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HIPSTERS + THE DEATH OF COOL

by **Sarah Barmak / Staff Reporter**

Walk past Queen West club The Social any given night and there they are, smoking in packs on the sidewalk, skinny jeans, thick-rimmed glasses, ironically ugly cardigans and greasy hair all congealing into a look both meticulous and haggard. Inside, they dance to Madonna and Goldfrapp, Souljah Boy and Faster Pussycat, stopping occasionally to sip bottles of 50 and to pose for photos that will appear the next morning on blogs like Last Night's Party. Just don't call them hipsters, please.

A minor firestorm has been set off in the past few weeks by a cover story in the recent edition of anti-corporate glossy *Adbusters*. Subtly entitled "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization," the piece argues that youth culture is nothing more than self-obsessed consumerism. Counter-essays on the blogs of Gavin McInnes, a former editor of magazine *Vice,* and contributor and artist Momus, have stepped up the debate, and scores of commenters have weighed in lambasting the story's author, Douglas Haddow.

These contortions might seem funny to U of T professor Joseph Heath and columnist Andrew Potter (if they read *Adbusters*, an unlikely prospect); their 2004 book *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed* argued not only that youth culture is based on consumerism, but that it always has been. Since The Doors' "Light My Fire" was nearly used in a 1968 TV ad for Buicks ("Come on, Buick, light my fire"), they argue, the marketplace has been driven by our desire to buy things that culture has deemed "cool," from blue jeans to Converse.

Discussing the *Adbusters* article on the culture message board Stillepost.ca, commenter "minister of hate" seemed to be saying as much when she argued that "'60s youth had their images sold back to them just as much as today's youth (and probably every other pop/subcultural movement) ... Were disco fanatics in the '70s, dancing and cocaine, politically loaded? What about the New Romantic trend of the '80s? What about raves?"

If youth culture has never been solely concerned with serious political change – on the contrary, it has often been marked by disaffection, apathy and drug abuse – then why, exactly, do today's hipsters, with their appetite for hedonism, inspire so much angst? Is all this hand-wringing anything new?

We tend to be fairly nostalgic about the political protests of the '60s and the anarchist punk fury of the '70s. But the *Adbusters* piece also betrayed a desire to return to a time when subcultural style itself – the subtle codes of underground aesthetics – meant something. It rails against "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 ... 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."

Contrast that with the vibrant description of the subversive style of '60s mods by admiring cultural theorist Dick Hebdige in 1979: "The motor scooter, originally an ultra-respectable means of transport, was turned into a menacing symbol of group solidarity ... Union jacks were emblazoned on the backs of grubby parka anoraks or cut up and converted into smartly tailored jackets ... the conventional insignia of the business world – the suit, collar and tie, short hair, etc. – were stripped of their original connotations – efficiency, ambition, compliance with authority – and transferred into `empty' fetishes, objects to be desired, fondled and valued in their own right."

By taking the signature look of British conformity and "emptying" it, or placing it in the context of their angry, pill-popping rebellion, the mods subverted the very symbols of the ruling class in an act of what Hebdige identified as *bricolage*. In contrast, by taking accessories associated with the working class (cheap beer and cigarettes), revolutionary Palestinians (the much-maligned keffiyeh) and eco-conscious youth (the fixed-gear bike) and rendering them "empty" fashion items, critics charge that hipsterdom has reversed the decades spent by youth recoding the dominant aesthetic to communicate their own urgent messages. Instead of poor kids wearing ties and changing their meaning to reflect their values, we now have rich kids taking the symbols of the underclass and using them as trinkets of social distinction.

The outrage at hipsters is, it seems, much about class. Of course, what this argument leaves out is that *bricolage* has always gone both ways: What are designer jeans and adult contemporary jazz other than moneyed folks adopting and adapting parts of lowbrow culture?

Contrary to what Haddow believes, those under 30 still seem, strangely enough, to care about stuff – the hours spent arguing passionately about the very article that accused them of apathy is no mean example. What has changed is this: The way people communicate deep involvement – in social change, in discourse, in subculture – has gone from being a below-ground, analogue language of worn, spray-painted or stitched symbols to the daylight of blogs, message boards and other digital mouthpieces.

In the near-forgotten, pre-digital days before a mass SMS could ignite a flashmob, style warriors communicated subversive intent – or just membership in a subculture – with materials they had at the ready; the gritty semaphore of a plaid hanky in the back pocket, for example. If you saw someone in a Mohawk and Doc Martens, you had a good idea of her politics. Now, a hipster in a neon '80s fanny pack could be conservative or ultraliberal. The subversive function has largely faded from style, leaving us with mere fashion. So instead of speaking with our clothes, we broadcast opinions and start micro-movements online.

This has led us, perhaps wrongly, to conclude that kids are obsessed with the aesthetic. Maybe this is a good thing; as viral marketing increasingly controls consumer trends – Rob Walker's branding tome *Buying In* recounts how Pabst Blue Ribbon was subtly marketed to skateboarders, becoming the hipster quaff of choice it is now – mere mortals can't compete.

It's a trend we're beginning to see: At dance nights at Toronto's reggae bar Thymeless, the opposite of hipster chic reigns; DJs play a bass-heavy offshoot of the UK garage scene called dubstep, and crowds eschew skinny jeans for baggy cargo pants and un-ironic, total-body camouflage. Not that skinny jeans wouldn't be welcome – the kids just don't seem to care.

If style ceases to communicate the way it used to, then we may potentially see the death of cool as we know it.

Maybe it's about time.