Everywhere you turn, people are talking about trends. On a CNN news show, a Chyron runs in the corner of the screen pointing out stories that are “trending now.” The home pages of Yahoo and AOL also feature Trending Now sections. Google Trends pays scary attention to popular searches.

The White House tends toward trends. “Last month, our economy added more than 100,000 private sector jobs and the unemployment rate fell sharply,” President Obama said in January. “The trend is clear.” And the White House website is tricked out with trendy phrases, such as “jobs trends,” “employment trends,” “the trend on earmarks” and “a troubling trend in food safety.”

Online and offline there’s a tremendous amount of trend, friend, including Truck Trend, TrendHunter, TrendIdeas, Teen Trend, Asia Trend, Florida Trend, Georgia Trend, Trendland, NewTrendMag, Sportrends and various Trend e-publications on college campuses.

The Trend — its spotting, its tracking, its examination — has become omnipresent in contemporary culture. And if there is one thing that watching trends has taught us, it’s that at precisely the point at which something becomes ubiquitous, that something is no longer a trend.

Trends In History

First, a definition: A trend is a prevailing tendency that is gradually gaining momentum and might have long-term implications. It’s different from a fad, which is a short-term burst of interest or way of being.

The fact that more people are working from home is a trend. That many of them wear Snuggies all day long is a fad. So many of the “trending now” items on the search engines’ lists are really fads, not trends.

Trends exist “because they satisfy some very basic needs in all of us: the need for communicating social identity and the collective need for making sense of the world,” says Maria Mackinney-Valentin, a fashion and trend scholar at the Danish Design School in Copenhagen.
“Wouldn’t it be better to see what lies ahead rather than stumble blindly into the future?” Celente asks. “No one can predict the future, but you can have a good idea of what lies ahead.”

He points to several financial trends, for instance.

“If you could have anticipated the real estate bubble,” he asks, “would you have avoided buying into it? If you had read in 2007 that there would be a ‘Panic of ’08,’ would you have left your money in the stock market and 401(k)? If you were an entrepreneur, and were told that bottled water, gourmet coffee and organic foods would be megatrends before they were, would you have considered them as profit opportunities?”

**Spotting Waves Of Behavior**

We have always had trends — in fashion and politics, in food and travel, in nearly all human pursuits. Traditionally, though, identifying those trends or movements was predominately the purview of historians. With the benefit of hindsight, pinpointing romanticism in music or neoclassicism in art is easy. In the 17th century, most of the so-called metaphysical poets were not even aware of each other.

The Internet has so fractured us globally that we no longer are looking for mass-culture experiences. … Marketing companies can no longer take advantage of trends. So maybe the last trend we will see is a trend toward a Trendless World — full of surprise and originality.

Eventually, culture watchers and sociologists began pointing out contemporaneous waves of behavior. In his 1962 book *Diffusion of Innovations*, sociology professor Everett Rodgers dissected the trajectory of trends and innovations — speaking of early adopters and laggards. By the end of the 20th century, trend spotting and trendsetting were marketable skills.

Between 1960 and 2000, the appearance of the word “trendsetter” increased in books nearly 500 percent, according to Google. In 1997, *The New Yorker* did a profile of trendsetters. The PBS documentary show *Frontline* aired *The Merchants of Cool*, which looked at how marketing wizards created trends in young people.

All of a sudden, trends and trend trackers were everywhere. *The New York Times* took note in a 2006 story. “Trends are the new trend,” Reinier Evers, founder of the Dutch company TrendWatching, told *The Times*. Evers made his mark in the trend-spotting world for naming widespread movements such as “Tryvertising,” “Life Caching” and “Youniversal Branding.”

*How Adoption Speed Affects the Abandonment of Cultural Tastes*, a 2009 study conducted by marketing professor Jonah Berger of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business and others, and published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, suggests that “cultural tastes that have been adopted quickly die faster.”

People look at trends with a jaundiced eye, the report states, so they “avoid identity-relevant items with sharply increasing popularity because they believe that they will be short lived.”

Has anything in our culture risen more swiftly than trend spotting?

**Fractured Culture**

The fashion industry is often the first to recognize trends. And it may have been among the first to forecast their end.

In the spring of 2010, Simon Doonan — creative director at Barneys upscale department stores — wrote in the Style pages of *The New York Observer* that he was not seeing any trends in human wear anymore. “In the old days, style used to be the prerogatives of a small group of people. Now it is a national sport. Ticket sales are exploding. People are pouring into the arena in such vast numbers that none of us can keep track of the rule book. Et voila! Nobody is keeping score. All bets are off. Anything goes.”

Doonan’s observation, that for decades trends have been set by a few at the top of the pecking order, may explain why there are fewer and fewer trends. Cable television and the Internet have splintered the mass audience that trend establishers and marketers once lorded over.

**Fractured Culture: An NPR Series**
Fractured Culture

Anti-Social Networks? We’re Just As Cliquey Online

The Record

Fractured Industry: Companies That Serve Musicians Without Deals

Today fashion, music, art, literature, politics, economics and just about everything else are going through social upheaval.

The Internet has so fractured us globally that we no longer are looking for mass-culture experiences. So major trends have become splintered mini-trends — which are not really trends at all. Trends only work when there is a growing audience that buys into them. And trends can only reach critical mass if the masses are not too critical.

And with the decline in trends comes a decline in the notion of there being such a thing as pop culture. Marketing companies can no longer take advantage of trends. So maybe the last trend we will see is a trend toward a Trendless World — full of surprise and originality.

The problem might be in the word itself. “I think there are trends in terminology just as there are in everything else,” says Mackinney-Valentin. “So the term ‘trend’ may be going out of fashion, but that does not mean that they are not still here.”

The trend of trends is changing, says Berger of the Wharton School. The wealth of data, analysis and commentary now available “means that trends have become a much more studied and talked-about topic, and this itself may affect their life cycles.”

When something becomes ubiquitous, it is no longer a trend, Berger says. “But it is also the case,” he says, “that merely calling something a trend or noting its trendiness may also decrease its allure or hasten its decline.”

“Why Do People Hate Hipsters?”

by

Alex Rayner

Published in Guardian News

October 14th, 2010

Hipster-hate blogs are multiplying online. But who are these much-maligned trendies — and why do people find them so irritating? Perhaps we should learn to love our skinny-jeaned friends instead.
There was a party going on in London E5: a house party in one of the Victorian terraces that line the streets in this modest area of east London. There had been parties on the street before, only on this particular Friday evening two months ago, guests wore Ray-Bans, deep-cut v-neck T-shirts and skinny jeans. They were also, according to one partisan report, in possession of “a sound system louder than the big bang.” Quite an event, yet not everyone in the street appreciated the loud music and louder fashions.

“I only put ‘hate’ in the title of the blog,” explains annoyed neighbour and anonymous author of Hackney Hipster Hate photo-blog, “because, on the night I wrote it, I was watching floods of hipsters arrive in the early hours at a terrace house and having an Ibiza-style party. It drove me insane.”

The partying, which lasted until 4am on Saturday morning was, in the blogger’s opinion, symptomatic “of new arrivals not really getting the measure of where they were living, having no idea about the community there and deciding to have a festival in a back garden at dawn, while people were trying to sleep, because Hackney’s supposedly the centre of cool for the next five minutes.”

Though it began in a moment of sleep-deprived abhorrence, Hackney Hipster Hate now posts images of fashionable east Londoners accompanied by a scornful commentary. The site has become one of an increasing number dedicated to vilifying fashionable twits who appear to care more about the next big thing than the welfare of their fellow man. Got slimline jeans, tattoos, a headband and a fixed-wheel bike? Then perhaps turn away now.

American comedian Joe Mande began his photo-blog, Look At This Fucking Hipster in April 2009. The site also captions shots of the young and pretentious with lines such as: “Hold on, let me check to see if Topshop sells any iPhone purses.” A paperback collection of the best posts was published in March 2010.

