

Was the Hipster Really All That Bad?

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by Ben Davis



A hipster in its natural habitat -- a summer music festival / Courtesy Getty Images

LCD Soundsystem played their final show at Madison Square Garden earlier this month, putting a neat period on a certain phase of hipster culture. I'd like to be able to say, as the song says, "I was there," but I was not. I was at home idly paging through n+1's small tome, "What Was the Hipster?: A Sociological Investigation." It seemed to be the right read for the moment.

The obvious reply to the question "What Was the Hipster?" is, of course, to ask another question: "Why Do I Care?" By consensus, both the term and its trucker-hat-sporting referent is played out. Yet there's something compelling about trying to read the hieroglyphics of one's own recent past. And there is, after all, an art component to the question.

Here are some of the manifestations of what I'd call "hipster art": The freaked-out bricolage of Assume Vivid Astro Focus and Paperrad; the twee celebrity fetishism of Elizabeth Peyton; the Nintendo generation nostalgia of Cory Arcangel; the beatific road trip pics of Ryan McGinley. A "sociological investigation" of hipster culture could actually be enlightening with regard to the basis of the art of the recent past.

Yet various expert voices in n+1's compendium on the subject deny that hipsters can even be artistic. Hipsters are defined as consumers, not producers. As far as I can tell, the vitriolic attitude stems from the fact that the "hipster" being discussed here is actually a bogeyman. But if you're going to actually say something meaningful, sociologically, you have to be talking about something that someone, somewhere can possibly identify with, or at least recognize.

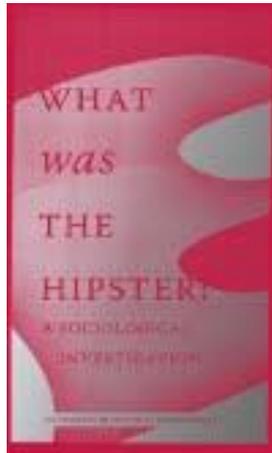
So, I'll say this. Yes, I think "Vice" sucks, and I mock people who wear large-sized sunglasses on the subway. I probably don't dress well enough to be called a hipster. But I've been known to wear ironic t-shirts and hats. Once upon a time, I founded an ironic mustache club. I have good friends who ride fixed-gear bikes. I like the music of Vampire Weekend and the three good songs by MGMT. None of this makes me a bad person.

The "hipster" sensibility is defined not just by specific cultural props, but by broad tendencies: hyper-ironic self-presentation; an obsession with cultural trivia and/or blank nostalgia; the romance with neo-bohemia, neo-collectivism, neo-tribalism. "What Was the Hipster?" offers some interesting thoughts on the underpinnings of these things, mainly from n+1's articulate editor Mark Greif. The social basis of hipster culture, Greif convincingly argues, is the mass of young people who are "overeducated and with a psychic investment in hipness to compensate for their inferior real capital." Further, this white faux-hemian subculture is wholly inauthentic, little more than middle-class bad consciousness about gentrification: "every micro-generation will be surprised by the number of its members who have been secretly preparing law-school applications while making fun of rich people who wear suits."

On this latter point, the description's lack of sympathy seems to me to get in the way of clear analysis. In my alternative account, I'd emphasize that during the high-water moment of "hipsterism" -- 1997 to 2003 is the locus classicus for Greif, the period of trailer park chic, oversized belt buckles, and endless wells of PBR, while a less defined Phase 2 stretches to the present -- the United States economy may have grown, but the prospects of all those middle-class white kids did not. As Paul Craig Roberts put it (somewhat hyperbolically) in 2006, even before the Great Recession, the turn towards the service economy meant that the U.S. was becoming "a nation of waitresses and bartenders," not some cultural-economy utopia. (Greif's comment about law school appears particularly unconvincing when set next to the recent New York Times article about the bleak prospects offered by an actual law degree, described as "a catastrophic investment.")

I graduated from college in 2001 with a degree in Humanities and Cultural Studies. With no idea what the hell to do with that, I went to work in a bookstore. All my co-workers had degrees in English or Philosophy, and we all had scorn for the dumb best-seller tastes of our customers -- in exact proportion to our keen awareness of the uselessness of our own cultivated tastes, the worth of which apparently topped out at \$12.50 an hour. What do you do in that situation except be ironic? The U.S. economy in the last decade threw many more college grads into this same type of purgatory -- still relatively privileged, but going nowhere. My best guess is that it is this group, with its wounded pride and self-consciousness at its own superfluousness, that forms the basis for the Quentin Tarantino-esque aesthetic vogue for useless cultural trivia. (Tarantino, in fact, is himself a former video store drone.)

In the same period, the slowing of upward mobility has also meant that young people are living in more varied and precarious living situations for longer periods of time before settling down (or rather, before attaining "the means to compete and exploit the benefits of the metropolis on traditional grounds of income and class dominance," as Greif prefers). This phenomenon seems to me to explain the broad appeal of neo-tribalist shtick. (I've written about this subject before with respect to the themes of "emerging adulthood" in the recent "Greater New York.")



n+1's "What Was the Hipster?: A Sociological Investigation" / Courtesy n+1

Is hipster culture sometimes nihilistic, consumerist, asinine? Oh my yes -- but not as overdeterminately so as "What Was the Hipster?" paints it. (Read artist Ebon Fisher's essay on "The Williamsburg Paradigm," about the birth of the Brooklyn art-and-music nexus in the 90s, to see that at its root this subculture was neither dead to politics -- however addled its politics were -- nor as blind to issues of privilege as Greif suggests). At any rate, if you are actually concerned with gentrification and social class, you might start by advocating for public housing, jobs programs, or anti-racist initiatives -- not ridiculing girls with bangs or guys wearing tight pants. That is counterproductive, particularly if, like Greif, your whole point is that an obsession with signs of cultural distinction insulates hipsters from real-world concerns. The fact that so much fire is wasted attacking a style says more about the closed intellectual hot house that the anti-hipster critics operate in than about any actual group of people being attacked. As the man said, "you wanted the truth/ and then you said you wanted proof/ I guess you're used to liars saying what you want." Think about it.