Benjamin Shoemake
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Melissa Wilcox
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Disidentifactory Power
Application Paper : Unabridged edition

In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz aims to "look at disidentifactory performances of politics,"[1] defining *disidentification* as a sort of third modality for the construction of identity, one which exceeds mere normative identification without becoming counter-identification. We can conceive of disidentification as a sort of counter-interpretive identification, indentifying with something while avoiding a parallel identification with the way it is conceived in mainstream culture. In this way, it is not so much an identification *against* (as in counteridentification), but an identification *in an alternative manner*.

If disidentification holds any sort of political or emotional power—and I think Muñoz would agree that it does—then the question remains as to how this power functions, for better or worse, in society. This is the question with which this paper will primarily be concerned. In what ways does disidentification help to promote social progress (in a positive direction), and in what ways does disidentification end up in service to cultural norms? Muñoz describes disidentification as a survival strategy, but while this helps us situate it in context, it does not absolve it of its problems— many forms of social conservatism can also be seen as survival strategies, but they nevertheless have very real damaging effects on individuals and society. And although the true scope of this question expands far beyond the confines of this paper, by looking at a few examples of disidentification in-practice we can start our journey towards an answer.

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1.   José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiv.

PART I: DRAG

Muñoz sees his work as "a contribution to the formation of a queer performance-studies lens,"[2] and so it is perhaps of little surprise that one of the principle topics he takes up is that of drag. Drag is an interesting problem to take up in an analysis of power structures and normativity, because in some instances it has been held as powerfully subversive and (by Muñoz) disidentifactory, but in others it has come under criticism for being toxic to trans individuals.[3] And while Muñoz acknowledges the normalized, sanitized, and potentially problematic nature of "coporate-sponsored" and "traditional gay drag," he holds that there exists a third form of drag performance, a "political drag" which "is about creating an uneasiness, an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric."[4] But how does this uneasiness play out?

> A few years ago I found some old copies of the zine "Drag" in the archives of a university library… What I found that was worth unearthing was a spirit of sisterhood and cooperation… No matter how idealized or fictionalized this spirit was, I think it's worth looking back at fondly and remembering that we have been *trying* to change our image, *trying* to fight side by side, for as long as trans women have been calling ourselves by those words, and even before.[5]

Scenes of drag performance have often been cited as places of trans empowerment. And in analysing the effects of drag upon mainstream normativity, I don't mean to belittle the fact that, historically, the stage has served as a place of experimentation, openness, and self-discovery for some (usually straight, usually feminine) trans individuals. But the trans project is to *expand* this venue beyond the confines of a performance, and to allow this kind of identity-formation to be undertaken by more and different kinds of people. It does not seek to preserve drag as a distinct mode of expression and performance, or really depend upon drag's continued existence at all. Since trans women are women,[6] a trans woman's performance of femininity is not a drag performance

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2. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, xiv.
3. "DRAG HURTS TRANS GIRLS. BOYCOTT DRAGFEST." (Poster, visible around the Whitman College campus, Walla Walla, WA, October 2015).
4. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 100.
5. Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women*, Issue #0 (October 2010), 63.
6. No I am not actually going to provide a citation for this.

any more than any other woman's performance would be.[7]

It is impossible to conceive of drag without a gender binary which precedes it. Drag depends upon, and reinscribes, gendered expectations within its performance, both through its caricature of the gender it preforms, and the audience's reassurance (through the label *drag*) that the gender of its performer is not in question. If drag challenges the rigidity of gendered *performance*, it does so by first asserting the conformance of the performer's *performativity*—positing itself as a man playing a woman, it reinforces the notion that "males" who perform femininity are, nevertheless, still men (or vice versa). Drag explains itself away with excuses of politics—Muñoz's "terrorist drag"—and its liberal incorporation of camp destroys any semblence of authenticity. Moreover, drag which attempts to step outside of or challenge the nature of this performance ceases to be drag; as Ester Newton remarks in her deliciously-titled 1972 book *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, "Transy drag is wrong".[8]

To Muñoz, there is little doubt that drag is disidentifactory. "One would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how 'real,' as an actual performance of 'woman'… The 'woman' produced in drag is not a woman, but instead a public disidentification with woman."[9] Drag reinterprets gender as a performance, but in doing so forecloses any possibility for genuine non-normative gender identification by constituting itself as fake and/or purely political in nature. Expectations of the performance of gender are challenged, but in such a way that any deviance from normativity is resituated back within the larger economy of the norm, reinforcing the hold of the structure on the bodies which seek to escape it.

