

The New Gnostics: The Semiotics of the Hipster

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Methodology	
Semiotic analysis	8
Tumblr	12
Music	15
Literature	15
Chapter one: Who is the hipster?	
1.1 Introduction	17
1.2 Too much literary criticism: a conceptual introduction	17
1.3 The average hipster: a précis	20
1.4 The ideal hipster: Cayce Pollard	21
1.5 The attributes of the hipster	25
1.6 Is the hipster modern or postmodern?	35
1.7 A brief genealogy of the hipster	40
1.8 Conclusion	42
Chapter two: A new gnosis	
2.1 Introduction	43
2.2 Twentieth century gnosticism	43
2.3 Hipster gnosticism in practice	51
2.4 The Authentic	58
2.5 Irony	60
2.6 Cultural appropriation	64
2.7 The hipster and death	68
2.8 Conclusion	73
Chapter three: The hipster and space	
3.1 Introduction	74
3.2 The Hyperreal	74
3.3 Location one: The City	82
3.4 Location two: The Outdoors	87
3.5 Imaginary America	92

3.6 Conclusion	94
Chapter four: Hipster businesses	
4.1 Introduction	96
4.2 1924.us	96
4.3 Sanborn Canoe and Best Made	98
4.4 Naked and Famous Denim	102
4.5 RELIC NYC	103
4.6 Conclusion	105
Chapter five: Vice and the City	
5.1 Introduction: VICE Magazine	107
5.2 Cosmopolitanism	109
5.3 The death of culture	111
5.4 Gnosis and City discourse	115
5.5 Conclusion	119
Conclusion: The Motor City and the future of the hipster	120
Bibliography	
Primary Sources	124
Works Cited	126

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Abstract

This thesis forms a sociological investigation of the 'hipster' subculture that has grown in importance in recent years. Using the methodology of semiotic analysis, it examines the trends and themes shown by the images that hipsters post on the microblogging website Tumblr, as well as analysing hipster journalism, texts and companies. This communication is conceptualised with reference to Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality in order to show that hipsters communicate in a way that distorts the perception of real space and results in the abstraction of the meaning of ideas like "global" and "local". It also explores the importance of secret knowledge in a community that manages to be both secretive and extremely open, comparing this example with the historical case of the Beat Generation, who hipsters have adopted as their progenitors, and discusses how their influence drives the hipster to view the world as a literary text to be re-read and re-interpreted.

Introduction

A strange new creature walks the city streets, an alien hiding behind dark glasses and a handlebar moustache. Dressed like a time-traveller caught between a rosy past and a rude, unintelligible future, they watch the world through coffee shop windows and over the tops of well-read books and are deeply dissatisfied. The hipster is uncomfortable, and it shows.

The hipster is a young person in skinny jeans, a bourgeois bohemian, a New Yorker, a skate punk, an elitist, a consumerist, a rich kid, a poor kid, a fan of retro clothing, an environmentalist, an Apple customer, a hypocrite. The hipster is them, but it isn't me. Depending on who you ask, the hipster is almost anyone, and also no-one. Nobody will admit to being a hipster, but everybody is ready to say who is – it is always somebody strange, and more often than not there is an implicit criticism. Still, there is something at the heart of all of this confusion. The hipster definitely exists, or at least, there is definitely a culture that bears the majority of the brunt of these accusations, and in spite of an unwillingness (unsurprisingly) to accept the name 'hipster', this culture is an extremely interesting one that is growing to be exceptionally significant, both in terms of membership and cultural impact. These people are postmodern and intensely ironic, but also deeply concerned with the nature of the world around them and the path that has been taken by consumer culture. Rejected by society and yet somehow also leading its trends, the hipster works, in their own flawed way, to find a new and more authentic way of life for the twenty-first century.

Who are these young people? What defines a hipster? Their numbers on the streets seem to increase by the day, and their influence on culture is growing alongside, not only through the popularity of their distinctive fashion, but also their ideology and distinctly twenty-first century way of viewing the world. What is this worldview – is it one of meaningless consumerism and market-driven elitism, or is it something more? Is there really anything new about the hipster at all? Confronted by this millennial spectre in skinny jeans, the average person recoils in confusion and anger, as though the hipster represents everything that is wrong with the world. Confusingly the feeling is mutual, and generally for the same reasons. Without a doubt, the hipster's distinctive nostalgias and ironies have become some of the defining aesthetics of the last few years, and their influence on the arts – particularly in film and television – has been similarly significant. This raises a further question: if this worldview is becoming commonplace, how is the hipster distinct from the general culture of the age?

This thesis will attempt to come to grips with the hipster and their motivations by disentangling the ways in which they communicate. If it is their signs – their strange clothing, purchasing habits and art – that alternately enthralls and infuriates the world, then it is these signs that we must address. I will

explain and deconstruct the hipster's communication, using an understanding primarily derived from their image-based communication online, but also learned from the study of hipster journalism, books and companies, and discuss why their habits of communication are so important. This thesis will deal with the hipster in their emerging nature as a global phenomenon, rather than as a uniquely American or local one. Hipster culture is notoriously local, but crucially it is also growing into something entirely more interesting through the medium of the internet and websites like Tumblr and Instagram. As such, the understanding outlined here will also give us the tools not only to make some educated guesses at the hipster's future but also to understand the hipster as they change and develop – an understanding that may prove crucial to our cultural future as a whole.

Methodology

Semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis is the major analytical tool that will be used in this thesis. The discipline of semiotics is, in essence, the study of the language of signs, be they verbal, visual or otherwise. A sign is a linguistic symbol – something that, when interpreted by a viewer or reader, has a meaning. This is a necessarily broad concept: almost anything can become a sign if it is used in communication somehow. For the most part, signs communicate to us on a very immediate level: as with the individual words on this page, most signs are interpreted instantly without any consideration. As with words strung into an essay however, signs in practice also form a complex web of interaction between authorship and interpretation. By analysing this interaction and the purpose that it serves, the study of semiotics allows us to determine a lot about the individuals who use them and, of particular importance here, the groups that they belong to.

Ferdinand De Saussure (Saussure, 1916/1983), who first proposed the science of semiotics, divides the sign into two components: the *signifier*, which is the sound, shape or thing that signifies something (for example, the word ‘dog’, or an image of a dog) and the *signified*, which is the concept to which the signifier refers (such as an actual, living dog). Although this concept is simple, signs become interesting when the relationship between signifier and signified is less direct: because the association between the two is generally “arbitrary, and based on convention” (as with the sound dog, which bears no real relationship to the animal), the meanings of signs are subject to change and interpretation, and can often tell us a lot about the culture that uses them (Berger, 2013, p. 22). Berger makes the example of long hair worn by men, which once “used to signify ‘artistic’ but now long hair has lost that meaning; it can mean anything nowadays: poets, truck drivers and baseball pitchers now often have long hair”. An example from hipster culture would be large-framed, horn-rimmed glasses, which were once unfashionable but now signify a complex mix of nostalgia, pseudo-intellectualism and non-conformity in their wearer.

Because some signifiers have a more direct relationship to their signified than others, C.S. Peirce breaks the sign down further into three categories – *iconic*, *indexical* and *symbolic*:

Every sign is determined by its objects, either first by partaking in the characters of the object, when I call a sign an Icon; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an Index; thirdly, by more or less approximate certainty

that it will be interpreted as denoting the object, in consequence of a habit (which term I use as including a natural disposition), when I call the sign a Symbol, (quoted in Zeman 1977, p. 36)

Berger (2013) explains these categories in more simple terms, and with an important qualifier:

Thus, a photograph would be iconic (it signifies by resemblance), smoke coming out of a house would be indexical (it signifies by cause and effect) and flags would be symbolic (one must learn what flags signify). The term “iconic” now has another meaning and is used loosely to refer to people, places, objects, and so on, that are noteworthy or of some importance. Thus, an iPhone is an iconic smartphone. (p.23)

It is also important to note that one signifier can be related to multiple signifiers: to offer another example from hipster culture, a photograph of a forest is an iconic sign of a forest, but it is also symbolic of freedom and healthy activity. In addition to these first three, Roland Barthes (1972) contributes a fourth and final layer of meaning, which he calls *myth*. Myth is more complex, but is crucial to semiotics in the age of mass media because it explains how semiotics works with concepts that are much larger than a single sign. Barthes explains it as a “second order semiological system”:

Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced by a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language. Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain.

[...]

in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the language object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. (p.113)

What this means is that collections of signs can essentially become single signs of something larger. In this way, the image of the forest also signifies the myth of the American dream and the journey west.

Myth can be used to make connections between different “semiological¹ chains”, linking them to concepts and signs that might otherwise have no relation, except that they signify certain elements of a larger myth. For example, if we take two images, one of Ronald McDonald and one of riot police beating protestors, there is no direct connection between the two. They depict very different subjects at every level of Peirce’s semiotic chain. Together however, they are both related depictions of the “myths”² of capitalist decay and cultural imperialism. Barthes calls this a “metalanguage of membership” because, much like traditional myths, the significance of these myths is determined by a person’s membership in a given group. Hipsters, much like any other group, have their own collection of myths that form an important part of their semiotic communication. This metalanguage allows for symbolic communication between individuals who have no real connection to one another, as is the case with most hipsters, whose ties as a larger group are not determined by personal connections. As Leslie Harman (1986) explains, it allows indirect and second-order signifiers to be used like indexical signs within a group:

An “economy of effort” has manifested itself in the sign-ridden world of publicity in the modern city. Members communicate through cars, jeans, hairstyles, makeup, accessories, gait, and location—in short, the whole range of expressive “externals” (Simmel, 1971) that form essential communicative elements in the semiotic environment. So, with the advent of a metalanguage of membership it is possible to account for the second-order signification of Calvin Klein jeans or Michael Jackson gloves in a similar vein as “red means stop” and “smoke means fire.” (p.154)

Harman’s examples here are important because the hipster relies upon many clothing-based signs in this way, as a method for communicating cultural bonds of understanding with people who might otherwise be strangers.

In order to derive the full value from a sign or set of signs as a cultural product, it is necessary also to make use of the perspective of symbolic interactionism, which shares many terms and much subject matter with semiotics, but is also different in key ways. Semiotics is primarily concerned with the study of communication, and as such provides us with the best tools for doing so, while symbolic interactionism is more inclined towards the study of the individuals who use signs to transmit meaning, and as such is equally important here. Both treat the sign as a key window into the systems that they aim to study. Efforts have been made to merge the two methods, but have historically found

¹ Barthes uses the term semiology (derived from Saussure’s work and the French *semiologie*) instead of semiotics, but the meaning is the same.

² Note that this should not be confused with the more common use of the word myth as something untrue; this use implies nothing about the validity of the “myth” in question.

little traction. Symbolic interactionism, crucially, is concerned with the social structure of an interaction that gives a sign its meaning, and therefore offers us the tools to go beyond the text and into the discourse of the culture that created it. Harman explains the difference (as far as it concerns us here) between the two as being related to the discourse of signs:

One critical basis for difference between symbolic interactionism and semiotics that points to the implicit negotiability of meaning for both perspectives is the notion of the “fullness” of a sign or symbol. For Saussure, a sign is “full” of meaning once it carries a message that will be read according to a convention or code. Saussure’s sign, although arbitrary, is the union of signifier and signified in a way such as to reproduce meaning that neither requires nor allows further clarification or elaboration as to its “intention.” This sign is a vehicle for the encoded message that cannot be responded to or even acknowledged. It involves a one-way process that imposes the reading to be done by some interpretant whose confirmation of the sign-meaning has no bearing on the representational value of the sign. There is a sense in which Saussure’s sign is indeed denotative, in that it allows for no negotiability of meaning. For Mead (1934), a significant symbol “is nothing but the stimulus whose response is given in advance” (p. 181). The very thing that makes a symbol significant is the confirmation of its shared meaning, through interaction with an other.

[...]

Mead’s symbol is only “full” when the response has been returned to its originator. Saussure’s sign is “full” once its meaning has been codified.

[...]

symbolic interactionism is concerned with the dynamics between intentionality, interaction, and interpretation in the pursuit by members of shared meaning, while for semiotics the negotiation of meaning in the form of interaction is deemphasized in favour of the perceived direct link between object, representamen and its undistorted communication to the reader (interpretant).

In this way, by using Mead’s interpretation of the symbol’s meaning as being a negotiation between the sender and the interpretant, we can get a better sense of how a community creates a sign. This is particularly important in this case because images on Tumblr (which will be explained in the following section), once released by their creator, continue to be passed around and reinterpreted by a culture that is constantly renegotiating its own values in order to stay relevant. It is this distinction that allows us to analyse a flow of imagery as a functional representation of a culture, rather than being confined to treating each text as a one-way transmission.

Because semiotics has a long history of contention and debate about even the most basic of its terms, many writers use terms like sign, symbol, icon etc. in subtly or even significantly different³ ways (Harman, 1986). For the purpose of clarity, this thesis will rely on the terms outlined above for semiotic analysis.

Tumblr

Much of the information that I have learned about the hipster has been derived from the study of hipsters using the popular social network and blogging website Tumblr (www.tumblr.com). Founded in 2007 in New York, Tumblr was sold to Yahoo for 1.1 billion American dollars in June 2013 (Fox, 2013). As of February 2014, Tumblr claims to host 172.8 million blogs, giving some idea of the number of its users (Tumblr, Inc., 2014).

Tumblr users are given a personal blog space on which they can post images and text. Unlike other blog websites, the main focus of Tumblr is images rather than text, and as such most Tumblr blogs are composed almost entirely of images. Because this format encourages its users to communicate with images as a direct replacement for words, Tumblr is an excellent source of images for semiotic analysis. Tumblr allows users to 'reblog' images that they see and like on other people's blogs, causing that image to automatically appear on their own blog. These images are often bundled with small captions, sometimes including discourse made from layers of captions that are added when an image is reblogged by another user. The nature of this system means that there is a constant flow of images being copied, annotated and discussed, and because of the ease of the reblogging device, keen users will often add tens of images to their blogs each day, although only a small proportion of this is new content. Where new content is added to the site, it is often in the form of either photographic images from the user's life or artistic images of various kinds. Among hipsters it is generally a combination of the two. Users can subscribe to each other's blog updates by 'following' their blog. Many blogs are semi-anonymous, and tell about their author only what the images that they post and reblog can imply semiotically. Each user has a 'home' page that is updated constantly with the blog posts from everyone that they follow in chronological order, allowing them to see updates from many users at once. For the average regular Tumblr user, this means a deluge of hundreds of new images each day.

Although they likely do not comprise the majority of its users, Tumblr is extremely popular among hipsters because it allows them to communicate visually, immediately and very naturally – a form of

³ Saussure and Peirce also disagree on the use of the word *symbol* with regard to the categories of signs, with Saussure assigning it to what Peirce would call an indexical (Harman, 1986). I have opted to use Peirce's terminology.

