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## Beauty Subliminals

**ABSTRACT** This essay focuses on “beauty subliminals,” visual and auditory social media content used as meditation and manifestation tools to aid viewers/listeners in achieving beauty and wellness objectives. I interpret “subliminals” as a kind of “supplement” meant to promote and maintain one’s algorithmically situated, embodied experience of computational media regimes and prevailing logics of self-optimization. Despite subliminals’ “magical” premise, this essay also gestures toward the need for magical ritual and beauty practices otherwise not subsumed by these logics.

Today, health, wellness, beauty, and self-care aesthetics blur with the mystical and esoteric. Contemporary American social media is rife with content focused on taking care of one’s body, mind, and self as well as entreaties to both “stay present” and “manifest” our hopes and desires. The genre of “subliminals” videos, an audio and visual phenomenon adjacent to beauty culture that emerged in the late 2010s on platforms like YouTube, includes audio of recorded spoken affirmations that are set at sped-up, “subliminal” frequencies usually masked by rain sounds, lo-fi beats, or slowed and reverbed pop music, visually accompanied with images and video clips. By listening to subliminal affirmations regularly, many of which are crafted for viewers and listeners who identify as women, one can allegedly achieve a variety of life changes including, but not limited to, “weight loss,” a “glow-up,” “clear skin,” “white teeth,” “beauty & intelligence,” a “curvy body,” a “thin waist,” and a “fat ass.” Subliminals serve as a directed meditative experience, packaged and curated as visual and auditory social media content meant to both encapsulate one’s attention and subconsciously shape one’s subjectivity at a micro-processual level at the hopeful desires of the viewer/listener. Does it matter if those watching and listening to these videos genuinely believe in their capacity to bring about the effects they promise? Not really. What matters is that they demonstrate awareness of how digital media operate by manipulating experience prior to conscious awareness—and how this awareness leads to embracing, at some level, an intentional orientation toward manipulation that turns toward what seems to be “occult” experience, while elsewhere this manipulation just underwrites the general logic of the social media feed.

The emergence of beauty subliminals reflects pervading cultural trends in computation described by media theorists such as Mark B. N. Hansen in their critiques of digital media.<sup>1</sup> While Hansen is mainly interested in interpreting computational art processes

1. See, for example, Mark B.N. Hansen, “Ubiquitous Sensation: Toward an Atmospheric, Collective and Microtemporal Model of Media,” in *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. Ulrik Ekman (MIT Press, 2012).

and practices, we can generally witness this phenomenon throughout meditation, mindfulness, and manifestation media content that is promoted as operating on “subliminal” or “subconscious” levels of the mind. The popularity of this content coincides with the continuous development of ubiquitous computing that has defined the twenty-first century. Although subliminals, a subgenre of this cultural trend, are produced through simple methods of audio layering and video editing, their aesthetic representation on social media highlights the microtemporal and ostensibly subperceptual level of influence that is underscored by algorithmic and computational media. Subliminals present themselves as media objects that we are technically able to perceive, but the purportedly “subliminal” or “subconscious” influence that inspires their viewership—both in the way they are advertised and curated on social media—allude to the larger cultural stakes and transformations under developments of ubiquitous computing that Hansen recognizes.

While subliminals manifest as social media content rather than atmospheric or ambient media phenomenon, their aesthetics—at the ostensible margins of perception—reproduce styles associated with ubiquitous computing. More pointedly, subliminals offer a way of understanding beauty on social media affected by these cultural logics. For women in particular, a fascination with subliminals intersects with the desire to achieve hegemonic beauty standards, promoting a beauty culture informed and shaped by the cultural codes and demands of ubiquitous computing: beauty becomes reduced to surface interaction, easily registerable and accessible. This formulation of beauty determined by optimization and predictability directly influences perception of ourselves, mediated or otherwise.



Thumbnail for “★ EXTREME beauty enhancer in ONE LISTEN subliminal (⚠️IX)” posted on YouTube by beauty subliminals channel “Isla subliminals ♡” in 2024. This subliminal currently has 1.3 million views.

Before considering beauty subliminals themselves as digital media objects, it is important to wade through the subconscious that subliminals purport to influence, as well as the seemingly “magical” realm subliminals inhabit that fascinate and attract viewers/listeners for their manifestive potential—and to take it seriously on its own terms. To merely dismiss subliminals as pseudoscience risks not thoughtfully engaging with the desires of their viewers and listeners, desires that, I suggest, reflect a deeper spiritual crisis and cultural yearning for magic and ritual. Similarly, a singular focus on the content creators of subliminals preying upon insecurities of specifically women to mine views—while crucial to recognize as a factor in viewership—also presents certain limits of critique. At the periphery of perception, we might ask ourselves what subliminals reveal to us regarding the desires of their viewers/listeners and how these desires are shaped.

