

# Seeking Refuge in Nature: Escapism and the Contemporary Pastoral Impulse in Cottagecore

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the phenomenon of cottagecore, an internet aesthetic that has gained considerable popularity across social media platforms including Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest. Characterized by its romanticized and simplified depictions of rural life, cottagecore content encompasses a multitude of topics such as farm life, ecological gardening, self-sufficiency, and crafting. The aesthetic seeks to present an idealized version of nature and rural living, rooted in a distant, idyllic past free from social predicaments such as capitalism, xenophobia, and the patriarchy. Though its advent predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it saw a significant surge in popularity during 2020. Through a case study, this paper aims to argue that cottagecore represents a contemporary manifestation of the pastoral tradition from literature and art history in twenty-first-century digital storytelling. It explores the interplay between socio-geographical changes and the resurgence of the pastoral impulse, comparing early industrialized America's pastoralism in the literature of nature writing with the rise of the pastoral in cottagecore amid the pandemic. This paper argues that the escapist fantasy expressed in cottagecore is not rooted in the actual disappearance of the wilderness but rather in the perceived loss of an idealized pastoral refuge, a nostalgic yearning for an imagined past in harmony with nature as viewed primarily through the lens of an urban upper middle class.

Oh- oh come take my hand / We're riding out tonight to case  
the promised land

—Bruce Springsteen, "Thunder Road"

Cottagecore is an internet aesthetic prevalent on a multitude of social media platforms such as Tumblr, TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest whose content is characterized by its romanticized, simplified, and simultaneously carefully constructed depictions of nature and life in the countryside (Lickhardt 21). While the content ranges from video-blog insights into life on a farm or in a cottage, tips on ecological gardening and sustainability, self-sufficiency-based living, crafting, baking, knitting, and bookbinding, the unifying

element of cottagecore content is its reductionist depiction of rural life, a purely aesthetic display of nature, and a sense of effortlessness and good-life mentality originating from its localization in a remote but unspecified past, away from capitalism, sexism, xenophobia, the patriarchy, heteronormativity, and the internet (Brand 2; Lickhardt 21). While cottagecore did not originate simultaneously or in response to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent worldwide lockdowns but came to life as early as 2017 according to both *The New York Times* and *Architectural Digest*, its popularity and spread across various aforementioned social media platforms increased notably in the spring and summer of 2020 and has since remained at high levels (Brand 2-3; Jennings).

Cottagecore closely follows the ideals of the pastoral delineated by literary and art history, both of which will be central objects of interest to this paper, along with the question of locating cottagecore aesthetics within that tradition. The main objective of this paper is to argue—and, by examining closely an example of a cottagecore TikTok video against the backdrop of the trend's cultural and political-historical context, to illustrate—that cottagecore is the contemporary manifestation of the close interrelationship between vast socio-geographical changes and the reemergence of the pastoral impulse substantiated by literary critic Don Scheese as well as its translation into twenty-first-century digital storytelling and art. As part of this analysis, the paper is concerned with drawing parallels between the reemergence of the pastoral in both art and literature of early industrialized America and similar patterns to be found in the popularization of cottagecore aesthetics in the immediate aftermath of global COVID-19 lockdown protocols.

In order to lay the theoretical foundations for the analysis of a video example in the case-study section of this paper, chapters one and three will be concerned with outlining key facts and figures of cottagecore aesthetics, its origins, recurring motifs, and symbolic language. Following this outline of the defining characteristics of the trend, chapter two will continue with a brief investigation of the historical origins of the pastoral in ancient Greek poetry as well as analyses of its subliminal message and imagery by literary critics Don Scheese, Leo Marx, and Raymond Williams, who classify the pastoral as an escapist fantasy projected onto the countryside by an increasingly urbanized society longing for wilderness and pristine nature as a source of inspiration and tranquility (Marx, *Machine* 9-10). Following this discussion, chapter four is concerned with the aforementioned analysis of a cottagecore TikTok video. Methodologically, the directorial and artistic choices will be examined with the help of analytical tools taken from film studies, specifically with regards to composition, lighting, and post-production editing. These findings will be, in a second step, analyzed and commented upon with regards to the associations and projections these directorial and artistic choices

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evoke in the audience as well as placed in the context of the previous analysis of cottagecore's cultural context of origin and connections to pastoral theory as part of chapter five.