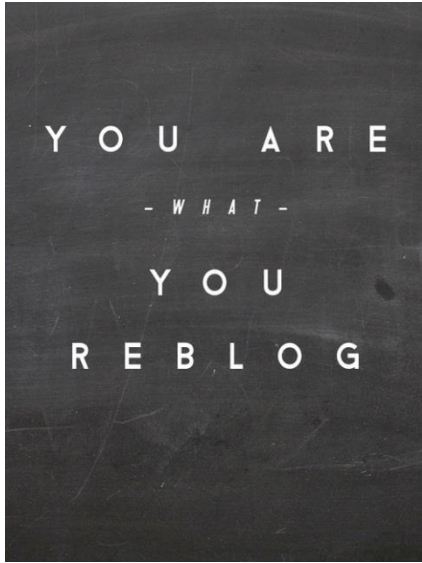


Figure 1: a popular image posted by Tumblr user typograsea, showing some of the importance that Tumblr holds for its users.

communication that this thesis will show is very important to the hipster. The site is also popular among young people in general, and is a key communication tool for many. The hipster network on Tumblr is comprised of a large number of dedicated participants that use Tumblr for written communication with one another as well as visual. It is impossible, from a user's perspective, to estimate the number of hipsters on Tumblr with any accuracy, primarily because Tumblr does not publish the relevant statistics, but the number of users who regularly post imagery with explicitly hipster themes (the specifics of which will be discussed in later chapters) easily numbers in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. These hipsters post a wide variety of images from all manner of sources. The amount of imagery that is

turned over daily is surprising – I have seen hundreds of professional-quality images every day with minimal repetition. This can likely be attributed to the very high number of hipsters who practice photography as an art form, many of whom are art school graduates or students. Because Tumblr users find their way to other blogs by looking at who has reblogged images that they like, this community is very open and membership is fluid. Unlike real-world communities that require a new entrant to know who to talk to and what to do, associations on Tumblr are free and uncomplicated, with no concern given to class, appearance or location. Because of this, Tumblr networks appear not to necessarily parallel any real-world social groups, instead existing primarily online. As will be explained later, my contention is that for the hipster, what takes place online precedes reality, which mirrors it imperfectly, instead of vice versa.

Because of Tumblr's ubiquity as a social tool among hipsters, the young in particular, it is a tool that allows us to learn a great deal about the hipster in general, and because Tumblr's nature defies any geographical specificity, we are able to observe the hipster as a global culture, rather than relying upon the hipsters in any given location and assuming that the experience is relevant globally. Given that the majority of the communication posted on Tumblr is visual rather than verbal, it is also possible to transcend language barriers to a degree, although in my experience on Tumblr examples of this actually happening are limited – the majority of hipsters speak English and are from English speaking countries. The major caveat to this method of studying the hipster is that we are offered little in the way of history: only hipster discourse as it exists now is represented, barring the rare occasions that posters choose to relate past experiences. However, this is as much a problem with hipsters in general as it is with Tumblr specifically: because this is a culture that no one will admit membership to, the

hipster has little ability or desire to put together a coherent history of themselves, and where they do it tends to be of local groups and places or highly exclusive social scenes. Where possible, a sense of the hipster's wider history has been assembled from other sources, primarily n+1's *What Was The Hipster* (2010) and Jake Kinzey's *The Sacred and the Profane* (2010) as well as more specific (often relating to a given area or scene) historical recollections in hipster literature like *Vice* magazine. Because it is not the goal of this thesis to provide a history, these sources provide us with sufficient information.

Using Tumblr as a source of imagery, I will attempt to pull together a sense of what the images posted online can tell us about the world that the hipster inhabits, and what hipsters consider important. By observing a batch of new updates every day over the course of months, I have developed a good sense of what themes and signs are popular and important, as well as how their popularity has ebbed and surged over time. The value of an image, sign, or theme in this capacity will be determined by the metrics of how many users have reblogged individual images as well as how often a theme or sign appears across a range of images posted by different users. The number of times that popular images are reblogged can run into the tens or even hundreds of thousands, giving a clear indicator as to its popularity. As such, all of the images used as evidence in this thesis have been reblogged at least 500 times (most significantly more than this) and crucially display themes or signs that are very common on hipster blogs. This number is not included in each case because it is not a perfect representation of an image's significance: an image with a high number of reblogs might gain this number from popularity with unrelated groups, and so on. The value of an image is very much determined by its context, which is not readily quantifiable.

One issue inherent in the Tumblr format is that many of the images that are posted there appear without proper attribution, because although it is possible to find an image's original poster, that poster is often not the author. Much of Tumblr's content is derived from images found elsewhere and either scanned in or copied. Because of the quick-fire nature of Tumblr posting, most users do not have the time or inclination to look for or provide proper attribution. As such, many of the images used here are without proper attribution because none is available. In such cases the user who posted the image has been attributed instead.

Hipsters also make use of a very similar social network called Instagram (<http://instagram.com/>). Despite of its importance to hipsters, I have elected not to make use of Instagram in the same way as Tumblr. This is primarily because Tumblr's system is more public and because the reblogging system (which is unique) provides both a clear metric for popularity and a consistent turnover. Based on my investigation, I believe that it is evident that observations made about the hipsters on Tumblr also hold true on Instagram. Because Instagram encourages original content to a much greater degree, the

images posted there are generally less refined, and because of the overlapping communities (most hipsters use both) the most resonant images from Instagram become popular on Tumblr as well.

Music

This thesis does not include any major discussion of hipster music. This is primarily because hipster music taste is a particularly volatile thing, in contrast with semiotics and literature, and does not hold up to analysis well. Hipster music tastes run the whole range of music styles, including rock, hip-hop and electronic dance music. Often, hipster music actively tries to avoid falling into any specific category, taking influence from various genres and mixing them together to create something new. Often this involves appropriating styles and influences from other cultures that, such as with the example of hip-hop culture, have reacted negatively to the use of their culture and sound by hipsters (Evans, 2010, p.106). While this is also true of many other things that will be studied herein, the major issue with music is that it is where the hipster applies his snobbery most distinctly: hipster bands are valued for their cult status, and when a band becomes popular enough to be studied with any clarity, they are often declared to have “sold out” and quickly lose their hip credibility. This, in combination with the extreme variety of individual hipster music ‘scenes’, which are often geographically specific (because of their bands’ limited popularity) makes hipster music a difficult thing to pin down and, more importantly, a very complicated subject to discuss with any certainty. This is true of much of hipster culture, which changes very quickly, but especially so of music. Over the time (approximately a year) that I have observed hipster culture, musical taste has been by far the most fleeting and evanescent of hipster attributes. Based on what I have observed about hipster music, there is little to be learned from it that cannot be better proven and articulated with reference to visual semiotics.

Literature

As well as analysing images, this thesis will also discuss literature. Hipster literature includes a wide range of styles but, because many hipsters are educated in the arts, tends to fit broadly within the genre of what is known as ‘literary’ fiction. The body of work produced by the Beat Generation’s authors, whose specific relevance to the hipster will be explained fully later, are key texts, and can be considered archetypal of more contemporary hipster work: they are generally semi-autobiographical and told from a first person perspective. Thematically, hipster texts tend to develop many of the concepts that are discussed in this thesis, in particular the search for authenticity and the ideal life, as well as alienation and the failure of the American dream. Because of the universality of these themes, hipster texts are drawn from throughout the 20th century, and include many writers such as Hunter S.

Thompson and Philip K. Dick who are appreciated outside of the context of their specific place in history or literary scene. Many contemporary writers could be considered to be producing hipster literature, such as Chuck Palahniuk or Tao Lin, but the majority of the texts that have evidenced widespread and long-term popularity with hipsters are from the 20th century. Selected Beat Generation texts will be discussed and analysed herein where relevant.

With regard to academic literature, there is a significant dearth of research on the subject of the hipster, considering their significance to popular culture, which can likely be attributed to their complexity as a subject and propensity for change. Two books have attempted to come fully to grips with the hipster in recent years: n+1 magazine's *What Was The Hipster* (2010), which features a collection of essays and the transcript of a discussion panel, and Jake Kinzey's *The Sacred and the Profane: an Investigation of Hipsters* (2010) which contains a thorough genealogy of the hipster and a discussion of their role within society. Both of these texts are quoted extensively throughout, and provide an excellent backbone of analysis and discourse. *What Was The Hipster* in particular includes a discussion of the hipster that ranges widely and gives a clear (if, by their own admission still uncertain) image of the hipster, although it is one that is, in my opinion, significantly limited by their focus on hipster enclaves like Williamsburg in New York. Similarly, the profusion of varied contributors means that although it is excellent as a source, it fails to come to any clear conclusions, meaning that it is primarily of use only as a guidebook for hipster culture.

Magazines such as Vice and n+1 are also crucial because they provide a degree of self-regulation to hipster culture (as evidenced by n+1's book on the subject, although they deny within that n+1 is a hipster magazine) and provide straightforward documentation of the emerging academic and world matters that concern the hipster. Vice magazine will be discussed extensively in chapter five.

Who is the hipster?

1.1 Introduction

In order to best understand the hipster's greater complexities we must first take into account the more straightforward question of who, exactly, the hipster is. The answer unfortunately is not so straightforward. As such, this section will approach the question in a number of different ways, beginning with the more abstract and ending with the more concrete. This will include a portrait of the 'average' hipster, the 'ideal' hipster, a detailed breakdown of some key attributes, and a brief genealogy.

1.2 Too much literary criticism: a conceptual introduction to the 'hipster'

As anyone who has read or attempted to write on the subject is aware, the 'hipster' is a notoriously difficult concept to put into simple terms. This is primarily due to the unwillingness of anyone, hipster or otherwise, to be labelled as a hipster. The word hipster is often a pejorative, used as an admonition for caring too much, too little, or simply dressing in a certain way. In spite of this, it is very clear that there is a very real subculture in existence for which we have no other name. Moreover, this subculture is becoming not only significant but influential, and therefore warrants investigation. In the article "Please, God, let 2014 be the year we retire the word 'hipster'" (2014), Dan Ozzi sums up the issue with the term very clearly:

The problem is that we've lumped too many subcultures and stereotypes into the definition of the hipster. As a result, the word, as an insult, has become completely meaningless. For example, those dorks who dress like it's 1932 and wear suspenders and buy handlebar moustache wax, those people are defined as hipsters. Young liberals who listen to NPR and write their screenplays in Starbucks, they are hipsters too. So are white kids who listen to hip-hop. Bearded dudes in flannel shirts, girls in rompers with birds on them, people who shop at Urban Outfitters, people with black-framed glasses, rockabilly couples, Prius drivers, bike-riders, Pitchfork readers, thrift store regulars, vinyl collectors, folk rockers, art school students, trust fund kids, vegans, ex-punks, anyone

between the ages of 22 and 35, and any of the 2.6 million people who live in Brooklyn. All hipsters, apparently. If everyone is a hipster, then no one is a hipster.

Rather, then, than make this distinction along the common lines of fashion, musical taste, political affiliation or any of the other basic indicators that we might commonly use, but which the hipster refuses, it is most profitable to define the hipster by a certain manner of reaction to the issues that mainstream culture is currently experiencing. These issues include the culture of consumerism, the increasing worldwide gap between rich and poor, and the pollution of the environment, among others. The hipster's response to these issues creates an identity that is multi-faceted and complex, but ultimately cohesive and well-evidenced. In a recent issue of n+1 magazine, the editorial staff made a significant observation that helps to clarify why the hipster's response to these common issues is interesting:

We live in the emerging mainstream moment of the sociology of taste. Think back to the first time you heard someone casually talk of "cultural capital" at a party, usually someone else's inglorious pursuit or accrual of it; or when you first listened to someone praise "the subversion of the dominant in a cultural field," or use the words strategize, negotiate, positioning, or leveraging in a discussion of a much admired "cultural producer's" career. (For it was always careers, never single works, that were being considered.) You might have thought that you were listening to Wall Street bankers detailing mergers and acquisitions, but these were English majors! Then there appeared those charticles at the back of New York magazine, weekly guides to the rise and fall of tastes, which derived directly from Bourdieu's maps of the field of power. (n+1 editors, 2013, p. 1)

The people that n+1's editors are referring to here are what we would call hipsters. They may not display any of the more overt signs of hipster membership, such as the distinctive clothing (although it is more than likely that they do), but this "sociology of taste" is crucial. It shows a worldview where everything is not only capable of being analysed, but needs to be. All motivation must be questioned, lest some pleasure eventually be discovered to be false, exploitative or ignorant. "Can we no longer really provide good-faith reasons for our cultural preferences," the editors ask, and the answer, as far as the hipster is concerned, is no. Too many of the promises and placations offered by society in order to explain away the evil of the world have already turned out to be hollow. The hipster, in essence, is the child who took the rhetoric of consumerism and the American dream to heart, now grown up and determined not to be fooled again. This forms a distinct and important way of looking at the world – a 'hipster gaze' full of analysis and sociology. The editorial is titled *Too Much Sociology*, but it might just as easily be *Too Much Semiotics* or *Too Much Literary Criticism* – any of the school of arts'

Like the hipster, the flâneur resists depiction as a human being, becoming instead a manifestation of the busy Parisian streets and a response to the ontological problem that they posed. His gaze was very much the hipster's gaze. He treated the streets and their inhabitants as a hermeneutical puzzle, a text to be deciphered. Were the flâneur alive today it is not hard to imagine that he might find himself on Tumblr, poring over images as the broken and scattered pieces of "the original whole" in the hope that that they might still "possess some residual attraction" (p.170) and pull together in the endless semiotic stream for long enough to finally pass by someone with the inclination to notice. The hipster does something that is not so different, although they walk entirely different streets. The hipster is best understood at first in this same way: not, as it is so easy to do, by his or her appearance, but as a conceptual response to the hermeneutical problem of the world as it exists today. It may be that the hipster is not as grand as the flâneur's ontological mission, but few things are. The hipster is, like the flâneur, a temporary condition arising out of a certain place and time.

1.3 The average hipster: a précis

For the purposes of convenience, we will now establish a general idea of what the average hipster might look like, based on what I have observed on Tumblr from users' posts about their personal lives, and from analysis of the images that they like and post. This does not all apply to all hipsters, but in my experience the majority of it applies to most.

The average hipster is somewhere between the ages of 18 and 25⁴. There is a roughly even likelihood that they are male or female. They are most likely white and English speaking, although they are avowedly non-racist and affect a cosmopolitan outlook. If they are not white, they are most likely to be of Asian descent, but still an English speaker. They are most likely American, or at least consume a lot of American media. They are most likely studying toward a degree in fine art or the arts, or have already recently graduated. With this qualification they hope to get a job in a creative industry, although it is also likely that they have yet to achieve this dream, and currently work a service job of some sort while engaging in creative endeavours on the side. This creative endeavour is most likely to be photography, although it is also likely to be poetry or fiction. They come from a family somewhere within the spectrum of the middle-class. Throughout their lives they have felt entitled to a continuation of this middle-class life, but now are worried that they may never achieve it for themselves. They are skinny but not athletic, and enjoy healthy, home-grown food. They have

⁴ Because hipster culture has existed in some form since the late 90s many hipsters may be older than this. However the current 'generation' of hipsters – who are the primary subject of this thesis, are within this age group. The use of Tumblr, which is not common among the older hipsters, marks a fairly clean break between these generations.

generally left-wing views, although they avoid actual politics. They are concerned about popular issues such as the environment, the exploitation of overseas labour, gay marriage equality, the rising gap between the rich and the poor, and the excesses of consumer culture. They feel guilty about their part in the culture that has given rise to these issues, and want to find ways to use technology to fix these issues. They are also aware that technology has caused many of these issues, and want to find a way to live a simpler life and become self-reliant. These two impulses pull them in different directions, and it makes them uncomfortable. They feel a great nostalgia for the way the world was in their parents' and grandparents' times, when things were much simpler. They also feel nostalgia for their own childhood, when they felt no concern about these issues, and could participate in technology and consumerism freely, and had high hopes for a technological future. In some way, the clothing that they wear reflects these nostalgias, and this internal struggle.

