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## The Agent of Apathy

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Feature

**teaser:**

Over the last decade the cultural figure known as the “hipster” has increasingly turned into a target of scorn, despite an apparent disagreement over what the term means and to whom it refers. This semi-mythological character reveals our own compliance with barbaric totalitarianism, a fault we’ve been projecting onto others.

*The following is excerpted from the upcoming book All These Serious Faces Will Only Drive You Mad. This is Part 1 in a series. Read Part 2 [here](#) [1]. To learn more about the book, please [click here](#) [2].*

Over the last decade the cultural figure known as the "hipster" has increasingly turned into a target of scorn, despite an apparent disagreement over what the term means and to whom it refers. In his 2008 *Adbusters* article, "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization," Douglas Haddow provides one of the keenest descriptions of this trend in its current form. "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..." (1)

As with most recent media examinations of hipsterdom, the article laments the passing of better cultural times. Haddow argues that—whereas the usual role of youth culture has been to attack the superficiality, inauthenticity, and decadence of mainstream adult culture—today's hipsters share few mental proclivities but apathy and irony, comprising "a youth subculture that mirrors the doomed shallowness of mainstream society." (2) But it seems today that everyone uses the word "hipster" to identify a different kind of person. The most consistent thing about the term is that no one will self-identify as a hipster. At one time the word "hip" meant little more than "cool," yet Haddow claims that hipsterdom "is set to consume the very core of Western counterculture." (3)

As to why this happened, Haddow provides two clues: the phenomenon is most highly concentrated in North America and Europe, and it marks the end point of something that started—or at least became solidified—when World War II ended in 1945. Actually, "decadence" may be a more direct precursor to today's hipster than the word "hip" itself. In his book *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, David Weir connects the *artistic movement* of decadence to the *lifestyle movement* of bohemianism, and designates the French poet Baudelaire as an "archetypal decadent figure." (4) Weir writes that decadent art is distinguished by its focus on decay, realism (as a departure from romanticism), misogyny, and a stated "superiority of art to nature."

To Weir, Baudelaire's 1856 poem "Un Charogne"—which ponders an animal carcass in the road—represents Western society beginning to stare *directly at death* instead of allowing it to lurk behind the veil of conscious thought. Weir says "the poem looks at death with a scientist's eye, and sees the decaying corpse, not merely as a fact, but as the *only* fact, a new absolute whose power exceeds that of religion." (5) But instead of leading to humility or grace, decadence seems defined more by anger and arrogance, a sort of violent spasm of the ego following in the wake of despair. It's basically an aesthetically impressive middle finger held up to death or God—a fabricated confidence, or a defiant defense mechanism.

Weir also surveys literary critics who see in decadent art a deeper investigation of the subconscious mind, following its "discovery" by the romantics. But until Sigmund Freud published the first works establishing the field of psychoanalysis in the late 1890s, the subconscious was only known to very creative individuals who intuitively sensed the importance of one's inner life: thoughts, feelings, dreams, visions, etc. The common person living during the last 150 years has actively avoided any exploration of the subconscious.

Today's hipster is a prime example, since he displays only superficial traits and seems fearful of psychic forces not in direct control of the conscious ego. The hipster's preference for alcohol and opiates over psychedelic substances reflects this notion. And death is the only concept that causes today's decadent more fear than the subconscious. So evidently Baudelaire's indignant stance toward human mortality didn't mature into an acceptance of death—only passed through time as the "enlightened despair" that Weir points out.

Angry at God or—since the decadent renounced all belief in God—angry at one's mother for subjecting him to life, the original decadent found himself detached from both family and religion. Decadent art lines up historically with the Industrial Age, when the majority of the world's population moved from rural to urban areas. This is how urban bohemian life arose, by a preference for the emerging hodgepodge of cultural hotbeds over the apparent dead-end of the rural lifestyle and the Victorian social structure. If anything, it was a willingness to subject oneself to a world of artificial decay, as opposed to the natural decay of friendships and families occurring "back home."

People adapted to the urban wasteland by convincing themselves that they played a part in something immense, much in the way religion used to provide a similar feeling. The system of urban life was more realistic and therefore more profound than the intangible system espoused by the church. The flashy distractions of the city offered people an angle of self-reflection that omitted all insecurities and dark uncertainties.

