy 1999, 1), could be termed *hyper-romanticism*. All the key elements of the Romantic aesthetic are uncannily, and exaggeratedly, displayed in new digital artifacts. For example, what is an "edit" but a digital version of a Romantic fragment? Or, what are the "neurodivergent and reclusive" (Schneider 2023) cinematic sigma males featured in #corecore edits—like Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho,* Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*, or BoJack Horseman—but contemporary versions of the quintessential Romantic character, the Byronic hero? [5] Even the emphasis on direct, unironic emotional

[5] Some authors have argued that the #corecore aesthetic has recently been appropriated by incels, the fringe internet community of young men adhering to the ideology of "male victimhood"(Solea, Sugiura 2023, 313). Segalovich

engagement with visual content is another aspect of this digital revival of Romanticism. After postmodernism, there's a shift to a new form of Romanticism. As Marx famously stated, "[A]ll great world-historic facts [...] appear twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (2006, I).

6. From Romantic fragment to TikTok edits

Since the pervading Romantic attitude is marked by the conviction that language fails to adequately capture the deepest of experiences, there's a sense of "incompletion" (Janowitz 1999, 484) that characterizes Romantic poetic endeavor. The "common form" (Allport 2012, 414) of incompletion that "traverses all of romanticism" (Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy 1988, 61), is that of "fragment." It's a mode of writing that "gives the most authentic [expression] to the problem of inexpressibility" (Janowitz 1999, 485) in literature. Thus, the fragment is "the romantic genre *par excellence*" (Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy 1988, 40). One should recall the obvious examples: Coleridge's "Kubla Khan (A Fragment)", Keats' "Hyperion (A Fragment)," Byron's *Don Juan*, ''described as 'fragments' upon publication" (Allport 2012, 400). The fragment points to its own "insufficiency": it's a trope of tension that approaches the frontier of language (drawing near to the point of inexpressibility where sentences disintegrate into linguistic debris).

This Romantic drive for fragmentation survives in contemporary social media "edits," like #corecore, as the essential poetic technique. What is (e.g.) #corecore but a process in which coherent media are shattered into fragments and then recycled, stitched together for a poetic effect that couldn't be achieved otherwise? These edits, like corecore, are hyper-romantic "poems, rife with short movie clips, music, and soundbites that are often nostalgic, nihilistic, or poignant" (Press-

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notes that if "you search 'corecore' on TikTok, [...] you'll find [that] the overwhelming majority of videos depict male despair" (2023). Excerpts from films and TV series with "violent male protagonists" (Segalovich 2023) having mental breakdowns "monologu[ing] about how everyone, especially girls, has rejected them" (Segalovich 2023) are a staple of #corecore. However, it seems that even the ideology of inceldom could be seen as a farcical recycling of the Byronic hero trope: a socially inept, troubled loner excluded from society and devoid of a romantic partner. One could even argue that Frankenstein's creature, the most recognizable Romantic hero, constantly lamenting his solitude and unattractiveness, and threatening Victor with violence if he doesn't provide him with a female companion, is the original incel. The phantom of Romanticism still hovers over the contemporary digital culture, not always as the most benevolent of presences.

Reynolds, qt. in Townsend 2023). The romantic fragment is the *ur-form* of #corecore.

7. "Literally me"

The same dynamic that informs contemporary #corecore edits was already at work in Mary Shelly's book. Both the creature and the novel are defined by "the editing metaphor" (Robinson 2012, 290). In the most literal sense, Frankenstein's monster is a visceral hyper-edit composed of discarded bodily "fragments." Thrown away "limbs, organs, assorted body parts" of various individuals are "sewn together" (Holmes 2012, 269) into one being endowed with a new life and movement.

However, it's not just the body of Victor's gruesome creation but also the very textual "body" of the novel itself that behaves as a hyper-edit of miscellaneous textual "remains." The novel is a patchwork of shattered archives consisting of Walton's letters to his sister, Elizabeth's letter to Frankenstein, and Frankenstein's own testimonies, lacking a unifying narrative voice. Both the monster and the novel are not simply "authored" but "edited" (Robinson 2012, 289).

