The Enduring, Insufferable Hipster:
Popular Critiques of Art, Commerce, and Authenticity Through the Ages

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ABSTRACT

The *hipster* has been one of the most pervasive pop cultural tropes yet of the 21st century. This paper explores the cultural myth of the hipster and its predecessors since the advent of the industrial revolution. From 19th century literary representations to blog sensations like Look At This Fucking Hipster, we see that the meanings of these styles of dress are actively debated, as they are thought to carry significant cultural and political implications. Ultimately, these discourses reveal much about the ways that we deconstruct the relationship between art and commerce while conveying anxieties over the implications of consumer culture for political and cultural possibilities.

Introduction: The meme that just won't quit

It is arguably one of the most pervasive American tropes of the 21st century. First sighted in the late 90s, this figure of speech evolved as a stereotype of a particular class of young adults who shared certain and somewhat eccentric cultural proclivities. This meme went on to enjoy an overwhelming presence in the 2000s, its visibility bolstered by best-selling books, playful parodies on Twitter and YouTube, editorial critiques among top magazines and newspapers, and diffusion via online social platforms. Even The New York Times had a hand in advancing this cliché, mentioning it more than 250 times each year from year 2005 until 2010 (Corbett, 2010). While this figure has been declared "dead" several times,[1] its appearance in media and popular culture continues to thrive. Google Trends reveals that search terms for "hipster" have consistently and dramatically increased from 2009 through 2012, achieving fourfold the frequency of searches conducted in the mid-2000s.[2] Internet memes like 'hipster kitty' and blogs like the highly trafficked Look At This Fucking Hipster remain present throughout the virtual world. The comedic television show *Portlandia*, which debuted in 2010, remains popular in 2013, making light of the Oregon hotspot for these people and their trendy behaviors.[3]

The term "hipster" has been so frequently used in recent years that there have been multiple public calls for a ban on both its use and the individuals to which it refers. Its subjects are not easy to banish, however, as they are seemingly both everywhere and nowhere. As Adbusters (Haddow, 2008) claims,

> ...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. [sic]

Perhaps no one identifies as a hipster because the term is elusive in definition. Some have attempted to elucidate a definition with very limited success. Two conference panels, organized in 2009 and 2010 at NYU and UCLA, respectively, were both called 'Look at this Fucking Panel' (a reference to the satirical photo-based blog 'Look at This Fucking Hipster'). While each panel produced heady debates on a litany of topics (post-colonialism, gentrification, Chinese ownership of U.S. debt, Slavoj Zizek, Pavement, and Debbie Gibson), neither panel could actually agree on a definition of hipster. The closest they came at UCLA—which offered a panel of experts on hipsterdom from Robert Lanham to *Vice* founder Gavin McInness--was this:

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[1] *PopMatters* declared the hipster dead in 2009; New York Magazine followed suit in 2010 with Mark Grief's 'What Was the Hipster?' Magazine n+1 also published a book by the same title in 2010. In 2011 (Aug. 19), Conner Rohwer of USA Today published asked, 'Is the Hipster Dead?' and indeed declared it dying. On November 29, 2011, an online magazine called The Chive (www.thechive.com) published a post titled 'Hipsterdom is dead, now you're just douchebags.'
[2] The term only appears to begin to take a drop in October 2012, and at the time of this writing in January 2013, it appears to continue to do so.
[3] Portland's strong hipsterness has also been noted in the press (for example, see Deresiewicz, 2011, writing for the New York Times). Other iconic sites for this meme include Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Greenpoint, Austin, Texas, home to the ever-popular SXSW, Chicago's Wicker Park, and Philadelphia neighborhoods of Fishtown and Northern Liberties.

A hipster is someone 18 to 25 years old with an interest in music, fashion and fornication; with progressive ideology; who is more than likely to harbor apathy; and who carries the desire to be creative and connected.

In addition to its vagueness, this definition, as we will see, is highly contested. And ironically, to be discussed later on, one of the panelists who has claimed that they "must die" now claims that hipsters don't actually exist. No one can really pin down who or where these hipsters are. And yet there they remain, in the forefront of the popular imagination, wearing tight vintage shirts, riding around on fixed-gear bikes, liking esoteric bands months—even years—before you even hear of them.