To do so requires an earnest engagement with the affordances of magic and ritual—and the ways that magic and ritual, as practices, are largely inaccessible in our contemporary moment. Beauty subliminals exemplify the way that magic is subsumed by pervading cultural logics. In *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (2018), philosopher Federico Campagna opposes “technic,” which refers not to technology as such but to a broader, totalizing worldview organized by technical rationality, to occult and esoteric philosophies, specifically Islamic Sufi traditions, which he groups under the worldview of “magic.”<sup>2</sup> Magic provides an alternative to the totalizing cosmogony of technic. At the basis of magic is an encounter with “the ineffable,” or that which is beyond language. Not to be mistaken simply for negation, the ineffable can instead be described as “life-in-itself,” a force also expressed as the “astral light” or “ether” across the grander scope of esoteric and occult traditions. “Magic” is ultimately possible by way of interacting with the ineffable, not by attempting to define or reify it—just forging and wielding various symbols, symbols that cannot be captured or exhausted.

Despite the expansive potential of magic observed by Campagna, magic has continuously been subsumed by the prevailing cosmogony of technic. We can describe beauty subliminals, like other mediations of the affective and the pre- or nonconscious, as a magical ritual practice gone awry. They underscore a deep fascination—and ultimately false confrontation—with the ineffable. An example of the subliminal genre that includes many of its signature features and demonstrates this false confrontation is “ETHEREAL ESSENCE extreme beauty subliminal (listen once) ♪”<sup>3</sup> In title alone, “ETHEREAL ESSENCE” exemplifies this attempt to reify or essentialize the ethereal, or what may be understood as “the ineffable” by another name. Originally posted on YouTube in 2020 by “eggtopia,” a popular subliminal channel run by YouTube lifestyle and beauty content creator “irlane saint-cyr,” the video garnered 6,961,018 views before being taken

2. Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

3. See “Ethereal Essence” ☆ eggtopia reupload,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3xICFxRMvI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3xICFxRMvI). In the subliminals community, it is popular to share, save, and re-circulate subliminals content. Created and posted by subliminals content creator irlane saint-cyr to her “eggtopia” YouTube channel, this video is technically a re-uploaded video posted by YouTube user “isabel.” The initial upload was titled “ETHEREAL ESSENCE” extreme beauty subliminal (listen once) ♪ and is referred to in this essay by its original title.



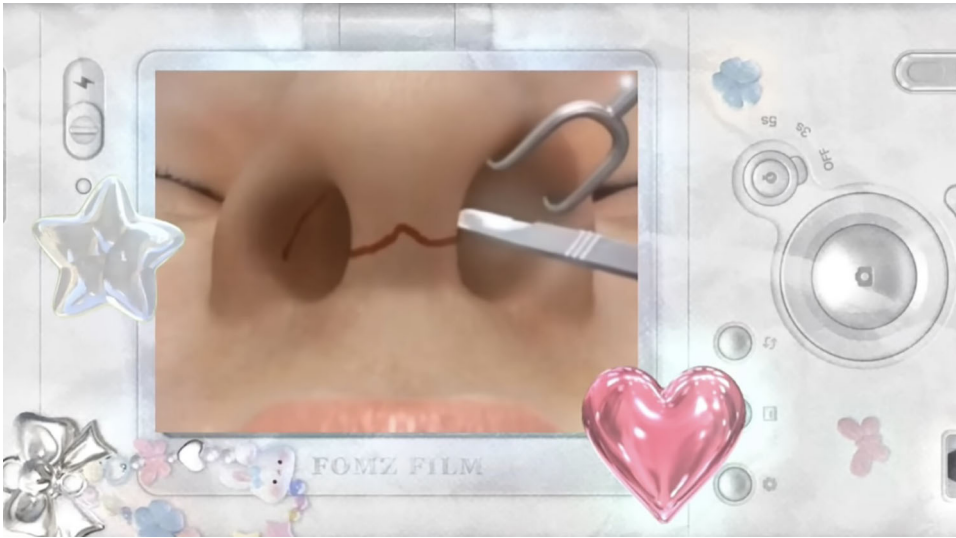
A screenshot of the “ETHEREAL ESSENCE” subliminal originally posted to YouTube by irlane saint-cyr.

down on November 13, 2022, due to YouTube’s recent demonetization policies. A recovered version re-posted by YouTube user “isabel” maintains its “ethereal” essence: the original subliminal audio, visuals, and video description. “ETHEREAL ESSENCE” features a reverbed version of the 2019 song “Complex” by K-pop singer Hoody. Accompanying the audio, this subliminal presents a collage image of the faces of four women, styled as Instagram models, one of whom poses with her phone in the process of taking a selfie, branded with the title heading “ETHEREAL ESSENCE: desired beauty, effortless confidence, magnetic charm.”

The video description includes a revived link<sup>4</sup> to a Google Doc that outlines the “affirmations + benefits” of this particular subliminal video, also detailing the specific “boosters” that this subliminal offers the listener/viewer. “Boosters” are additional affirmations that increase the potency of the subliminal with further manifestations to be performed by the viewer. Treated as a supplement (subliminals are prescribed for their desired aesthetic effects, aided with boosters) these boosters provide details regarding the effects and results of a subliminal to various degrees of specificity, pertaining to both physical qualities (e.g., “have the healthiest + softest + glossiest hair in all of existence”) or mental qualities (“be overflowing with confidence, extremely magnetic charm”). One booster affirmation included in the “ETHEREAL ESSENCE” list states: “be extremely photogenic + videogenic, always look stunning from all possible angles.” Angles, facial symmetry, and an “optimal” proportionality of the face and body are emphasized throughout subliminal affirmation lists, often exaggeratedly and absurdly so.