The editing also extends to the creature's self-understanding. When he discovers a discarded "leathern portmanteau" (Shelley 2001, 125) containing *Paradise Lost* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the texts Romantics have regarded as the forerunners of their tradition, he employs them to construct his own emotional identity. The creature's engagement with these texts is akin to a contemporary TikTok user creating a #corecore edit, borrowing elements from previous media to form "a consistent vibe" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023) that resonates with his emotional state. The creature uses fragments from these texts, such as passages describing Werther's "despondency and gloom" and Satan's "bitter gall of envy" (Shelley 2001, 126), to express emotions that he cannot articulate on his own. Fragmentation becomes the language of his unutterable grief. There's something "forever alive in [his] bosom" (Shelley 2001, 125) that he cannot properly express, so he uses emotionally charged fragments and images extrapolated from previous texts, "a fund of [...] sources upon which [he] cannibalistically feeds" (Baldick 2012, 256). In the creature's usage, these works become a catalog of emotions, a source of aesthetic identification. He is like a contemporary TikTok user commenting under a clip showing Ryan Gosling character screaming in *Blade Runner 2049*: ''Literally me."

In some of the emotionally tensest moments in the novel, the characters resort to the artifice of quotation instead of speaking in their own voice (which suddenly appears impotent). After the creature opens its "dull, yellow eye" (Shelley 2001, 59) and Victor becomes aware of

what he has done, his mute, agitated feelings of "unnatural horror" (Shelley 2001, 176) suddenly give rise to a quotation from Coleridge: "Like one who, on a lonely road/Doth walk in fear and dread..." (2001, 60). In the same way, the monster's wailing in "the excess of [...] despair" (2001, 205) upon discovering Victor's dead body in Walton's cabin, transitions into a quotation from *Paradise Lost*: "Evil thenceforth became my good" (2001, 205). Or, one could recall Victor's lament for his dead friend Clerval, voiced through a fragment from Wordsworth (2001, 150). The romantic fragment becomes *a language of grief* and lament, a lacuna of inexpressible sentiment –"a fantasy of discourse, a gaping of desire" (Barthes 1994, 94)–a substitute evoked to express the inexpressible, pre-linguistic, organic emotions to which the Romantics ascribed a higher-level authenticity.

This same Romantic attitude is repeated in #corecore. Fragments of previous media in melancholy repetition constitute a peculiar language of mourning. These are layers of fractured media content that, put together, define "the modern human condition in some way" (Pitcher 2023), and "it's like people are screaming underneath" (Therieau, qt. in Glossop 2023).

The collage aesthetic, the aggregation of fragments into one Frankensteinian whole, has come to be not only "the central principle of all art in the 20th century" (Barthelme, qt. in Copeland 2002, 11) but also an apt "metaphor for modern existence" (Hopkins 1997, 11). Obsession with fragmentation is the enduring legacy of "the romantic epoch" (Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy 1988, 110) that survives in all subsequent traditions. One should recall Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the quintessential Modernist poem "haunted by the spectral figure of Romanticism" (Casaliggi, March-Russell 2012, 2). Eliot could not have employed more adequate poetic forms than fragment and collage to achieve the poem's enormous ambition: to capture the very experience of modernity, the fabric of the modern world.

Fragment is an expression of desire for totalities. When you want to portray everything, such an endeavor necessarily breaks up into fragments. *The Waste Land* could be seen as a distant, venerable ancestor of #corecore edits. The poem itself is a series of fragments, "ruins of other texts [and media]" (Janowitz 1999, 486) heavily edited and loosely weaved together by a common atmosphere. Shattered conversational sequences are followed in rapid succession by "bits of near movie dialogue[s]" and almost liquefied extractions from Chaucer, Augustine, lyrics of jazz tunes, "Ovid, Verlaine, and so on" (Hopkins 1997, 8). As if the 1922 poem prophetically recreates the future digital

experience of scrolling through the curated content of social media feeds.

