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# The "Blank" Degree of Style

## What Happened to the "Normcore" Trend

**Benjamin Simmenauer**

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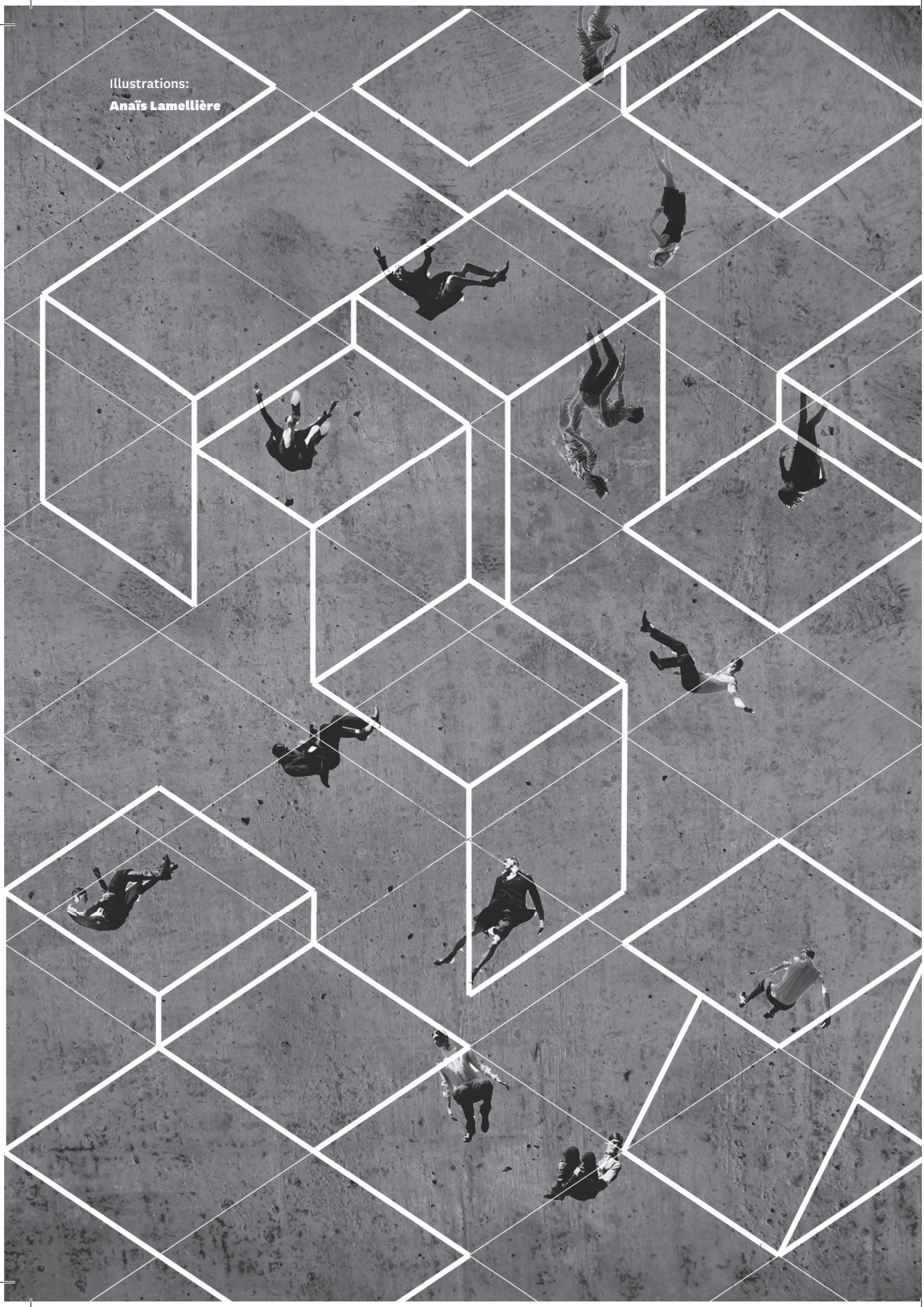


