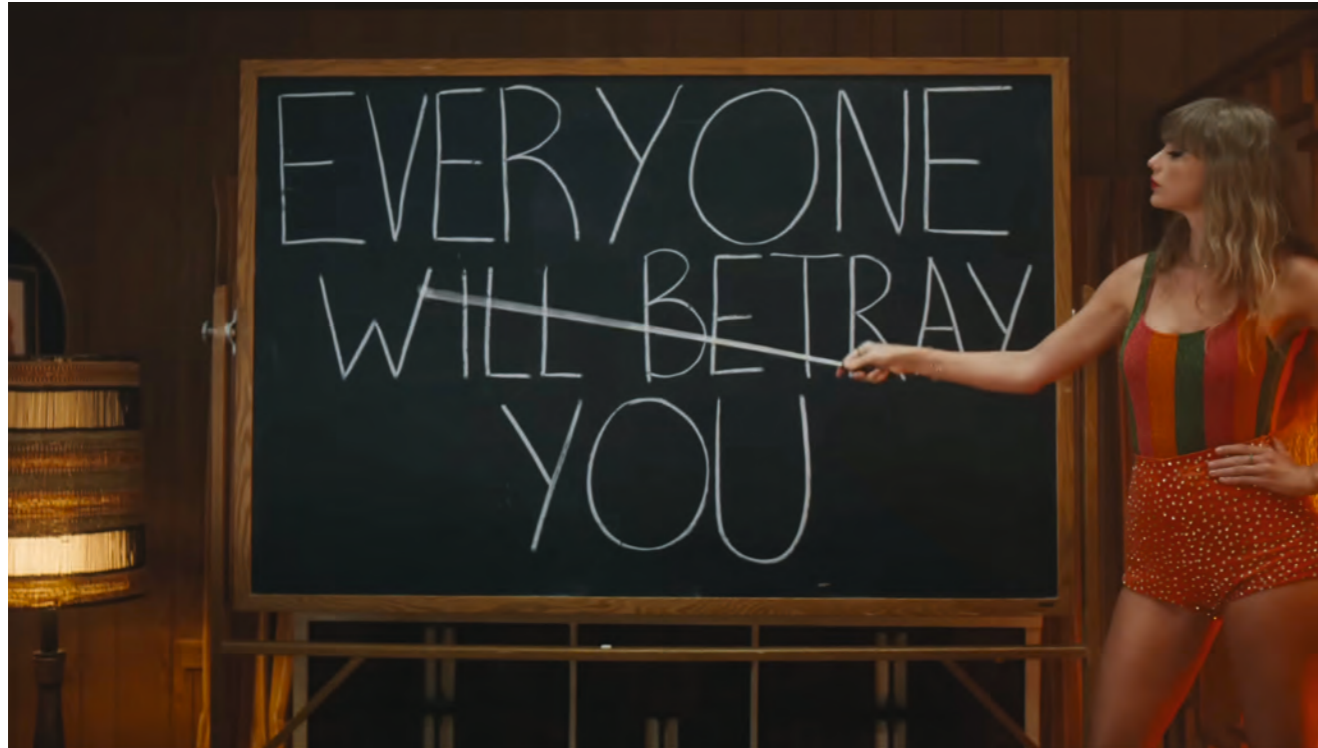


Taylor Swift's Cardigan Generation



Pop music ought to feel like a rush, a trip, a haze, for three minutes at a time. So what does it say that the globe's most-streamed music is like paracetamol, harmless and vague about the pain it treats? That we're out of zing? No – just that a generation obsessed with self-concern has ascended to cultural power.