1.4 The ideal hipster: Cayce Pollard

Because Tumblr users post mostly images that reflect the life that they would like to have, or would like others to believe that they have, it provides us with a much clearer view of the idealised hipster than the actual one. This is not an impediment: the hipster is very idealistic, and it is by understanding these ideals that we get the best sense of what they really value and hope to achieve.

Perhaps suitably, one excellent example of the ideal hipster is found in a fictional character. Cayce Pollard (pronounced "Case"), the heroine of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003)⁵, makes an excellent example of the hipster ideal. Set in the wake of 9/11, the novel chronicles, perhaps by accident, the birth of the contemporary hipster. As such she is a particularly good example because, in Gibson's typically prescient style, she comes somewhat before her time, and therefore lacks many of the overt signifiers, visual or otherwise, that we have become used to associating with hipsterdom. Pollard works as a "coolhunter"⁶, a freelance semiotics expert with an innate sense for the future of fashion and signs:

Google Cayce and you will find "coolhunter," if you look closely you may see it suggested that she is a "sensitive" of some kind, a dowser in the world of global marketing.

Though the truth, Damien would say, is closer to allergy, a morbid and sometimes violent reactivity to the semiotics of the marketplace.

⁵ Note that because this text is referenced from an e-book, there are no page numbers available.

⁶ Cool Hunting is now the name of a popular hip-focused website that specialises in finding new and avant-garde things, such as high-concept clothing, emerging technology and art (<http://www.coolhunting.com/>).

Using this skill she consults to advertising agencies, who know the value of her intuition. This intuition is not learned, but instinctive: in one scene she demonstrates the ability to pick the emerging fashion trends out of a crowd of people in the street, and in another she determines the value of a potential logo instantly, shaming ad agency executives who were unaware that it would never be successful. Her connection to semiotics is more real than theoretical: the subtle forces that draw ordinary humans into feeling one way or another about a brand grab her violently, instilling nausea or panic depending on the signs in question:

But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. Or so she hopes, and doesn't know, but suspects in her heart that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity.

She needs out of this logo-maze, desperately. But the escalator to the street exit will dump her back into Knightsbridge, seeming somehow now more of the same, and she remembers that the street runs down, and always her energy with it, to *Sloane Square*, another nexus of whatever she suffers these reactions to. Laura Ashley, down there, and that can get ugly.

She has a sense for signs and semiotics that others do not – or rather, she is aware of the forces that push and pull the ignorant crowds into consumerism – and it is both a blessing and a curse. It allows her to be let into secrets that others might miss, and often centres on finding the original point of something cool:

[...] her career of actual on-the-street cool-hunting, such as it's been, and as much as she hates to call it that. She's done a bit, too. She's been dropped into neighbourhoods like Dogtown, which birthed skateboarding, to explore roots in hope of finding whatever the next thing might be. And she's learned it's largely a matter of being willing to ask the next question. She's met the very Mexican who first wore his baseball cap backward, asking the next question. She's that good.

By locating the authentic source, she is able to access the cool before it is blown out of proportion, abstracted and “removed from the source”. Her job is to be among the Avant-garde again and again, forever avoiding the peril of becoming outmoded by “being willing to ask the next question”. Her search for the authentic (which in this case is a quest for the author of a strangely emotive video that is being gradually disseminated in fragments on the internet) leads her across the globe, to London, Tokyo and Moscow. This trip is funded by Blue Ant, a multi-national advertising agency that values the important advantage that early access to secret knowledge provides. As such, Pollard travels in luxury, her every need met by Blue Ant's strange but constant care. Crucially this travel is not undertaken as

an outsider: although she is an American and therefore not local to any of these places, her sense for cool leads her, like a dowser to water, inevitably toward the coolest secrets in each location. Similarly the wealth of Blue Ant's patronage allows her to coast safely above the danger and dirt in each location: she goes as a VIP, a visiting delegate for whom the very best and most interesting accommodation, transport and knowledge is made automatically available by Blue Ant's local branch. She manages to be both above the roughness of any given location, but also deep in it – invulnerable in her luxury but also down-to-earth by virtue of her sheer natural talent, gliding silently and unimpeded like a phantom through world culture.

Importantly, Pollard acquires much of the information that she uses to track down her mysterious video's author from a semi-anonymous online community called Footage:Fetish:Forum, where fans of the video gather to discuss its semiotics and try to discover its secrets. Pollard relies upon this community to alert her to any new fragments of film that have been found and to help break down the information that they contain. As with Blue Ant, her friends from this community help her as she travels, giving her the benefit of their local knowledge. The forum becomes for her a space away from space:

It is a way now, approximately, of being at home. The forum has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones.

Because the film has no actual language the online community that surrounds it is global, drawn by taste rather than the boundaries of cities or nations. It speaks through pure imagery, a language that requires only the skill to recognise it, and as such the community requires no forced exclusivity – only those who understand its quality on an intrinsic level will feel the need to become involved. Although on a different scale, this is a lot like Tumblr networks, which form around discourses of imagery that are emotive and resonant to each individual.

In spite of the wealth and the other benefits of Blue Ant's patronage, Pollard maintains a relationship with the company and its founder that is largely adversarial and begrudging at best. This is because Pollard is ultimately critical of the consumerist advertising system, despite its being the source of her income. She is able to stand apart from the agencies that are part of this system because her unique talent is such that she is able to dictate her own terms to her employers without fear that they will employ someone else for the same job. Pollard completes her outsider-ness by dressing with an extremely calculated neutrality, wearing only clothes that are authentic and broadcast no signals:

[...]a fresh Fruit Tee-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-1, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the black leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay—if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark.

She sees her own gray eyes, pale in the glass, and beyond them Ben Sherman shirts and fishtail parkas, cufflinks in the form of the RAF roundel that marked the wings of Spitfires.

CPUs. Cayce Pollard Units. That's what Damien calls the clothing she wears. CPUs are either black, white, or gray, and ideally seem to have come into this world without human intervention.

What people take for relentless minimalism is a side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion. This has resulted in a remorseless paring-down of what she can and will wear. She is, literally, allergic to fashion. She can only tolerate things that could have been worn, to a general lack of comment, during any year between 1945 and 2000.

Notably this date range ends at the year 2000, excluding the two years since (the book is based in 2002) implying some understanding on Gibson/Pollard's part that relics of the 20th century change their meaning, however subtly, in the shift to the 21st century. Cayce's Buzz Rickson's jacket, a reproduction of a bomber jacket first issued in 1949 (Buzz Rickson's is a real brand that has since released the jacket as part of a "William Gibson collection", alongside a number of other reproduction garments), displays a relationship to the past that could perhaps not have existed in the 20th century:

The Rickson's is a fanatical museum-grade replica of a U.S. MA-1 flying jacket, as purely functional and iconic a garment as the previous century produced. Dorotea's slow burn is being accelerated, Cayce suspects, by her perception that Cayce's MA-1 trumps any attempt at minimalism, the Rickson's having been created by Japanese obsessives driven by passions having nothing at all to do with anything remotely like fashion.

Although the MA-1 jacket never achieved widespread popularity with hipsters⁷, the M-1965 field jacket, which is similarly "functional and iconic", notably did, although its general forms have since been taken up by popular fashion and become abstracted. Similarly, reproductions of 20th century American jeans, such as Levi's 501 cuts from particular years and various Lee pieces, created largely by similar groups of "Japanese obsessives", have become relatively popular among hipsters.

Considering all of these features, Cayce Pollard is an ideal representation of the hipster. Although she does not conform to all of the specific fashions that we might commonly use to identify hipsters visually, she is very much the theoretical ideal: she is a uniquely talented creative, a global citizen, an

⁷ The MA-1 did find some underground popularity however, and as of February 2014 it actually appears to be experiencing something of a resurgence.

initiate into secrets and above all a natural reader of signs. Although most hipsters are not all, or even necessarily any of these things, they are the ideal – when the hipster looks at people in images on Tumblr, Cayce Pollard is what they likely imagine that those people are like. In a later Gibson novel she even acknowledges some of her significance as a hipster archetype, saying, “I’d been sort of coolhunter as well, before that had a name, but now it’s difficult to find anyone who isn’t,” implying that her talent, which she loses at the end of *Pattern Recognition*, had been spread around the world by Blue Ant’s marketing, like “some kind of global contagion” (*Zero History*, 2010, p.336). She is, therefore, as close to the hipster archetype as it is possible to get. With this ideal hipster character in mind, we can now look at the individual attributes of the real hipster.

1.5 The attributes of the hipster

Wealth

Wealth is central to the hipster experience. One need only look at the price tags in hipster stores (some examples of which are examined later) to see evidence of this: prices are consistently very high, and although the products themselves are often equally high quality, there is also evidence among hipsters generally of a drive toward consumption of goods that equals or exceeds what we see in regular society. Much of what we see posted on Tumblr by hipsters is consumer-driven: we regularly see images that imitate the forms of advertising, and that fetishize items such as clothing as being essential parts of otherwise unrelated concepts like reconnecting with nature or being artistic. As such, a degree of wealth is necessary for proper participation in hipster culture. Mark Greif (2010) notes that this wealth is not necessary straightforward financial wealth, but actually comes in the form of cultural capital:

Hence the meaning of the (not literally true) assumption that “all hipsters are rich”: the truth it speaks to is the knowledge that, income-poor though they may be temporarily, young people who choose and can afford to pursue this form of status competition often have, at the least, been recipients of significant educational investment (lead to the college degree) and are likely to have possessed some safety from their previous, parental class status (a reliably middle-class backstop). Soon enough they are likely to ascend out of the poorer, low-rent neighbourhoods in which they temporarily live. As for those ambitious people who move to the city from lower-middle-class backgrounds, the hipster mode equally provides worthwhile distinction in a cultural effort at classing up; you blend in and gain a new taste of future superiority. Superiority over other classes

than your peers, too: you may be tending bar, but if you are tending bar in hip clothes and you're in a band at night, you'll always possess higher status in *culture* (if not in income) than the bond-trader losers ordering vodka tonics in button downs. (p.161)

The value of this is that, with the safety net of middle-class parents and a degree or two behind them, the hipster is disengaged from what would otherwise be the more pressing issues of suffering through low-income work while trying to save for an education or the deposit on a house. A hipster's income is left open entirely for spending, because spending, as the example of the bartender shows, is the best way to increase cultural capital. This relationship with money also serves as a barrier to entry: unless a person is prepared to spend in this way, their ability to be functional as a hipster is limited, and therefore for someone from a lower-class background, being a hipster would simply seem like a financially reckless decision. Similarly, the hipster's mode of conspicuous consumption requires a relationship with wealth that has a long history: unlike the more traditional instances of conspicuous consumption, which are "characterized by possession of wasteful commodities" (Gottdiener, 2000, p. 9) and therefore intrinsically about showing one's wealth, hipster consumption is about taste and the implicit display of cultural capital. Although the two are, from a sociological perspective, inherently inseparable, hipster consumption never really addresses the issue of wealth because when we see it as cultural capital, wealth slides easily under the radar. The very idea of a middle-class upbringing is an exercise in hidden wealth, which manifests itself as safety, stability and freedom rather than luxury. This wealth is so well hidden that not only does the hipster not see it, but it has remained unseen for perhaps generations. Wealth, to the hipster, simply means the freedom to buy the right things, to travel and properly engage with the world. Wealth even means the ability to be *less* wasteful, because it affords the ability to make 'ethical' purchases such as locally made goods or free range eggs. As with Cayce Pollard and Blue Ant, wealth is simply an insulator, an invisible membrane through which the hipster engages with the world.

It is this relationship with wealth – or rather, deliberate lack of relationship with it – that allows the hipster to fetishize its absence. The hipsters of the early 2000's were the most overt with this, appropriating the signs of 'white trash' culture as a vehicle for irony and a kind of bitter authenticity perhaps best encapsulated in their love of Pabst Blue Ribbon (or PBR), a famously cheap and low-quality American beer. Although white trash culture has been strip-mined of its semiotic value and PBR has become too well-known as a joke to retain any credibility among hipsters, the idea of living a cash-poor life as a way of staying 'real' is still popular. This likely has a lot to do with many hipsters being of or around university age, and therefore unable to avoid being relatively poor, rather than any Beat Generation-style desire to give up one's wealth and go looking for something else. Interestingly, the removal of ostentation and the shifting of focus instead to the more authenticity-driven,

minimalist examples of taste has in the past been a characteristic reaction of the wealthy to the intrusions of new wealth:

The nouveau succeeds by his exhibitionism in gaining the regard of the masses, but the adoption of the canon of restraint by the old elite forces him in turn to recognize its superiority. By seeming to value little what is of such cardinal importance to the newly rich, the old elite successfully undercuts the props from the prestige system of the nouveau.

For the nouveau is made painfully aware that the evidence of material splendour on which he places so high regard and which he has striven so long to obtain, are not highly esteemed in that lofty society to which he desires entrance. The old elite reveals its indifference to ostentatious display, which quite apparently it can afford, by clearly refraining from such display. And to completely demolish the nouveau it terms all conspicuous consumption to be not really the sort of thing which well-bred persons engage in. (Weiss & Steiner, 1951, p. 264)

While the majority of hipsters were never really the kind of rich that Weiss and Steiner refer to here, they are members of a similarly (although of course less) privileged class, facing a similar change in the social order. Where “counter-snobbery” could be said to have been caused by the post-war rise of the middle class propelling the upper segment of that class into genuine riches, what the hipster is facing is more like the fall of the middle class. As members of what has been termed, among other things, ‘generation screwed’, many hipsters are facing a future where there is no real hope of ever being as wealthy as their parents. They are still, by and large, a wealthy group, but there is a distinct change of social position taking place, and as such, the hipster has needed to find a way to show the distinction that they were raised to believe that they had, but which recessions and failing job markets are beginning to teach them that they do not. Counter-snobbery becomes a practical way to avoid the question of what actually distinguishes the hipster from his or her contemporaries (or even co-workers) in the working class in light of the fact that many of those contemporaries are likely earning the same or even more money. We see examples of this often on Tumblr in images of previously run-down inner city apartments that have been renovated and returned to functionality. Where the Beat ideal was to be a free agent moving outside of society and occasionally through it, tied down to nothing and simply poor as a by-product, the hipster ideal has more to do with establishing a bolthole and clinging to it – an ethos that we see in action in the hipster’s much-maligned habit of gentrifying poor neighbourhoods. Where the Beats strove not to rely on a corrupt society, the hipster would rather reform it – to teach it by example how to spend its money more thoughtfully (as dubious as the validity of the hipster’s claim to this may be at times). In the images that we see on Tumblr, painting pock-marked brick walls or old radiators white is a common theme, as is leaving sections of aged wood

exposed where years of feet or hands have rubbed the paint away, choices that are designed to turn an interior into a modern white space while leaving evidence of a place's history, showing clearly what changes the hipster occupant has made and what historical aspects they value. Cayce Pollard lives in a similar apartment in a cheap rent-controlled neighbourhood of New York:

Her own place, in New York, is a whitewashed cave, scarcely more demonstrative of self, its uneven tenement floors painted a shade of blue she discovered in northern Spain. An ancient tint, arsenic-based. Peasants there had used it for centuries on interior walls, and it was said to keep flies away. Cayce had had it mixed in plastic enamel, sans arsenic, from a Polaroid she'd taken. Like the varnish on the bar in Camden High Street, it sealed the furry splinters of wear. Texture. She likes an acquired texture, evidence of long habitation, but nothing too personal.