Hipster as offensive communication

There is ample evidence of the hipster's function as a pejorative in everyday culture and social interactions. As illustrated in an earlier analysis of consumer reviews of coffee shops (Khaled 2010), some claim that independently owned coffee shops in urban areas are full of hipsters, both employees and patrons. Oftentimes, reviewers mention hipsters in the context of feeling judged by other patrons with regards to style of dress and ideological affiliation. As Eugene, a patron at an independent coffee shop in Philadelphia explains on the review Yelp (yelp.com),

for some reason, I felt really out of place there. Maybe it's b/c I don't have the hipster look all the white kids are sporting in West Philly. It's not like I'm decked out in Abercrombie or something. I'm a T-shirt and jeans guy...I just don't like my clothing super tight. That doesn't mean I don't recycle. Nor does it mean I'm some corporate A-hole. Hipsterism claims to be tolerant but they (hipsters) always give non-hipsters like myself that look of detached judgmentalism whenever they walk in the room. Hipsters, do me a favor and please stop making me feel like I caused global warming. And wtf is up with Hipsters drinking PBR? It's probably the worst beer I've ever tasted.

Another Yelp coffee shop review claims, "It's true that the clientele are largely "hipsters" (whatever that even means), but they seem to be of the fuzzy, attractive variety and not the judgmental and scary one." And yet another: "Yes, it's often full of pretentious hipsters. But! It's just such a wonderful space."

According to Eugene, his political ideology and behavior are being intuited from his style of dress. While feeling that they are judged as being uncool and/or right-wing, patrons attempt to call out those they identify as 'hipsters' because they see some sort of hypocrisy between their appearance, the ideology inferred from their appearance, and other behavior or lifestyle symbols.

The term 'hipster' is often used as a means to insult others' style and question their authenticity. On a local blog post regarding Philadelphia's hatred of hipsters, another commenter clarifies why hipsters are 'fuckin' annoying':

The way they dress is neither 'interesting', 'edgy', 'creative', nor 'fun'—it's boring and ridiculous. They look like Urban-Outfitters-Americlones, yet consider themselves oh-so-unique.

> The way they ride their bikes like idiots (drunk, through stop signs, through red lights, into cars...) is obnoxious. The fact that they vociferously pronounce their mode of transportation superior to all others is also rather obnoxious.

> Their constant quest for the most ironic and/or unpalatable music has become tiresome. I am sick of them trying to convince me that 'artrock' is something I should bother with. ('Philly...Hatred')

That there appears to be at least some consensus over ideas about the hipster demonstrates the importance of media in cultivating and circulating them. Resentment toward hipsters is greatly evident across the media, from the blogosphere to the commercial press. Even in the most acclaimed journalistic publications, hipsters are hated with a passion. They are "human filth," in the opinion of Zev Borow (2005), writing for *New York Magazine.* New York's *Time Out* magazine ran a cover story feature in 2007 called "Why the Hipster Must Die". In 2008, *Adbusters* also ran a cover story on hipsters titled "The Dead End of Western Civilization."

The widely trafficked blog *Look At This Fucking Hipster* (LATFH), established in 2009, offers a slew of images of alleged hipsters, accompanied by captions mocking their appearance and behavior (soon also came a book by the same title). Even the creator of LATFH, Joe Mande, said that the site was simply about "laughing at clowns for being clowns," though it had become filled with such hostile rhetoric that he found it weird "how much other people seem to hate hipsters" (Gawker, 2009).[4]

While hipster has become an enduring myth, it is often unclear exactly what is so reprehensible about this figure. Though it has enjoyed coverage alongside national news in the *New York Times,* the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Magazine*, and *Time,* the hipster remains in popular discourse as more of an inchoate tangle of symbols, ideas and feelings than a clear category of individuals and behaviors. So the question still remains: what exactly is a hipster and how do we make sense of it as a statement about American culture? In order to address this, we will need to explicate some of the most widely discussed commentaries on hipsters.

Editorial Critiques of the Hipster

The main critique against hipsters is that they look the same, they lack a subversive ideology, and they are expert consumerists. As Mark Greif, an assistant professor at The New School, writes in 2010 for *New York Magazine,*

> …the neighborhood organization of hipsters, their tight-knit colonies of similar-looking, slouching people, represents not hostility to authority (as among punks or hippies) but a superior community of status where the game of knowing-in-advance can be played with maximum refinement. The hipster is a savant at picking up the tiny changes of rapidly cycling consumer distinction.

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[4] 'Hipster' does not carry entirely negative meanings, and there are some individuals I interviewed and others in casual conversation who have identified as a 'hipster' for reasons that appear to be ideological. Those who did identify as hipsters, nonetheless, did so in a defensive manner, as if they were deliberately battling these offensive connotations.

The hipster is thought to lack a subversive political ideology due to a preoccupation with the consumption of cultural goods. As Douglas Haddow for the Vancouver based anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* claims, 'Hipsterdom is the first 'counterculture' to be born under the advertising industry's microscope, leaving it open to constant manipulation ... Less a subculture, the hipster is a consumer group.' According to *Alameda Times-Star* in 2003, 'In generalized terms, hipsters are white, well-educated and from middle-class or affluent families.' And Robert Lanham, cultural critic and author of the satirical book *The Hipster Handbook* writes, 'First and foremost, hipsterism is about stuff. It's the natural byproduct of a consumption-obsessed culture with a thriving middle class.'Douglas Haddow, again, writes, 'An amalgamation of its own history, the youth of the West are left with consuming cool rather that creating it.' In 2007, Christian Lorentzen, for *Time Out New York,* penned an editorial titled 'Why the Hipster Must Die.' He exclaims, 'These hipster zombies… 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.'