Still from "Anti-Hero," 2022, music video

At the turn of the last decade, pop acts like Grimes, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga spoke of the extraordinary; of willful, magical nostalgia, of weird and shocking new forms of beauty. Amy Winehouse had already passed, and Britney Spears become muted – two of the aughts' leading lights ravaged by the brutality of mass entertainment. Taylor Swift, though, was plotting another course. On the fateful 2009 night when Kany West interrupted her onstage as she received her first MTV Video Music Award, she had arrived to the red carpet in a horse-drawn carriage like Cinderella, honest from this first full-fledged coming-out about the stock quality of her dreams, the short leash of her imagination. The qualities of hers that have since come to the fore are those that the job center tells you to list on your CV, and the pain that she describes is the reasonable, everyday type that fits in the palm of her lover's "freezing hand." She has become the leading proponent of a covert conservatism – as art historian Sven Lütticken once wrote about painter Günther Förg – that "allows the center to hold"; an immensely appealing ordinariness that gives priority to magnitude over monumentality.

A friend recently shared a Facebook memory from 2010: "Turn your Spotify to private," someone had posted on his wall, "we can all see you listening to Kelly Clarkson." Is anyone shamed like this anymore? Does that function still exist? Besides spelling the demise of such shame, the ascent of Taylor Swift tells the story of millennials succumbing to themselves, millennials grown tired of trying to be cool. Gawking and profusely thankful on every late-night show, Swift was never cool. Among the first things she says in the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana* (2020) is that her entire "moral code, then and now, is a need to be thought of as good." Far from "Dirrty" in the way of X-tina (2002), nor a *Good Girl Gone Bad* like Rihanna (2007), she is, as she admits on *folklore* (2020), "an old cardigan," or better still, a mirrorball: "I can change everything about me to fit in." From her radiates the bright light of the ordinary – a light that we might try to resist, as we would capitalism or growing old, but only for so long.

While she treads water in this way, the pressure off, our Faustian bargain lost, her lyrics contain enough nuance, ambivalence, and, above all, specificity to keep listeners hooked. Swift is a master of the bridge, in many instances utilizing it as a narrative volte-face. In "I Almost Do" (2012), the narrator pines for her lost love, until the bridge

transforms the title's refrain from an expression of doubt to one of certainty: Almost is not enough. We were strung along for three whole minutes while she had already made her decision. Her songwriting is akin to that of Carol King or Joan Baez; her Eras Tour – judging only from the film – with Swift often alone on stage with her guitar, her shoulders tense at her ears, has the quality of a 1970s folk gathering, less about the music than the message, the recognition and the collective emotions that are stirred.

Swift, too, has her political anthems, the declarations of wokeness that became obligatory during the first Trump presidency – "You Need to Calm Down" (2019), "The Man" (2019), "Mad Woman" (2020) – but she is at her cleverest and most appealing when she channels society's ugliness into romantic dramas and diaristic reminiscing. "All Too Well" (2012), even more manic and relentless in its ten-minute long 2021 reissue, showcases a narrator consistently renewing the contract on her own misery, unable to stop herself from dwelling on details of old scarves and refrigerator lights. This fatalistic plotline continues years later in "right where you left me" (2020), with Swift singing "you left me no choice but to stay here forever," leaving the listener to wonder what notion of agency is really at stake here. In "My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys" (2024), the outro provides a sort of answer: "just say when, I'd play again." These are the sparks of identification we gather around, as people used to gather around fire: the disappointments that follow from naivety and projection, the embarrassment of bearing witness to one's own helplessness, while knowingly indulging the outlandish fantasy of the inevitable – the greatest comfort of all.

In spite of what might look like a fairytale transformation, in this respect, her music is remarkably consistent. The girl who sees her hometown disappearing in the rear-view mirror on "White Horse" (2008) is the same one who stays at her parents' house in "'tis the damn season" (2020), looking with ambivalence at "the road not taken." Swift gives voice to a generation of millennials that went looking for sex in the city – emancipation, self-actualization, consumer freedom – only to find that, for the first time in over a century of modernity, they might genuinely have been better off staying at home. Crises of housing, austerity, and mental health play a part here, but the score that Swift supplies is the private one of "so-called friends" in a back-stabbing public sphere, pretentious hipster lovers who listen to indie records

Swift is a victim of her own perfectionism; her triumph is her vulnerability, her vulnerability her business model. Her mode is the same autobiographical confessional that has been the dominant trend in literature during the same period.