Finally, Weir says the decadent mentality admits its own ineffectual role as scapegoat. He

quotes the Italian critic Poggioli: "The very notion of decadence, at least its modern version, is practically inconceivable without this psychological compulsion...to become the passive accomplice and willing victim of barbarism...to play a passive, and yet theatrical, role on history's stage." (6)

This acceptance of victimization carried through to the "post-modern" or "post-war" era. In his book *Hip: The History*, John Leland calls the span from about 1947 to 1959 "the golden age of hip, a Cold War convergence of art, image, dope, clothes, celebrity, intellectual arrogance and rebel grace." (7) Leland divides this golden age into two main movements: the jazz style then emergent known as bop, and a group of writers now ubiquitously known as "the Beat Generation." "[Charlie] Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk and a small handful of peers transformed America's music, jazz, from a reflection of national aspirations to an unblinking critique of them. [...] A generation of white writers, led by Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, could only clock in and follow in kind." (8)

In my mind, Kerouac is the ultimate hipster archetype, despite his professed disinterest in their world. Kerouac's 1958 novel *The Subterraneans* provided one of the clearest visions of the post-war urban hipster. In between descriptions of a brief but heated interracial affair, Kerouac explains with hurried abandon the "subterranean hip generation tendencies to silence, bohemian mystery, drugs, beard, semi-holiness and, as I came to find later, insurpassable nastiness..." (9)

Kerouac's book formed a direct link between the '50s hipster scene and the writers of the mid-19th century. As Kerouac specifies, "The book is modeled after Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a full confession of one's most wretched and hidden agonies after an 'affair' of any kind. The prose is what I believe to be the prose of the future, from both the conscious top and the unconscious bottom of the mind, limited only by the limitations of time flying by as our mind flies with it." (10)

Kerouac also documents the hipster's superficial traits that have survived to present time—for example, "...a woman of 25 prophesying the future style of America with short almost crewcut but with curls black snaky hair, snaky walk, pale pale junkey anemic face...her hand holding a short butt and the neat little flick she was giving it to knock the ashes..." (11) And Ann Charters, Kerouac's first biographer, writes that "at Allen's apartment everybody hung out in grimy undershirts, torn T-shirts and battered sneakers." (12)

While Kerouac painted them as a mostly harmless bunch, Norman Mailer provides a much grittier description in his 1957 essay "The White Negro." The first hipster seems to have been a product of the exact same forces that inspired Baudelaire's decadent poetry, only on a much larger scale. Mailer describes a type of young adult attempting to actively engage the frightening new terrain of Cold War America:

"It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war...or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled...then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death...to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self." (13)

According to Mailer, a specific lingo defined the hipster more than anything else. "Hip" and

"beat" existed in opposition, with hip being the more desirable state. Mailer's description makes it clear that it was more of a pseudo-philosophy of abstract rationalizations, centered around the multifaceted concept of freedom. The hipster hoped for inner freedom just as much as outer freedom. Strangely, Mailer even called it a "cool religious revival," despite the lack of church-goers in the scene (other than Kerouac, a believing Catholic). Mailer probably meant "religious" more in William James's sense of relating to a divine concept or presence. In other words, hipsters were mainly concerned with forming a subjective philosophy or value system based on one's own life experiences. And as for what hipsters considered divine, sex was high atop the list.

Objectives other than sex weren't so specific, often getting muddled in language about motion. And an intense interpersonal competition pervaded all aspects of the hipster lifestyle. Mailer writes, "Unstated but obvious is the social sense that there is not nearly enough sweet for everyone." (14) This is an enormous part of the plot in *The Subterraneans*, both in literary and sexual endeavors. Thus, friendships were built on flimsy foundations, and hipsters dropped their loyalties at the first indication that the "sweet" could be obtained.

Another part of pursuing sex was the hope of liberating oneself from restrictive moral codes that appeared to be governing the very people who had orchestrated the horrors of World War II. Naturally, the hipster turned to those who had never had power: African Americans, especially bop musicians. In a strange way, Mailer's hipster represented a broadening of the social conscience, a budding awareness that the ideals at the foundation of the United States of America—freedom most of all—had never been fully realized.

The recognition of jazz's supreme expressive force inevitably led to a glorification of the bop scene and the "morality of the bottom." (15) The bop player and hipster alike "lived in the enormous present" and "subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body." But something about this kick-seeking annoyed or even infuriated the greater culture, as is evident from Mailer's epigraph calling the hipster an "*enfant terrible* turned inside out."