### COTTAGECORE AESTHETICS: NOSTALGIA FOR A FLUID PAST

According to Brand, “[c]ottagecore can be understood as the projection of a core fantasy of escape to a cottage in the woods to live as if it were a ‘simpler time’” (2). Connected to the escapist fantasy are notions of a carefree lifestyle filled with crafting, knitting, and do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, baking, cooking, tending to ecological gardening (and farm animals), hiking, reading and writing in the nearby fields, as well as a general sense of ease and deceleration from twenty-first-century hustle culture (2). Moreover, the demarcation from reality gained by means of cottagecore is not only a spatial one but more so an ideological one. Cottagecore aspires to escape the capitalist logic of resource extraction, price dumping, mass production, and continued acceleration and expresses post-capitalist desire in that the focus of the content is put on the process of making and on the learning of skills, rather than the result of a craft or a recipe (Waller 35; Lickhardt 21).<sup>1</sup> As Waller points out, an activity proposed in cottagecore is often more time-consuming and expensive than simply purchasing the finished product; however, individuals partaking in the activity do so for the purpose of enjoyment, to practice mindfulness, and for reasons of sustainability (35). The sharing of traditional skills and the appreciation of the process of producing a unique item is the primary objective of the aesthetics (Brand 14; Waller 36). In addition to that, cottagecore removes itself from the realities of contemporary urban life not only on a spatial and an ideological dimension but first and foremost on a temporal dimension. Cottagecore is, as Brand remarks, “nostalgic for a fluid past” and does not refer to a specific point in history but rather picks up various elements from pre-industrialized life and incorporates them freely into the aesthetics (8; Johnston 8). In cottagecore, ideas come before accuracy, and even magical elements are seamlessly implemented into the trend.

Remarkably, cottagecore aesthetics are not bound to a certain geographical realm nor do they originate in one specific country; rather, the content can be produced anywhere from a city park to the English countryside to the Brazilian rainforest, as the many different filming locations of cottagecore content illustrate. According to Johnston, the common denominator of landscapes portrayed in cottagecore is “an abundance of greenery, wildflowers and berries, and perhaps an

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<sup>1</sup> This should not be mistaken to indicate that cottagecore expresses postcapitalist desire as a whole. The trend is based in considerable part on the sale of material goods, uses excessive digital media consumption as its primary mode of distribution, and has been heavily commercialized by global brands.

idle river flowing across the land” (8). As such, these elements mirror those distinct to the art-historical pastoral as described by Rabb. She notes that the pastoral in landscape art is defined by the celebration of “the dominion of mankind over nature” expressed in the portrayal of lush gardens, well-tended yards, and developed landscapes, which is seen as symbolic of the beauty and safety to be found in nature as the refuge of mankind. As Johnston notes, it is the “perception of possibility that drives people to these communities,” and while it is questionable if the promise of finding a retreat and a sanctuary in nature holds true, she remarks that “it is not the land itself but the cultural frame of reference that has been facilitated that offers this escape” (9). Thus, regardless of its actual existence, the prospect of the virtual Arcadian garden (Buell 2) is a sufficiently large pull factor for audiences to engage with this type of content on a large scale. What matters is the external image facilitated by means of constituting and perceiving the countryside as an antithesis of the city, a sphere characterized by the absence of acceleration, hierarchical structures, obligations, and social restraints (Johnston 8; Marx, *Machine* 9). This argument will be traced further in the chapter to follow.

Escapism builds on a long-standing history in American culture, both in visual media such as art and film and in pop culture and music. The Platonic philosophical ideal of “the quest for happiness has been culturally and philosophically linked to the uncovering of pure and ideal forms of being” in Western cultures, as Trifonas exemplifies with the American megacorporation Disney (1110). As such, Disney has successfully established the consumption of its products and fantasies as a precondition for participation in this escapist fantasy, which promises an escape from social predicaments such as the culture of cynicism and ever-intensifying capitalist modes of being, instead offering the dualistic notion of clear ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as well as the promise of everyday childlike wonders (Trifonas 1110). This profoundly contradictory condition is likewise expressed in cottagecore’s promise of an escape to a more harmonious and fulfilling life in nature. Rooted in the critique of contemporary modes of being, cottagecore seemingly offers an unequivocally better as well as graspable alternative to the realities of twenty-first-century and specifically post-COVID life—one which, at first glance, rejects fully the restraints of internalized capitalism and instead promotes sustainable practices and ethics of care. As previously argued with the help of Johnston, however, not the spatial removal as such but rather the “cultural frame of reference that has been facilitated [...] offers this escape” (9). Furthermore, cottagecore is deeply intertwined with capitalist modes of production and largely dependent on their workings for its continued relevance to online communities, making this claim questionable at best. This argument will be elaborated on in the following chapter.