“much cooler than mine,” but are just as emotionally unavailable as the one who occasioned “Teardrops On My Guitar,” Swift’s first hit, back in Nashville in 2006. Her music is about the confusion and doubt that ensue from having been promised the world, but realizing it might not be worth having.

In this way, Swift is a victim of her own perfectionism; her triumph is her vulnerability, her vulnerability her business model. Her mode is the same autobiographical confessional that has been the dominant trend in literature during the same period. The writer Leslie Jamison comes to mind as another perfect specimen. In her recent memoir, *Splinters* (2024), she picks up a doomed love affair from the airport while listening to the “sadcore dream pop where subtlety went to die.” My guess is she’s referring either to *folklore* or Lykke Li’s *so sad so sexy* (2018), both classics of that genre, characterized by lowercases and an autumn palette. By Jamison’s example, to be “radical” in this generation is to have three Ivy League degrees, an eating disorder, and an alcohol problem, all of which are the same: Perfection is our extremity, extremity our perfection, our cry for help, our rock ‘n’ roll suicide. “It’s like your work is trying to break through shame into shamelessness,” a critic tells Jamison at a reading. She achieves this by the force of quantity and repetition: a too-long book, too many metaphors. By Swift’s example, we could also say: a thirty-one-track album and a three-and-a-half hour endurance act of a concert in 2024 alone. When Swift doesn’t get any Grammy nominations – as *Miss Americana* shows – she holds back her tears and tells her agent: “It’s fine. I’ll just have to make a better record.”

If, for two centuries, the female protagonist has lived and died on the spectrum spanning innocence to defilement, Swift’s millennial tragedy is self-effacement by way of risk aversion and sentimentality. She is painting during a recession, Picasso’s blue period, reversion to the gold standard. No customer will be turned away – it’s bound to be

exhausting. Success, for millennials, is not an art of innovation wrought through transgression, but a popularity contest as expungement of guilt as of doubt. Her career made from hysterical crowd-pleasers like “Never Getting Back Together” (2012), “Shake It Off” (2014), and “ME!” (2019), Swift has sustained it by transmitting the injustice of the world through the familiar narratives of lopsided relationships, insecurity, and disappointment. “I know you by heart, but you don’t even know where I start”; “You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath.” She’s trapped in an unequal exchange by her own indulgence, and she knows it.

In the end, the appeal of the trap is its truth: that all of us are actually so simple, cosplaying a form of profundity that does not offer a way out of our collective mire, but instead gives it a romantic glow, allows the center to hold. This is also where her music becomes, like Förg’s art in the 1990s, an anesthetic for an unsustainable situation: not a cure, sure, yet by not giving in, we’re only hurting ourselves further. For a decade, Swift’s clever Protestant-ethic inversions have reflected the glassy goneness and endless disassociation of our free-market lives. But, at the onset of another Trump presidency, I wonder if her bland cosmopolitanism, her business-as-usual sublimation of capitalism into a heartache that just can’t be shook, can sustain its hegemonic claim on culture. The late writer Gary Indiana wrote about Rainer Werner Fassbinder – “a fat, ugly sadomasochist who terrorized everyone around him” – that he was “a faithful mirror of an ugly world.” I’m sick of Swift’s millennial propriety, because I’m sick of my own. Somebody smash the mirror, please. —

KRISTIAN VISTRUP MADSEN is a writer and curator based in Berlin.

LOUISIANA

11.10.24-27.4.25

OCEAN

JOHN AKOMFRAH EL ANATSUI NINA BEIER
JEANNETTE EHLERS ELLEN GALLAGHER SUSAN HILLER
PIERRE HUYGHE KIRSTEN JUSTESEN GEORGIA O’KEEFFE
HOWARDENA PINDELL PIPILOTTI RIST ALLAN SEKULA
EMILIJA ŠKARNULYTĖ SUPERFLEX YUYAN WANG ...