Hipsters are attributed as an exemplary reason for many of the processes and traits characteristic of American consumer culture. In other words, hipsters are thought to promote processes of gentrification by moving into neighborhoods known for cheap rent in large numbers, pushing up costs of living in those areas and forcing previous classes of residents outward. Lorentzen and Greif seem to agree that hipsters readily give in to trends in fashion and other areas of consumption. According to these critiques, hipsters are what Everett Rogers in 1962 dubbed 'early adopters' of trends—they want to be the first to exhibit the latest fashion, beverage, or technological sensation. Hence are the copious media representations of hipsters and PBR, plaid shirts, and Apple products. Hipsters supposedly rush to consume the things that will become popular so that they can say they liked them 'before they were cool.'

According to these critiques, one of the main problems with hipsters is that they appropriate the symbols of other social movements, lifestyles, and subcultures. Vancouver-based anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* claims that hipsters 'easily blend in and mutate other social movements, sub-cultures and lifestyles' (Haddowm 2008). As Mark Greif (2010) similarly argues,

> Over the past decade, hipsters have mixed with particular elements of anarchist, free, vegan, environmentalist, punk, and even anti-capitalist communities. One glimpses behind them the bike messengers, straight-edge skaters, Lesbian Avengers, freegans, enviro-anarchists, and interracial hip-hoppers who live as they please, with a spiritual middle finger always raised.

There are in fact associations between hipster styles of dress and cultural tastes and what is commonly referred to as 'indie culture.' In 2003, Robert Lanham's *The Hipster Handbook* was published. It was a landmark in the trope's rapid ascension in public discourse. Like many other humorous coffee table books, it offered up many amusing stereotypes about hipsters. For instance, Lanham warns that you might be a hipster if you "own records put out by [independent record labels] Matador, DFA, Definitive Jux, Dischord, Warp, Thrill Jockey, Smells Like Records, Sub Pop, K Records and Drag City" (2003: 3).[5]

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[5] Robert, does that include mp3s? If so, this author might be a hipster.

'Indie culture' is a subculture (though today perhaps it is more accurately a constellation of various genre-based communities such as those mentioned above by Greif) strongly shaped by independent punk music in the 80s, and founded on principles of freedom from outside commercial influence. Indie culture consists of a network of local and regional movements fueled by the independent production and distribution of music, art and literature. Based on the model of commercial independence, these subcultures enjoyed artistic freedom. As Kaya Oakes argues, the main motivation for this was control:

> If you were signed to an independent label, you had control over how you sounded in the studio, how your album art came out, what the label could and couldn't do to promote and market your music, where you would play shows, and what lyrics you could sing (2009: 45).

The DIY or a do-it-yourself ethos was thus a moral concept that would not just be tied to music production, distribution, and touring, but also in literature, clothing production, food growth, film production, cosmetics, transportation—all aspects of life. These DIY ethics, which have bled into numerous subcultures near and around punk, heavily privilege virtues of creation, originality and self-reliance.

Independence is about having the ability to make what you want to, unobstructed by other interests. Although for artists, this often meant relative poverty, since distribution was not strong and radio stations, motivated by payouts from record labels for playing songs, often ignored independent music. But as Oakes claims, "given the fact that so many bands got screwed by majors, they were often willing to sacrifice the chance to get rich for the chance to do what they wanted" (2009: 45-46). Creative control is prioritized over profit. Independence is not just a central concept as a form of production, but the ideological centerpiece of a lifestyle and culture. Indie and its related subcultures adhere to a principle of independence from outside commercial interests, one that guides both the ethos and aesthetics of cultural production for these communities. They operate from outside the system, forming their own media platforms and subculture, equipped with a primary principle, one so inherent in its identity it is instilled into its very moniker.

There is of course much concern over the commercialization of indie's ideas, principles and products from within these subcultures themselves. Much of these concerns are manifest in blog posts and magazine articles on "selling out" and the tensions for independent artists between politics and practicality. But the fashion industry has had a longstanding tendency to co-opt and commodify the aesthetic innovations of subcultures (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991, p. 168). The co-optation of subcultural symbols and styles of dress has seemingly prompted a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2002 [1972]) of its own, with the contemporary fashion industry being seen as a major threat to a thriving subcultural identity.