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7.   Of course, trans individuals are intimately familiar with drag going *the other way* (ie., strategically passing as their socially-imposed gender), but this is usually not what is meant by "drag".

8.   "It violates the glamour standard… that is, the right context and motivation for impersonation (performance, making legitimate money) as opposed to the wrong context and motivation (private life, private compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* a woman)." Ester Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 51.

9.   Q-E-fucking-D. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 108.

PART II: NORMCORE, VAPORWAVE美学, AND CAPTIALI$$M

The fact that the disidentification performed in drag serves as a barrier to progress in the realm of trans rights does not mean, however, that all forms of disidentification must necessarily end the same way. Disidentification is, I think, an especially relevant concept in our current political climate, and in this section I will take a closer look at two of the many forms that it has taken in recent years: those of normcore and vaporwave.

We live in an age of disidentification which borders on post-identification. The internet greatly expands the possibilites for identity formation as a new brand of self-sustaining capitalism reduces all difference to a single unified and idealized consumer. "Whether you're soft grudge, pastel goth, or pale, you can shop at Forever 21."[10] Think Different, Worldwide.[11]

It is an age in which being a "conscious consumer" is no longer possible or relevant: the personal cost of not using Google, or being on Facebook (forced ignorance; social exile) is far greater than the effect it would have on the companies themselves (loss of a tiny fraction of ad revenue). We have no choice but to consent to policies that we may not agree with (global capitalism, the mass storage and indexing of our personal lives) in order to meaningfully operate with many of society's structures. And this consent-which-is-not-consent (I have read and agree to the Terms of Service) makes disidentification a standard mode of operation for many lives.

It is into this environment that New York forcasting group K-HOLE released their fourth report, "Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom". The report made big (albeit breif) waves for its introduction of the concept of *normcore*, posited as the new path to freedom in this disidentifactory age. "Once upon a time people were born into communities and had to find their individuality. Today people are born individuals and have to find their communities," the report says. "Normcore doesn't want the freedom to become someone, normcore wants the freedom to be <u>with</u> anyone."[12]

Normcore is disidentification turned back upon itself. It rejects the idea of an authentic identity,

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10. K-HOLE, "Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom," *K-HOLE* (New York), no. 4 (October 2013): 15, `http://khole.net/issues/youth-mode/`.

11. Apple, *Apple Music - Worldwide* (YouTube, August 8, 2015), `https://youtu.be/BNUC6UQ_Qvg`.

12. K-HOLE, "Youth Mode," 27–28.

becoming whatever is needed to belong to a situation or community. "Identity doesn't matter anymore," normcore says. "But at least we have friends."

Of course, inhabiting the normcore ideal requires a kind of social mobility that not everyone has. Being able to step in and out of identities requires a freedom of choice oftentimes not offered to minorities of race, gender, or sexuality. For those who are able to perform its disidentification, however, normcore denounces identity as non-essential, and while it is too early to tell what effect this will ultimately have, it has profound potential for a reimagining of queer lives.