No less crucial is the historical and political context in which cottagecore operates. The online aesthetics are frequently faced with criticism regarding the

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overwhelming presence of white, thin, able-bodied creators, the appropriation of indigenous knowledge and practices, as well as the missing representation of people of color (Waller 38; Brand 5). In response to parts of this critique of marginalization and ignorance, specific hashtags and subgenres such as #blackcottagecore have emerged on social media, seeking to make visible a more diverse spectrum of cottagecore creators and content (Brand 5). Through its continuous hinting at motifs and historic figures from pre-industrialized and in particular nineteenth-century society, the accusation of mimicking poverty and reproducing a colonialist mindset is likewise held against the trend (Brand 6). Practices and activities labeled as cottagecore are oftentimes rooted in long-standing and at times spiritual practices of historically marginalized and mistreated communities who faced great violence in the name of Western colonial powers. In cottagecore, these practices are now reintroduced and at times appropriated by precisely those dominant Western cultures that sought to disrupt and annihilate communities outside of their religious and economical system of beliefs, oftentimes without providing an adequate historical background or giving credit when partaking in these practices. By means of the reintroduction of those practices and activities in a new context and by a demographic historically holding hegemonic power and prestige, they have now become desirable and prestigious to a wider demographic, influencing audiences of such trends to partake in sustainable and communitarian practices formerly associated with a lack of resources and marginalization in dominant Western culture. The pastoral as it appears in cottagecore has, moreover, been heavily commercialized and monetized by corporations such as H&M and Primark, which have implemented elements from the cottagecore spectrum into their products as of the mid 2020s (Lickhardt 22-23; Waller 39).

### LIVING 'CLOSER' TO NATURE: THE PASTORAL IN AMERICAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Expressing the desire of a return to a “middle landscape” (Marx, *Machine* 71) located both spiritually and geographically in between wilderness and civilization, the pastoral embodies “a yearning for escape from civilization’s bewildering complexity, repressiveness, and brutality and even from history and its contingencies,” as seen in parallel with a spatial removal from urban centers and the seeking of a comfortable refuge in nature (Cannavò 76). Originating in Virgil’s *Eclogues* and later resurfacing in the Renaissance, the pastoral has since remained a seminal and ever-present motif found likewise in landscape art and poetry. It reverberates sentiments of the Arcadian garden as realized in the American landscape (Robinson 572; Buell 3). Similarly, in *The Country and the City*, literary critic Raymond Williams identifies the juxtaposition of countryside versus cities in

literature as well as the projections attached to them as “a myth functioning as a memory,” idealizing the country as a golden age of simplicity, innocence, and tranquility (Williams 43; Alpers 28). Not least with the publication of Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, the pastoral has become of vital importance to the discussion and study of American literature and culture, for it is “through an examination of the ‘pastoral ideal’ and its ‘subsequent transformation under the impact on industrialism,’ Marx maintained, that we can understand ‘a distinctively American theory of society’” (qtd. in Robinson 571). The pastoral desire is deeply intertwined with the European settlement of North America and its philosophical reverberations in the mythification of America as a supposed virgin land offering “new life in a fresh, green landscape” (Marx, *Machine* 3). Thus, it became enshrined upon the new nation and has since remained central to the study of the American national psyche (Cannavò 75-76).