Illustrations:
**Anaïs Lamellière**

by **Benjamin Simmenauer**

# The "Blank" Degree of Style

## What Happened to the "Normcore" Trend

### Hipster vs normcore

Roland Barthes would have liked the "normcore" trend: he would have seen in it the manifestation of the sign's almighty power. What do "normcore" followers want? To escape from the empire of expression, to rub out all visible marks of a singular personal identity, to free themselves from the dogma of self-promotion, and to merge themselves in the neutrality of a low-key look, as the writer of the *Writing Degree Zero* seeks to disappear in a writing freed from the literary codes. Yet Barthes, the formalist, would have underlined the paradox residing in the display through one's appearance of her disdain of said appearances. The criticism of style-less writers (of writers devoid of style), that of having one nevertheless, that comes from the subtraction of literary effects, and blends as possible with the common language, can apply to the supporters of "normcore". Their "blank" style is worked on: it forms a significant ensemble of the same depth than, for say, the "goth" trend or the "preppy" aesthetics.

According to the New Yorkers of "K-Hole", who invented the term in a report published in 2014, "normcore" is opposed to "hipster". Responding to hipsters' flamboyant ironic compositions, following an operating method consisting in mixing contrasting styles (a pair of leggings with a lumberjack shirt, a bow tie with a hoodie), the normcore displays a rigorous monotony. "Hipster" and "normcore" refer to two adaptive strategies in a context dominated by brands and by the importance of digital tools. Hipsters and normcores share the same rejection of brands: they are heirs to the no logo culture. The rise of social media, and the tremendous *panopticon* which resulted, reinforced the cult of singularity, as much as it compounded the fear of ridicule, which explains the hipster/normcore dialectic regarding clothing extravaganza. Another paradoxical, rarely mentioned consequence of the Internet, is that when everyone is looking at each other, knows that she is observed and that only appearances matter, the individual whom ostensibly resists to that cult increases her own prestige. Nothing seems more worthy of respect than the "somber challenge of indifference" defined by Bataille. The hipster, as well as the normcore, are playing at who cares less about the applicable conventions and standards of good taste.

The "normcore" trend seems to have already vanished. Since 2014, year of its birth, it doesn't appear anymore in magazines, nor in the Powerpoint presentations of trend agencies. According to "K-Hole", whose investigation

methods aren't known to us, it has been overthrown by a new trend called "chaos magic". We could not verify this assertion, but it is likely that "normcore" has indeed short-lived: a paradoxical protestation gesture, by which one distinguishes herself from the others by getting in line, is obviously threatened by self-destruction. As the normcore crowd grows, the gap shrinks between the "normality" targeted by the normcore enthusiast and the normality he is trying to avoid: the average person is no longer an ideal, it is the surrounding normality, the prevailing style.