4. The link referred to—in the description on the linked YouTube re-upload—is not currently publicly accessible. However, the “eggtopia” YouTube channel does list benefits to a deluxe version of this subliminal in the first pinned comment here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CgRLmdUkbQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CgRLmdUkbQ).





IMAGES 3-4. Screenshots captured from the beauty subliminal “👉Series:2 🌟 \* Scientifically perfect dolly nose surg 🎀🌟 [50 Trillion affs]” posted on “Valerieherto’s” YouTube channel in 2024. This subliminal includes moving images that emphasize subliminals’ preoccupation with manifesting optimized facial and bodily measurements and proportions based on contemporary beauty standards and trends (a stylized animation of a rhinoplasty procedure) that are reified and registered through processes of mediation that are meta-referenced (the procedure is being viewed on an animated digital camera screen with overlaid glittering effects).

incomprehensible to us, subliminals facilitate space to project fantasy of one’s own potential knowability in a world that prompts us to clearly define ourselves for the sake of optimization. The viewers/listeners of subliminals are left with the ostensibly magical sense that something underneath the surface must be happening, that something must yield expected results. Even the illusion of potential results, in the case of beauty



subliminals, may serve as a supplement to assuage the anxieties of viewers/listeners as related to their own self-conception. A spiritual encounter with oneself (like the ineffable, similarly incomprehensible) is avoided while a self that can be rendered knowable, optimized, and predicted is eagerly embraced.

Magic and manifestation are reduced to the realm of mere appearances, rather than harnessing one's expansive potentiality to create meaning through one's will as a possible esoteric practice or ritual. In this way, subliminals serve as a placebo supplement in name and in function. They pacify one's will to create meaning through an engagement with the ineffable in favor of exposing and reifying it instead. Subliminals rely heavily on their own totalizing language, and, like a placebo, placate the mind with their ostensibly understood effects and expected results. Subliminals are framed as not just social media content but as packaged medicinal remedies. In the description section of "ETHEREAL ESSENCE," there are written reminders to drink plenty of water ("stay hydrated"), to sit down (as one might experience "dizziness or motion sickness"), and general cautionary statements regarding the necessity to take listening breaks to avoid unwanted side effects or exhaustion. Treated as a supplement prescribed for their desired aesthetic effects and aided with additional "boosters," subliminals as supplements offer an aesthetic demonstration of the stakes of social media consumption in our contemporary moment. Subliminals, an amalgamation of spells and words and images, are hypermediated content meant to explicitly manifest one's desires—however, they are entirely divorced from the practices of esoteric and occult traditions.

In this vein, "manifestation" and "supplementation" can be read as dual concepts. "Manifestation" possesses similar significations as supplement—also a trace, either a conditional blessing or ailment, or a ghost of something—while simultaneously underscoring the sign's particular display or presentation. Manifestation, in its most optimistic sense, implies the possibility of exercising one's capacity as a human to wield technic, to create symbols not necessarily determinative. However, manifestation has effectively become another word for "optimization." These glimmering supplements, imbued with seemingly magical, mystical promise, offer ways of understanding our contemporary moment's preoccupation with "manifestation." As sites of manifestation, beauty subliminals present a dramatization of expressing one's desires as well as the pitfalls of a more myopic engagement with one's desire. For media theorists like Bernard Stiegler, the culture industry's homogenization of consciousness and attention through marketing produces malaise such that any singular potential of desire is negated, leading to a process of deindividuation that alienates the self and "suffocates" one's desire.<sup>5</sup> The experience of the instantaneous and present moment, already dramatized through the aesthetics and rhetoric of subliminals, is crystallized and directed throughout set segmentations and capillaries of desire, rather than suggesting a possible expansiveness of consciousness and perception that is often facilitated by meditation and spiritual and esoteric practices more broadly. Subliminal content favors a simple antidote, a relinquishing and placation of

5. See for example Bernard Stiegler, "Suffocated Desire, or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual: Contribution to a Theory of Mass Consumption," trans. Johann Rossouw, *Parrhesia* 13 (2011): 52–61.

one's will in favor of optimized direction. The proliferation of content like subliminals suggests a psychic submission toward results-based or user-engagement models and logics that concretize and perpetuate a sense of optimized beauty that is entirely externally motivated.

In this context, to salvage beauty and self-expression from these optimizing constraints, or to salvage the possibility of freedom from the constraints of these limiting logics of representation, requires a reappraisal of desire itself. Perhaps desire's suffocation should not be our sole concern, but rather the relinquishing of one's will—that is, one's capacity to exercise intentionality and creation that is not beholden to a particular determination—in favor of advancing “desirous” means to an end (“magnetic charm,” “fat ass,” or otherwise) that are ultimately totalizing and limiting determinations of the mind, body, and self. ■

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