In outlining the profound impact pastoral sentiments have had and continue to have on both American society and the national self-understanding, Marx distinguishes between a sentimental and a complex pastoralism. The former he criticizes sharply as an oversimplification and purely superficial reading of the pastoral concept, calling it a “nostalgic, anti-urban attitude that ignored ‘hard social and technological realities’ and manifested itself in ‘the piety toward the out-of-doors expressed in wilderness cult’” (qtd. in Robinson 572). Complex pastoralism, however, Marx associates with the literary canon of authors such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Fitzgerald, attesting their works with a realistic, although defeating, admittance to the realities of industrialization upon the realization of their pastoral desires (Cannavò 78). According to Marx, complex pastoralism admits to a core truth and foundational principle of American politics and society, namely “the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact” (*Machine* 354). As part of his argument for complex pastoralism, Marx draws on Jeffersonian agrarian pastoralism as expressed in *Notes on Virginia* and the accounts of Jefferson’s initial opposition to the introduction of industrialization to a then largely rural America in order to outline Jefferson’s concession to a mitigated form of technological progress unlike the one deemed all-consuming that operated in the so-called old world of Europe (Cannavò 78). Instead, the “Jeffersonian ideal of rural peace, simplicity, and contentment” (Marx, *Machine* 208) was believed to be consistent with the curiosity in and the promises of technological innovation, effectively uniting two previously irreconcilable American interests (Cannavò 78). Both the middle landscape and the frontier were to be sustained in their original, separate, and distinct forms and “sustain [the] egalitarian society of small property holders” (Cannavò 78). According to Marx, the belief persisted in American society that “the New World environment [held the capacity] to ‘purify’ the system” (*Machine* 158), hence giving rise to a “utopian ideology of industrialization and technological advancement” in the early nineteenth century (Cannavò 79). In literature, such

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sentiments were echoed in the early writings of pastoral writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who attested to the new nation and its “unspoiled landscape [...] imagination, intuition, perceptions of order,” and the potential to lead “to a morally elevated society” (Cannavò 78-79). According to Scheese, pastoral writers as such can be characterized as

antimodernists who employ the pastoral to tell of their ‘escape to’—a less pejorative way to put it might be ‘quest for’—a particular place in order to celebrate a return to a simpler, more harmonious way of life ‘closer to nature’; and to present to their audience, from the vantage point of the predominantly nonhuman world, the pleasures and privileges of living a kind of border life. (6)

Finally, and largely due to “the unprecedented, explosive rapidity with which the continent was settled and industrialized,” such overwhelmingly hopeful narratives faded out and were instead replaced by those of disturbances of the pastoral realm by means of technology (Cannavò 79).

The interruption of the pastoral by means of technological progress crowns the very title of Marx’s monograph, while also designating the metaphor popularized in nineteenth-century American literature by, among others, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne amid such socio-geographical developments (Marx, *Machine* 15). “Within the lifetime of a single generation,” Marx states, “a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world’s most productive industrial machine” (*Machine* 343). In Marx’s argument, the “interrupted idyll” is a distinguishing feature of the American pastoral symptomatic of the ever-present conflict between “myth and history, between the pastoral ideal and the growth of technology” (Bryant 64). Even more so, Marx points out how the machine is a conqueror of nature, having “joined the forces already pressing to occupy the virgin land” and threatening the very essence the American national psyche is substantially rooted in (“Machine” 32). Thus, in Marx’s reading of Thoreau and his accounts of the attempted realization of the pastoral dream in *Walden* (Cannavò 79), Thoreau questioned substantially the concept of the pastoral life and saw it as doomed despite his harsh criticism of the destructive powers of industrialization and the detrimental effects it had on the American wilderness (Cannavò 79). “The need for defense against the forces of history [did] not tempt Thoreau to a nostalgic embrace of the ‘pastoral life’ that [was] being whirled away” (*Machine* 255), Marx concludes, instead arguing that *Walden* speaks of a “tragic” (Robinson 573) literary dream and finally the “revelation that ‘the Walden site cannot provide a refuge, in any literal sense, from the forces of change’” (qtd. in Robinson 573). Hence, to Marx, Thoreau’s refuge at Walden Pond was less a social and more a literary undertaking, whose impact can be attested for in the lasting significance of *Walden* as a literary work (Robinson 573).

Ultimately, Marx concludes, the pastoral idea is less one of the collective or individual spatial removal from, and reordering outside of, society in a dream-like Arcadian garden but rather the imaginative as well as spiritual exploration of it in “private, and, in fact, literary experience” (Marx, *Machine* 264). As Cannavò finally assesses, “Thoreau takes the pastoral dream and ‘removes it from history, where it is manifestly unrealizable, and relocates it in literature, which is to say, in his own consciousness’” (80). As such, the “subjective pastoral retreat aims at the renewal of ‘the inner, not the external landscape’” (Marx, “Pastoral Ideals” qtd. in Cannavò 80), reinforcing the notion expressed by Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* that the pastoral refuge is one of spiritual and imaginative, rather than spatial, removal from society.