When it comes to the commercialization of styles of dress, one major concern is that the reproduction of counter-cultural fashions has diluted the symbolic power they had initially cultivated. Observers lament that "[t]oday's subcultural styles carry much less counter-cultural weight, being rapidly coopted by media industries and marketed in a highly developed consumer culture" (Crane 2001: 183). Lars Svendsen similarly states, "subcultures are becoming less reliable suppliers of 'meaningful' clothes" mostly because "the boundaries between subculture and mass culture have become very indistinct" (Svendsen 2006, p. 73). According to Sociologist David Muggleton (2002), in lieu of subcultures today there exist 'post-subcultures'—whose

members are less preoccupied with maintaining ideological and stylistic distinctions from other groups, and who engage in 'style surfing', consisting of fluid movement between various styles rather than one discernable aesthetic. Consumers develop only fleeting attachments to subcultural styles, attachments based on more of an aesthetic appeal and desire to appropriate trends than an affective affiliation with a subculture. Subcultures have thus given way to "stylistic promiscuity" (Polhemus 1994: 131), in which people frequently change styles and mix different distinct styles. These concerns have led to calls from within these communities for increased resistance to commercial exploitation.

The point that Greif and others have made is that hipsters have borrowed from a litany of other subcultures—ones that are inherently political in ideology. Yet, in contrast to these subcultures, the hipster remains apolitical and apathetic, without ideology or sentiment. As New York Times author William Deresiewicz argues,

> ... unlike those of previous youth cultures, the hipster ethos contains no element of rebellion, rejection or dissent — remarkably so, given that countercultural opposition would seem to be essential to the very idea of youth culture. ('Generation Sell')

At the heart of many of the attacks against the hipster is an anxiety over the end of political subversion amongst youth-oriented subcultures.

Ultimately, the hipster is thought to represent the contemporary disconnect between symbols and their original meanings. According to Frederic Jameson (1971), how commodities are produced no longer matter because individuals prefer a relation to consumption, resulting in our enjoyment of products today that are 'utterly without depth' (1971: 105). Similarly, according to Lars Svendsen (2006), fashion in the modern world 'does not communicate a message—it *is* the actual message. It is not so much a question of a semantic code as an aesthetic effect. To the extent it says anything, it is something in the nature of 'Look at me!'' (73). Similarly, critics argue that the dress of the modern-day hipster is meant to conjure images of indie culture, complete with a DIY ethic, the organic creation of art and cultural artifacts, and an actively political, progressive ideology—yet, according to them, the hipster is in actuality a corporate retail shopper, trend obsessed, who only cares about appearing to be these things because it grants them a certain social standing. The hipster represents the most extreme of these concerns of the diminishing political power of fashion. The hipster is what happens when dress no longer means what it seemingly attempted to mean.

Perhaps one of the strongest condemnations of the hipster subculture is that it is wholly inauthentic. Following a poll of its users, the online magazine Gawker proposed in 2010, in lieu of hipster, the term 'fauxhemian' ('Your New Hipster Slur'). Parodies of hipsters seem to come easy because as a group, they are perceived as more concerned with looking cool than actually having a clear point of view. *Time* magazine writes in July 2009 that 'Everything about them is exactly constructed to give off the vibe that they just don't care.' Robert Horning, for *PopMatters* in April 2009, argues that the "hipster is defined by a lack of authenticity, by a sense of lateness to the scene" or the way that they transform the situation into a "self-conscious scene, something others can scrutinize and exploit." In other words, hipsters try too hard to make it appear that they are not trying at all.

The hipster represents critiques of the blind pursuit of consumer trends, of overwhelming homogeneity, and of the inauthenticity that is thought to characterize contemporary life. The above claims would have us believe that only recently has consumer culture encroached upon the

subversive potential of subcultures—though in reality, these criticisms are in no way new. In fact, similar ideas about the bohemian lifestyle as well as accompanying criticisms are embedded in texts and cultural artifacts about bohemian culture dating as early as the late nineteenth century.

<div align="center">**Previous incarnations and critiques of the hipster**</div>

Since manufacturing and media technologies transformed the art and fashion industries in the early nineteenth century, there have been different cultural castes deriding one another—on one hand, the bourgeoise upper class who purchased art from the bohemians yet resented their debaucherous lifestyles, and the bohemians, the nomadic, usually impoverished artists of Western Europe who themselves resented their relations with the bourgeoisie. Critics of bohemia declared the subculture as one fraught with transparent attempts to claim artistic merit and superior status, while those inside it have sought to distinguish poseurs from true creative producers. The term hipster, moreover, has enjoyed a long tenure in the popular vernacular. Understanding the origins of bohemianism as well as the etymology of *hipster* help us understand the recurring themes underlying the trope of the hipster.