8. "The constant flicker"

If there is one aesthetic form that defines modernity, it is *the collage*—the edited flow of fragments. The "archetypal modern [storyteller]" (Hopkins 1997, 9) is not the novelist who strives to maintain "continuity and internal consistency" (Hopkins 1997, 9) of experiences, but rather the "filmmaker, cutting, editing, transposing reality and fantasy, [...] present and past, into a collage" (Hopkins 1997, 9). Romantic, non-linear, "flash-back" narration (which can be traced back to *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*) influenced later cinematic storytelling that relies on a rapid succession of scenes. The edited sequence of fragments is a crucial modern technique since the succession "of quick, disparate images" (Hopkins 1997, 6) seems to be a more fitting medium than purely linear narration for portraying "the complex reality in which we live" (Hopkins 1997, 9). #Corecore can be seen as an accelerated continuation of this trend.

Additionally, there is a strong "urban [...] emphasis" (Seitz, qt. in Copeland 2002, 13) in collage aesthetics, as it "derives its inspiration from the deep disjunctive structures of the contemporary city" (Copeland 2002, 13). The city appears as a vast neon hypertext, with the unceasing flickering flow of automobiles, glowing billboards, and distant "galaxies" of illuminated apartment units in skyscrapers, all testifying to the simultaneity of countless lives. One can only experience the city in fragments. There is a unique link between the "fragment" and nostalgia, one that is essentially cinematic.

For example, it is well-known that Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, with its "flash-backs and close-ups" (Tredell 2007, 79), is influenced by various cinematic techniques—so much so that one might even claim film is its "primary influence" (Tredell 2007, 79). However, there is one particular cinematic scene in the novel where Nick Carraway succumbs to urban nostalgia:

> I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes, I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. [...] At the enchanted metropolitan twilight, I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others— [...] young clerks

in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life (Fitzgerald 2001, 37).

The scene extensively uses "Romantic vocabulary" (Tredell 2007, 34). Nick's experience of the city is fragmented, consisting of the surface quality of flickering lights and countless lives constantly passing near him, opening up a fantasized space of innumerable possibilities. His "haunting loneliness" fuels his desire for proximity and companionship. He can only see fragments of the lives of others—"women walking up Fifth Avenue," "young clerks in the dusk." The fragment becomes the language of desire, which is structured around gaps, splits, tensions, and condensations. The presence of a fragment acknowledges the unspeakable core of fantasy, the void that cannot be articulated or illuminated. Nick's desire for the proximity of others is fragmentary, essentially cinematic, a "suture" of flickering images. In a way, Nick's desire takes the proto-form of #corecore: a quick, melancholy stream of fragments of the lives of others. Edits are structured *like desire*. They thrive on incompleteness, isolation, condensation, and interruption.

To fantasize, one needs a fragment, not the whole experience. A fragment leaves an empty space for fantasy. It holds the promise that the gap can potentially become anything one wants it to be. It is no wonder that cinematic desire is built around fragmentary edits and poignant panoramas of "bright lights" and "big cities." The fragment is the genre of totality, of complete possession. It is driven by a desire to possess everything, to consume everything, to gather all experiences—only to discover the futility of such attempts. To possess everything means to possess fragments.

9. "Terrible objects"

How can we account for the strange popularity of edited video collages, such as #corecore, in the digital space after the pandemic? It seems that the general sense that we are now living in an era dominated by what Timothy Morton calls "hyperobjects" has intensified.

But what exactly are *hyperobjects*? Consider COVID-19 as a "hyperobject." It was a phenomenon "too vast and weird for [us] to wrap [our] heads around" (Hudson 2021). COVID-19 cannot be grasped in its totality as a "thing-in-itself" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023). Instead, we perceive its consequences—the "slides," the "fragments" of it. What we see and interact with is not COVID-19 itself, but face masks, respiratory symptoms, lockdowns, social distancing, death tolls, conspiracies...

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is another example of a hyperobject. Again, it cannot be conceived as a singular event, akin to a

medieval conflict. In today's globalized world, crucial events do not unfold in a specific location. The war is not an isolated phenomenon but a series of diverse, diffused experiences such as economic crises, higher rents, immigration waves, gas price fluctuations, the rise of right-wing movements worldwide.