In July 2009 US writers and editors Brenna Ehrlich and Andrea Bartz began Stuff Hipsters Hate. They’ve also published a paperback collection of posts.

The Unhappy Hipsters photo-blog was inaugurated in January 2010. It satirises the smug, modernist home-owners often seen in the pages of US interiors magazine Dwell.
Hipster Hitler web comic was launched in August 2010. It re-imagines the führer as a cardigan-wearing know-it-all, fond of bicycles, organic cashews and typewriters. Fans can buy American Apparel T-shirts bearing such slogans as “Eva 4 Eva” and “Death Camp For Cutie”.

Early this September, TheGrandSpectacular posted its debut pop video, Being a Dickhead’s Cool, on YouTube. While lacking that crucial H word, the song brutally teases London’s poseurs and the video animates shots taken from Hackney Hipster Hate and latfh.com, among other sources. Since its upload on 8 September, the original clip has had around 3,275,000 views.

In autumn/winter 2010, if there’s one thing more fashionable than being a hipster, it’s laughing at hipsters.

Of course, ridiculing young poseurs isn’t an especially new thing to do. The Guardian’s Charlie Brooker created the character of Nathan Barley, a vacuous media playboy, back in 1999, around the same time the east London fanzine The Shoreditch Twat began published its first edition. Plenty of the jokes in 80s sitcom The Young Ones, or even the 70s comedy Butterflies were at the expense of similarly youthful pretentions. Though these newer, online baiers pick similar targets, it isn’t clear that the term hipster, in its modern usage, is sharply defined enough for truly cutting satire. While all these sites appear to know what they’re talking about, none of them offers a working definition of a hipster.

The OED isn’t much help; it traces the word back to the 1940s and offers “hepcat” as its rough equivalent. Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay The White Negro was subtitled Superficial Reflections on the Hipster and describes an American existentialist who adopts the jazzier trappings of African-American life to free himself (and it usually is a he) from “the squares”. Yet “hipsters” was also used during the 1960s to describe trousers that flared from the hip. Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a surprise to find that in August the New York Times has advised its journalists against using the word, citing doubts over “how precise a meaning it conveys”; meanwhile, a public debate held at the University of California, Los Angeles, recently failed to offer a useful description of this latter-day bogeyman.

Nevertheless, from London to Lima, Sydney to Mexico City, detractors might not know exactly what a hipster is, but they do know what they don’t like: a tiresome sort of trendy, ostentatious in their perceived rebellion, yet strangely conformist; meticulous in their tastes, yet also strangely limited. Squatting somewhere between MGMT, The Inbetweeners and Derek Zoolander, this modern incarnation is all mouth and skinny trousers.

Perhaps the most comprehensive examination of this contemporary manifestation is being published in a traditional print format this week. What Was the Hipster? is a 200-page collection of American essays and discussions, which assesses the significance of these turn-of-the-century poseurs.

Fashionable hipster: from hackneyhipsterhate.tumblr.com

Put together by n+1, a twice-yearly Brooklyn journal of politics, literature and culture, the book offers three definitions of the type in question. The first is white, urban, cool dudes in Manhattan’s Lower East Side circa 1999. This summation begins with a string of keywords: “trucker hats; undershirts called ‘wifebeaters’ worn as outerwear; the aesthetic of basement rec-room pornography, flash-lit Polaroids, fake wood panelling; Pabst Blue Ribbon; ‘porno’ or ‘paedophile’ moustaches; aviator glasses; Americana T-shirts for church socials, etc; tube socks; the late albums of Johnny Cash produced by Rick Rubin; and tattoos.”
The second definition highlights followers of a certain hipster culture, which revels in a childlike naivety; the films of Wes Anderson, the early books of Dave Eggers, and the twee indie pop of Belle and Sebastian are all mentioned.

The third is the “hip consumer”: the smart shopper who understands that some consumer purchases, such as the right vintage T-shirt, might even be regarded as a form of art. They even split the term, drawing a distinction between the trucker-cap-wearing New Yorkers of 1999-2003, and a more recent type of cool kid, keen on such low-tech status symbols as typewriters, fixed-wheel bikes, and the kind of outdated instrumentation used on records by Arcade Fire, Animal Collective and Grizzly Bear.

Mark Greif, a New York English professor and one of the book’s chief editors traces this hipster’s recent history back to the post-punk DIY movement of the 80s.

“Back then there was this insistence on something like an alternative to capitalism,” says Greif, “an opposition to major labels and pop; you could make your album on a small unknown label and it would only be sold for cheap. Youth culture had this quite hopeful notion that it was possible to make your own art and distribute it, in order to evade this wider commercial sphere.” By the early 90s, these ideals had foundered; grunge bands signed to major labels and Kurt Cobain had killed himself.

“What is meaningful about the hipster moment, 1999 and after,” says Greif from his office in New York, “is that it seems to be an effort to live a life that retains the coolness in believing that you belong to a counter-culture, where the substance of the rebellion has become pro-commerce.”

Instead of “doing art” the cool kids were now, in Greif’s words “doing products.”

“In the 50s and 60s, there are five people at the centre working very hard, miserably trying to write a book and around them there are 95 people more or less having fun,” Greif explains. “In the hipster culture the people at that centre aren’t necessarily producing art, they’re actually working in advertising, marketing and product placement. These were once embarrassing jobs. Now it’s meaningful in this world to say that you sell sneakers, at a high level.”

The book settles on 1999 as New York’s hipster year zero. This was when American Apparel opened, the Canadian hipster magazine Vice moved to New York, and the sneaker boutique and branding agency Alife established itself on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

“There was this crucial bar, Welcome to the Johnsons,” Greif recalls, “it opened in 1999. It was only the lower east side, but it was made to look as if you were sitting in a living room in Middle America.”

Early hipsters’ adoption of these and other suburban signifiers, such as trucker caps and BMX bikes, as they sauntered around urban areas is significant. The White Negro had fetishised blackness; these newer arrivals glorified lower-middle-class whites. This is partially why Greif and co, in a line that sounds very much like it may stray into Pseuds Corner, see these early hipsters as neoliberal.

“It seemed to revolve around the desire to reproduce as rebellion these things that had formerly been part of the mainstream market,” says Greif, citing the art-gallery porn by the likes of Richard Kern and the conspicuous consumption of meat while in the company of vegetarians as two examples. “There’s this idea that they are the agents of change, the true revolutionaries, where the revolutionary change is to . . . make exclusive the pleasures that had potentially belonged to anyone in the past, to celebrate the upwards redistribution of wealth.”
Musical hipster: from hackneyhipsterhate.tumblr.com

Not all hipsters arrive in the big cities flush with cash, but they almost always possess some cultural capital, usually a university degree and refined upbringing. They can use this to prevent themselves from ending up on the bottom of the pile, even if their only means of upward mobility are snarky putdowns and a working knowledge of the Smiths.

“It becomes a defence mechanism, if you’re ‘declassed’ in a city, to stop yourself from winding up at the bottom,” Greif argues. “It’s about social positioning, how to mark yourself out as different or exclusive in a democratic society, where it’s quite easy to buy the consumer trappings of success.”

A more withering assessment of youth culture is hard to imagine. And yet, in a neat flourish in the n+1 book, US writer Rob Horing asks whether the hipster hatred doesn’t raise deeper questions in the detractors.

“The hipster,” Horing suggests, “is the bogeyman who keeps us from becoming too settled in our identity, keeps us moving forward into new fashions, keep us consuming more ‘creatively’ and discovering new things that haven’t become lame and hipster. We keep consuming more, and more cravenly, yet this always seems to us to be the hipster’s fault, not our own.”