The 19th century hipster

Elizabeth Wilson's (1999) analysis of bohemian culture provides excellent parallels to modern-day hipsterdom. Artistic bohemia emerged in major European cities in the 1830s when marginalized and impoverished artists, writers, journalists, and musicians began to concentrate in gypsy neighborhoods. In the wake of Western industrialization, the mass production of art had increased tensions between the classes—rather than executing the wishes of a particular patron, artists now had to create art for an unknown audience. Even while the bourgeoisie consumed romanticized literary renditions of bohemian lifestyles, paid high prices for their art, and adopted their fashion styles, criticisms and parodies of bohemians abounded. Bohemians were often caricatured in plays and literary magazines such as *Punch*. Writer Gabriel Guillemot notes in 1868 in his essay *La Boheme* that bohemian in the popular vernacular meant the artist that was gay and carefree, idle and boisterous. The bourgeoisie were fickle consumers, and often criticized art they rejected, while the bohemians were caught between the need to make a living by pleasing the bourgeoisie and the less profitable urge toward genuine artistic expression. Clashing lifestyles exacerbated class tensions, as bohemians often engaged in unconventional practices such as open sexuality, anarchic politics, and voluntary poverty.

The original 20th century hipsters

In the 1920s and 30s, and as popular renditions accompanied them, we eventually see the bohemian lifestyle in America replaced with another that is aesthetically less romantic, but otherwise just as nomadic, carefree, marginalized and poor—that of the beatnik. In the 1940 and 50s emerge soon-to-be-famous beat poets and writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac, who seized the public imagination by recounting the fascinating adventures of the wanderer, of lifestyles revolving around drugs, sex, and literature.

But they also went by another moniker-- hipsters. Take Allen Ginsburg's famous poem Howl, published in 1956:

> angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night
>
> who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz.

Hipsters were initially considered the product of class and racial interactions in the jazz age—middle-class white youths seeking to emulate the lifestyle of the mostly black jazz musicians they admired. While they continue to be revered as a class of cultural producers, the average hipster of the 40s was often depicted as a follower of a musical genre and social class to which s/he did not really belong. Eventually *hipster* gave way to *hippie* in the 1960s, when elements of the expanding Beat movement were incorporated into the hippie counterculture, as hippies were considered the descendants of hipsters.

Recurrent themes

Although the bohemians, hipsters/beatniks, hippies, and modern day hipsters each have unique aesthetic and ideological orientations, and each subculture was represented as vaguely liberal, creative, and comprised of rebellious lower and working class youth. While these similarities cease when it comes to the specifics of their politics, musical or artistic preferences, these groups occupied similar marginal subcultural positions. Each group was criticized by outsiders for apathy and fakery, for caring about hedonism and lifestyle over politics or art.

And while today's hipster is mostly invoked without reference to their 20th century descendants who share the same name, the etymology of *hipster* only further highlights the recurrence of subversive subcultures and the surprising similarity with which such groups are constructed in popular culture. Further, the cultural beliefs and assumptions about hipsters are remarkably similar to cultural critiques of bohemians and marginal subcultures of the past. These critiques broadly convey two related concerns: that hipsters are overly concerned with consumption, and hipsters are pretentious.

As these excerpts reveal, immense value is granted to cultural producers—and not just any sort of producer, but specifically those who make music and art. Style and fashion, on the other hand, are reduced to superficial games of status claiming. If one's eccentric appearance is not to be stigmatized as ostentatious, it should accompany some type of socially sanctioned form of cultural production. A related underlying assumption of these claims is that consumption is inherently negative and inauthentic. The mass production of goods assisted in problematizing consumption, since one could follow the lead of others buy purchasing the same items. To consume also means to waste, another negative connotation of consumption.

A similar recurring theme is that of authenticity, the social construction of the real. For long, alternatives to mass-market products have been considered 'pure' and 'original' (Zukin, 2008). And independent creative work is thought to be 'creating from the heart' (Fine, 2004: 59), giving it a special authentic authority. The purchase of corporate-produced fashions therefore strikes as inauthentic on many grounds: inauthentic for a corporation to sell fashions that claim to be eccentric, subversive, young, urban and edgy; inauthentic for a middle-class, corporate-consuming consumer to present a subversive, marginal stylistic image; and inauthentic relations between the consumer and the product (because of the product's biography and because of the moral incongruencies between the product's biography and the culture to which it refers).

But there are even certain types of production that are viewed as inauthentic. A 2007 *Slate* magazine article maintains that the while the independent music scene 'can embrace some fascinating hermetic weirdos such as Joanna Newsom or Panda Bear, it's also prone to producing fine-arts-grad poseurs such as the The Decemberists and poor-little-rich-boy-or-girl singer songwriters.'[6] Similarly, "trust-fund hipsters" and middle class producers are both considered inauthentic—the former for their construction of subcultural status through consumption; the latter for the use of wealth to take shortcuts in cultural production. American Singer Lana Del Rey has recently received a great deal of negative media attention for her image, which critics argue has suddenly taken a different direction at the behest of a wealthy father and several managers. As one commenter on a blog post argues,

> She was, quite literally, manufactured. Her father paid for a team of people (for five years to figure out the exact perfect combination of looks and name and sound that would be most successful today. He also paid for her marketing, for her to be on itunes when she barely has any music out yet, etc. No, money can't buy everything, but if it pays for enough hype, enough publicity, and a contract with a big or important label, it can get you very far (and on SNL).