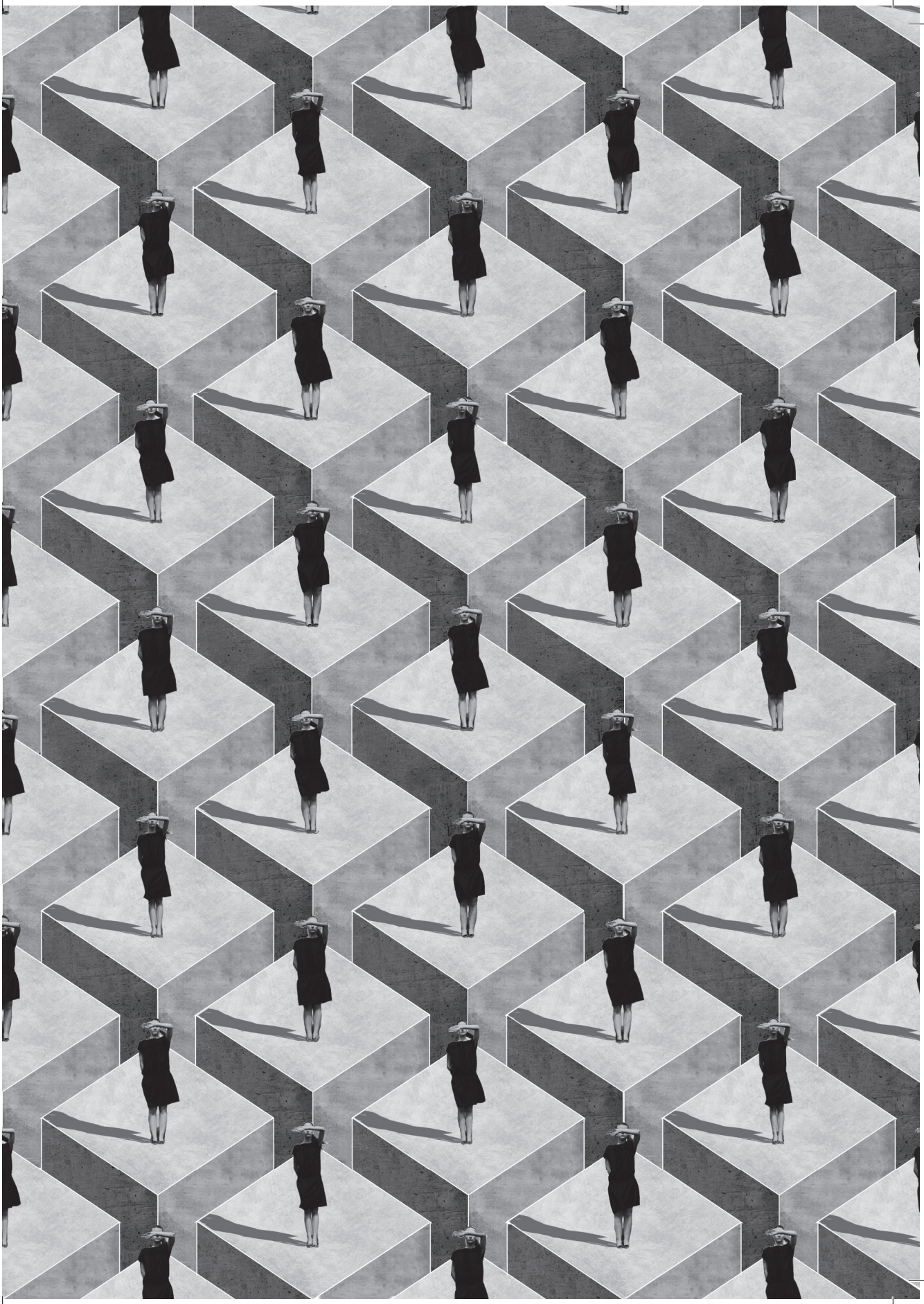
The cool youth who had been normcore has probably found other means to demonstrate their scorn for fashion. Besides, while hipster and normcore movements are only adopted by a small portion of people, even within the "creative" networks of major cities, rejection of the fashion clothes remains a common, widespread phenomenon. Not that the fashionable people have forsaken their wish to distinguish themselves through clothing, but they seem to achieve it better when they resist fashion directives: vintage clothing is sought after because it conveys rejection of the prevalent dogma of the permanent renewal ; the omnipresent sportswear clothing indicates a functionalist peri-urban landscape, opposed to the preciosity of fashion circles; androgynous staples (at all prices: COS, APC, Slimane-era Saint Laurent…) allow to establish a clothing-body relationship subtracted from the heteronormative canons of beauty.

### Vetements, without the circumflex accent

History of normcore has reached its epilogue, in the most incongruous place: in the very heart of Parisian fashion. The microcosm that attends fashion weeks has only one word in its mouth: "Vetements". While the layman could rightfully doubt that it consists in a major change in the customer's consumption habits, it is because he doesn't know that "Vetements" does not refer to its usual referent (the objects that serve as a cover or protection), but to a fashion brand whose success was both dazzling and contested. This branding choice is not as dumb as it seems, and is not, for instance, equivalent in clothing terms to a soft drink that would be named "beverage".

The joke in this baptism does not rely on the fact that "Vetements" refers, in a generic way, to the category of clothing in general, but in the contradiction between what is generally considered as "designers" fashion brands' reasons of being – a stylistically radical proposition – and the purely practical connotation of the term.