#### PERFORMATIVITY VERSUS AUTHENTICITY IN COTTAGECORE

On account of its primary medium of distribution and consumption being social media, cottagecore offers two distinct modes of participation in the trend, both tied to acts of escapism but varying in their degree of spatial removal from nature as such. Members of the community may choose to either passively consume the content or actively contribute to the trend by producing and publishing cottagecore-inspired pictures, videos, playlists, book recommendations, recipes, and more. The dualism at the heart of these two modes of participation thus mirrors the dualism inherent in the trend overall, namely a simultaneity of practicing mindfulness while participating in constant distraction, of praising going offline while being an online-based trend, and of turning the documentation of a craft into its carefully constructed performance. Brand emphasizes that “[c]ottagecore, as it inspires a mode of crafting tied to the digital, creates the dialectic intersections between romantic pastoralism and technology, and between community and isolation” (2). This dialectic intersection is inherently part of online trends taking place in the developmental phase of the internet referred to as web 4.0 and may likewise be observed in some of cottagecore’s overlapping aesthetics such as dark academia.<sup>2</sup> Brand, with reference to findings by Coeckelbergh, moreover argues that the internet has traditionally been associated with escapist fantasies and a means of removal from one’s reality and that social media has accelerated this development considerably by merging analog and digital realities (11). This phenomenon applies to the object of interest at hand in that varying degrees of performativity and role adoption are observable in the wide range of content to be found, which, in turn, revisits the argument previously made on the genuineness of

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2 Dark academia is an internet aesthetic prevalent on social media inspired by and romanticizing higher education, specifically classic literature, philosophy, and the humanities. Its distinct visuals and fashion trends are rooted in primarily dark and earthy color palettes (Bateman).



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rural escapist fantasies as such and the prospects of their implementation against the backdrop of their designated target audience.

Some cottagecore content communicates self-awareness of the performativity and artificiality of the trend and the inherent contradiction of maintaining a constant social media presence while living an allegedly off-grid and technology-free lifestyle insofar as that content is explicitly referenced as trying out and partaking in the online aesthetics (see, for example, creator @amandamaryanna on YouTube). However, the majority of the content is made up of creators offering vlog-format insights into their days filled with crafting and tending to the cottage and surrounding gardens, thereby putting some claim to authenticity rooted not least in the chosen format of a diary-like documentary accompaniment of day-to-day events. As pointed out by both Lickhardt and Waller, however, authenticity does not truly exist in this online trend, seeing that all content is created for the sole purpose of sharing it on social media and reaching a specific target audience, therefore picking up on currently popular trends and motifs to ensure positive feedback from and resonance with the target group (Lickhardt 22; Waller 38). Although the primary objective of cottagecore may be the return to nature, a removal from contemporary sociopolitical reality, and the sharing of traditional skills (Waller 4), the act of participating in and spreading this trend via social media in fact adds another level of separation from the realm its audience seeks to reconnect with.

Moreover, Brand elaborates that through the means of composition and editing, cottagecore videos specifically are less an act of documentation and sharing of craft and skills but rather a secondary layer of performativity that may be regarded as “inhabiting the role of craft itself” (15). These two layers embedded in the act of craftsmanship in cottagecore—the primary layer of physical craftsmanship in the actual creation of a product and the secondary layer of metaphysical craftsmanship in the documentary accompaniment and subsequent editing of the creative process—thus reinforce one another and consequently blur the boundaries between documentation and performance, as I argue. It is for this reason that composition, art direction, and specifically editing and the use of sound will be investigated in the analysis of an exemplary cottagecore TikTok video in the case study of this paper. With the help of technical terms and analytical tools taken from Michael Ryan’s *An Introduction to Criticism: Literature / Film / Culture* and Ed Sikov’s *Film Studies: An Introduction*, the analysis seeks to unite findings from the previous theory sections and situate cottagecore within the tradition of the pastoral.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: @VIRGINIA\_COTTAGE\_DIARY'S "THE MOST BEAUTIFUL RAIN LAST NIGHT..."