Horing also raises an even less-palatable notion: “If you are concerned enough about the phenomenon to analyse it and discuss it, you are already somewhere on the continuum of hipsterism and are in the process of trying to rid yourself of its ‘taint’.”

Is this view from the heights of Manhattan academia shared on the streets of Hackney? Not entirely.

What does our anonymous blogger think? “The argument of ‘you’re probably just a failing or self-hating hipster’? Heard that one before. I honestly count myself out of that argument on the basis I barely socialise. My skin is translucent from not leaving the house. When I take photos on [London hipster enclave] Broadway Market, I’m not noticed because they take one look at me and look away. My blandness is an insult to their eyes.”

Could Hackney’s hipster-baiter ever concede that east London’s trendies might, in the words of one n+1 contributor, remind us of “youth and daring and style, that we don’t have any more or perhaps never did?”

Apparently not. “There’s nothing daring about wearing Ray-Bans with colourful frames. Every single idiot is doing it.”

“The Sad Science of Hipsterdom”

by Jeff Wise

Published in Psychology Today

September 8, 2010
explore and explain dispassionately, whether the object of study be the noble eagle or the lowly nematode. So what does science have to tell us about this fascinatingly misunderstood breed, the indigenous North American hipster?

Surprisingly much.

In a paper in an upcoming issue of the Journal of Consumer Research entitled “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” authors Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson delve deep into the phenomenon of hipsterism, and in particular its most abiding mystery: if everyone hates hipsters, why would anyone want to be one?

The long and short of it is that they don’t.

In general, psychologists who study consumers understand that people are largely motivated to spend money not just on things that they materially need, but that bolster their sense of identity. They purchase not just goods and services, but mythologies. Imagining themselves as rugged, rebellious patriots, they buy a Harley-Davidson. Imagining themselves as respected and well-heeled, they buy a Lexus.

Hipsters, though, follow a different paradigm. Their problem is that their purchases tend to place them within a category whose mythology they despise. That’s right: Nobody likes hipsters, not even hipsters.

As Arsel and Thompson put it, the beats of the ’50s and hippies of the ’60s and ’70s, both of which had an admirable authenticity about them even if you didn’t care for the particulars, eventually gave rise to “the millennial hipster,” which “came to be represented as an uberconsumer of trends and as a new, and rather gullible, target market that consumes cool rather than creating it.” As examples of the dorkification they cite online parodies of the iconic Mac v. PC ads and this viral YouTube video.

The upshot being that any people who legitimately enjoy all the trappings on hipsterhood — the authors mention Pabst Blue Ribbon, Puma, and the trucker hat — must psychologically distance themselves from the demographic group of which they are so clearly a part. And so their subconscious brains have to work double time so that they can convince themselves that the things they buy do not reflect on their true character.

Arsel and Thompson interviewed hipsters and asked them how they dealt with the problem of being identified as such. The answer, they found, was to “demythologize” the hipster experience, that is, to psychologically reclassify their own behavior as being separate from the aggregate activity that the rest of the world lumps together as “hipster.” They interviewed one consumer, identified as Scarlet, who told them:

"I'm not gonna lie, I shop at Urban [Outfitters] sometimes, only when it's on sale of course... I like doing a lot of the things that are the hipster thing to do, but I do them because I like to do them, not because they're the cool thing to do. And because I am immersed in the social scene where there are a lot of hipsters, people mistake me for being one of them."

The deeper irony is that those who try to assert their independence from the commodification of identity wind up tapping into another marketplace myth, what the authors call “the myth of consumer sovereignty.” This is the idea that by assiduously selecting from all the identity markers available for purchase, a person can assemble one that authentically reflects their true self independent of the marketplace. Some of the hipsters that Arsel and Thompson talked to are well aware of the futility of this project. Said one, identified as “Tom”:

"I don’t necessarily know every single weird obscure band. I don’t necessarily want to. But I mean, yeah, who do I hang out with? I hang out with like a bunch of tattooed indie dorks. So, yeah, I guess I am but I wouldn’t self-identify, I think. I’d listen to stuff that’s outside the mainstream or it’s like I dress weird compared to the majority of the population. I just try not to think about it too much. The minute you start identifying with a subculture... you kind of lose individuality, surrender part of your identity, and we don’t wanna do that."

This, then, is the essence of being a hipster. Pretending you aren’t one.

UPDATE: For more PT-inflected insight into hipsterology, check out news editor Andrea Bartz’s side project, Stuff Hipsters Hate, a blog that is now also out in book form.
UPDATE 2: Those seeking a more serious exposition of the hipster culture-space might wish to examine Hipster Runoff, an examination of alt-dom by a thoughtful and perspicacious insider.

UPDATE 3: After much debate, recrimination, and soul-searching in the comment section, I believe that a definitive conclusion to the hipster debate has been achieved by this video, submitted by an anonymous reader. The circle has been squared.

Check out my blog. Follow me on Twitter.

Links:

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"Hipster detox: Quick impressions"
Published in Time Out New York
September 7th, 2010

See how three New York hipsters coped with two weeks of mainstream living.

Name: Drew
Age: 26
Occupation: TONY night receptionist

Hipster-to-mainstream substitutions:
- Beat up Chucks to boat shoes
- Slim Levi’s to white shorts
- Tight T’s to polo with popped collar
- Death on the Installment Plan to Star Wars novel
- New Yorker to Maxim
- Old Spice to Axe body spray
- Sweet-ass beard to clean shaven
- J’aimerais pas crever un dimanche to The Condemned (with Stone Cold Steve Austin)
- Union Pool to The Maritime Hotel
- Japanter to Springsteen’s Greatest Hits
- Hipster jerk friends I see too much to cool high school friend I don’t see enough

Assessment of detox: "I’ve been given a lot to think about, especially since I’m not getting any younger and I don’t know that I want to be living the life of a broke, pretentious clown when I’m 40."

Read Drew’s entire assessment. [1]
Name: Scott
Age: 26
Occupation: “between jobs”

Hipster-to-mainstream substitutions:
- Gram Parsons to Toby Keith
- Hüsker Dü T-shirt to a friend’s Rangers jersey
- In the Fascist Bathroom to Mein Kampf
- Tilda Swinton to Ashlee Simpson
- Masturbation to video games
- Brooklyn Lager to Stella Artois
- Desmond Dekker to Sean Paul
- NYC subway to PATH train
- Thread worn Levi’s to JNCO’s
- Karaoke to Pat Benatar to karaoke to Kid Rock

Assessment of detox: “Am I going to change? Fuck that! I’ve already cashed in on whatever cheap kicks I may have accrued for being able to relate to 15-year-old girls in the heartland.”

Name: Katie
Age: 25
Occupation: Williamsburg bartender

Hipster-to-mainstream substitutions:
- Cowboy boots to pointy heels (considered sporting Crocs during the day but could not bring herself to do it)
- Maintaining own nails to visiting a salon
- Obsessive hair straightening to au naturale
- Jack Daniels to appletinis
- Bukowski to Confessions of a Shopaholic
- Throbbing Gristle to Celine Dion
- Liking that one song by The Knife to liking Fergie’s “Glamorous” (which, she notes, “Sadly, I now do.”)
- Children of Men to Reign Over Me
- Lost and Found/Daddy’s Turkey’s Nest to Pop Burger/Marquee/Pastis
- Relaxing in MacCarren Park to relaxing in Central Park

Assessment of detox: “I have a newfound appreciation for US Weekly and I’m now taking some classes at the Y, but other than that I don’t think much has changed.”
Apparently, being a hipster also involves having a talent for self-deception, because the powers that be at TONY thought me hipster enough to take up the challenge of a two-week detox, in an attempt to make me step back from my ironically stylish self to see what I’d find. And I started with...