Wealth makes individuals vulnerable to claims of cultural inauthenticity because the use of the products or services of cultural intermediaries inherently requires a surplus of monetary capital.

The requirement that artists be starving in order to be bona fide artists is not new, of course. Mark Paytress, author of *The Rolling Stones: Off the Record* writes that in 1977, frontman Mick Jagger called Patti Smith a 'poseur of the worst kind, intellectual bullshit, trying to be a street girl' **(**2003: 270**).** And as Elizabeth Wilson explains of bohemians of the 19th century: 'In the role of the dedicated, penniless artist who refuses to debase art for pecuniary gain, the bohemian represents the [authentic]; as the café poseur who produces nothing, he represents [fakery]' (1971: 12).

These class implications confound those that some of our greatest cultural theorists have put forth. In the time that Bourdieu wrote Distinction, prior to 1984, one's class position may have determined one's aesthetic tastes to a substantial degree, because there were many types of cultural knowledges and skills that could only be acquired through a formal education. Nowadays one enjoys widespread access to each and every cultural genre and skill regardless of class or education, thanks to the ubiquity of media technologies. Yet the assumption still stands that one cannot assume the status afforded by the streets if one has acquired a higher education or displays other traits associated with more upwardly mobile classes. It is part of a longstanding ideology among members of independent subcultures that wealth diminishes social status.

Authenticity is often invoked not merely in evaluation of an artistic form, but of a form or style in conjunction with the background of the cultural producer. What seems to make the band *The Decemberists* poseurs in the eyes of *Slate* is not their inadequate training, but rather their graduate fine arts education. Similarly, independent songwriters may be embraced as eccentric, colorful additions—unless they come from wealthy backgrounds or have attended to higher educations. Why does education and class detract from one's authenticity as an artist? Once again, this seems to be more of an issue of status than authenticity—subcultures have long

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[6] For the record, Joanna Newsom dropped out of school but studied composition and creative writing, Panda Bear went to Boston U. but majored in religion, and Colin Meloy from the Decemberists didn't go to grad school, but studied creative writing in Missoula.

stigmatized privileged upbringings, as a way of claiming territory and carving boundaries of status.

Cultural production

Conversely to the disdain toward consumerism, criticisms of the hipster imply a certain valorizing of production. The hipster, as we have just observed a variety of blogs, newspapers and magazines claim, is decisively middle-class and obsessed with consumption (rather than production), yet through dress and behavior attempts to claim the status of the independent artist. Meanwhile, as the narrative goes, the hipster has overshadowed truly marginal groups that are productive and conscientious.

Artistic production is considered a form of personal self-expression that requires a unique sense of creativity—unlike consumption, good taste exhibited through the production of novel goods can hardly be achieved incidentally. Not only is production framed as a valuable outward expression of character, but artistic production is a source of personal income and is revered for the economic growth of communities. Thus, to create art affords one an exclusive status. As historian Elizabeth Wilson observes **(**1999**:**12**),** the fake bohemian 'claimed the status of the artist yet produced little or nothing.' The idea that one can *claim* the status of the artist is interesting in itself. This suggests that our appearance, as a form of symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1984; 1986), conveys claims about us that *should* be corroborated by our actual occupations, activities, and identities. That is, if I dress in a creative way and patronize some of the same places as artists, I better be an artist and not a vacuum salesperson.

When these subcultures or 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006) denigrate one another, it is oftentimes over the social status attributed to particular behaviors. We see that hipsters are denigrated for looking like DJs or musicians but not actually producing anything in actuality. And, similarly, hipsters are criticized for consuming products simply for being trendy (American Apparel, fixed gear bikes), or for consuming products that are mass-produced (Urban Outfitters). Those who criticize hipsters often argue that their values are compromised by a fundamental disconnect between image and behavior. The concern with cultural production, however, is a concern that we've had for centuries.

The end of counter-culture

As discussed earlier, several critics argue that emergence of the twenty first century hipster subculture represent the end of political activism via cultural subversion. Douglas Haddow (2008), for instance, argues, '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.'