Other examples of hyperobjects include global warming and "climate change [...], financial collapses" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023), "oil spills, all plastic ever manufactured, capitalism [...], the sum total of Styrofoam and plutonium littered across the Earth over the past century, which will remain for millennia" (Hudson 2021). Hyperobjects are "massive forces whose impacts defy our physical perceptions" (Hudson 2021). These "events" are immeasurable and often destructive. We cannot "see [them] directly" but only interact with their menacing shadows—"gigantic patches of darkness that fleetingly slide across the landscape" (Morton 2013, 153). The existence of a hyperobject is inferred not from the thing itself, but from its side effects: "graphs, instruments, tracks in a diffusion cloud chamber, sunburn, radiation sickness, mutagenic effects [...], mushroom clouds" (Morton 2013, 153), and microplastics in our brains. Hyperobjects are "nonlocal" (Morton 2013, 38) and "phased" (Morton 2013, 70). We only see its "samples and edits" (Morton 2013, 87), the "figments and fragments of doom" (Morton 2013, 153).

Isn't #corecore the perfect aesthetic expression of a time dominated by hyperobjects? This "layered application of media" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023) deals only with samples, the debris produced by vast, incomprehensible, and immeasurable phenomena such as the pandemic, "consumerism, capitalism, technological atomization, systemic injustices [...], and irreversible climate change" (Colquitt, Cobb 2023).

Moreover, the awareness that we now live in times of hyperobjects carries a distinctively Romantic attitude. What is our experience of hyperobjects if not a reworking of a crucial aesthetic notion from Romanticism—*the Sublime*?

For the Romantics, the Sublime referred to experiences that are "too great for the imagination to ‘take it all in’ at once," a sensation of being "rendered helpless" (Shaw 2006, 80-1) by the presence of "terrible objects" (Burke, qt. in Shaw 2006, 48) that are "formless" or "exceed our ability to perceive [them]" (Shaw 2006, 78). Imagine a storm in the North Sea, with mammoth dark waves and ice shoves. The Sublime is about the aesthetic experience of gigantic, uncontrollable forces, where the "source of terror" lies in the failure to comprehend and encompass the whole phenomenon, leaving us only with "a vast number of distinct

points" (Burke, qt. in Shaw 2006, 49), and the feeling of being overwhelmed and even annulled by a colossal presence.

Here, one may see a link between the Sublime—the crucial aesthetic category of Romanticism—and the "fragment," its most distinguishing genre. The fragment is the only adequate form to "represent the unrepresentable" (Larrissy 1999, 6). The fragmentary stutter is the most appropriate linguistic expression of sublime feelings. The Sublime, an aesthetic impression of a large-scale failure of unity, can only be experienced in fragments. The fragment allows "the sublime [to occur] within representation whilst annulling the possibility of representation" (Milbank, qt. in Shaw 2006, 26).

As we've seen, the aesthetic vocabulary (the forms like #corecore) we use to address contemporary crises—*hyperobjects* like pandemics and global warming—necessarily borrow from Romanticism. Consider the Atlantic garbage patch, COVID-19, or wildfires induced by climate change; one might notice a certain sublime quality, a dark fascination with this imagery, in the media reports of these events. It is as if the contemporary Sublime is man-made: limitless, desolate landfills instead of "the solemn Alps."

For the Romantics, the Sublime was something to be contemplated from a safe distance, "while leaning on a walking stick, like the character in the Friedrich painting [*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*]" (Morton 2013, 160). Today, however, we cannot maintain such a distance. When we experience the new, *dark Sublime* induced by man-made phenomena—let's call it, drawing on Morton, *the hypersublime*—we find ourselves not on the edge, observing "the mighty Alps" (Shelley 2001, 93) or "the tremendous and ever-moving glaciers" (Shelley 2001, 94) which were the traditional sources of the Romantic Sublime, but rather "falling inside the abyss, [...] the fiery interior of a hyperobject" (Morton 2013, 160). This new Anthropocene Sublime is swallowing us; we are inside hyperobjects, "like Jonah in the Whale" (Morton 2013, 20). Unlike the original Romantic Sublime, the Hypersublime is marked not by aesthetic distance but by terrifying proximity and "insideness."