**FASHION**

Aren’t “regular people” supposed to wear, like, khakis or something? I eschewed my regular slim Levi’s, thrift-store T-shirts and all-black Converse in favor of dress pants, button-down shirts and Ferragamos. The comments at work quickly grew tedious. I started entertaining myself by making up outlandish explanations for the new look: job interview at JPMorgan; became a Jehovah’s Witness; went to rehab. However, as time passed, I noted an unexpectedly consistent reaction. No matter how retardedly out of character I dressed, people still insisted that I looked stylish. One day, I wore Kmart boating shoes with no socks, pleated shorts and a white polo shirt with a popped-out collar—a sort of deranged-yachtsman look—and people still said that I wore it well. Probably they were just trying to be polite, but I also like to think that hipsterdom necessitates a certain devil-may-care swagger that helps you wear anything with confidence. Is there any other way to explain how guys cruising down Bedford Avenue shoehorned into jeans that would look tight on a ten-year-old girl still manage to (sometimes) pull it off? I looked forward to returning to my slacker gear—though I am definitely keeping the boat shoes.

**READING**

Normally, I’m something of a book snob. I prefer reading—translated, of course—authors like Jean Genet or Hermann Broch to Dan Brown and David Baldacci. So it was with some trepidation that I entered Borders and purchased a Star Wars novel and a copy of Maxim. Reading these gems on the L train was humiliating. I wear my cultural trappings as a badge of pride, and apparently, I also like to impress people whose opinions I claim not to care about. Truth be told, I found myself enjoying tales from a galaxy far, far away. Despite the fact that they were written on a third-grade level, the lack of existential conflict and postmodern window dressing was refreshing. And the lightsabers were cool too. Maxim, it should be noted, was less revelatory, although I did learn six important tips on how to make a successful sex tape. I will be going back to The New Yorker and Harper’s, but I’m also going to make time for nerding out in sci-fi land.

**MUSIC**

I long ago lost any discernible criteria for judging what is actually good. For this experiment, I threw aside the creative noise of Lightning Bolt and An Albatross for the ballads of Springsteen. A funny thing happened: I realized that I really, really love Springsteen. Yes, even “Secret Garden”–style Bruce.

**SOCIAL LIFE**

In the course of trying to figure out how much of Drew Toal is genuine handsome rake and how much is just hipster ephemera, I started to consider how many of my friends I had lost touch with merely because we don’t share the same interests. I looked up an old high-school pal who lives in Soho, works at Merrill Lynch and frequents places that likely wouldn’t let me within ten feet of the front door. We caught up, fell into our old routine, and not once did our many superficial differences become an issue. We enjoyed some Patrón margaritas and shit-talked girls who wouldn’t look at us in high school. Naturally, he paid for the booze, since I am dead broke. It was one of the better times I have had in quite a while. Will my friend and I hang out again? I hope so. Maybe he can hire me as his valet or something.

I’ve been given a lot to think about, especially since I’m not getting any younger and I don’t know that I want to be living the life of a broke, pretentious clown when I’m 40. Fortunately New York is a neverland for people like me, and there’s no real rush to embrace adulthood. For now, I will continue to be a beacon of fantastic/abysmal cultural wherewithal and empty pockets—a hipster, and proud.

Photos: Cinzia Reale-Castello

*Before* Hipster Drew sticks it to the Man by trading witty bons mots with the literati, smelling like a spicy old sailor and showing off his junk in ball-strangling denim.

*After* Post-hipster Drew tries his hardest to become a “reg” (his hipster slang for regular person).
1862
Captain Frederick Pabst marries Maria Best, and buys into her father’s Milwaukee brewing company two years later. In 1882, his award-winning suds come with a blue ribbon, thus birthing the hipster’s favorite beer—Pabst Blue Ribbon.

1897
The Chicago Tribune reports on “flippant youth” wearing slogan tees such as ones reading no flies on me. Can punk in drublic or zero to horny in 2.5 beers or don’t blame me, i voted for taft be far behind?

1917
Converse introduces the “All-Star,” later dubbed the “Chuck Taylor All-Star.” The supersmelly fungus huts are popular—and unpopular, and then popular, and then unpopular, and then popular again—in every decade to come.

1944
The word hipster—a.k.a. “a character who likes hot jazz”—first appears, in a glossary of jive expressions that accompanies Harry Gibson’s album Boogie Woogie in Blue.

1950s
John Deere introduces its signature hat, with a foam front and mesh backing. It would father the trucker hat, which would father Punk’d.

1966
Ninety-pound British model Twiggy (née Lesley Hornby) makes her first appearance in a photo shoot. Thin is forever in.

1970
Urban Outfitters is born in Philadelphia. Stocked with ’70s fashions, the store probably looked the same as it does today.

1974
Designer Vivienne Westwood and her husband, Malcolm McLaren, sell ripped T-shirts and rubber S&M clothing, launching the punk fashion movement. Spray-on jeans (and the Sex Pistols) soon follow.

1977
Elvis Costello sports his trademark dork glasses on the cover of his first album, My Aim Is True.

1981
MTV first starts searing the collective youth unconscious with a million ’80s images that will later be ironically paid tribute to.

1991
Nirvana’s Nevermind tour begins in Toronto, and Kurt Cobain becomes the reluctant icon of grunge fashion.

1996
Take everything that came before this, put it in air quotes, and you have Williamsburg. Drawn by cheapo rents, artists had been moving there since the 1970s, and by the mid-’90s, they predominated, waving an ironic retro look as their flag.

2002
The hipster style permeates the mainstream: Celebs and teenyboppers don the Von Dutch trucker hat, worn to death by Ashton Kutcher on MTV.

2003
The New York Times declares the trucker hat “over,” which means it was over at least a year before. Meanwhile, The Boston Globe discovers its local kids are drinking…PBR (which means that one’s really over). And Robert Lanham’s mocking The Hipster Handbook finishes off the whole culture. Or does it?

2007
Skinny jeans, trucker hats, Costello glasses, slogan tees, PBR, Vans, All-Stars—all are declared “dead”
Throughout history, to understand prevailing social trends and cultural practices of a given time one need look no further than the youth of that period. The ‘movers and shakers’ of their times, they sit, stand, and march at the front lines, carrying (and oftentimes dragging) society along with them. Perhaps this progressive mindset of youth culture can be attributed to an urge to reject the parameters of the society crafted by their parents’ generation, coupled with the desire to live in a world wrought by their own hands. So rich is the history of youths as social mobilizers that we must certainly turn our attention the youth culture of modern times. One group of particular interest belongs to the so-called ‘hipster’ movement that has flourished within the United States over the last decade to become one of the most prevailing social movements in contemporary U.S. culture-politics. The hipster, often (stereo)typified by skin-tight jeans, cotton spandex leggings, fixed-gear bikes, vintage flannel shirts, fake eyeglasses, and the appropriation of products typically associated with the “working class,” such as Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and Parliament cigarettes, has arisen as a movement that “fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a blinking inauthenticity.”[1] Despite strong controversy and debate over the social ‘credibility’ of the hipster movement, hipsterdom has risen to the highest ranks of youth culture and, like its youthful predecessors, holds great power in the direction of contemporary society. In examining the hipster movement one can not only come to better understand contemporary youth culture, but its place within a larger sociocultural landscape and its relation to past and future cultural movements.

