



W6: Aesthetics

I'm assuming that you're all very familiar with the notion of an **aesthetic**, but I'm also assuming that you're not familiar with thinking about it from an analytical standpoint. But that's exactly what we're going to do this week, and what this week's reading assignments are about. I think we can all agree that the term itself has become ubiquitous in contemporary youth culture, yet the concept itself remains surprisingly undiscussed or debated within that same culture; it's as if all of us already know exactly what the term itself refers to, so discussions tend to circulate around specific aesthetics rather than on what the term itself is referring to. As media scholars, however, scrutinizing such supposedly transparent terms is precisely what we are required to do. In this week's reading assignments and lecture, I hope that you'll discover that the term "aesthetic" is a lot more pervasive, and a lot more complex than you may have realized. I would go so far as to argue that it's one of the most important concepts of our time because it provides a framework within which we construct our very sense of identity. But in today's youth culture, this process works very differently from how it has done until quite recently.

Take a very well-known aesthetic like **cyberpunk**. If you take a look at the entry on the Aesthetics Wiki, you'll discover (and you may know already) that the term "cyberpunk" originated in the literary sphere, specifically a subgenre of science fiction that originated in the early 1980s in the fiction of male Anglo-American novelists such as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, while a variant of cyberpunk that subsequently developed in the fiction of Neil Stephenson and others became known as **steampunk**, an equally well-known aesthetic today. The point here is that even though both cyberpunk and steampunk started out as popular subgenres of literary science fiction, they are today much more than just that. From its inception, in fact, cyberpunk was never an exclusively literary genre, and along with William Gibson's novel **Neuromancer** (1984) Ridley Scott's noirish, science fiction film **Blade Runner** (Ridley Scott, 1982) has become synonymous with the genre. After Gibson's film and Scott's film, cyberpunk's distinctive aesthetic became ubiquitous not just in other works of fiction and movies but also videogames and graphic novels, and today extends across the whole spectrum of contemporary media: no longer just a literary style, it's a visual style (reprised in the recent sequel **Blade Runner 2049** (Denis Villeneuve, 2017)),

Readings:

Guilherme Giolo and Michaël Bertrand, "The Aesthetics of the Self: The Meaning-Making of Internet Aesthetics" ([PDF](#)) **Aesthetics Wiki** (read all articles in the section called "What Are Aesthetics?" and explore the site).

a musical style (a derivative of the EDM genre synthwave), and a fashion style (cosplay); “Steampunk” is a popular Halloween outfit.

Drawing on the older analytical framework of media semiotics, it’s of course interesting and fun to try to identify the specific elements of the cyberpunk aesthetic. Of course, this isn’t limited to purely audiovisual elements and motifs—neon-drenched urban cityscapes at night, a heavily purple color palette, ambient electronic soundscapes inspired by the soundtrack of **Blade Runner**—but also characterization, plot structures, narrative themes, production design, costume design. Trying to define cyberpunk in this way quickly becomes a trickier task than it initially appears. Much the same argument could be made about other major aesthetics of our time, from goth to vaporwave. The point, though, is that even though aesthetics may originate in one particular medium, genre, or platform—literature, film, popular music, anime—they are no longer limited to any one of these but extend across them; this is, in fact, why they are more usefully defined as aesthetics. We’ve already seen a good example of this in the first week of classes, with the aesthetic of the Japanese Studio Ghibli, which as we have seen has its own distinctive aesthetic that has made it recognizable worldwide.

Yet it could also be suggested that as was the case with the historical cinematic genre known as **film noir**, cyberpunk, vaporwave, or Ghibli, their aesthetic is not just limited purely to their stylistic elements (visuals, music, etc.) or even their narratives or character design, but includes other elements that are a lot harder to define: a particular worldview, for example (nihilistic, humanistic, etc.); a particular sensibility or emotional register that can be expressed by two other key contemporary concepts: **mood** and **vibe**. Just as cyberpunk has its own particular vibe, so too in a very different way do Ghibli movies. What are the characteristics of this mood or vibe in either case, and what exactly do we mean by “vibe” in the first place? It’s another term that is worth thinking about. I won’t say any more about it here, but encourage you to reflect upon it in this week’s discussion forum.

So what, exactly, **is** an aesthetic? In what is to my knowledge the only academic source to date to have explored the concept of the aesthetic in theoretical terms, Giolo and Berghman (2024) suggest that traditional conceptual frameworks such as genre, lifestyle, or subculture are no longer adequate to understanding the contemporary modalities of cultural identity and creativity. Instead, they explore the concept of the “aesthetic” as the key component of a new analytical framework. What does an “aesthetic” in this contemporary sense consist of? One of the defining components of what Giolo and Berghman call Internet aesthetics is their association with certain kinds of **experience**, and the corresponding feelings evoked by the memory of that experience: the experience of living in the world of 1950s America, for example, or the world of Harry Potter; the experience of living in a dystopian future; or, one might add, the experience of living on the American West Coast in the 1970s, or in Tokyo at the height of the bubble economy. While music is a key component of such experiences, it is only one modality within a larger cultural world. Imaginatively speaking, aesthetics recall the fantasy worlds of videogames and LARPing:

Experiences (and, likely, their importance for Internet aesthetics) seem to be even more evident in the titles of playlists associated with different aesthetics: “You are studying in a haunted library with ghosts” (dark academia playlist), “You found the entrance to a secret garden”, “You are falling for the protagonist in a fantasy novel” (light royaltycore), or “A playlist for old money living in the French countryside” (light academia). Even clearer here, multiple objects (songs) are grouped and given symbolic meaning under a new interpretive key. This key is experience-centered. Thus, it seems acceptable to assume that experience is also the goal of an Internet aesthetic: to become someone different, to feel as if living in a different time (2024). [Emphasis mine]

Giolo and Berghman (2024) also emphasize the affective dimension of Internet aesthetics, and their interviewees frequently reference feelings when describing them:

"The aesthetics that I like really depend on my mood of the day. On Sundays, when it's sunny, I really enjoy aesthetic images that give me this summer feeling" Jane (Dutch, prefers "cottagecore").

Jane, who strongly connects "cottagecore" to morning walks, went on to explain that in those moments the scenarios and imaginaries of this Internet aesthetic "flow" into her activity, representing "the things I would like at that moment. They give me a warming feeling" (2024). [Emphasis mine]

By now we are (hopefully) getting closer to understanding what it means to describe city pop as an aesthetic rather than just a musical genre. Like vaporwave, like future funk, like mallsoft, like lo-fi hip hop, city pop conjures up a particular kind of cultural-historical aesthetic experience and a corresponding affective structure, via playlists, imagery, and other elements. As has been much discussed in the case of vaporwave, the dominant temperamental register is nostalgic and melancholic, invoking a bygone era of economic optimism and technological utopianism rendered only more poignant by the harsh realities of the dystopian present.

Denis Villeneuve, dir. 2017. *Blade Runner 2049*. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Giolo, Guilherme, and Michaël Berghman. 2024. "The Aesthetics of the Self: The Meaning-Making of Internet Aesthetics." *Cultural Sociology*, ahead of print. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755241229570>.

Ridley Scott, dir. 1982. *Blade Runner*. Warner Bros. Pictures.