This TikTok video by creator @virginia\_cottage\_diary titled "the most beautiful rain last night..." and published on July 20, 2022, has generated over 303,000 views as of October 8, 2023. The video is fourteen seconds long and is composed of six shots recorded by the creator at and around her house located in the state of Virginia, US, all in vertical format. The account has generated over 129,000 followers as of October 8, 2023, and is labeled with the profile description "[c]ottage living in the country [fairy emoji]" and "[t]he small things are the best things [star emoji]" (@virginia\_cottage\_diary). The content of this profile varies from tours of the house and surrounding gardens to videos on the restoration process of this house, vlogs on the creator's life in the countryside, to videos on thrifting and recipes. The video of interest to this case study, "the most beautiful rain last night...", can be categorized as a typical example of cottagecore content for the platform TikTok, portraying the allegedly authentic representation of the cottagecore lifestyle through a montage of seemingly random short video clips. Moreover, little to no postproduction editing or set design is observable at first glance—a directorial choice representative of cottagecore content on TikTok, evoking the allusion of spontaneity and authenticity for the audience. In combination with the use of a sound highly significant to the online communities of cottagecore and related trends such as dark academia, this video example is representative of the trend's mainstream layout on TikTok.

The six shots constituting the final video are made up of the following settings: first, a corner of the front porch of the veranda surrounding the house, including a rocking chair with parts of the lawn and surrounding forest in the background. The second shot presents a green meadow with large trees and a small road in the background, while the third shows parts of this house with a grand tree to the left-hand side and a sunset in the background. The fourth shot depicts a section of the vegetable garden with a thick forest in the background, and the fifth presents a garden shed surrounded by a forest and a meadow featuring a set of bright red lawn chairs and a small table of the same color. Finally, shot number six follows with a close-up of green tomatoes located in the vegetable garden, with heavy raindrops dripping off them. Scheese describes such a pastoral as a 'middle landscape' characterized by the duality of cultivation and human impact on the one hand and primordial nature on the other hand (7-8). As previously discussed with reference to the characteristics of the pastoral in landscape art as outlined by Rabb, this video likewise depicts the pastoral in that nature is portrayed as "a comforting source of physical and spiritual sustenance" and evokes sentiments of beauty and safety mirrored specifically in the cultivation of land by mankind.

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Due to the vertical format, which is required for and representative of the platform TikTok, the field of vision is determined by vertical lines and tight framing (Ryan 139). The dominance of these vertical lines is furthermore created by means of the surrounding large trees in the background of each shot, the design of the veranda in the first shot and the construction of the vegetable garden in the fourth and the sixth shots, as well as the heavy rainfall present in all of the shots. The first five of the six shots have deep focus and thus allow for greater depth of field, focusing on both the foreground and the background simultaneously, while the final, sixth shot focuses only on the tomatoes in the foreground and has a blurry background, giving it a more cinematic appearance (Ryan 140). The lighting in all six shots is provided solely by means of daylight and the varying weather conditions of the thunderstorm. No artificial lighting was used, which in effect creates the illusion of spontaneity and authenticity of this video as an insight into the cottagecore lifestyle (cf. Sikov 44). As pointed out by Sikov, each artistic choice in film, however minimal, serves to communicate subconsciously to the audience distinct values, sentiments, and convictions and has meaningful consequences (Sikov 4; Trifonas 1108). While the viewer does not know whether these shots were in fact all spontaneously recorded within a few hours and truly do portray one summer thunderstorm or rather represent a collection of carefully selected shots recorded over a period of a few months and subsequently assembled into the final video, the use of strictly natural lighting evokes the allusion of a tangible imagined past and spatial/temporal escapism communicated in cottagecore. Due to its largely similar visual makeup, the representation of the pastoral in cottagecore feels deeply familiar and therefore palpable to the audience, making it a graspable alternative to contemporary realities. More so, the familiarity evoked by the use of strictly natural lighting makes tangible the likelihood of social and political developments expressed in cottagecore, away from sexism, xenophobia, heteronormativity, and constant acceleration toward deceleration, diversity representation, and collaborative and community-based models of living, once more communicating that such changes are within reach. This phenomenon relates back to previous discussions on authenticity and performativity of cottagecore content explored with reference to Brand and Coeckelbergh in the previous chapter.