This same argument, nonetheless, was also leveled in previous years. It was 1969 when *Vogue* had boldly proclaimed, 'In fashion, the revolution is over' (Steele 1997: 76**).** Hunter S. Thompson, for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1967 argues that the hippie movement was counterproductive to the counterculture because

> Students who were once angry activists were content to lie back in their pads and smile at the world through a fog of marijuana smoke—or, worse, to dress like clowns or American Indians and stay zonked for days at a time on LSD. **(**Lowe, 2007**)**

To Thompson, the hippies replaced or overshadowed the true activists, who were interested in more than ostentatious fashion, drugs, and free lifestyles. And similarly, a 1967 edition of LIFE magazine argues that hippies were not genuinely concerned with the substance of their professed philosophies:

> The customary exchange, however, is between a puzzled outsider and a hippie who rather apathetically tries to explain what it's all about. Certain catch phrases recur, like love, brotherhood and expanding consciousness. Enlightenment is rare. ('Hippie...West')

Bohemians and beatniks also captured attention for their eccentric dress and partying ways, and less often than for their ideological stances. Aleister Crowley, writing in Britain in the 1920s, says*:* "Not artists at all, but Arty People…they just talk about drawing and painting and their studios are only used for dressing up for parties and dances" **(**Wilson, 1999: 16). Audiences enjoyed making fun of the aesthetic pretensions of bohemians in precisely the same ways that the hipster has been criticized. So while hippies and beatniks and punks are currently nostalgized as being truly subversive and individual, in their heydays people also complained that their days of subversion were over.

It turns out, perhaps not surprisingly at this point, that bohemians would also relate to the ambivalence surrounding conceptions of hipsterdom. Elizabeth Wilson (1999: 12):

> Many and contradictory ideas were condensed into the figure of the bohemian, who literally embodied the ambivalent relationship of industrial Western culture to its art and artistic communities; the single word 'bohemian' contains a whole ideology of art; consequently no definition of the term can ever be wholly satisfactory.

We might then say that the hipster is, for the most part, a cultural myth, a boogeyman if you will. But it appears that the issue is more than a large stratum of youth that have goofy style. Perhaps this figure represents some of our greatest anxieties—that consumer culture and corporatization have spawned a generation that is so consumed by the desire to have style that it trumps issues of substance.

Is this current generation of eccentric youth truly not actually producing anything new, or has our consumptive climate rendered us so uninspired or clueless or fatigued or apathetic that as a society, there isn't much of a cause that masses of young people have felt the need to mobilize against? Are there real subcultures fighting for change lumped under the category of hipster? Or is hipster just a frame attributed to certain people, to highlight the absent fight for social change and/or the absence of artistic production despite the feigning of doing so.

Academics Zeynep Arsel and Craig Thompson (2008**)** argue that contemporary depictions of the hipster derive from mass media narratives with various commercial and ideological interests. In other words, the hipster is a less of a coherent type and more of a cultural myth that is shaped through ideologies and that appropriates the field of indie music and culture for the purpose of stigmatizing it. There are real subcultures or at least scenes and tribes out there

dedicated to real impassioned social causes, but it seems as if there is a tendency to generalize and categorize *the other*, those who are unlike us.

While their analysis is useful, I would add that the myth of the hipster represents not any particular subculture, but rather contemporary American mainstream culture. The hipster is both everywhere and nowhere, to be fair, for some tangible reasons: because the clothing style deemed to be hip is indeed a popular trend, and one may purchase hipness from corporate retailers such as Urban Outfitters and American Apparel. Perhaps the problems that we face today are akin to those that the bohemians faced amidst the industrial revolution. As Walter Benjamin explains in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,*

> To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility […] But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (2008: IV)

In a culture where the mass production of clothes, of art, of music relieves us of any sense of authenticity, a chronic anxiety and uncertainty may arise regarding whether the artistic value of such products is, as Elizabeth Wilson puts it, "a supreme value or an elaborate hoax." **(**1999: 12).

Conclusion

So, we see that hipsters have enjoyed a social position parallel to those of previous descendents. But we still have not figured out, where *are* the hipsters?

It seems that today, nearly everyone is a hipster. Academic Elizabeth Wilson claimed in 2008 that the whole of mainstream culture has been bohemianized. Cultural critic David Brooks, in his (2000) book *Bobos in Paradise,* coins the term 'bobo' to describe the new cultural trend of bourgeoise bohemians—an upper class subculture that espouses a liberal idealistic philosophy and carries consumer preferences for vintage, shabby-chic, and local, American-made goods.

Christian Lorentzen, Harper's senior editor who previously declared in writing that hipsters "must die," would entirely rebuke his own claims. At that panel, Lorentzen argued that the idea of the hipster was actually a great fraud and he apologized for his part in it, explaining,

> No member of my family, no close friend, no enemy, no rival, no dance partner, no party guest, no barkeep, no doctor, no lawyer, no banker, no artist, no guitar player, no deejay, no model, no photographer, no author, no pilot, no stewardess, no actor, no actress, no television personality, no robber, no cop, no priest, no nun, no hooker, no pimp, no acquaintance known to me, has ever been a hipster.