In the second-wave feminist manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan took a moment to chide the beatniks for their inaction, listing Mailer as a leader of the pack. "It was easier, safer, to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy, and the uncontrolled bomb. [...] Norman Mailer and the young beatnik writers confined their revolutionary spirit to sex and kicks and drugs and advertising themselves in four-letter words." (16)

Friedan recognized the need to take advantage of increases in higher education and career opportunities in order to make post-war America as constructive as possible. Mailer and the Beats, on the other hand, saw the immense price of creating and maintaining so-called "security" in America and called it an immoral sham. Thus, a schism formed in the general flow of American culture, giving birth to what we now call the "counter-culture."

While many today celebrate the Beats for their rebellious appeal, those writers also marked a dawning appreciation for the concept of individualism. This was the first large-scale manifestation of what writers and artists had begun at least 100 years prior: looking at one's inner life, like trying to open a clock to see how the gears work. Mailer saw the hipster's infantilism as a sign that one was working through repressed urges.

Because of this volatile state of growing self-awareness, Mailer thought the hipster could be considered a "philosophical psychopath," struggling to figure out what role the individual person played in the near-catastrophe of nuclear armament that had developed in the world. In other words, all humans were acting in an infantile manner; hipsters were just *externalizing it* in deliberately extreme ways in order to conceptualize and hopefully change that part of one's nature.

Still, the "bohemians" in the city found themselves in a new sub-culture of frenzied panic. In *The Subterraneans*, Leo and Mardou claim that hipsters lived by the motto, "you take care of yourself, I'll take care of me." (17) To these two, the American form of Existentialism was a particularly cruel and self-serving philosophy. Somehow the hipsters didn't see that they were acting the same way as America as a whole. Minds like game theory mathematician John Nash engineered this Cold War mentality in America, promoting an picture of humans as selfish and paranoid animals. (18) Nash and others at the Rand Corporation actually *recommended* this stance, in order to create a social equilibrium in which one person's selfishness would be balanced against everyone else's. National leaders encouraged this behavior, and it became a staple of both domestic and foreign policy.

Similarly, Mailer notes that psychopathy was on the rise in 1957. Since it was "present in a host of people including many politicians, professional soldiers, newspaper columnists, entertainers, artists, jazz musicians...and half the executives of Hollywood, television, and advertising, it can be seen that there are aspects of psychopathy which already exert considerable cultural influence." (19)

While the hipster may have been largely unaware of it, he shared a hostile power drive with those running the country. This marks the onset of a key characteristic of post-war American society: an inevitable hypocrisy. From the very start, what was perceived to be a revolutionary counter-culture was based on the same foundations of human psychology that underpinned the mainstream culture, including in politics and the media.

There's no denying that the hipster's lingo masked a lust for power, even if his top prize was an orgasm, which Mailer alternately refers to as the "holy grail" and "fountain of youth." (20) Greed, deception, and even violence characterized the hipster's crusade for that prize, the same as any crusade. Therefore, the hipster's everlasting battle over the "sweet" played out as little more than a mammalian dominance game with major similarities to what we call free market capitalism, just as game theorists like Nash had calculated.

While Mailer understood that the possibility of thermonuclear warfare was a major impetus for the hipster's existence, he didn't seem as aware that it thrust the hipster—like all Americans—into a psychologically primitive state. The hipster lived proudly with his declaration of self-interest, but in reality he had little other choice. As Robert Anton Wilson writes in his book *Prometheus Rising*, "*Throughout human life, when the bio-survival circuit senses danger, all other mental activity ceases.*" (21)

This would be a good time to specify that the character I'm referring to as the "hipster" is not a real person. It is a cultural construction, an approximation of certain social phenomena used to describe movements happening in society. It's an attempt to make a coherent picture out of relative chaos. Since the term has persisted from the mid-20th century into the 21st, it signifies that these social phenomena still exist in some form. But

as Korzybski used to say (and Wilson used to quote), "The map is not the territory"—so please keep in mind that I'm using the term "hipster" first and foremost for convenience.

\* \* \*

As the second half of the 20th century progressed, the sexual and violent aspects of the hipster largely faded along with his philosophy. The Age of Mass Media picked up enormous speed with the appearance of the television, which pervaded most American homes by the end of the '50s. In 1980 the critic George W.S. Trow argued that TV had eliminated the common ground—or "middle distance"—between the individual and any kind of real culture, and that something would have to fill the gap. (22) But I think that the counter-culture *was this first new common ground*, a more youthful culture that teens and young adults felt they could interact with instead of just having it fed to them. Hence, hip urban neighborhoods served as the principal geographic component of the middle ground.