To begin, let us briefly examine the history of the term ‘hipster’ and its connotations, both in the past and in the present. Author and linguistics scholar Rosemarie Ostler points to the Beat movement of the 1950s as the era in which the term was first coined. Originally meaning “a man who is up to all the latest trends,”[2] the term ‘hipster’ evolved to denote a new movement of anti-conformist youths that formed in reaction against the rise of suburban culture within the U.S. after the Second World War. Ostler writes, “Not everyone was satisfied with life in Squaresville. A new generation of hipsters fell in at their favorite beanyer to drink espresso and hear some far-out cat read poetry.”[3] In touch with the latest ‘trends’ of non-conformity, these hipsters attempted to distance themselves from bourgeois American living through art, music, fashion, experimental drugs, and casual sex. Similarly, the modern hipster embraces counterculture through an alternative lifestyle that diverges from the norms of ‘mainstream’ society, with a few significant differences. While the Beatnik hipster of the 1950s could be typified as part of a reactionary movement against “Squaresville,” modern hipsterdom has evolved as more of a passive social commentary that borrows heavily from previous social movements, drawing most of its cultural significance from an anachronistic ‘quoting’ of previous trends and statements, and not functioning as a directly reactionary movement, per se. In an article entitled “Kill the Hipster: Why the Hipster Must Die (A Modest Proposal to Save New York Cool),” Time Out New York’s Christian Lorentzen writes, “Those 18-to-34 year-olds called hipsters have defanged, skinned and consumed the fringe movements of the postwar era—Beat, hippie, punk, even grunge. Hungry for more, and sick with the anxiety of influence, they feed as well from the trough of the uncool, turning white trash chic, and gouging the husks of long-expired subcultures—vaudeville, burlesque, cowboys and pirates.”[4] Perceived by many to be a lack of “authenticity” or “direction,” the hipster’s amalgamation of previous trends brings much criticism to the movement and has made it nearly impossible to come to a consensus as to what constitutes the modern hipster. A tremendously intertextual phenomenon, hipsterdom functions as a movement based on a compounded social pastiche. For example, one of the hallmarks of hipster fashion are the large, black-framed sunglasses previously worn by Beatniks and jazz musicians of the 1950s (think Ray Charles), which, in their own time, functioned as a parody of the coke-bottle spectacles of the cookie-cutter, suburban “Square.” In an essay entitled “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” anthropologist Clifford Geertz discusses what he calls a “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures”[5], and argues that in order to properly understand culture we must come to fully understand the histories, connotations, and cultural peculiarities that shape action and thought. “Our [anthropologists’] double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts, the ‘said’ of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those
structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behavior."[6] It is in the manner of Geertz’s concept of “thick description” that we may be able to uncover the elusive intertextuality of the hipster movement and be able to formulate a more precise definition of hipsterdom and its relation to cultural change and progress.

The media image of the hipster is anything but positive, and ranges anywhere from slight disdain to outright repulsion (i.e. Lorentzen’s “Kill the Hipster” article). Journalist Douglas Haddow, writer for the anti-consumerist magazine AdBusters, investigates some of the various attitudes towards hipsterdom in his article “Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization.” In recounting a conversation from the previous night of observation, Haddow writes,

“So…this is a hipster party?” I ask the girl sitting next to me. She’s wearing big dangling earrings, an American Apparel V-neck tee, non-prescription eyeglasses and an inappropriately warm wool coat. “Yeah, just look around you, 99 percent of people here are total hipsters!” she says. “Are you a hipster?” I ask. “Fuck no,” she says, laughing back the last of her glass before she hops off to the dance floor.[7]

Haddow points out an interesting twist in the hipster phenomenon: while hipsters have undoubtedly come to inhabit every major city in the United States and have sparked a number of hipster-directed media in the form of hipster blogs, vlogs, magazines, and fashion, few will actually admit to being a hipster themselves. Haddow continues,

Standing outside an art-party next to a neat row of locked-up fixed gear bikes, I come across a couple girls who exemplify hipster homogeneity. I ask one of the girls if her being at an art party and wearing fake eyeglasses, leggings and a flannel shirt makes her a hipster. “I’m not comfortable with that term,” she replies. Her friend adds, with just a flicker of menace in her eyes, “Yeah, I don’t know, you shouldn’t use that word, it’s just…” "Offensive?” I ask. “No…it’s just, well…if you don’t know why then you just shouldn’t even use it.”

Hipsterdom, unlike previous social movements, exists in a kind of social limbo—preserved on a large scale through various (anonymous) mediums such as magazines and internet blogs, but denied on an individual basis. Haddow admits, “It is rare, if not impossible, to find an individual who will proclaim themselves a proud hipster. It’s an odd dance of self-identity—adamantly denying your existence while wearing clearly defined symbols that proclaim it.”[8] In such a way, we see that hipsterdom indeed differs greatly from previous youth cultures in that it is not self-identifying, but a form nevertheless imposed by the observer, whether hipster or not.

This perceived shame of being part of the hipster “scene” has been dealt with in a variety of ways outside of sheer denial, including the rise of trendy hipster blogs and a number of online magazines including Vice, Another Magazine, and Gawker that serve as hipster support groups of sorts, when so few readily identify as hipsters in public. Cartoonist for Vice Magazine, Kaz Stzepk’s panel “Hipster Hunter[9] is one such work. Set in Capitol Hill, Seattle, a sector of the city known to house those of the counterculture, W.N., a belligerent redneck sharpshooter, takes down a series of stereotypical hipsters by baiting them with the hipster’s only weakness: malt liquor energy drinks. In its absurdity, and considering its audience base, this comic serves to diffuse the shame and stigma associated with being a hipster by poking fun at it. A common technique used by many throughout history, for example, the African-American appropriation of the term “nigger,” or the adoption and embrace of the term “fag” in various homosexual communities. By appropriating such stereotypical discrimination, and then recirculating it to the masses via hipster media, hipsters are able to neutralize the stigma of hipsterdom while still maintaining their lifestyle choices. Similarly, the hipster podcasting site Current TV sponsors a number of video blogs, including a mock-umentary series that covers the fictitious “Hipster Olympics.”[10] The “athletes” bumble through the games exhibiting a number of stereotypical hipster indicators including tight jeans, ironic fashion sense, and an overall apathy. Like the comic, this video serves to magnify a stereotype to ludicrous proportion so that one cannot help but laugh at the image, yet simultaneously grow more comfortable with individual “hipster-isms.”

With the rise of personal hipster acceptance brought about by such mediums as Vice and Current TV has come the inevitable broadening of hipster community- and identity-politics. When walking down the street one night I ran into an acquaintance of mine who was sporting a retro leather jacket, tight jeans, carried an overall quirk about her, and could be considered, for all external reasons, a hipster. Knowing that she was from New York City (considered by many to be the hipster Mecca), I asked her about the
hipster scene in her neighborhood. "Would you say there are a lot of hipsters in New York?" I asked.

"Well, what do you mean by that?" she replied. "I guess I’m wondering if there are a lot of people around that fit the 'hipster' identity." I said, quotation marks in hand. "Oh…well, that’s not really a fair question… There are lots of different types of hipsters, so it matters which one…" Our conversation quickly ended as she excused herself, cowboy boots clicking on the rainy pavement as she walked away. She alluded to something very important—the diversification of hipster identity. Today, you can find not only one type of hipster, but "lots." Obviously, this comes with something that follows every major social movement: language. "The Hipster Handbook,"[11] the companion to understanding the hipster life, boasts a glossary of the most common hipster words, including "bronson" (beer), kale (money), and "bust a Moby" (to dance), through which hipsters can find common ground on which to network and further diversify the trend. However, with this expansion of the hipster identity and a mainstreaming of the movement into greater sectors of life comes furthered criticism from more sources. Today, the hipster may be looked down upon by not only non-hipster peers and "closet" hipsters, but by mainstream society as well. The anti-hipster stoop[12] in New Orleans reveals a rising opinion of the hipster as a nuisance to society. Located across the street from a dive-bar frequented by hipsters, the stoop features the words, "Keep Off Hipsters" in bold black paint. Similar to the No Loitering and No Soliciting signs found in stores and business across the country, this image paints a picture of the hipster as pest, the modern 'rascal' of the night. While hipster networks may be extending, their enemies also grow in number as the movement becomes more and more widely recognized and assimilated into mainstream vocabulary.