> The fraud held that there are people called hipsters who follow a creed called hipsterism and exist in a realm called hipsterdom […] The truth is that there was no such culture worth speaking of, and the people called hipsters just happened to be young, and, more often than not, funny-looking.

There are, of course, also social psychological reasons that people do not want to be identified as hipsters. Regardless of the expansiveness of the range of meanings provoked by the term, many people simply do not want to be boxed into a pre-determined category. We do not want to be stereotyped; we want to feel unique. It is also clear that no one wants to be labeled a hipster

because by doing so one is *a priori* labeled, as Adbusters declared, the 'dead-end of western civilization.'

Most importantly, though, perhaps the hipster is both ubiquitous and elusive because we assume them to be part of a specific subculture, but they are in fact floating parts of a commercial mainstream. The problem at heart is the seeming encroachment of big money on a subculture that values originality and innovation, sincerely inspired cultural production, and sustainable, ethical manufacturing practices. The contemporary American consumer environment has made it so that artifacts that were previously confined to tight-knit groups are easily copied and sold to others who want to look like their members. Because the bounds governing who can look a certain way are enlarging, people come up with ways, discursive, symbolic, and otherwise, of signaling approval (or disapproval) of one's appearance and the things they are thought to convey.

Because the hipster carries connotations of insincerity and inauthenticity, it is used as an insult by individuals who belong to distant social groups as well as by similar-looking others who see themselves as more genuine versions. One of the worst offenses to cultural authorities on authenticity appears to be the purchase of hip styles of dress from corporate-owned shops, because eccentric styles of dress are supposed to convey the creative abilities of their wearer, but now everyone can look interesting because they have the ability to consume conveniently. But what is authenticity? What makes a person authentically creative? The bohemian of the 19th century caused the same anxieties brought on by today's hipster because of the relationship between art and commerce, and between art and status. Do the individuals making up the creative class really care about their craft, or do they care about making money, or acquiring prestige? Do the individuals whose personal aesthetic and lifestyle appear to revolve around an inclination toward creativity, only seek to look that way because such appearances confer some type of special status?

We have and always will grapple with these questions, though in the age of mechanical— and now digital—reproduction, authenticity becomes of even greater concern. We can develop music tastes based on information we readily consume from popular music blogs like Pitchfork. We can purchase seemingly individualized bohemian clothing styles from mass-producing corporations owned by suit-wearing rich Republicans. And we can all make music now with the aid of synthesizers and production software. These developments force us to exert even closer scrutiny on the marginalized groups that we expect to save us from our darkest imaginations of a persistently intrusive commercial space.

These various critiques of the hipster, whether through editorial pieces for major publications, Tumblr blog posts and discussion forum rants, televised representations, or casual conversations, all seem to point to some rather broad social anxieties: that the large-scale commercialization of art and culture will create a completely homogenous and passive consumerist public; that big businesses will continue to co-opt counter-cultures for the sake of profit; that dress is used as a means to shape one's identity via inauthentic cross-cultural appropriations; and that consumers no longer have meaningful relations with the products they consume. These criticisms, however, are the same that are generally attributed to American consumer culture, and that have been, since Adorno and Horkheimer's (1973) treatise against the culture industries. We also see in this piece that these anxieties extend back until the origins of the industrial revolution, when major shifts in the relationship between art, commerce, and identity began to take shape. That does not mean that these anxieties are not important, nor does

it mean that they are unjustified. Discussions of the institutions and processes that enable and constrain individual identity and political participation should always be part of a healthy public sphere. The trope of the hipster has also coincided with increasing calls for more progressive manufacturing practices throughout the fashion industry and more attention being paid to issues such as environmental sustainability, human rights, and the global implications of our production and consumption practices.

Now connoting a generation ostentatiously concerned with looking cool at the expense of a real point of view, the hipster represents the point at which consumption becomes conflated with creativity. But the term is not merely an innocuous jab at obnoxiously dressed outsiders, an aesthetic revolt, but perhaps more importantly reflects a widespread disdain of the idea of consumerism as a lifestyle. It seems that, for the sake of accuracy, *hipster* is more cultural trope than actual occurrence. Like "Generation X" of the nineties, the hipster conveys contemporary concerns with the many processes of globalization, gentrification, commodification, mass production, corporate consolidation, and digitization. The only problem is that when we attempt to define the real hipsters, we are at a loss, because we look around, and then we realize that, enveloped in all of these processes, technically, we are all subjects, consequences, and co-conspirators in these processes, whether we want to be or not. And so the hipster is both a reality and a myth, but more importantly operates as a medium for our greatest concerns about our relation to art, economy, and culture.

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