10. The Sublime of waste

Contemporary digital collages reflect an apocalyptic sentiment. The endless stream of videos on social media platforms can be seen as a desperate attempt to capture and make sense of our world before its end. Social media platforms function like apocalyptic machines, constantly summarizing and recapitulating contemporary experiences through the repetition of fragments. The incessant flow of edited video collages conveys a sense of cultural exhaustion and a longing for closure.

Even the fast-paced clips in #corecore are reminiscent of the final rewinding of life during near-death experiences. The contemporary internet aesthetic is infused with this melancholic sense of an ending, an expression of what Shumon Basar (2022) has called "Endcore."

There is an apocalyptic quality to the doomscrolling that characterizes the new social media experience. An environmentalist strain of #corecore portrays melting glaciers, California wildfires against a backdrop of burning-red skies and traffic congestion, endless expanses of landfills, and vast seas filled with plastic bags and bottles—almost immortal, indestructible polyethylene hyperobjects that "will outlive [us] by [...] hundreds [of] years" (Morton 2013, 90). These #corecore edits are a genre of catastrophe. They evoke a new feeling of a dark, all-encompassing Sublime of waste. As one scrolls through these video sequences, one might feel like Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), witnessing a catastrophe "which keeps piling wreckage [...] the pile of debris [growing] skyward" (Benjamin 2023).

This doomsday quality of repetitious edited videos is shaped by a distinct Romantic impulse. Think of *Frankenstein*, which ends in the all-consuming, alien desert of whiteness at the North Pole, or *Moby-Dick*, which in its final chapter evokes the apocalyptic imagery of the awful power of Nature wiping out humankind: "[T]hen all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (Melville 2014, 560). Or consider Byron's "Darkness," depicting the extinction of the Sun and stars, the post-apocalyptic desolation of the heat death of the Universe, "the space, rayless, and pathless [...] the icy earth" (Byron 2023).

The Romantic Sublime often invites imagining a world without humans—the lonely, snow-covered Alps like alien pyramids of a vanished civilization, violent ocean storms swallowing ships, uninhabitable terrains devoid of humans. Even Shelley's depiction of Mont Blanc illustrates a peculiar stasis—the unmoving, eventless eternity of a post-apocalyptic space: "A city of death [...] / And wall impregnable of beaming ice" (Shelley 2023). There is an apocalyptic silence in it all.

What was particularly modern about the Romantic imagination was its ability to transform and sublimate the imagery of apocalyptic desolation and destruction into aesthetic experience. This "neo-romanticist vision of sublime-world destruction" (Sinnerbrink 2016, 98) endures in present-day social media artifacts, revealing the persistent afterlife of Romanticism in contemporary culture. Romanticism still remains ''an unfinished chapter" (Heath, Boreham 2002, 171).

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CORECORE: HIPERROMANTIZAM I POSTPANDEMIJSKA INTERNET ESTETIKA

Nakon pandemije došlo je do vidljivih promjena i u internet estetici. Ovom procesu doprinjela je i rastuća popularnost digitalnih platformi koje se gotovo isključivo oslanjaju na video sadržaje (poput Instagram *reels*-a i TikToka). Nakon što je, po svoj prilici, nastupila dugo najavljivana „smrt postmodernizma", čini se da digitalnim prostorom trenutno dominiraju kulturne forme čije se estetičko porijeklo može slijediti do romantizma. Kao da nakon postmodernizma, nastupa nova fascinacija prenaglašenim romantičarskim kategorijama. Taj fenomen možemo opisati kao *hiperromantizam*. U ovom radu istražujemo načine na koje su romantičarske estetičke prakse doživjele čudnu digitalnu

transformaciju i neočekivanu prisutnost na novim društvenim mrežama, posebno u postpandemijskom periodu.

Ključne riječi: internet estetika, TikTok, romantizam, sublimno, *Frankenštajn*, fragment;