To come to better understand hipsterdom on the "ground level," so to speak, I paid a visit to the local independent college radio station and spoke with Sean,[13] one of the staff members there, and an avid proponent of independent music. Knowing that the so-called "indie" music scene is supported largely by hipster patrons, I bargained that the hub of the local music scene would be an ideal place to learn more about hipsterdom. The following are a few of his responses to my questions:

Cameron: So when I say hipster, what comes to mind?

Sean: I guess a person at a concert, perhaps with stylish hair and clothing.

C: Indeed. Would you say that within the hipster movement there’s a lot of focus on music?

S: I think so, in general. I feel like that’s what it maybe started with and was built around, but maybe has moved a little away from that too. […] I think it’s always nice that they’re building themselves around a music or art scene, as opposed to something like…fossil fuels…like building monster trucks and then racing them around. If people’ve gotta pick something to congregate around that’s a good thing. You know, broadens people’s mind.

C: Yeah, it definitely seems like hipsterdom has gone through some stages—definitely branching out. And monster trucks aren’t too great.

S: Yeah.

C: I think we’d both agree that hipsterdom carries certain pejorative connotations. Would you say that being a hipster is oftentimes denied by the "accused?"

S: Sounds pretty true. I feel like it’s a thing that nobody really wants to be called. You know, like if you acknowledge you’re a hipster, then it might acknowledge that you’re trying a little too hard.

C: Yeah.

S: At the same time I feel like it’s a collection of like, you know, “If you do all of these things, then you’re definitely a hipster.” But there’s very few people that actually do all of them.

C: Yeah, there’s always an “excuse.”

S: Yeah.

Here we see affirmation of a number of the various characteristics attributed to the hipster, including connection to fashion and music scenes, and the denial of hipsterdom. As the interview continued, I showed Sean a number of the hipster-related media discussed above and documented his reactions. In viewing Vice’s "Hipster Hunter" comic, Sean had the following to say:

C: So, what do you think of it?

S: It’s moving. […] It’s right off the bat. They chose Capitol Hill, which, in Seattle, is kinda like the fancy hip neighborhood, like, it’s for young urban professionals, that sort of thing. A lot of skinny people, I think that’s part of it. All white people…pretty common up there.

C: Yeah. As a native Seattleite, would you say that these characters do represent actual people that you may find on the street, or are they exaggerated in any way?
S: Umm…You can find ‘em, definitely.

C: Well, to be honest, I’ve met many of the hipster stereotypes myself—I love bikes, I love being vegetarian… I don’t really like Pabst Blue Ribbon or Parliament cigarettes…but...

S: I’m okay with Pabst Blue Ribbon.

C: Okay, I haven’t had too much experience...

S: I don’t like Parliament cigarettes though.

C: No, but the independent music scene I’m also really into. So, there’s a part of me that’s fearing, “Perhaps I’m a hipster.”

S: I think it’s possible.

C: Maybe

S: Maybe we all are. Perhaps we’re all hipsters, and it’s just a matter of time before we come to admit it to ourselves.

Sean makes an interesting point: perhaps we’re all hipsters. As we have seen, hipsterdom has become increasingly diversified in the rise of hipster support networks and media, but has also filtered into mainstream society through, as Douglas Haddow puts it, an uncanny ability to ‘blend in and mutate other social movements, sub-cultures, and lifestyles.’[14] In this manner, one can hardly avoid finding some aspect of oneself that might be classified as hipster-esque, whether it be fashion sense, mode of transportation, or musical preference. To fully understand the hipster phenomenon we must examine it not in an objective state (i.e. listing the "traits" of the hipster), but in context. By looking closely at the hipster movement, one realizes that it is a social movement created within a hegemonized post-modernity—a reality typified by the amalgamation and aesthetic exploitation of previous generations’ symbols and livelihoods (i.e. the resurgence of bizarre 1980s “kicks,” reminiscent of the footwear of the early hip-hop movement, and supported by the hipster scene), and the corporate recirculation of these identities under a legitimized “retro”/“blast from the past” aesthetic. Simply labeling someone a hipster fails to realize the greater significance of the movement as working within a modern hegemony in which culture has, in a sense, hit a ‘brick wall’ and is reeling back upon itself. Recognizing this, one can come to see the hipster movement as a manner in which the youth of the United States cope with this reality, and, like their revolutionary predecessors, transform it to make it their own.

References


"Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization"

By Douglas Haddow
Published in Adbusters
http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/79/hipster.html
July 29th, 2008

We've reached a point in our civilization where counterculture has mutated into a self-obsessed aesthetic vacuum. So while hipsterdom is the end product of all prior countercultures, it's been stripped of its subversion and originality. (Cover story of Adbusters Issue #79.)

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I'm sipping a scummy pint of cloudy beer in the back of a trendy dive bar turned nightclub in the heart of the city’s heroin district. In front of me stand a gang of hippiesh grunge-punk types, who crowd around each other and collectively scoff at the smoking laws by sneaking puffs of “fuck-you,” reveling in their perceived rebellion as the haggard, staggering staff look on without the slightest concern.

The "DJ" is keystroking a selection of MP3s off his MacBook, making a mix that sounds like he took a hatchet to a collection of yesteryear billboard hits, from DMX to Dolly Parton, but mashed up with a jittery techno backbeat.

“So… this is a hipster party?” I ask the girl sitting next to me. She’s wearing big dangling earrings, an American Apparel V-neck tee, non-prescription eyeglasses and an inappropriately warm wool coat.

“Yeah, just look around you, 99 percent of the people here are total hipsters!”

“Are you a hipster?”

“Fuck no,” she says, laughing back the last of her glass before she hops off to the dance floor.

Ever since the Allies bombed the Axis into submission, Western civilization has had a succession of counter-culture movements that have energetically challenged the status quo. Each successive decade of the post-war era has seen it smash social standards, riot and fight to revolutionize every aspect of music, art, government and civil society.

But after punk was plasticized and hip hop lost its impetus for social change, all of the formerly dominant streams of “counter-culture” have merged together. Now, one mutating, trans-Atlantic melting pot of styles, tastes and behavior has come to define the generally indefinable idea of the “Hipster.”

An artificial appropriation of different styles from different eras, the hipster represents the end of Western civilization – a culture lost in the superficiality of its past and unable to create any new meaning. Not only is it unsustainable, it is suicidal. While previous youth movements have challenged the dysfunction and decadence of their elders, today we have the “hipster” – a youth subculture that mirrors the doomed shallowness of mainstream society.
Take a stroll down the street in any major North American or European city and you'll be sure to see a speckle of fashion-conscious twentysomethings hanging about and sporting a number of predictable stylistic trademarks: skinny jeans, cotton spandex leggings, fixed-gear bikes, vintage flannel, fake eyeglasses and a keffiyeh – initially sported by Jewish students and Western protesters to express solidarity with Palestinians, the keffiyeh has become a completely meaningless hipster cliché fashion accessory.

The American Apparel V-neck shirt, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and Parliament cigarettes are symbols and icons of working or revolutionary classes that have been appropriated by hipsterdom and drained of meaning. Ten years ago, a man wearing a plain V-neck tee and drinking a Pabst would never be accused of being a trend-follower. But in 2008, such things have become shameless clichés of a class of individuals that seek to escape their own wealth and privilege by immersing themselves in the aesthetic of the working class.

This obsession with “street-cred” reaches its apex of absurdity as hipsters have recently and wholeheartedly adopted the fixed-gear bike as the only acceptable form of transportation – only to have brakes installed on a piece of machinery that is defined by its lack thereof.

Lovers of apathy and irony, hipsters are connected through a global network of blogs and shops that push forth a global vision of fashion-informed aesthetics. Loosely associated with some form of creative output, they attend art parties, take lo-fi pictures with analog cameras, ride their bikes to night clubs and sweat it up at nouveau disco-coke parties. The hipster tends to religiously blog about their daily exploits, usually while leafing through generation-defining magazines like Vice, Another Magazine and Wallpaper. This cursory and stylized lifestyle has made the hipster almost universally loathed.