Her apartment is not expensive – it is kept cheap by rent-control and is “as carefully cleansed of extraneous objects as she can keep it” – what we see instead is an exercise in taste rather than wealth. Although the blue floor would undoubtedly be an expensive addition, the thing that keeps other homeowners from imitating it is not the price tag but the knowledge required to pick the right shade of blue and to properly enjoy what it represents. Her wealth is still ever-present, but it is converted into the more acceptable form of knowledge and social capital.

Conservatism

The hipster's idealisation of a more authentic time has a tendency to manifest as a kind of conservatism. This is not conservatism in the more common political sense but rather a desire to return to the ways of the past and live a less complicated life. Whether hipsters do much to realise this desire is another question, but it forms a crucial part of their ideology. In a practical sense we see this in the popular revival of various home-production skills such as baking bread, preserving, pickling, or brewing beer. Vegetable gardens have become popular, in particular those containing 'heirloom' fruit varieties, as has buying goods from local producers. Hipster restaurants, having largely exhausted the appeal of modernist cooking methods, have begun to focus on reviving simple regional and peasant dishes, practicing “nose-to-tail” and “farm-to-table” methods that aim to use every part of a locally-reared animal. The focus in this is primarily on food items and food culture, because food represents one of the most straightforward ways of improving one's engagement with the world, easily allowing the hipster to reduce their environmental footprint while actually eating better and becoming healthier, both morally and physically. Eating, in this sense, is a very straightforward way of taking something conceptual and incorporating it literally into the self. Similarly, it has become popular

for hipsters to buy quality, hard-wearing clothing made in nostalgic styles. Leaning towards modernist styling, these clothes are often unadorned, preferring to let the quality of materials and the patina created by a long lifetime of use speak for itself. Practices such as barbering and leather craft have become common. Having observed the excesses of global culture, the hipster chooses to respond with an ethos that values sustainability and personal responsibility for one's own consumption. We see a good example of this in the following Tumblr post, which includes both an image (figure 1) and text. Tumblr user simplytonka writes:

How my heart yearns to live a quiet life like this. Reading the Bible and books on the front porch, a husband and children to share life with. A garden to feed us with foods that grow from the earth. And how it also yearns to spread goodness and love to the world. To study and research psychology to help those who suffer. To leave an impact of compassion and love on the hearts of others.

This is a particularly clear example, but similar images are posted and re-blogged by hipsters consistently, often including a hipster as the subject of the photograph. To the hipster, who in practice most likely lives in the city, a simple "quiet life" out in the country holds a strange allure – it represents the theoretical apex of their stated ambitions, and yet for the kind of person who lives in the city and posts fashion images on Tumblr, it is also largely implausible as a real lifestyle. As simplytonka seems to acknowledge, this fantasy exists as more of a charm – a natural state of living that should be kept in mind and referred to as the ideal – rather than an actual objective. As we see in the picture, the person living this life is not actually a hipster; the hipster is behind the camera.



Figure 1: posted by Tumblr user cinoh and reblogged by user simplytonka along with the text quoted above.



Figure 2: posted by Tumblr user aseel00 and reblogged with the simple comments "work" by one user and "everyday" by another, showing a fetishisation of the concept of simple hands-on work and its aesthetic, which is captured here by worn, filthy overalls and dirty fingernails. Note the excellent use of colour balance, contrast and depth of field that turns dirt into beauty.

As with all conservatism, there is an idealised past upon which much of what the hipster celebrates and works toward is based. In general terms, this past is probably best defined as being post-war America – a time and place characterised in popular memory by a perfect mix of wealth, opportunity

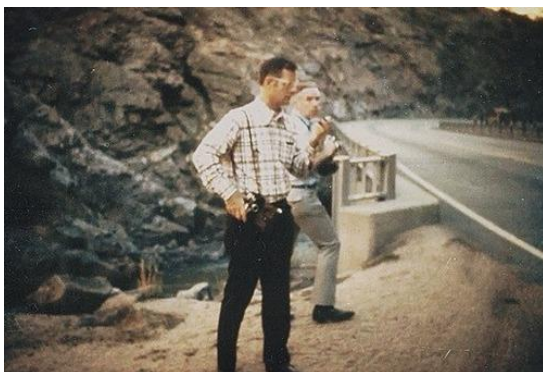
and optimism. America is the default location for this ideal past because it has become the default location for media in general: when a cultural text remembers the past, that past is almost always American, and for the young hipster, cultural texts are the transcripts of cultural memory. The post-war years were essentially the beginning of the 'American century'; the defeat of fascism was a validation of democracy and capitalism, creating an up-swelling of optimism that led to an economic boom lasting for the better part of three decades. This time period appeals to the hipster because of the optimism and innocence that it represents, as well as the relatively uncomplicated and authentic lifestyle that it offered. In contrast to the present day, where to be American and young is to shoulder the burden of all sorts of unwelcome guilt, from environmental pollution to the sins of military interventionism, the post-war American (in theory at least) felt no such guilt, being either naïve or genuinely innocent. The American military was, for the last time in its history, demonstrably a force for good, whose heroism had helped to defeat an almost cartoonishly evil enemy. We see an example of this in Cayce Pollard's MA-1 jacket from 1949: rather than being a symbol of American militarism like a present-day army jacket would be, it becomes a more general symbol of Americana and prosperity. It was during these times that the nuclear family and the modern company man prospered, but crucially even those who did not fit in, like Jack Kerouac, could survive drifting across a country that must have seemed so vast and full of possibility. The post-war years are, in the eyes of popular history, the time when the fantasy of the American dream was at its most plausible.

Of course, this conservatism, once again like all others, is based more on feeling than it is on actual history. The hipster's ideal past is a patchwork of influences, taking pieces of inspiration from throughout the 20th century, and from the vague affect and incomplete retellings of cinema and television. In literary terms many authors from the 20's and 30's are popular, in particular F. Scott Fitzgerald but also the rest of the 'lost generation', as well as hippie culture from the 60's and 70's. Ever on the lookout for new sources of inspiration, the hipster will incorporate anything that resonates as a meaningful cultural symbol of authenticity. This syncretism may seem strange, given that their education and need for historical sources of knowledge would seem to suggest (and in my experience, this is relatively true) that hipsters ought to have a good understanding of history. The simple answer is that when it comes in the form of signs, history loses its linearity. The historical awareness that informs conservatism is made up of impressions rather than genuine events, and in this sense is almost entirely separate from the 'real' history that one might find in a textbook, of which the individual hipster's understanding likely varies about as much as we would expect from a member of the educated classes. Much as a set of slides begin to tell a new story when jumbled up and presented out of order, history for the hipster has more in common with one of William Burroughs' "cut-up" novels – where the text is taken apart and reorganised into a reeling impressionist mess of experiences,

absent any formal or authorial sense of time or narrative – than it does a historical timeline. Like the cut-up, a narrative emerges out of the chaos simply because the reader translates a series of impressions into a continuity. When the communal experience of historical impressions comes in the form of images on Tumblr, which, like the cut-up, is both linear (in the sense that images appear on the dashboard one after the other) and non-linear (following the posts of many different authors, the order in which they appear is basically random) at the same time, history gives way, falling into a kind of semiotic melting-pot. The emergence out of this pot of an ideology that favours the American post-war period says more about that time’s prevalence as a wider cultural fantasy than it does the hipster specifically.

Interestingly, we can also see evidence that in spite of this conservatism’s beginnings as an environmentalist response to consumerism, other traditionally conservative behaviours, such as religious belief, marriage and child-rearing have begun to seep into hipster culture as well. The post

Figure 4: posted by Tumblr user biological-research. This image was reblogged with a note from another user, earthysoul, who wrote, “I wish I wish I wish” – indicating a strong nostalgia for 1977, which comes at the end of what we might call the post-war period, but has been developed as a key time of innocence by media like That 70’s Show, which was airing when most of today’s hipsters were relatively young.



Figures 5 (left) and 6 (above) posted by Tumblr users dailydoseofstuf and rainydaysandblankets respectively. These images, presumably taken from family photo albums, show the kind of history that the hipster seeks to bring into the present: modern and yet authentic and intensely American. Note the washed-out and blue-tinted colour palette in figure 6, and the oversaturation and dark vignette around the corners of figure 5, all of which are often added artificially to images created by hipsters and which we will see often in subsequent images.

by Tumblr user simplytonka referenced above is a particularly clear example, stating a desire to be “reading the Bible and books on the front porch, [with] a husband and children to share life with”. Tumblr is alive with images of hipster weddings, which are surprisingly traditional, showing loving heterosexual couples and often large, expensive wedding ceremonies. Religious quotes (always Christian) are also often posted, scrawled in hip-looking retro signwriting style across images of the outdoors that look almost identical to images used for hipster advertising. In embracing the idealism and semiotics of a rosy American past, it would seem that the hipster has, almost accidentally, taken on some of that past’s ‘family values’ as well. The dedication to inclusiveness that we see in hipsters – that sociology-driven unwillingness to exclude any culture – means that while the average hipster,



Figure 7: "he has made us accepted into the beloved" a quote from Ephesians 1:6, posted by Tumblr user laurenannoleary. Note the use of retro-looking handwritten type, which is a common trope, as is the arrow motif. Christian quotes drawn in this way over outdoor scenes regularly appear on Tumblr, indicating a connection between the natural world and the hipster's understanding of God.



Figure 8: a branding image taken from Slinghammer Co.'s Tumblr (slinghammerco.tumblr.com). Note the similarity to the bible quote image to the left. Slinghammer sells handkerchiefs made of organic American cotton and deadstock fabrics.

being educated and progressive, would be unlikely to be religious, the atheist hipster is generally unwilling to draw attention to it. As such, there is no impulse from within the hipster community to assert an expected religious position. Religion, under these circumstances, becomes a lifestyle choice that has little reason impact on the other aspects of the hipster's life – although it tends to temper the desire for more transgressive or cynical behaviours that some hipsters display, the kind of Christianity that can co-exist in any sense with hipsterdom is not one that is given to evangelism or worldview-dominating faith (McCracken, 2010, pp. 96, 97). As we see when comparing the images shown above, Christian themes fit surprisingly well into the un-ironic/enthusiastic elements of hipster culture; the hipster's passion for authentic behaviours in the outdoors is easily reconceptualised as a passion for connecting with God in the wilderness. My understanding (which can only ever be anecdotal – no hipster census would ever be possible) however is that these more seriously conservative hipsters are a minority, and although there is certainly nothing extreme about them, it is very unlikely that they will ever grow to be any more common or expand their conservatism much

further – hipster culture is generally drifts away from any extreme of thought, for reasons that will be discussed below, and will likely either cause these hipsters to check their enthusiasm or leave them suddenly out of the loop.

Politics

The hipster is famously apolitical. Being generally American and sociologically inclined, this is perhaps unsurprising – when the political system is trapped in a deadlock of meaningless partisanship, political engagement becomes less and less worthwhile as time goes by. Mark Greif (2010) conceptualises the hipster’s political engagement as being associated with a series of ultimately ignored attempts at left-wing discontent:

Where hipsterdom is taken to be anti-political, it seems that the watershed moments it particularly jeers at, and may have been shaped and periodized by, were two major episodes of ultimately failed political action, which stand out in the sensibility of this generation: the 1999 protests at the WTO Ministerial conference in Seattle – hence the hipsters’ sometime mockery, sometimes embrace, of global labour concern and environmentalism – and the ignored 2003 protests against the promised invasion of Iraq. Barack Obama’s election in 2008 then seems to have represented a reunification of the apathetic and the committed around disgust with the previous presidency – *no one* liked George W. Bush. (p.6)

We can of course now add 2011’s Occupy movement to this list, as with Barack Obama’s ineffectual presidency. This history of defeats and unrealised ambitions, coupled with the hipster’s tendency to apply critical sociology and analyse the motivations and power structures of anything that they begin to feel enthusiastic about, would tend to stymie any developing impulse toward serious political engagement. Of course we can also tell from this list that the hipster does appear to make a habit of intermittently attempting political engagement – but that they tend not to achieve much by doing so, and ultimately withdraw into disengagement again. The hipster’s engagement with the issues that they value tends instead to be through the rubric of consumption: by purchasing ethically and carefully, they work to use their economic power and cultural capital to reward and foster positive practices. Given that the hipster primarily identifies the world’s issues as being economically driven (explained in section 2.3) this is a relatively logical behaviour, although it could also be argued that it better represents a desire to alleviate their own personal guilt than any real concern about making the world a better place.

Race

Being predominantly American and of middle class origin, hipsters tend to be white. Hipsters of other races do exist, and appear regularly enough on Tumblr, but they are in a significant minority. Where they do appear, they are most often of Asian descent, with other races represented equally. Although the hipster is committed to a 'post-racial' outlook, owing largely to their attitude of sociological criticism, their nostalgia tends significantly toward white history – only from a white viewpoint, for example, do the 1950s seem like an ideal time to have been alive. Of course, this nostalgic history as presented in hipster media is scrubbed clean of any racism, but it is no coincidence that the faces that we see in images nostalgic for the post-war period are almost universally white. As such, a lot of hipster behaviour could be read as a method of getting back in touch with white history, and the attempt to find and develop any authenticities that might be unique to that culture. It should be noted, however, that the hipster appears to view this more as an attempt to come to terms with their American-ness than their whiteness.

Gender

In much the same way as with race, the hipster is overtly feminist. Feminist images are common on Tumblr, and the human subjects shown in images in general represent both genders roughly equally. Female models are more often used ornamentally than men in images, acting as set-pieces rather than participants, but perhaps less often than we might normally expect from media in general. Male bodies are also used in this way, but less frequently than women. This relative equality has to do with the amount of fashion related content in hipster imagery on Tumblr, although even in fashion images men are more likely to be shown doing something – hiking in the outdoors or doing a job in the city – than women. It has been observed in the past that hipster males present a “feminized” appearance, with skinny bodies wrapped in skinny clothes and an obsession with clothing and decoration (Baumgardner, 2010), though the images that I have reviewed would suggest that in recent times a more masculine aesthetic has become popular: although hipsters still tend to be skinny and fashion-obsessed, overt signifiers of masculinity such as full beards, flannel shirts and rugged leather boots have become common components of that fashion. Activities that are strongly coded as masculine such as chopping wood, building things and drinking beer are common subjects for hipster images. There is a strong correlation between these activities and authenticity; activities that are coded as authentic are often also coded as being masculine, such as wood chopping. Some traditionally feminine activities are coded as being authentic as well, such as gardening, cooking or making clothes, but images of these activities show men and women participating in them roughly equally. Reclaiming

masculinity, then, has become an important theme in hipster culture in recent years – perhaps as a response to the assertions of femininity and androgyny that have been regularly aimed at the hipster aesthetic in the past.