Vetements is well-named: according to Demna Gvasalia, the brand is first and foremost inspired by the "daily life". Thus, we find in the "Vetements" wardrobe: large trench coats worn on sweat pants, fluorescent t-shirts, iPhone cases, lumberjack shirts, patched jeans, thrift shop dresses and floral aprons, asymmetric, huge men shirts tucked in tartan skirts, leather thigh-high boots, goth and hard rock sweaters, but also DHL-replica t-shirts, hijacked Champion hoodies (on which the brands name takes place under the original logo), and also firemen, policers or security agents outfits. A Vetements fashion show evokes a sort of Berliner collage of heteroclite subcultures: hippie yuppie (bobo), dark metal, catholic preppy, queer fetish, renewed western, glitter psychedelic and grunge coexist within the same silhouette. Vetements sticks to delivering "clothing snapshots", a series of retakes from a trivial routine, and *in fine*, rather ugly. But this "polaroid" aesthetics cannot be reduced to a



simple reproduction of the original mundane clothing: compared to what serves as its model, the Vetements production is distinguished by its gloomy, almost deformed quality. Some might have maybe expected some ornament on the clothes, when shown on the fashion show: it is the absolute opposite, the clothes are even more degraded. Too big, too large, either dull or loud-colored, covered with ridiculous logos, badly matched (the "mix and match" has never been more crazy), the Vetements clothing seems constructed in a hurry, or even deconstructed then badly re-sewn. This cool carelessness is transformed here in a product assembly instruction.

We understand why Vetements caused such a controversy among the fashion experts. On the one side, the shocked ones, who accuse the collective of giving up the creative effort, to interfere with the whole industry (designer fashion) who relies entirely on its capacity to breach, each season, with the commonness and the *déjà-vu*. The followers, on the other hand, can be divided into two categories. A large part of Vetements *aficionados* are industry professionals, reediting the pleasure of normcore, in a context of over-clothing. Nothing feels more transgressive than dressing "as everyone else"... especially since, thanks to the numerous distortions applied by Vetements designers, you're not dressed exactly like everyone else, but rather like a caricature of "everyone", which allows a sense of indifference in addition to dandyism, a sort of aristocratic detachment from the "real normal", who is gently parodied. A less frivolous portion of the Vetements community revels in the filiation with Margiela: with Vetements, it is not about buying fashion, but rather, about buying real clothes reduced to their essence, without the usual pathos of mythology and designer's storytelling (which is often more expensive than the fabric or the making). It is tempting to agree with the snobs: the essentialists seem to have forgotten that Margiela never tried to make "real clothes", practical and inspired by the observation of daily living. His ambition, with the introduction of the recycling device, was very different: taking a real piece of clothing, using a technical derivation (the notorious "deconstruction"), then turning it into an archive of an upcoming fashion garment. Which means stepping it away from its practical value in order to make it into a conceptual object. Margiela was challenging an industry variable deemed incompressible: the dynamics of constant renewal. He showed that it was possible to grant the already worn a value superior to that of the new, that the fashion avant-garde should follow the same path as archeology.

Vetements might not be innovative, but it is another pillar that its designers are addressing: the transcendence of the fashion garment. They are undermining the idea that fashion should offer an "elsewhere", by allowing its customer to dress up as ordinary people. This "blank" style reminds us (in the clothing field), of the work Michel Houellebecq, with his inclination towards the spoken language, his rudimentary syntax, his gross loans from Wikipedia, his understatements, his liking for the trivially technic vocabulary and for the name-dropping. The joy of an accurate, ironic, literal description of the outside world, that can be felt when reading a successful novel from Houellebecq, can be considered a third factor, and perhaps not the worst, for the appreciation of Vetements. ■

**Notes**

**1** This panopticon is reciprocal too, as opposed to Bentham's, in which only the jailer could watch the convicted people: on the internet, everyone is watching one another.

**2** Georges Bataille, T*he Accursed share: an Essay on General Economy*, p.77, Zone Books, New York, 1988.

**3** For instance, on Business of Fashion website, an apology of the "genius" of Vetements can be read as well as the denunciation of the lack of real creativity in the conception of Vetements garments (Eugene Rabkin, *The Rise of the Fashion Hipster*, 22 april 2016).

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