“These hipster zombies… are the idols of the style pages, the darlings of viral marketers and the marks of predatory real-estate agents,” wrote Christian Lorentzen in a Time Out New York article entitled ‘Why the Hipster Must Die.’ “And they must be buried for cool to be reborn.”

With nothing to defend, uphold or even embrace, the idea of “hipsterdom” is left wide open for attack. And yet, it is this ironic lack of authenticity that has allowed hipsterdom to grow into a global phenomenon that is set to consume the very core of Western counterculture. Most critics make a point of attacking the hipster’s lack of individuality, but it is this stubborn obfuscation that distinguishes them from their predecessors, while allowing hipsterdom to easily blend in and mutate other social movements, sub-cultures and lifestyles.

Standing outside an art-party next to a neat row of locked-up fixed-gear bikes, I come across a couple girls who exemplify hipster homogeneity. I ask one of the girls if her being at an art party and wearing fake eyeglasses, leggings and a flannel shirt makes her a hipster.

“I’m not comfortable with that term,” she replies.

Her friend adds, with just a flicker of menace in her eyes, “Yeah, I don’t know, you shouldn’t use that word, it’s just…”

“Offensive?”

“No… it’s just, well… if you don’t know why then you just shouldn’t even use it.”

“Ok, so what are you girls doing tonight after this party?”

“Ummm… We’re going to the after-party.”

Gavin McInnes, one of the founders of Vice, who recently left the magazine, is considered to be one of hipsterdom’s primary architects. But, in contrast to the majority of concerned media-types, McInnes, whose “Dos and Don’ts” commentary defined the rules of hipster fashion for over a decade, is more critical of those doing the criticizing.

“I’ve always found that word [“hipster”] is used with such disdain, like it’s always used by chubby bloggers who aren’t getting laid anymore and are bored, and they’re just so mad at these young kids for going out and getting wasted and having fun and being fashionable,” he says. “I’m dubious of these hypotheses because they always smell of an agenda.”

Punks wear their tattered threads and studded leather jackets with honor, priding themselves on their innovative and cheap methods of self-expression and rebellion. B-boys and b-girls announce themselves to anyone within earshot with baggy gear and boomboxes. But it is rare, if not impossible, to find an individual who will proclaim themself a proud hipster. It’s an odd dance of self-identity – adamantly
denying your existence while wearing clearly defined symbols that proclaims it.

“He’s 17 and he lives for the scene!” a girl whispers in my ear as I sneak a photo of a young kid dancing up against a wall in a dimly lit corner of the after-party. He’s got a flipped-out, do-it-yourself haircut, skin-tight jeans, leather jacket, a vintage punk tee and some popping high tops.

“Shoot me,” he demands, walking up, cigarette in mouth, striking a pose and exhaling. He hits a few different angles with a firmly unimpressed expression and then gets a bit giddy when I show him the results.

“Rad, thanks,” he says, re-focusing on the music and submerging himself back into the sweaty funk of the crowd where he resumes a jittery head bobble with a little bit of a twitch.

The dance floor at a hipster party looks like it should be surrounded by quotation marks. While punk, disco and hip hop all had immersive, intimate and energetic dance styles that liberated the dancer from his/her mental states – be it the head-spinning b-boy or violent thrashings of a live punk show – the hipster has more of a joke dance. A faux shrug shuffle that mocks the very idea of dancing or, at its best, illustrates a non-commital fear of expression typified in a weird twitch/ironic twist. The dancers are too self-aware to let themselves feel any form of liberation; they shuffle along, shrugging themselves into oblivion.

Perhaps the true motivation behind this deliberate nonchalance is an attempt to attract the attention of the ever-present party photographers, who swim through the crowd like neon sharks, flashing little blasts of phosphorescent ecstasy whenever they spot someone worth momentarily immortalizing.

Noticing a few flickers of light splash out from the club bathroom, I peep in only to find one such photographer taking part in an impromptu soft-core porno shoot. Two girls and a guy are taking off their clothes and striking poses for a set of grimy glamour shots. It’s all grins and smirks until another girl pokes her head inside and screeches, “You’re not some club kid in New York in the nineties. This shit is so hipster!” – which sparks a bit of a catfight, causing me to beat a hasty retreat.

In many ways, the lifestyle promoted by hipsterdom is highly ritualized. Many of the party-goers who are subject to the photoblogger’s snapshots no doubt crawl out of bed the next afternoon and immediately re-experience the previous night’s debauchery. Red-eyed and bleary, they sit hunched over their laptops, wading through a sea of similarity to find their own (momentarily) thrilling instant of perfected hipster-ness.

What they may or may not know is that “cool-hunters” will also be skulking the same sites, taking note of how they dress and what they consume. These marketers and party-promoters get paid to co-opt youth culture and then re-sell it back at a profit. In the end, hipsters are sold what they think they invent and are spoon-fed their pre-packaged cultural livelihood.

Hipsterdom is the first “counterculture” to be born under the advertising industry’s microscope, leaving it open to constant manipulation but also forcing its participants to continually shift their interests and affiliations. Less a subculture, the hipster is a consumer group – using their capital to purchase empty authenticity and rebellion. But the moment a trend, band, sound, style or feeling gains too much exposure, it is suddenly looked upon with disdain. Hipsters cannot afford to maintain any cultural loyalties or affiliations for fear they will lose relevance.

An amalgamation of its own history, the youth of the West are left with consuming cool rather than creating it. The cultural zeitgeists of the past have always been sparked by furious indignation and are reactionary movements. But the hipster’s self-involved and isolated maintenance does nothing to feed cultural evolution. Western civilization’s well has run dry. The only way to avoid hitting the colossus of societal failure that looms over the horizon is for the kids to abandon this vain existence and start over.

“If you don’t give a damn, we don’t give a fuck!” chants an emcee before his incitements are abruptly cut short when the power plug is pulled and the lights snapped on.

Dawn breaks and the last of the after-after-parties begin to spill into the streets. The hipsters are falling out, rubbing their eyes and scanning the surrounding landscape for the way back from which they came. Some hop on their fixed-gear bikes, some call for cabs, while a few of us hop a fence and cut through the industrial wasteland of a nearby condo development.

The half-built condos tower above us like foreboding monoliths of our yuppy futures. I take a look at one
of the girls wearing a bright pink keffiyah and carrying a Polaroid camera and think, “If only we carried rocks instead of cameras, we’d look like revolutionaries.” But instead we ignore the weapons that lie at our feet – oblivious to our own impending demise.

We are a lost generation, desperately clinging to anything that feels real, but too afraid to become it ourselves. We are a defeated generation, resigned to the hypocrisy of those before us, who once sang songs of rebellion and now sell them back to us. We are the last generation, a culmination of all previous things, destroyed by the vapidity that surrounds us. The hipster represents the end of Western civilization – a culture so detached and disconnected that it has stopped giving birth to anything new.

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“Why the Hipster Must Die: A modest proposal to save New York cool”
by Christian Lorentzen
Published in Time Out New York
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May 30th, 2007
Illustration Credit: Jesse Philips

Has the hipster killed cool in New York? Did it die the day Wes Anderson proved too precious for his own good, or was it when Chloë Sevigny fellated Vincent Gallo onscreen? Did it vanish along with Kokie’s, International Bar and Tonic? Or when McSweeney’s moved shop to San Francisco and Bright Eyes signed a lease on the Lower East Side? Was it possible to be a hipster once a band that played Northsix one night was heard the next day on NPR’s Weekend Edition? Did it hurt to have American Apparel marketing soft-porn style to young bankers? Was something lost the day Ecstasy made the cover of the Times Magazine? Or was it the day Bloomberg banned smoking in bars? And how many times an hour could one check e-mail and still have an honest, or even ironic, claim on being cool?