Emerging in the years surrounding K-HOLE's report came the idea of *vaporwave*. A musical and visual aesthetic movement of growing popularity and significance, vaporwave performs a disidentifactory reappropriation of 1990's in-store music and computer graphics, drawing heavily upon the naïve imaginings of a time when brand-name meant security and technology provided freedom and wonderment. "It's hard to imagine that, back then, there was still crime and wars and bad stuff...but this music makes you forget all that. Thank you."[13]

One of the works which helped to solidify the vaporwave aesthetic was the album 札幌コンテンポラリー, by 情報デスクVIRTUAL, who had previously contributed to the movement under the moniker MACINTOSH PLUS. With track titles such as "SHOP@HOME NETWᴑRK LLC" and "T E S T A R O S S A interLude   iNTELLiMAX RELEASE GROUP PRESENTS", 札幌コンテンポラリー provides an awkward and jarring collection of mall music, mind-numbing to focus on but somehow difficult to turn away from.[14] Commenting on the album, 情報デスク VIRTUAL describes it as "a brief glimpse into the new possibilities of international communication" and "a parody of American hypercontextualization of e-Asia circa 1995".[15]

Vaporwave is, itself, an aesthetic movement, and is not inherently political. But the harsh visual appearance and uneasy capitalist nature of vaporwave's disidentification makes it a powerful tool

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13. Tape-A-Thon, *Kmart October 1989*, ed. davismv, with a comment. by peachtreecodeman, The Internet Archive, Attention K-Mart Shoppers, October 14, 2015, `https://archive.org/details/KmartOctober1989`.
14. 情報デスクVIRTUAL, 札幌コンテンポラリー, BEER ON THE RUG, April 20, 2012, `http://beerontherug.bandcamp.com/album/-`.
15. MR P, "情報デスクVIRTUAL - 札幌コンテンポラリー," *Tiny Mix Tapes*.

for communities to resist a widespread normativity that seeks to distract from systemic problems with aluminum enclosures and glasses that talk to you. We can see this in the way certain brands have embraced the image[16]—MTV's new visual aesthetic, perhaps best deployed in their *Look Different* campaign,[17] sets itself in sharp opposition to the polished sameness of Apple and Google, and the creative team of Tumblr, often cited (and criticized) as one of the more inclusive places on the internet, makes surreal jabs at branding and identity. "Bad dog is the foundation of the Tumblr community. Have you posted bad dog today? Share bad dog with friends and followers. Is viral dog yet? Belong."[18]

We can see the aesthetic step far beyond its mall-music origins in works such as the music video for Hitchhiker's 히치하이커 *11(ELEVEN)*. The catchy dance beat pairs itself with uncanny-valley 3D models of dancers, often direct copy-paste clones of one another, shown in various urban settings. The camera places all of its emphasis on these hyper-surreal human-esque figures as the "real people" sometimes seen in the background are systematically ignored, questioning the authenticity of conformance to mainstream pop culture.[19] The music video's trailer, uploaded a few weeks later, parodies capitalization and fame as interviewees' words are creatively reinterpreted in the subtitles to create a more evocative and commercially-viable message.[20]

CONCLUSION

In an age where social movements come endorsed by Facebook, disidentification has more and more become a prevalent part of daily life. As we have seen in the instance of drag, disidentifactory practices are not always beneficial. However, through modern movements such vaporwave,

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16. It is unclear whether the corporate use of vaporwave's disidentification with corpratism strengthens or corrupts it.
17. MTV, "MTV's Look Different," `http://www.lookdifferent.org/`.
18. ministryofdesign, Untitled post in reply to macnuke2000, *Piblishing and Dustribution: Official Tumblr Creative Team*, July 17, 2015, `http://ministryofdesign.tumblr.com/post/124350650716/macnuke2000-wtf-is-this-legit-question`.
19. Hitchhiker, 히치하이커 *11(ELEVEN) (Official Music Video)* (YouTube, September 11, 2014), `https://youtu.be/92DHfaBCmIs`.
20. Hitchhiker, *The Trailer : The Story of Hitchhiker* (YouTube, October 30, 2014), `https://youtu.be/NCfpSyCY4sM`.

we have also seen disidentification deployed to convey a deeply political message, challenging normativity without becoming reincorporated into it. Other modern trends, such as that of normcore, are more ambiguous in their effects, but appear as clear survival strategies for a disenfranchised youth (mode). Like any mode of working with power structures, disidentification can be used to create effects that can be either positive or negative, but by taking a closer look at a few select instances of its operation, we have begun to shed light on how this power operates in society.

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