1.6 Is the hipster modern or postmodern?

The hipster's way of life reflects an outlook that can be fully classified as neither modern nor postmodern, but rather a mixture of both. The hipster's self-consciousness defies the simplicity of any clear definition, taking aspects of the two and incorporating them in seemingly incompatible and contradictory ways. In order to make sense of it, we must define these terms and then look to the contemporary scholarship on the subject of what, if anything, comes after postmodernity.

We find perhaps the simplest and most relevant definition of what it means to be modern in Adolf Loos' 1908 essay on the subject, *Ornament and Crime*. For Loos, modernity represented the next step of cultural evolution, and this evolution was best measured by what a culture's participants chose to leave out of their lives. "The evolution of culture", he wrote, "is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects" (p.30). Loos makes the example of such ornaments as tattoos on the human body and "scallop and holes" punched into shoes, arguing that they are unnecessary relics of paganism and meaningless tradition. The modern age found itself incapable of producing new ornament, a predicament that most observers synonymised with an inability to produce new culture, but that to Loos was evidence that culture was finally arising without ornament – "I said: Weep not! See, therein lies the greatness of our age, that it is incapable of producing a new ornament. We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way to freedom through ornament" (p.30). Although Loos primarily uses aesthetic ornamentation for his examples, he also speaks of religion (both Christian and pagan) as ornament, and it is evident that to him ornamentation is more a cultural issue than an aesthetic one. Ornamentation and the fashions that it represents are inherently irrational – they have no tangible benefit and yet form so much of the primary value of an object – and it is this irrational relationship with wealth, production and cultural endeavour that Loos hoped we had "fought our way to freedom through". Modernity, then, represents "a triumphalistic exercise of [universal] instrumental rationality in the domain of the social" (Vanhooser, 2003, p. 13), that is, the celebration of culture-wide rationalism that formed the basis of much of the 20th century's unprecedented development.

Postmodernity, in its simplest definition, is no more than what came after the ideas of modernity. Although he fails to acknowledge it, the blueprint for modernity's ultimate decline was evident in Loos'

argument: the absence of ornament became like an ornament itself – a fashion that would eventually be replaced by new generations for whom it could never have the same value as it did for Loos. As Fredric Jameson (2000) explains, in reference to art:

Those formerly subversive and embattled styles - Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens; the International Style (Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies); Stravinsky; Joyce, Proust and Mann - felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy - dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new. (pp. 282-283)

Postmodernity has therefore been defined by the ways in which it is in direct opposition to modernity's values: by the sudden return to ornamentation and great rapidity with which the fashions of these ornamentations, now democratised and placed in the hands the newly wealthy many as opposed to the aristocratic few, have begun to change. For Loos modern culture was the purview of the aristocrats – those who had enough experience with wealth to know the ultimate pointlessness of ornamentation – but crucially it was these aristocrats (who might be considered ornamental themselves) that modernity's rationalism did away with. Postmodernity, then, is also a key result of the ongoing development of capitalism, and its cultural effects are symptomatic of the shift into 'late' or 'third stage' capitalism, which began with the post-war years and is defined by globalisation, internationalisation of capital and the labour market and the expansion of mass consumption. Although capitalism has been shifting into this mode since the end of the war, the late 20th century, which we also tend to associate with the height of postmodernity⁸, was when the effects of late capitalism began to become most overt (as they remain today). Without an aristocracy to serve, this capitalism draws its tastes from the purchasing habits of the masses instead, eliminating or confusing the "older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (p.283), which results in a postmodern tendency to celebrate the crass and the mundane as being anything but – a reflection, perhaps, of the expansion of mundane consumerism onto a global scale. We see a key example of this in the work of Andy Warhol, whose art celebrated mundane commodities and celebrity culture in a way that was designed to be infinitely reproducible without any loss of real meaning. Warhol's art, like consumer culture, draws no distinction between "high" and "low" culture. As Fredric Jameson explains, this breakdown is a key feature of postmodernity:

⁸ This is assuming that post-postmodernity is in fact not simply an aspect of postmodernity, which, depending on the theory in question, it may be.

Many of the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer "quote" such "texts" as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high-art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw. (Jameson, 2000, p. 283)

Jameson refers here to postmodernism, which he interprets through the examples of art, opposed to postmodernity, which is the larger social context that such art reflects. As Loos observed however, the behaviours of modernity, and by extension postmodernity, are inherently reducible to aesthetic examples, and can therefore be considered to be matters of communication. Where modernity rendered ornamentation to be meaningless, postmodernity did not, by making its return to ornamentation, return it to meaning in the same way. Communication in postmodernity is separated entirely from the practical issues that Loos identified in his discussion of craftsmen and shoemakers: as the costs of mass overseas labour and materials approach zero, the significance inherent in the physical properties of objects like shoes and furniture approaches zero as well. The value of an object becomes its ability to communicate – its ability to “incorporate” cultural texts and narratives – allowing for products to exist that trade entirely on their ability to clearly and effectively reference a concept. We see examples of this in the popularity of Converse’s Chuck Taylor shoes, which trade on their recognition as the embodiment of a kind of toothless non-conformity, or in Gucci’s patterned handbags, which have become symbolic of wealth through their extreme cost and ironic ugliness. The products in question are simply a means of turning symbolic communications into commodities.

Placing the hipster within any particular variety of (post)modernism is a complex and perhaps inherently flawed endeavour. As Jameson said, “there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were high modernisms in place” (p.282), which is in fact an understatement. The issue with hipsters is that, given that the majority of them were born between the late eighties and the mid-nineties, defining their postmodernism as being a reaction to modernity is implausible – postmodernity has been the dominant condition for longer than most hipsters have been alive, and modernity exists only as a memory, a historical period from which to draw fragments of cultural memory for bricolage and pastiche. We see many iconic elements of both occurring, either in concert or isolation, among hipsters. The hipster is without a doubt a reaction against late capitalism, but it is also a reaction undertaken by people who have never known any other world, and who are deeply entrenched within its systems. As such this reaction becomes an awkward but unique mix of elements

from both modernity and postmodernity. Loos' obsession with plain things, for example, appears often to have been renewed among hipsters who, like Loos, fetishize unadorned items of clothing: American Apparel, once a hipster icon (now waning in popularity, but still much-imitated), made its name by offering quality, slim-fitting tee-shirts with nothing printed on them. Clothing (often styled after work-wear) made from materials like natural leather and raw denim, which are expensive but have the potential to last a long time, are now extremely popular. These materials gather a patina with age, fading or changing colour as they wear in. Items of clothing made this way are characteristically unadorned, leaving space for the patina to emerge and become noticeable – a process that serves to display visually the extent to which a hipster has invested in a quality item that is made well and takes time to mature. Unlike Loos, however, hipsters have come by this ideology of high-quality, simple items (other things, such as homes and furniture, are treated similarly) in a very post-modern way. Modernism, to the hipster, is evidently a style, and the adoption of modern attitudes has brought with it a nostalgia for cultures that surrounded the modernisms of the early 20th century. Conversely, hipsters also fetishize items that are entirely ornamental – printed shirts and pop-culture arcana, which exist only to communicate, and are abstracted entirely from their function, are also common. We often see hipsters aping the styles of the 80's and 90's, wearing high-waisted acid-wash jeans and jackets made from holographic vinyl, demonstrating a kind of ironic nostalgia for the excesses of postmodernity. Like Warhol, they celebrate the absurdity of consumer products, finding beauty in their infinite reproducibility and poetry in their semiotics⁹. Hipster culture tends towards pastiche (Kinzey, 2010, p.61), a key postmodern style, but use it to borrow from throughout western history, drawing no clear boundaries between the things that they appreciate honestly and the things that they use ironically. Comparing the two varieties of conflicting nostalgia, it is hard to imagine how they fit together. It is as though there are two distinct assortments of hipsters – those who look for meaning in the past and those who see meaninglessness in the future. The more we attempt to break down these individual behaviours, the more they come to seem unrelated, and yet we know that they are not – individual hipsters exhibit appreciation for both, alternating freely and confidently between them in their discourse on Tumblr. As with all things, the hipster complicates matters further by refusing to allow classification: empowered by their sociology and their education, they strive diligently to avoid falling into the trap of being classified as being like any one thing or another, lest they too be ploughed under by history.

Many theorists have attempted to establish a theory of post-postmodernity, but have largely failed to evidence any cohesion. Although what we see in the hipster is explicable without resorting to engagement with the whole of this unresolved discourse, one relatively recent theory stands out as

⁹ For examples of how this works, see section 2.5 on hipster irony.

being particularly relevant. “Metamodernism” proposes a state that “oscillates between the modern and the postmodern”, attempting to juggle the behaviours and ways of thinking that define the two (Vermeulen & Akker, 2010):

It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm. (p.6)

The swing of this metaphorical pendulum goes a long way toward defining, if not explaining, what we see in the hipster, who often seems to incorporate perspectives that have always been deeply at odds with one another, such as irony and enthusiasm. This “metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (p.6) – meaning that there is a dichotomy inherent in the metamodern hipster that is, if not a balance, then at least an acknowledged necessity of cohabitation between modern and postmodern ways of thinking. Indeed, this constant self-checking is very much the behaviour of the hipster, whose sociology allows no behaviour to go unquestioned, the key side-effect of which is an inability to slip into any extreme of thought. This serves to keep hipster culture consistently turning over, and therefore never stale, but also prevents hipster culture as a movement from displaying any long-term goals or central ideologies. As we will see throughout this thesis, the hipster certainly fits the template for a metamodern person. Metamodernity gives us a way of making sense of the hipster’s apparent disharmony by allowing for a reading of that has more to do with what they are reacting to than how they make that reaction. Rather than attempting in vain to explain how each individual action is modern or postmodern in one sense or another, we can view these modernities as a continuity that ends, for the time being at least, with metamodernity. This allows us to discuss the hipster in the way that I believe it will become evident that they view themselves: as historically informed but ultimately progressive, searching for a new way to respond to a past that has evidently failed.

1.7 A brief genealogy of the hipster

The hipster's origin story is much the same as the many other counter-cultural movements that have arisen in the last few decades. As such, most of the relevant history has already been examined in detail in other research. Jake Kinzey (2010, pp. 10-13) traces the hipster's origins back to the Bohemians, who grew out of Paris after the French revolution. They were shaped by the sudden expansion of capitalism and, crucially, by the way that it drastically altered the economics of making art, shifting it away from the patronage system and into a competitive market economy. Like hipsters, the bohemians were frequently poor and cultivated an image of being "mad geniuses" who were apart from mainstream society. Next in Kinzey's genealogy come the Avant-garde, who evolved in response to the further expansion of capitalist monopolies and imperialism, championing an approach that emphasised the importance of the real and the authentic, and sought to "eras[e] the boundaries between everyday life and art". In the 1940s the word 'hipster' first entered the public lexicon as a name for African-American Jazz enthusiasts, who, much like the Bohemians, attempted to set themselves apart from society as a method of achieving status in a world that would otherwise grant them none (Broyard, 1948). The authenticity of Jazz music (particularly bebop, which was more cerebral and complex) was used as a currency to secure this status, but was ultimately co-opted by white hipsters who sought to experience its authenticity for themselves. Directly following this (and including many of those white hipsters) is the most important of the hipster's ancestors, the Beat Generation. The Beats are crucial not because there is any real link between them and the contemporary hipster, but because hipsters have deliberately adopted the Beats¹⁰ as their progenitors. Kinzey explains accurately¹¹ why the Beats fit so well into this role:

The Beats wanted nothing to do with the 1950s suburbanised hell-hole that America had become after world war II. Amidst McCarthy-Fordist-conformism they let it be known through their writing and lifestyle that they were rejecting the main steam and seeking "authenticity" which, from the 1950s onwards, became a dominant theme within subculture. The Beats began as a group of writers in New York City. Like the bohemians (and much of the Avant-garde) the Beats did not mind the gritty and dirty. (p.16)

¹⁰ Some members of the Lost Generation are also cast in this role, in particular F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Anatole Broyard (1948) refers to the original jazz hipsters as "the illegitimate son[s] of the Lost Generation".

¹¹ Kinzey fails to make note of the Beats' singular importance to the hipster, indicating that their specific significance may be a relatively recent development. Kinzey's book was published in 2010.

The real importance of the Beats has to do with two things: the body of work that they produced in a readily accessible language (and yet with plenty for the educated reader to discover) and the time in which they lived. The Beats, whose major figures were all American writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, produced a large body of work that transgressed the boundaries and offended the tastes of the “suburbanised hell-hole” of mainstream society in the search for that crucial authenticity. These books and poems, despite their age, are key texts in the contemporary hipster’s library, and many have recently been made into major films¹² deliberately targeted at the hipster audience. The time period that the Beats inhabited is important because, in spite of the Beats’ negative reaction to its realities (the hipster obviously leaves things like McCarthyism out of their nostalgia), it is also the time period for which the hipster is most nostalgic. The Beats therefore serve as a historical stand-in for the hipster, doing what the hipster likes to imagine that he or she might have done given the opportunity. The Beats’ criticisms of society are easily transferred to the present day, where many of the same problems apply, and can thereby be ignored in their historical context.

Various movements have arisen since in the same model – based around a key authenticity and the desire to escape or reform a corrupt society – the most obvious example of which would be Beats direct and more widespread successor, the hippie movement, but also including others such as punk, hip-hop and grunge. All of these are of interest to the hipster because they have a core of authenticity to be accessed and understood, but none appear to be regarded as direct ancestors in the way that the Beats are. The possible exception to this is if we view the hipster’s recent history as being tied to indie rock music¹³, in which case grunge can be considered to resemble an early hipster scene.

Although this thesis argues that the contemporary hipster refuses geographic specificity, it is also important to mention Williamsburg, New York, as a crucial incubator for hipster culture in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s (Kinzey, 2010). Because hipsters tend to raise real estate prices and gentrify neighbourhoods, Williamsburg is no longer especially relevant, having become too gentrified to be of interest to young hipsters, but other areas such as Bushwick, New York are now serving a similar purpose (Greif, 2010), although they are no longer strictly necessary in the way that Williamsburg once was. Hipsters began to appear in something resembling their current form in this area in the late 90’s. This earlier model appears to have attracted little attention at the time, but began to gain momentum around the new millennium with an aesthetic that appropriated (ironically or otherwise) elements of

¹² Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* was the subject of a 2010 film, Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* was made into a film in 2012, and Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs’ *And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks* was adapted into *Kill Your Darlings* in 2013. All of these films starred major actors.

¹³ This approach may have had some merit in the past, but hipsters have generally decoupled themselves from the indie music scene in recent times. Although there is plenty of overlap, the two are distinctly separate.

white-trash and skate-punk culture. Since then the hipster has adopted and discarded a range of new influences and aesthetics, but has remained functionally the same, continuing to grow in influence.

1.8 Conclusion

It might not be unfair to say that, as with the flâneur, there is no accurate translation for the word hipster. The hipster is a specific reaction to the world that is driven by an outlook of sociology and semiotics, and which longs to view the world as a text to be analysed as such. Our idealised hipster, William Gibson's fictional Cayce Pollard, gives us a sense of how it is to live in a world where semiotics is not only a theoretical approach but a physical force with a very real impact, and also shows us how the hipster wants to live. This worldview is inherently tied to a background that is most likely to be white, American and middle class, and a longing to find meaning in the history that this background offers. The hipster remains an evolving concept that refuses to name itself and refuses any attempt at a practical definition. Still, we can say a lot about the people who engage with it and advance its aims, and that is what this section was an attempt to do. These definitions are a snapshot in time, and while they are true at the time of writing, this may be the only time that they are true. Hipster culture detests stasis above all else. As such, we will now begin to look at the more structural elements of hipster culture, in the hopes of finding something more permanent.