All six shots are furthermore filmed as panning shots. Here, the camera is moved slightly to the left-hand or the right-hand side on a horizontal level, not moving its base, which remains aimed at a certain element within the frame (cf. Sikov 25). Panning shots are very frequent and popular on TikTok and often used in vlogs to establish a sense of place and create the desired atmosphere for the viewer. In addition to the absence of artificial lighting, little to no effects or color correction are perceivable in these shots, which, once more, establishes a sense of spontaneity and immediacy to the moment of recording. The transitions between the six shots are rapid, and one clip is superseded by the next without the use of any perceivable

effects, thus turning them into a montage of the summer thunderstorm (cf. Sikov 58). This minimalistic editing style is very frequent and popular on TikTok, specifically for cottagecore and travel content videos. On the whole, by means of very minimal effects, minimal editing, and little to no perceivable set design, the creator is able to generate a sense of immediacy to the moment of recording, immersing the viewer in those images of her cottagecore lifestyle and upholding the illusion of authenticity and spontaneity for the audience. However, as previously argued with the help of Sikov and Brand, cottagecore follows the dualistic mode of physical and metaphysical craft, blurring the boundaries between documentation and performance, thus rendering impossible an exact and final assessment of where one ends and the other begins. Hence, categorizing this video as either an authentic depiction of the rural lifestyle or its carefully constructed reenactment misconceives the point of cottagecore, which is solely to offer a virtual escape into the world of cozy cabins, lush green meadows, and homemade jams. Cottagecore does not claim authenticity of the pastoral ideal but rather playfully addresses stereotypes and archetypes of rural life within its display of the escapist fantasy.

For this video specifically, the strategic placement and selection of sound is of vital importance to the analysis of cottagecore as an expression of the contemporary pastoral impulse. The creator uses two different audio tracks and subsequently overlaps them by means of sound editing. Track one is diegetic sound, namely the audio recordings of the summer thunderstorm by her cottage in Virginia (Ryan 141). Both the sound of raindrops dripping onto the porch as well as the garden surrounding the cottage and waves of thunder are audible faintly in the background. Although the sound is diegetic, i.e., it originates from one of the video shots incorporated in the final product, it is nonsynchronous, i.e., the creator isolated the sound recording from one of the video shots and used it as a sound bridge that carries over to all of the six shots as well as the transitions between them (141). Audio track two, which is set much louder than track one and consequently functions as the foreground of the overall sound installation, is the TikTok sound “i went into the woods” by the creator gen. This is nondiegetic sound, i.e., it does not originate from one of the video shots but rather works in ways similar to that of a soundtrack or a film score (141). This sound is nonsynchronous as well and likewise used as a sound bridge carrying over to all of the six shots and the transitions between them (141).

The TikTok sound “i went into the woods,” which has been featured in approximately 1,500 postings as of October 8, 2023, is frequently used within the cottagecore, dark academia, and BookTok<sup>3</sup> communities and consists of a short audio recording taken from the 1989 drama film *Dead Poets Society*, directed by

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<sup>3</sup> BookTok is the designated corner of TikTok reserved for the discussion and recommendation of books, most of them young adult or fantasy/sci-fi books and most often centered around a female protagonist (Jerasa and Boffone 221).

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Peter Weir. In this scene, members of the Dead Poets Society, a student-led secret poetry club at the elite all-male secondary school Welton Academy, sneak off campus to an underground cave to read and discuss poetry—both self-written and established works—starting each meeting by reading out loud an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; or Life in the Woods* as their traditional opening message. The recording reads as follows: “I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. To put to rout all that was not life; and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived” (*Dead Poets Society* 0:36:45-0:37:10). The quotation was, however, abbreviated and altered for the film script and is not consistent with Thoreau’s actual writing. This reference to Thoreau’s *Walden*, one of the central works of American pastoral literature, is highly significant to the study of cottagecore as an expression of the contemporary pastoral impulse exemplified in this video. The quotation both underlines the visual language of the video as analyzed in the previous paragraphs and adds to its meaning in that the cottagecore lifestyle—and those partaking in it too—seek to isolate themselves from civilization and retreat to a remote refuge in nature in order to turn their attention to poetry, the arts, and different modes of creative expression. Arguably, cottagecore thus revisits the isolation famously practiced by Thoreau at Walden Pond.

### THE PASTORAL IN AN ERA OF DIMINISHING WILDERNESS: THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Literary critic Don Scheese elaborates that among the many changes the industrial revolution brought to the land-use practices and socio-geographical conditions prevailing in mid-to-late-nineteenth-century America that shaped people’s perception of their natural environment, the growing popularity of the then emerging genre of nature writing as well as the repopularization of pastoral landscape art spoke for “the public’s continued desire for the pastoral in an era of diminishing wilderness” (28-29). More so, Scheese substantiates that this mechanism can be traced across the development of nature writing up until the late twentieth century, arguing that an increased public awareness for endangered wilderness and substantial threats to the environment is repeatedly followed by an increased popularity and demand for depictions and accounts of the pastoral in both art and literature (35-36; Buell 2). As COVID-19 lockdown measures were implemented globally in the early spring of 2020, the consumption of cottagecore content skyrocketed across social media platforms. According to Jennings, each increase in COVID-19 case numbers was immediately followed by an increased demand for cottagecore content, and “[f]rom early March to early April, the

cottagecore hashtag jumped 153 percent, while likes on cottagecore posts were up 541 percent” on the platform of Tumblr (Jennings).