Yes, the assassins of cool still walk our streets: Any night of the week finds the East Village, the Lower East Side and Williamsburg teeming with youth—a pageant of the bohemian undead. These hipster zombies—now more likely to be brokers or lawyers than art-school dropouts—are the idols of the style pages, the darlings of viral marketers and the marks of predatory real-estate agents. And they must be buried for cool to be reborn.

It was in the real-estate section of one of the city’s lesser dailies, under the headline luxury seems to be set for the lower east side, that I found an astonishing remark attributed to Michael Desjadon, the director of sales at Massey Knakal: “The profile of the typical renter in the area is changing from the ‘counterculture hipster’ to the ‘more mainstream’ hipster and young professional.”

“I wish I’d thought of this phrase, but we call the Lower East Side ‘the last real neighborhood in New York,’” Desjadon, an amiable fellow and a patron of LES bars, told me when I called him up. “The mainstream hipster,” he explained, “is not an artist or a musician. He has an office job, and wears one hat to work and another at night.” Presumably, the latter is a trucker—or a porkpie—hat.

The mouth of a real-estate agent is rarely the source of truth, but Mr. Desjadon knows his territory (and is no doubt cashing in on this knowledge). He has unwittingly explicated the transformation of the hipster into the “indie yuppie,” an avatar we might imagine as the fusion of Kurt Cobain and Adam Gopnik. The indie yuppie is (literally) the child of the bobo, and just as his father the baby boomer did, he has learned to simulate rebellion while procuring and furnishing a comfortable two-bedroom. His haircut may be asymmetrical, but his dog never misses a walk. And around the corner, sleeping on couches, neophyte slackers dream until they wake up late for their temp jobs. The savvy among them soon grasp that they’ve arrived at the party too late.

Under the guise of “irony,” hipsterism fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a winking inauthenticity. Those 18-to-34-year-olds called hipsters have defanged, skinned and consumed the fringe movements of the postwar era—Beat, hippie, punk, even grunge. Hungry for more, and sick with the anxiety of influence, they feed as well from the trough of the uncool, turning white trash chic, and gouging the husks of long-expired subcultures—vaudeville, burlesque, cowboys and pirates.

Of course, hipsterism being originally, and still mostly, the province of whites (the pastiest of whites), its acolytes raid the cultural stores of every unmelted ethnicity in the pot. Similarly, they devour gay style: Witness the cultural burp known as metrosexuality. As the hipster ambles from the thrift store to a $100
haircut at Freemans Sporting Club, these aesthetics are assimilated—cannibalized—into a repertoire of meaninglessness, from which the hipster can construct an identity in the manner of a collage, or a shuffled playlist on an iPod.

All isms seek dominance of human affairs, and in this, hipsterism in New York City has proved more virulent than any of its forebears. (Punk, after all, never really broke—except in the form of hipsterism.) At last there was nothing left for hipsters to do but to convert the squares, take them to the bar and let them pick up the tab. Secrets were shared. The hipster hooked up with the common consumer; he woke up a zombie.

How can this be undone? I propose that the only hope for a reanimated bohemia, if not a dezombified hipsterdom, is civil war.

Hipsters in their present undead incarnation are essentially people who think of themselves as being cooler than America. But they are afflicted by that other ism sociologists made an industry of decrying in the 20th century: narcissism. The late prophet of our current moment, George W. S. Trow, posited that television had obliterated the context of American life. The only refuges remaining were TV, God and the self. Young people who live in cities notoriously shun God and television to cultivate themselves. Now, as the age of MySpace comes due for a backlash and the former teen idols of our crypto-ironic fascination start to show their age, the time has come for the hipsters in the garden of Union Pool to open their eyes, realize that they are surrounded by jackasses and milquetoasts, and stage their own dive-bar putsches.

The fault lines are clear enough already. We know that there are Sweet hipsters, who practice the sort of irony you can take home to meet the parents, and there are those Vicious hipsters, who practice the form of not-quite-passive aggression called snark.

On the Sweet end of the spectrum, The Believer lavishes its literary and pop-culture idols with a uniform layer of affection that renders it near impossible to distinguish the great from the mediocre. This aesthetic of relativism grants everybody an A for effort and allows anyone projecting the image of an artist to conceive of himself as such. It proliferates as a social plague among hipsters who invite their entire address book to readings, shows and art openings. The e-mails arrive, and though it is known in advance that the art will be nothing much, the trek is made. The avant-garde illusion ultimately sustains itself on free beer.

As the war claims its casualties, the Sweet may discover that behind their aesthetic relativism is an impulse more political than cultural: They are rightfully activists. Their cause has emerged in the form of global warming, and I would not be surprised if the color of cool in their future is green. Along the way they might rediscover a concept hipsters have lately had little use for: love.

Meanwhile, among those who adopt the Vicious pose, a lighthearted scorn perfected by Gawker is roundly applied to the objects of pop celebrity, both talented and (mostly) otherwise. The effect is akin to dipping sushi in wasabi sauce: The flavor is a little less bland, but it’s still mostly rice. The hipster who keeps up with the antics of Hilton, Lohan and Spears does so sneringly, and her knowingness introduces one degree of difference between herself and the Midwestern housewife who buys Us Weekly at the Wal-Mart checkout line.

When I asked Gawker managing editor Choire Sicha whether it was possible to ignore talentless celebrities, he responded with the remorse of a custodian of cultural decline: “Everyone can, and should, be ignored. We were warned about this situation we find ourselves in by philosophers, and well before it happened. It’s just too bad we weren’t warned by celebrities, or we would have listened to them.”

So the Sweet will turn on the Vicious, and the Vicious will shun the Sweet. The sniping in the blogosphere will escalate, and turf wars will ensue. Power will be consolidated in the frontiers of the outer boroughs as the Vicious tighten their grip on Bushwick and the Sweet flee south to Kensington and Windsor Terrace, or give up and move to Queens (better yet, to their rightful home: the West Coast).

If they can vanquish the Sweet, the path for the Vicious is less obvious. A good first step might entail purging the lawyers and bankers lurking in their company. But on the other hand, those guys are good at footing the bill. Another tactic would require the conversion of snark to self-criticism, and that would necessarily involve ignoring no-talent celebrities, and mean an end to playing it safe. The safest game in town—in fashion and music especially—is retro, and if there is no Ezra Pound in corduroys out there to say, “Make it new,” let me be the one to say, “Stop making it old.”

What distinguishes the zombie hipsters at large today from the “white Negroes” Norman Mailer described in the 1950s is a lack of menace. The original hipster—Mailer had in mind James Dean and the Neal Cassady who inspired On the Road—was a “philosophical psychopath” who might steal your car and drive it to Mexico. The myth of menace survives in the pages of Vice, but the magazine’s signature feature—the “Do’s and Don’t’s”—suggests a safe path to transgression, a notion as
oxymoronic as the “mainstream hipster.” Mailer, who traced hipster psychosis to the Holocaust and the atom bomb, would likely point to September 11 as the event that left hordes of twentysomethings whispering, “We would be safe,” to quote the Sweet hipster novelist Jonathan Safran Foer. Menace is now lost on anyone older than 20. It is left to those born after 1990 to move to town, frighten the zombies away, destabilize the real-estate market and restore something unsavory to what used to be called hip.

Until then, the battle will rage. Which side are you on?
A scholarship is an award of financial aid for a student to further their education. Scholarships are awarded based upon various criteria, which usually reflect the values and purposes of the donor or founder of the award. Scholarship money is not required to be repaid by the student. This article primarily addresses scholarships in North America. While the terms are frequently used interchangeably, there is a difference. Scholarships may have a financial need component but rely on other criteria as well.