A new gnosticism

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the forms that hipster society takes, as well as the behaviours, sensibilities and pressures that have dictated this form. The hipster, being a very elusive and complex subculture, is best examined by viewing its relationship to both the institution and to other subcultures, because it is in relation to firmly defined and well-known forms that the unknown becomes visible. This is especially important in the case of the hipster because, as we will see, the hipster is themselves very concerned with both of these things. This chapter will begin with comparisons to two relevant cultures: the Beat Generation, who are viewed by (hipster) history as the hipsters of their day, and whose literature has been especially influential, and the early Gnostics, a secretive cult whose practices relating to knowledge provide good way of understanding why hipsters value what they do. I will then explain the ways that hipsters communicate among themselves, including the importance of authenticity and the necessity of understanding what is ironic and what is not.

2.2 Twentieth century Gnosticism

Gnosticism takes its origins in a strong reaction against or creative misreading of an overwhelming precursor, the Hebrew Bible. The arch villain for the Gnostics was the Demiurge, a creator god whose name parodied the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*, where he is portrayed as an artisan, "world maker," who does the best he can at imitating the true Forms of Eternity. But for the Gnostics, the Demiurge is Yahweh (and Elohim), the Hebraic vision of the creator god in Genesis, a god taken by the Gnostics to be at best a botcher or ignoramus, at worst a spirit of malevolence. The high god of the Hebrews is not the alien or true God of the Gnostics, who indeed was identified by many Gnostics with the primordial Abyss, the void and deep from which the Hebrew god or Demiurge stole or displaced the stuff for his false creation. (Bloom, 1992, p. 38)

The Gnostic of the past, who lived generally in the early days of Christianity, was defined by opposition to the institution: the danger inherent in possessing heresy gave such knowledge great value by restricting its distribution and forcing the Gnostics to guard it with their lives. Under such circumstances the divulging of gnosis becomes akin to an initiation: only those prepared for such knowledge would seek it out, and the penalty for keeping the company of heretics would ensure that

regardless of whether the initiate found the information itself credible, the secret would have to remain secret. Having grown out of the various counter-cultural movements, the hipster is essentially defined, just like the Gnostic, by what they oppose, and this has a crucial impact on the way that they see the world. The hipster is fundamentally dissatisfied with the world and the way that it is run: well-educated and wealthy enough to be discerning, the hipster is acutely and painfully aware that the world is obsessed with fakes, and that the gods of the western world, those corporations that supply us with the products by which we define ourselves, are traders in fakery. For example, what the rest of the world might perceive as a 'cool' article of clothing becomes, to the hipster, a symbol of oppression: denim faded with a sandblaster and ripped to appropriate the look of a life that never occurred, supply chains that lead from the shopping mall through Indonesian sweat shops and Chinese cotton plantations and back to the boardrooms and focus groups of corporations and millionaires with no connection whatsoever to the original fashion that their clothes represent – other than a desire to monetise it. Like gnosis, this knowledge essentially changes something in those who come to understand it: the things that the rest of the developed world takes for granted are corrupted and begin to seem like hollow shadows of what they should be.

For the hipster gnosis becomes a way of circumventing this system of fakes and creating a meaningful life in its shadow. The original hipster – the African-American Jazz aficionado of the 1940s – used his music and its associated dialect, *jive*, as a form of gnosis in order to establish a “fictitious, independent base of power to rival white domination”, making “the pretence of a superior truth [..], an a priori knowledge comparable to the positive knowledge that the whites held” (Greif, 2010). Because he had no power in the established system, the hipster used jazz to create a compelling order of gnosis that prioritised the knowledge that he had, and made it powerful. The jazz hipsters approached the establishment of this gnosis like a piece of theatre:

He affected a white streak, made with powder, in his hair. This was the outer sign of a significant, prophetic mutation. And he always wore dark glasses, because normal light offended his eyes. He was an underground man, requiring especial adjustment to ordinary conditions; he was a lucifugous creature of the darkness, where sex, gambling, crime, and other bold acts of consequence occurred.

[...]

He laid claims to apocalyptic visions and heuristic discoveries when he *picked up*; he was Lazarus, come back from the dead, come back to tell them all, he would tell them all. He conspicuously consumed himself in a high flame. He cared nothing for catabolic consequences; he was so prodigal as to be invulnerable. (Broyard, 1948)

Jazz and 'tea' (marijuana) gave the hipster access to an authentic experience that nobody else had the knowledge to participate in. By committing transgressive "acts of consequence" and dressing up like a kind of impossibly hip vampire, the hipster stepped outside of the normal world and circumvented the system that would otherwise have given him no status. Unfortunately for the hipster, as we know from Norman Mailer's infamous essay *The White Negro* (1957), as the black hipster's secret knowledge became less secret (a predictable side effect of his popularity) white culture eventually co-opted it and drained his gnosis of value – as Broyard put it, he was "bought and placed in a zoo". This is the inevitable consequence, in Broyard's telling, of attempting to parlay a secret out into mainstream popularity: the two are simply polar opposites. This is important because the hipster of the present day could be said to be doing the very same thing and yet somehow succeeding.

The origins of contemporary hipster's use of gnosis can be found in the drug culture surrounding the early Beat Generation (which included some of the first white hipsters), and the necessary secrecy of a lifestyle fraught with institutionalised danger. William S. Burroughs' *Junky* is perhaps the best example of Beat Gnosticism in an autobiographical text. First published in 1953, *Junky* is a history of Burroughs' own addiction to heroin, which began "during the War, in 1944 or 1945" (p.1). Heroin is portrayed as transformative, changing Burroughs by his exposure to it. The novel makes a relatively frank account of this addiction, describing the desperate crimes committed by Burroughs and his fellow addicts for the sake of staying ahead of the ever-present spectre of "junk sickness" that awaits around every corner. Still, Burroughs' accounts of the drug itself transgress occasionally into the romantic. The "junk" itself is never described positively, but the change that it brings about in its users is rendered as mystical:

New Orleans was a strange town to me and I had no way of making a junk connection. Walking around the city, I spotted several junk neighbourhoods: St Charles and Poydras, the area around and above Lee Circle, Canal and Exchange Place. I don't spot junk neighbourhoods by the way they look, but by the feel, somewhat the same process by which a dowser locates hidden water. I am walking along and suddenly the junk in my cells moves and twitches like the dowser's wand: 'Junk here!'

Scientists recently experimented with a worm that they were able to shrink by withholding food. By periodically shrinking the worm so that it was in continual growth, the worm's life was prolonged indefinitely. Perhaps if a junky could keep himself in a constant state of kicking, he would live to a phenomenal age. (p.xxvii)

Here the drug takes the place of knowledge, giving Burroughs (or Bill Lee, as he calls his character in *Junky*) a kind of psychic connection to his fellow initiates. Having known the drug, he is actually

transmuted by it: he talks often of “junk cells” in his body that replace the normal human cells. These cells cause changes in a junkie’s very being:

Why does an addict get a new habit so much quicker than a junk virgin even after the addict has been clean for years? I do not accept the theory that junk is lurking in the body all that time – the spine is where it supposedly holes up – and I disagree with all the psychological answers. I think the use of junk causes permanent cellular alteration. Once a junky, always a junky. (p.117)

The effect of initiation into dangerous knowledge is clear: after being submerged in it there is no going back. Knowing permanently changes the addict, altering him internally and therefore also fundamentally changing the way that the world around him appears. Similarly, the junkie’s physical appearance changes depending the presence of junk in his veins:

Doolie sick was an unnerving sight. The envelope of personality was gone, dissolved by his junk-hungry cells. Viscera and cells, galvanized into a loathsome insect-like activity, seemed on the point of breaking through the surface. His face was blurred, unrecognizable, at the same time shrunken and tumescent. (p.58)

The same thing happens more immediately when Burroughs tries peyote, another drug with a reputation for delivering revelatory and transmutational experiences:

Our faces swelled under the eyes and our lips got thicker through some glandular action of the drug. We actually looked like Indians. (p.146)

The drugs that Burroughs takes make changes to him that are both overt and secret: the physical signs are freely evident and visible, but only intelligible to those who are already intimated with their meaning and their larger significance. Gnosis also changes, at least in a literary environment, the way that the initiate sees the world. Burroughs is famous for his unwillingness to draw a line between fiction and reality: his sour, addiction-plagued outlook saw an almost gleefully absurd undercurrent of madness running beneath the normal world, one where time and space break down and thought has the power to transform bodies into monsters. The world of his fiction, which sees already mad stories cut up and reassembled out of order, begins to bleed over into his memoirs, contaminating his real life. For a man who seems to live from one altered state to another, this is perhaps not surprising. In *The Yage Letters* (1963) (and in other letters) Burroughs often signs his name William Lee, the name of his character in *Naked Lunch* (1959), and as Will Self notes, "Burroughs’ own conception of himself was essentially fictional, and it's not superfluous to observe that before he began to write with any

fixity he had already become a character in other writers' works, notably Kerouac's *On the Road*" (2002, p. xiv). This was not a unique condition: all of the major beat writers wrote about their friends consistently, and it is through these semi-fictional renditions more than any historically accurate record that we remember them. Burroughs' work often begins in a style that is straightforward and biographical, but lapses gradually into a world that is full of dark intimations of hidden knowledge, punctuated by seemingly random and sudden, intensely fictional moments of Kafkaesque horror:

What is his lost trade? Definitely of a servant class and something to do with the dead, though he is not an embalmer. Perhaps he stores something in his body – a substance to prolong life – of which he is periodically milked by his masters. He is as specialised as an insect, for the performance of some inconceivably vile function. (*Junky*, p.112)

Like the U.S. Pegler fans say, 'The trouble is Unions.' They would say it spitting blood from radiation sickness. Or in the process of turning into crustaceans. (*The Yage Letters*, p.12)

The City is visited by epidemics of violence and the untended dead are eaten by vultures in the street. Funerals and cemeteries are not permitted. Albinos blink in the sun, boys sit in trees languidly masturbating, people eaten by unknown diseases spit at passers-by and bite them and throw pus and scabs and assorted vectors [...].

Whenever you get blackout drunk you wake up with one of these diseased faceless citizens in your bed who has spent all night exhausting their ingenuity trying to infect you. But no one knows how the diseases are transmitted or indeed if they are contagious. These diseased beggars live in a maze of burrows under The City and pop out anywhere often pushing up through the floor of a crowded café.

[...] A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a live one. (*The Yage Letters* p. 52, 53)

Obviously these are not real observations, even though they are found in works that maintain at least the appearance of truth. These little gnoses are stand-ins for larger truths, the greatest of which (and certainly the most apparent to Burroughs writing on a yage come-down in Lima) is that everything is corrupt. Everybody, to use Burroughs' metaphor, is sick, and although nobody knows quite why, the primary feature of this sickness is a desire to see it spread, and to see it rule like the Demiurge over a world in its own flawed image. Gnosis is necessarily melodramatic: for little secrets to force a re-evaluation of the world they must be far-reaching and grand. The tendency to see the world as potentially fictional, or rather to see oneself and one's life as a text, is crucial here in that it allows for these metaphorical substitutions to be made without any loss of meaning. It also allows the world to

be re-read as necessary: even for Yahweh, the very heart of the world, to become the pitiable Demiurge when read with a new text. The importance of drug culture for the Beats is that it allowed for there to be some element of beauty in that corruption: the euphoric highs of more common drugs like Benzedrine gave the Beats no choice but to revel in the filth around them, and even eventually to accept it. As we see in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*¹⁴ (Collected Poems 1947-1985, 1995), Benzedrine's manic high and corresponding crash brought the "holy" and the corrupt into sudden relief:

Who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine
until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering and mouth-wracked
and battered bleak and drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo, (p.126)

Ginsberg goes from describing the Bronx (the third most densely populated county in the USA) as holy to a come-down outside the Zoo that sounds as sour and poisonous as Burroughs' in Lima. The Beat Demiurge, then, is not the dirt itself but the fear of that dirt: the blind, middle-class, right-wing, idiot conformity that would keep its vices secret but denounce them in public. This is much the same as the Christian-Gnostic Demiurge, who insisted upon a perfection that he did not possess, except located in a more generalised institutional role – government, the police and the older generation of squares in general. As homosexuals and recreational drug users, Burroughs and Ginsberg (and the other Beats, for various reasons) bore the brunt of that institutional hypocrisy regularly, so it is no surprise that the Beats would place 'the man' on the Demiurge's false throne. Ginsberg makes this connection explicit towards the end of *Howl*, when he gives the institution the name Moloch, referring to a pagan god whose worship was alleged to have included the fiery sacrifice of children:

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!

¹⁴ *Howl* is an especially iconic poem in hipster media, and was the subject of a 2010 film titled *Howl*, which starred James Franco and John Hamm, both of whose work is very popular among hipsters.

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch
whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!
Moloch whose name is the Mind!

[...]

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! Skeleton treasuries! Blind capitals!
Demonic industries! Spectral nations! Invincible mad houses granite cocks! Monstrous
bombs! (p.131)

As we see here, particularly with the lines about the “Congress of sorrows” and “the stunned governments”, a direct comparison is drawn between the institution and a false god. This institution is not only the government, who perpetuate it by being corrupt (“whose blood is running money”), but also the financial system and the plutocracy that would like to keep the masses quiet and busy. God here has become a product, as we see with the comparison of skyscrapers to a street of “endless Jehovahs” – something that can be built over and over as necessary. In choosing Moloch as the name for this Demiurge, Ginsberg makes the direct association with human sacrifice by fire. To be a part of the system, he implies, is to slowly feed one’s self into the “cannibal dynamo” at Moloch’s heart, which keeps itself alive by burning people up – wearing them out slowly over a lifetime of work.

Gnosticism and secret societies have a long-standing relationship with sacrifice: initiation into a new world of knowledge necessarily involves sacrificing the stability that a life given over to the Demiurge allows. Rituals of initiation into any group almost always involve a degree of stylised rebirth, where the newcomer feeds himself symbolically to a monster and is reborn an initiate (Eliade, 1957). As with Burroughs’ experiences with heroin and peyote, ritually-acquired knowledge is transformative. These experiences are often transgressive: the violence and strangeness of the ritual burn it into the initiate’s brain, binding him to secrecy. For the beats, drugs played an important role in this, providing an experience that was otherworldly and bizarre but also criminal and intensely stigmatized. Guilt keeps the society necessarily secret, providing a functional reason to restrict entry and endowing the group with a legitimacy of purpose. The classic example of how guilt and transformation is applied in secret society ritual – which is for obvious reasons rarely realised – is that of human sacrifice, a crime of such magnitude that secrecy is assured. For the original Gnostics there was certainly an element of self-sacrifice involved: committing heresy meant not only potential death but, perhaps more importantly, damnation at the hands of the Demiurge should their gnoses be wrong. The importance of sacrifice, in a metaphysical sense, is that it breaks down the barrier between the mundane and the divine, allowing the sacrificial object, and those sacrificing it, to cease to be mundane:

The principle of sacrifice is destruction, but though it sometimes goes so far as to destroy completely (as in a holocaust [a burnt offering]) the destruction that sacrifice intends to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object's real ties to subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice. (Bataille, 1997, p. 210)

That “unintelligible caprice” is the essence of the sacred, the breakdown of the ties to meaning and function by which the mundane is bound but the sacred is not. For the beats (and hipsters) the more accurate term for the sacred might be the sublime, but the relationship is the same. Like the jazz hipster and his “prophetic mutation”, the transgression of an internal boundary allows for the transgression of an external, social one. On a practical level this serves to elevate the sacrificing group's bonds beyond the necessity for meaning (invalidating any question about what purpose the group actually serves – *they must be secret because there is a secret to be kept*) regardless of whether the sacred/sublime is real or imagined. The importance of this for the Beats was that it allowed them to reconfigure their self-destructive behaviours into social commentary on a much greater scale.