Based on the observation made by Scheese and Marx on the continued reemergence of the pastoral in literature and art in times of the substantial disappearance of the wilderness and accelerated socio-geographical changes, in addition to the data provided by Jennings on the rapid popularization of cottagecore amid such changes, I argue that the pandemic and subsequent global lockdown strategies have worked in ways similar to what Marx’s ‘interrupted idyll’ motif symbolized in early industrialized America: a sudden and forceful intervention into prevailing socio-geographical structures in addition to a sudden awareness of global dependencies amid an already worsening global climate crisis. Cottagecore aesthetics, with its depictions of homey cabins and rolling green hills where one can read, craft, and knit all day, presented a welcoming digital refuge from a reality too fast-paced to be accurately processed. It offered a means of virtual escape in addition to mirroring the isolation people involuntarily experienced at home (Brand 9-15). Hence, not the disappearance of an actual wilderness but rather the loss of the pastoral idyll as a projection surface, a theoretical wilderness refuge, and an escapist fantasy perceived primarily through the lens of an upper-middle-class urban society is at the root of the contemporary pastoral longing expressed by cottagecore. As initially established with reference to Johnston, although cottagecore may present itself “as an escape from social normativity, it is not the land itself but the cultural frame of reference that has been facilitated that offers this escape” (9). As a representation of the pastoral, cottagecore should thus not be mistaken to express the desire of a full and definitive spatial removal from society but rather can be understood as conveying a nostalgic longing for a spiritual as well as imaginative spatial and temporal return (Marx, *Machine* 264) to a primarily nonhuman idyllic refuge in nature, a longing likewise expressed in Thoreau’s *Walden* and Virgil’s *Eclogues*. Much like Thoreau’s withdrawal to Walden Pond resulted in the insight that the pastoral ideal could never offer “a refuge, in any literal sense, from the forces of change” (Marx, *Machine* 253) but could instead offer the renewal of the internal, not the external, landscape (Cannavò 80) in “private, and, in fact, literary experience” (Marx, *Machine* 264), cottagecore likewise offers a subjective, imaginative withdrawal to, and refuge in, nature through its multifaceted forms of creative expression in digital media and storytelling.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined cottagecore aesthetics as a representation of the contemporary pastoral impulse in digital storytelling and art. By conducting a small-scale case study analyzed with regards to art direction, composition, and

## Seeking Refuge in Nature: Escapism and the Contemporary Pastoral Impulse in Cottagecore

particularly sound editing, I was able to illustrate how culturally fraught notions of the countryside as an Arcadian garden prevail in the escapist fantasy and perpetuate the practice of virtual “landscaping” (Lilley 62) already observable in the pastoral employed by Virgil as well as in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. Upon examining the discussion surrounding authenticity and performativity in the trend, I argued that cottagecore does not prompt an actual return to nature but rather offers a virtual alternative to contemporary social and political realities by playfully addressing (and at times outright enacting) archetypes of rural life, thus inviting the audience to reinvent themselves with the help of social media. With reference to Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*, I was furthermore able to demonstrate that the demarcation from capitalism, xenophobia, and sociopolitical acceleration offered in cottagecore is facilitated not through means of a spatial or temporal removal but via the ever-present associations of country and city as polar opposites, associations that operate along the mechanism of “a myth functioning as a memory” (Williams 43). Finally, and with reference to Leo Marx’s analysis of the conflict between the pastoral ideal and the progress narrative persistent in nineteenth-century American literature and society outlined in *The Machine in the Garden*, I investigated more closely the cultural and sociopolitical context of cottagecore’s rise to popularity amid the COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of an acute climate crisis. I thus demonstrated that the pattern observed by Don Scheese of the continued reemergence of the pastoral amid vast socio-geographical changes and the disappearance of the wilderness applies in this instance as well.

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