And the hipsters who achieved the most fame in the '50s and early '60s—specifically those who fall into the group we call the Beat Generation—are the ones remembered today as the most authentic or admirable. People probably emulate this "golden age of hip" because it was only temporarily sampled by the Mass Media Machine. The world portrayed by Kerouac in *The Subterraneans* still feels more real or genuine than the post-modern world depicted on TV.

Unfortunately though, the counter-culture doesn't offer anything much more substantial than the mainstream culture in terms of lifestyle. People looking back to the Beats from a distance of half a century—when seeking guidance in how to live one's life—find mostly ineffective revolt (such as Ginsberg telling America to "go fuck yourself with your atom bomb") and, on the other hand, Kerouac's utter compliance with the totalitarian system. As Weir notes, one true mark of decadence is a willingness for, or inability to avoid, being victimized by barbarism.

While hip might be a force of transition that brings new elements into the larger culture, it's essentially center-oriented; all things flow into the middle, to where the Great Capitalist Eye can behold them in greater clarity, and then sacrifice them to the gods (i.e., package them for mass consumption and distribute them to every neighborhood in America). This descent from "outer" to "inner"—from sub- to mainstream culture—is often only a matter of time.

In other words, hip is totally dependent on the power structure, and is therefore, at its heart, a measure of decadence. And I'd argue that hip is the undertow—a sure way to drown in the cultural flow that had already risen to near-intolerable velocity by the 1950s. Today we have Haddow's picture of the hipster, an empty shell of a once-meaningful figure—even though the original was also a construction. Haddow writes that "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." (23)

Haddow also observes the flimsy aura of rebelliousness that today's hipsters demonstrate. He attends a hipster party in Williamsburg (Brooklyn, New York), to examine the heart pumping the lifeblood of the whole "movement." After the party, Haddow walks past some newly constructed condos and ponders the inevitability of these supposed rebels rising in the "corporate ladder" and entering the "grown-up world" of property ownership and

"respectability." He considers picking up a rock and throwing it through a condo window, as if any truly "revolutionary" act would be better than this *total submission*.

This brings us back to the problem of victimization by barbarism. It seems that decadence survives primarily as a defense mechanism, an effort to lessen the self-loathing associated with serving as scapegoat of an authoritarian system. I called the hipster a cultural construction, but we could also refer to him as a *mythological figure* of the post-modern age—by which I mean "symbolic," not "fake" or "imaginary." He's no hero; actually, I'd say he's an anti-hero. The fact that we all hate the hipster, but no one will actually admit to being one, creates a sort of vacuum of reality. We project the hipster aspect onto other people, too proud or fearful to consider how much "hipster" exists inside of us. *We are slowly crucifying this figure because he is proof that our social-democratic and humanistic ideals have failed.*

Thus, the hipster is the *agent of apathy*. In a way, his story inverts the Christ myth, and the hipster is our own "anti-christ," or anti-savior. A hipster might espouse an ideology that intends to improve our global situation, but that ideology will always be subverted by his will to power or his acquiescence to authority. Thus, the hipster is not a danger to the empire but a friend to it—and this slow crucifixion is being conducted not by a tyrant, but by individuals skilled at self-deception.

Even if it were possible to create another "golden age of hip" (as many hipster critics seem to hope for), post-war history would repeat itself because *the psychological forces that created this hipster scourge have not changed*. We haven't picked apart our own decadent tendencies, our own apathetic contentment with the continuation of totalitarianism into the 21st century. Only power status separates the two kinds of decadents, the "bohemian" and the "bourgeois."

Any reluctance to play the scapegoat is easily absolved by access to material goods: cars, HDTVs, and other items fit for "royalty." As a loser, the decadent hipster reluctantly affirms a socio-cultural system that make him feel like a winner, only later having to accept that success in the bio-survival game (i.e., "making a living") means sacrificing all ideals and becoming the very kind of hypocritical zombie that was one's villain earlier in life.

The hipster has failed to rebel against the capitalist pyramid scheme, just as he has failed to revolt against the genetic and psychological forces controlling him from within. So the hipster might have more to teach us than any other cultural figure of the present. As we progress through this critical moment in history, we could benefit from trying to discern the hipster every time we look in the mirror.

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#### NOTES:

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