For the Beats the illegal activity was only a catalyst – the crude secrecy of petty crime gave way to a larger culture of revealed knowledge and intimate understanding in which the role of drugs was simply practical (as an entry to the sublime). In doing this the Beats laid the framework for a model of a secret society that essentially turns itself inside out – where the crimes and the guilt are displayed openly but their meaning is the secret. Again, we can relate this to the role of entheogenic drug use in Beat culture: there was no longer a need to keep the secret because the wrong ears they might as well have been speaking in tongues. The sudden turn from an introverted gnostic society into a highly extroverted self-publishing kind of gnosticism seems strange, but viewed historically it makes sense: while plenty of users and ne'er-do-wells were already organised (in the loosest possible sense of the word) into local groups in the normal closed-gnostic manner, the sudden broadcast of this open-gnosticism by the original Beats turned them into a Generation. We see examples of this open-faced guilt throughout Ginsberg's *Howl*:

who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana
for New York,
who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried
their torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, with alcohol and cock and endless balls,
(p.126)

The obscenity trial that followed Howl's publication is evidence enough of how shocking these 'crimes' were to the uninitiated. It is also clear from reading Howl that in some sense or another, Ginsberg feels correspondingly guilty about his transgressions. This passage is intentionally crude, using the most jarring words possible; where the same sentences might easily be re-written to present a more appealing picture of Ginsberg and his friends' behaviour, he chooses the opposite deliberately and with practiced poetic skill. As such, the focus in these admissions is not in legitimizing them but simply displaying them. The violence done to bodies ("purgatoried their torsos/ night after night") and minds ("I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness") is presented in a kind of sad glory, motivated by the senseless hunger of a broken American Dream – the most unintelligibly capricious thing that the twentieth century knew. Howl was like the epitaph for a generation that had yet to properly begin. We see the same thing in Burroughs' lifetime of works: books like *Junky* and *Queer* (1985) put his addictions and perversions on display and transformed him from a nameless junkie into a literary figure.

2.3 Hipster Gnosticism in practice

Much has changed since the 1950s. Although the Beat Generation's literature is part of the backbone of hipster thought, history has softened its impact somewhat. The Beats' slow movement from *counterculture* to *literature* means that the way the current generation of hipsters read Beat writing is drastically different from how it was read by the Beats' contemporaries. This difference is so pronounced (and yet has gone so unnoticed) that Kerouac is now taught in high schools. The audience, for the most part, has changed accordingly. Where the Beats were societal outcasts who spurned and were spurned in turn by the institution, the hipster is essentially the opposite. Where the Beats were "expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull" (Ginsberg, p.126) the ideal hipster graduates with honours and goes to work for an upscale marketing or design agency, or starts a boutique firm selling their skills and knowledge on a smaller scale. The hipster cannot afford to be an outcast, and therefore the option of criminal guilt as a binding mechanism is no longer practical. Although hipsterdom has a thriving drug culture located somewhere near (if perhaps not in) its heart, drug use is no longer a culturally aberrant enough behaviour to justify any guilt or really be considered a meaningful crime¹⁵. Heavily stylised and made ubiquitous in

¹⁵ Drugs are still a regular enough theme in hipster images on Tumblr, but they tend to be used in different ways. Marijuana, as the "jazz cigarette", was a key element of early Beat culture, with Burroughs allegedly being the second white man in America to ever be arrested for possession of it (Thompson, 2003). With legalization now growing in America, hip media tends to associate marijuana more with organic food and emerging technology

contemporary media (in much the same way as alcohol), it has ceased to reflect any real statement or lifestyle. The interesting exception to this might be cocaine, which is so symbolically loaded (think *Scarface* or *Pulp Fiction*) that it can be used ironically. In general, though, the average hipster's drug use (or absence thereof) is more an accident of demography than any kind of counter-cultural imperative.

The social form displayed by the Beats – that of open-Gnosticism backed by a kind of self-sacrificial guilt – has been taken up wholeheartedly by the contemporary hipster. With this form has come a reproduction of the Beat aesthetic, in both the visual and philosophical sense, (the visual in particular, which is interesting because I can't help but wonder if the original Beats ever realised that they *had* a visual aesthetic – the Maynard G. Krebs style of caricature came later). The Demiurge has changed his clothes a little, but is roughly the same. Contrary to reasonable expectations, this Demiurge is almost never characterised in terms of political left or right¹⁶, perhaps owing to the hipster's fixation with America and the political stagnation there. Instead it is more centred on economics – a representation of the empty, thoughtless consumerism that is burning up our natural resources and the faceless, insane plutocrats who profit needlessly from it. This economic guilt is everywhere: in the age of global warming, and disposable electronics, society as a whole is immensely guilty. The hipster's shame is that he knows this, and even comprehends it more fully than most, but is unable and unwilling to be separated fully from the culture of consumerism that the Demiurge has built. In order to work around this hurdle, the hipster uses the mechanics of gnosis to separate themselves symbolically from regular society in order to access a more authentic world. The authentic as it is represented in common memory (generally meaning media) is taken apart and studied for the signifiers of branding and style, things that can be reconstructed and consumed in order to summon authenticity back into the present. In this way, the hipster works to combat the Demiurge on his own terms, with gnosis that can be bought and sold because it exists within the marketplace.

The value of gnosticism for the hipster is that it inherently privileges an intellectual approach to life. The hipster's academic knowledge, hard won and yet seemingly without value in the job market, becomes suddenly useful again. The world becomes, in light of gnosticism, much like the flâneur's Paris: a great text full of subtle clues and tiny secrets that allow the whole to be re-read differently. With their skill in areas like sociology, semiotics and literary criticism, the hipster seems made for this kind of world, like a new priestly class whose job is to disentangle the mysteries of twenty-first century life. The hipster adorns themselves with layers of signs in order evidence their initiation into this

than crime or guilt. The one major exception to this is that cocaine is now used semi-ironically in a way related to guilt, and is associated with consumerism and self-consumption – for a full explanation see section 2.8.

¹⁶ I have almost never seen political images on Tumblr. Where they do occur, they are roughly balanced between America's two political parties. I have never seen political imagery from any other country posted.

knowledge. This serves both to communicate their level of initiation to other hipsters and to display a separation from the world in the same manner as Broyard's jazz hipster did with his outlandish appearance and permanent sunglasses. The most obvious evidence of this will always be clothing. Clothing is a very practical way of representing oneself, displaying taste, wealth and cultural affiliation in a manner that alters the appearance, and is therefore read by viewers as being a direct indication of one's own nature. As such it is also the logical method of advertising secret knowledge: without a familiarity with the relevant metalanguage of membership, secret signs worn as clothing are interpreted simply as regular clothes. For a good example of how this works in practice, we can look to the popularity of retro-styled hiking gear as items of fashion. This is a particularly clear example because this gear has a very broad popularity among hipsters, who wear it both when actually hiking and as streetwear. On Tumblr we see hipsters wearing brands like Herschel Supply Co. and Danner Goods, whose styling speaks directly to the images of hiking trips and idyllic vacations remembered through faded images in parents' photo albums and home movies. Herschel's backpacks take their stylistic cues directly from the kinds of backpacks that were common in the 1970s and 60s (and more



Figure 1 (above): An image taken from Herschel's 2013 lookbook (Herschel Supply Co., 2013).



Figure 2: A recent Herschel Supply backpack, showing the brand's distinctly nostalgic style. The leather lash tab is placed directly in the middle of the bag's flap where a brand symbol might normally be, as opposed to on the side or toward the bottom where it might be more useful.



Figure 3 (right): An image taken from Herschel's 2014 lookbook (Herschel Supply Co., 2014). Note the mismatched enamel mugs.

recently even earlier, as the design in figure 2 shows), incorporating details like the sewn-on label patch (visible on the red bag) various leather straps (recreated now in vegan ‘leather’) and the leather



Figure 4: an image of a gnostic hipster tattoo, posted by Tumblr user hypervulgar. The meaning of this symbol is unclear (if there is a meaning at all). Tattoos like this are common among hipsters as markers of gnosis, both for the purpose of recognition by those who understand and in order to display gnosis to those who do not. Regardless of its meaning, this symbol is deliberately arcane and gnostic looking. Eyes and triangles, reminiscent of the all-seeing-eye, a classic symbol of secret knowledge and initiation, are very common tattoos for this reason. This use is reminiscent of the jazz hipster’s “prophetic mutation” – gnostic symbols serve to mark the hipster as special, with knowledge not of this world.

diamond-shaped lash tab, visible on the blue and green bag in figure 2. Lash tabs in particular have been abstracted from their original purpose (which is as a point onto which other objects can be tied or clipped), becoming a kind of branding symbol for reproduction-style hiking bags in general. I have yet to see an image on Tumblr featuring such a bag where the lash tab is actually in use: the tab is so ideally suited to being a sign that its intended function has essentially been abandoned. Lash tabs have even occasionally been added to other items, like wallets and even caps, where they could not possibly be of practical use (it should be noted that Herschel has wisely refrained from such excesses, which invite the stain of inauthenticity).

The bags in the Herschel lookbook images shown on the previous page (figures 1 and 3) are reinforced in both their authenticity and relevance by the signs that are carefully positioned alongside them: the patterns on the blankets and rug; the cabin’s exposed wooden walls and floorboards; the muted, washed-out colouring designed to imitate an old film

camera. These photos appear to have been taken in a family cabin, somewhere permanently half-finished (especially in figure one) where the decorations and furnishings are hand-me-downs from another generation: note the enamelled cups¹⁷ and the wicker setting on the table in figure 3. Placed in the context of these semiotic environments the products are charged with an authenticity of origin and purpose that allows them to be worn outside of their intended environment as a kind of charm against unreality. Of course, these signs lose their value in the eyes of viewers who do not have a proper understanding of the context: products that are so strongly referential of a specific authenticity require a subtle balance between the reference’s availability in collective cultural memory and a degree of exclusivity. The hipster is strongly conscious of the knife-edge on which authenticity is balanced: the authentic is an intimate, subtle experience (note the woman with the red bag: her

¹⁷ Enamelled mugs and plates are a popular nostalgic item sold by hipster companies, including Best Made Co, who are discussed in chapter four. Another popular item in the same vein is the brand Fire King, who made glassware and particularly recognizable cups that were ubiquitous in America in the 1940s. Some hipster companies (such as Naked and Famous, also discussed in chapter four) now sell Fire King products made in their original (otherwise no longer used) borosilicate glass process.

unrehearsed pose, friendly smile; the viewer is positioned as an accomplice instead of a voyeur) and must remain so if it is to have any value. As such, signs like the leather lash tab become means of Gnostic identification among hipsters: wearing a Herschel backpack or Danner boots indicates a longing for the outdoors (or at least the idealised outdoors of Herschel's lookbook) and a degree of anachronism. Notably there are grades to this signalling: to some a lash tab on the back of a wallet or cap might conjure the same images of retro outdoor pursuits that it does on a backpack, but to those who are aware of its function such a hat or wallet might mark its wearer as lacking in knowledge. The appearance of this sign on inauthentic goods is also a clear display of the fleeting half-life of these identifiers: the gathering ubiquity of Herschel bags displaying prominent lash tabs means that as a sign, its value is beginning to decay into a broader signifier of abstracted 'cool', rather than of authenticity, which is tied to at least a theoretical observance of its intended use. Should this sign fall any further into abstraction it will likely be abandoned by hipsters entirely: anecdotal evidence suggests that Herschel's growing popularity may already be having a strong negative effect on its authentic credibility among hipsters. Like heroin, the need for turnover is consistent. Of course, this is only a single, very limited example of something that necessarily has an infinite number of individual permutations. Other common examples of broadly popular gnososes include the display of patination on raw denim or leather items, or tattoos of meaningful symbols such as (literally gnostic) sacred geometric symbols like elaborate mandalas or the 'flower of life'.

For an idealised example of market-Gnosticism, we can again turn to William Gibson's fiction. In *Zero History* (2010) which is the final novel in the trilogy that began with *Pattern Recognition* (2003), one of the major plots involves the attempt to learn the origins of a "very secret brand" of denim clothing named Gabriel Hounds, after an English legend. Modelled after real-world marketing strategies that use deliberate scarcity and short-term "pop-up" stores to sell products for high prices and build brand notoriety, Gibson's fictional brand takes market Gnosticism to its logical extreme by being a genuine secret, sold in "drops" promoted by word of mouth only, to a worldwide audience that "tops out at no more than a thousand" made up of only the most highly-connected individuals. These customers range from popular band members to those who simply have a talent for keeping their ear to the street. In spite of this small market, demand is very high. The Gabriel Hounds themselves are made, like many real-world brands that like to capitalise on secret knowledge, of Japanese 'selvedge' denim, produced on vintage shuttle looms that are no longer used by major denim manufacturers due to their cost. These jeans and jackets are of exceptional quality, but show no overt branding aside from hidden tags. They are patterned using elements from classic 20th century clothing items but designed to display this heritage only subtly: where brands like Herschel require that their nostalgia be overt, the aim of Gabriel Hounds' style is to speak to those who have a refined sense for how things look when

done right, outside of the context of fashion. As one character explains, “It’s about atemporality. About opting out of the industrialization of novelty. It’s about deeper code” – a code that allows Hounds enthusiasts recognise each other simply by the cut and quality of their clothing:

“First thing I saw was her Hounds, girls’ Hounds,” Clammy continued.

[...]

“So you admired her jeans?”

“Made it known,” Clammy said, “that I knew what they were.”

“And?”

“She asked me if I’d like a pair. Told me she knew of a drop.”

“Drop?”

“A shipment.”

“Where from?”

“Didn’t want to ask,” he said, gravely. “Wanted me Hounds. Next day, she said. Said she’d take me.” (pp.76, 77)

Information changes hands only when enthusiasts recognise each other, each withholding information until they have an idea of the level of the other’s initiation. Hollis Henry, the book’s protagonist, initially sidesteps her lack of gnosis by wearing a Hounds jacket that has not been made for a number of seasons when she goes to meet her initial sources of information, tricking them into assuming that she has knowledge. Just like illegal drugs, one character suggests, their value comes from being unattainable, accessible only by those who can be trusted in a special way, who understand the rules of the “deeper code”, although the code in this case is a semiotic one. In this way, the participants in the brand are charged with keeping the secret, rather than the brand’s owners – a system that, in the book at least, maintains itself by “the deliberate construction of parallel microeconomies, where knowledge is more congruent than wealth” (p.337). The brand’s followers keep the secret because by doing so they are protecting the value of their own gnosis. As one character explains, this is actually a novel idea:

“I’m more interested in their reinvention of exclusivity. Far ahead, say, of the Burberry label you can only buy in one special outlet in Tokyo, but not here, and not on the web. That’s old-school geographical exclusivity. Gabriel Hounds is something else. There’s something spectral about it.”
(p.216)

Considering how readily the hipster manages to turn knowledge into a kind of currency, it is easy to imagine how currency makes the change into knowledge in the broader gnostic marketplace. As we

saw in the example of Cayce Pollard, the ‘ideal hipster’, financial wealth has a significant relationship to the hipster’s ability to interact with gnosis and the authentic, serving to insulate its owner from the unsavoury elements of learning about the world. Gabriel Hounds makes a point of being beyond the question of nationality: although the denim that they use is tentatively identified as being Japanese in origin, the location where the clothes are made is never revealed, and the question is repeatedly deflected as being irrelevant. For those who want to attend “drops”, the necessity is not to be in a particular place, but rather to be travelling: drops take place all around the world in key cultural centres like Tokyo, Prague and Melbourne. As such, although the clothes themselves are relatively reasonably priced, there is a cost associated with engagement that has nothing to do with the price tag or knowledge. This gnosis requires a freedom that can only come from wealth, and as such the recognition that comes from spotting another Hounds owner is really more like the recognition of another traveller – another person who can afford to be at home in many key locations instead of only one.

Although a genuinely secret brand like Gabriel Hounds is largely implausible in reality (or if similar brands do exist, it would be a curious but genuine breach of research ethics to divulge their secrets here) many elements of the marketing strategy of “reinvent[ed] exclusivity” are used to market to hipsters. As already mentioned, brands that make products a lot like Gabriel Hounds are relatively common, although many such brands maintain varying levels of exclusivity more out of a distaste for the idea of marketing than any interest in higher concepts, building in recent years a cult status among hipsters that has diversified their business away from a clientele that was previous comprised largely of Gibson’s “Japanese obsessives”. A second wave of such companies has sprung up in America, run by hipsters and employing more diverse marketing strategies – many of which use the internet to attempt to strike a balance between exclusivity and profit, although, perhaps demonstrating the hipster’s willingness to engage with the realities of the capitalist system, most err away from any meaningful exclusivity unless it is maintained simply by an extreme price. In reality, exclusivity is much more fetishized than it is actually used¹⁸, primarily because genuine secrets have a tendency to spiral out of control when exposed to market forces. Moreover, as any hipsters who have attempted to create gnostic brands have likely come to learn, gnostic appeal has much more to do with marketing than it does its absence.

¹⁸ For a good example of this, see the section on Relic in Chapter four.

2.4 The Authentic

The intrinsic appeal that Gabriel Hounds manifests in Gibson's characters is raw authenticity – a combination of perfect practicality and the total absence of mediation that stands out, even to those who are not aware of the brand itself, because it is so remarkably absent in regular life. This effect is powerful and universal:

“He had a jacket quite a lot like yours, but made of a sort of canvas, off-white, plain brass buttons. Always in need of a good wash. Perfectly simple, but it was one of those things that everyone immediately wanted or, failing that, wanted the name of a designer, a brand. He'd laugh at them. Tell them it was no-name. Tell them it was 'fucking real, not fashion.' That a friend of his in Chicago had made it.” (p.119)

The authentic, in much the same way as Gnosticism, covets a degree of grandeur. Like the Christian who realises he has spent his life worshipping the Demiurge, the non-hipster on the street sees the white canvas jacket and suddenly has no reference point, because all he knows is fashion. It forces the viewer to suddenly re-evaluate their consumption and what they think of as quality. The pursuit of this kind of absolute authenticity is, above all else, what defines the hipster as a cultural force, but of course, just like the sudden renunciation of Christianity in the face of gnosis, Gibson's fantasy authentic is generally implausible. For an authenticity to reverberate so meaningfully like this in reality, it would have to be an absolute, universal baseline of experience – something akin to a mass religious experience – but somehow achieved semiotically, through a very well made jacket with brass buttons. Hipsters themselves are evidence enough that there is no absolute semiotic authentic: although many themes interconnect the various groups of hipster that we have seen over the last decade, the sets of signs and behaviours that each group associated with authenticity have changed significantly. Moreover, although the current iteration of hipsters have managed to have a lot of influence over mainstream fashions, there is no evidence in my opinion that the authenticities that it espouses will be any more long-lived than those of the past were. What Gibson's idea of authenticity makes clear is that for authenticity to be relatable as a sign, it must have its roots in some degree of shared understanding. For Gibson and the hipster, as we have already seen, the location of this shared understanding is a vague past centred on an idealised post-war America. One problem with this is that although the optimism following victory in the Second World War provides an extremely rich vein of authenticity, it also derives much of its importance from being the start of the current 'saeculum', or period of shared cultural memory, meaning that as it passes out of that shared memory, it becomes less and less relevant, thereby necessitating that the location of the authentic be changed. It could be

argued that locating the authentic at the far edge of the saeculum has actually contributed to the health of this particular authentic – unlike past sources such as skate-punk or white trash culture, the post-war years are distant and vague enough to defy any specific criticisms. In spite of this, however,



Figure 5: Posted by Tumblr user homemayde. Note the raw selvage denim apron and jeans that he is wearing, which are dyed a dark indigo to showcase most effectively the patina that his work has worn into them. His jeans, which are cuffed to show the traditional Japanese 'mud-dye' colouring on the inside of the fabric and (although we cannot see it here) the 'self-edge' of the exposed edges of the cloth, which indicates that it was made on a shuttle loom, are very similar in cut and construction to Gibson's description of Gabriel Hounds jeans.

the point of Gibson's authenticity is that it declares that the baseline for clothing (or any other fashion item) is in post-war American clothing, deciding that clothing from this period is semiotically neutral and perfectly practical. Gibson works his way around this somewhat by equating this neutrality with practically designed work-wear and military uniforms (key details from Henry's Hounds jacket come from a Lee mechanic's jacket from the early 1950s, and Pollard wears a bomber jacket from 1949), a justification that is also very common among hipsters, who fetishize work-wear in particular, good examples of which can be seen in figure 5. In practical terms however, these are still semiotically charged items, and their significance has far more to do with the period that they evoke than any intrinsic excellence in their construction. For anyone who sees these items, therefore, their reaction is determined by their own personal relationship to the past that is being referenced, the crucial difference being that it appears relatively universal because the past in

question is largely remembered through media, and as such our cultural understanding of it has been significantly homogenised.

It must be acknowledged, also, that hipsters participate in many 'authentic' behaviours aside from fashion. As we see in the image to the left, practical behaviours like making and using tools are valued highly as well, as is anything that involves producing an authentic product, such as farming, brewing, cooking or building. These kinds of behaviours, as with Gabriel Hounds, are designed to produce items that stand out from their mass-produced counterparts by being of higher quality. Although often less readily converted into signifiers than clothing items, these products also tend to draw much of their authenticity from knowledge of the past. A good example might be the popularity of 'rediscovering' antique cocktails recipes from key eras like the roaring twenties or prohibition, which are often made

in hip bars with ingredients like liqueurs or bitters that have been made using similarly rediscovered artisanal recipes. These drinks provide the satisfaction of both high-quality taste and participation in authenticity derived from the past. Another example is the use of tools made in traditional ways, like Best Made Co.'s well-known axe range¹⁹ which are made using traditional materials and encourage wood-chopping as an authentic behaviour. Crucially, these behaviours are evidence of *taste* – of knowledge of how to find the authentic and engage with it – and are designed to show this taste to others. This is why image-based social networking sites like Tumblr and Instagram are so crucial to hipsters: they allow for taste to be displayed much more efficiently. Behaviours like eating and drinking artisanal products or cutting wood in the forest, which would previously have been generally unrelated to semiotics, suddenly become significant because they can be translated into images and shared. The commonly-mocked tendency for hipsters to take photos of their food before they eat it (which has become so common that some restaurants have banned it) is a good example: without Instagram, the experience of eating authentic food would have to be an entirely internal, personal one, but by taking and sharing a picture it becomes evidence of gnosis and taste.

2.5 Irony

Although I argue that it is the search for authenticity that should be considered the defining attribute of the hipster, it must be recognised that as far as public perception is concerned, the hipster has much more to do with irony than authenticity. It is indeed important, although I would also argue that the two actually share a lot of common ground in the hipster's semiotics. Irony, in its most basic sense, is the use of language that implies the opposite of what it explicitly states, often in order to be humorous or mocking. In the case of the hipster this is best demonstrated by the fashions of wearing absurdly decorated sweaters or growing 'porn star' moustaches – behaviours that serve to communicate a contempt for established concepts of what looks good, while demonstrating a wry sense of humour. The visibility of these ironic signifiers has a lot to do with why irony is such a well-known hipster trait, as does their inaccessibility to those who do not understand their specific ironic premise. Irony, in this sense, is intensely gnostic in its operation: if the viewer does not understand the signs, they will fail to understand what their ironic use means, or may actually fail to perceive any irony at all. The other concern, when dealing with hipsters specifically, is that irony may be perceived when none is present: for example, it is common (even in texts about hipsters, such as *What Was the Hipster*) to mislabel behaviours that hipsters engage in because they are authentic, such as wearing

¹⁹ Best Made Co. is discussed in detail in Chapter four.



Figure 6: an image of a painting by Lucas Price posted by Tumblr by user hypebeast, showing the iconic Supreme branded hat – an ironic symbol of absurd consumption – contrasted with symbols of death, beauty and classicism in the form of an oil painting.



Figure 7: an image of a tee-shirt that reads “Aesthetics” in stylized script, posted by Tumblr user alaynyala. A play on shirts that would normally read “Althetics”, this shirt self-consciously references the hipster’s obsession with aesthetics and the key role that it takes in their lives.

clothes from the 1950s, as being ironic. Although the hipster’s wry humour is certainly present in their treatment of nostalgia (much as anybody’s sense of humour is present in most of what they do) the failure to properly recognise when the hipster is *not* being ironic is significant because it misinterprets the authentic as being a meaningless expression of postmodern nihilism, when really it is the opposite, something that the hipster takes very seriously. It must be acknowledged, unfortunately, that calling this a misinterpretation is also something of an oversimplification. In hipster media, semiotic expressions of irony and authenticity fly hot and fast, and an example of one can never really be said to be entirely free of the other. The major example of this is in the way that irony tends to derive much of its material from the 80’s and 90’s. Although this time period is coded as being postmodern and morally bankrupted by the gleeful and open expansions of capitalism and advertising that took place within it, there is also a significant aspect of nostalgia involved because this was the time when most of the current generation of hipsters were children. This time, much like the idealised 1950s, was a period of innocence and freedom, not only because as children they had no idea what consumer culture was turning into, but also because, looking back, the media of the time exhibited an almost startling degree of naiveté as well. The signs from this time are also readily recognised by young hipsters in a way that other historic signs are not: because they had so much meaning for 80’s or 90’s children, they are deeply ingrained and, among that generation, universal – unlike signs of the authentic, which require that the viewer be familiar with specific gnoses from a history that they did not live through. A good example of how this works is seen in figure eight on the page below: because Bart Simpson is such an essential cultural figure from the 90’s, the ironic confusion of his image is

culturally resonant, at least for the hipster and his or her peers. Other television shows from the era are popular sources for this ironic nostalgia as well, such as the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Daria*, or *Friends*. In *What was the hipster* (2010) panellists repeatedly joke about 80's sitcoms like *Charles in Charge* (which ran from 1984 to 1990), but interestingly while 90's references are common among the hipsters that I have observed on Tumblr, *Charles in Charge* appears to have fallen out of fashion, these hipsters being mostly too young to remember it. Without that memory, an 80's sitcom becomes a bland and uninteresting piece of gnosis.

One important value of this irony and its specific associated nostalgia is that it allows for the hipster to engage with consumerism without (entirely) sacrificing objectivity and maintaining their all-important distance from it and its more negative elements. A good example of this would be the popularity of 80's and 90's shoes worn both ironically and nostalgically. Reproductions of Nike 'Air Jordan' and 'Air Max' shoes have become popular, for example, as very obvious and resonant symbols of their eras. New Balance and Converse have also released new lines of reproduction shoes, often in limited edition colours and fabrics in order to create exclusivity (an example of which is shown in figure 9). Original deadstock shoes, particularly Air Jordans, regularly sell for hundreds of dollars on eBay. Other, newer brands that trade in irony but have no specific claim to nostalgia have become popular as well – brands like Supreme play up the absurdity of the consumption that they represent, while others like Black Milk use pop culture signs to saturate their clothing in irony and self-conscious



Figure 8: an image of a product posted by AfterDarkVintage on Etsy. The Tee-shirt shows Bart Simpson, whose image has become a common ironic sign for 90's culture. He is often shown drawn in the rougher style of the earlier episodes. The image takes this irony even further by corrupting the sign, showing him kissing his friend Milhouse.



Figure 9: Converse 'Auckland Racer' shoes have been reissued in their original 80's style. The above photo shows a limited edition version made of terrycloth, taken from <http://hypebeast.com/2013/9/converse-first-string-auckland-racer-terry-oatmeal>

referentiality. These examples differ from other hipster consumption because they make no claim to any artisanal value nor an environmental or social cause. These are simply mass-produced brands, made largely in sweatshops overseas for the profit of shareholders. Particularly in the case of Nike, which is famous for its poor treatment of workers, the idea of buying such brands is a significant

change of direction for the hipster and an unfortunate demonstration of the importance that aesthetic considerations have for them: the gnosis provided by irony would appear to be no less valuable than the gnosis provided by more positive purchasing choices.

The significance of irony is best put into perspective by looking at Susan Sontag's explanations of Camp, which is a very similar sensibility that is applied in the same way, albeit by different groups. Sontag explains the basic values of Camp as such:

Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.

[...]

1. To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.

2. To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized -- or at least apolitical.

Looking at irony in this sense, its importance as a means of dealing with the world becomes apparent. Because the world has become so pervasively false, Camp/irony becomes a necessary means of elevating cultural participation out of the blandness that would otherwise make such engagement meaningless. Because the content of mass culture is so banal, its stylistic elements are emphasised instead and appropriated for use in discourse that hopes to be more meaningful, or at least more clever. This is important because it frees the hipster of responsibility for contributing to a negative system: like a gnostic forced to speak on the terms of Christianity or Judaism, the hipster takes language from the Demiurge of mass culture and attempts to rework it into something useful. Sontag explains this as a kind of postmodern dandyism:

46. The dandy was overbred. His posture was disdain, or else ennui. He sought rare sensations, undefiled by mass appreciation. [...] He was dedicated to "good taste."

The connoisseur of Camp has found more ingenious pleasures. Not in Latin poetry and rare wines and velvet jackets, but in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses. Mere use does not defile the objects of his pleasure, since he learns to possess them in a rare way. Camp -- Dandyism in the age of mass culture -- makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica.

In response to the postmodern merging of high and low culture, Camp/irony becomes the only recourse for those who wish to remain a relevant part of culture without submitting to its weaknesses. The interesting thing about the hipster is that they actually manage to do some of both: like the dandy, the hipster takes to subtle, artisanal pleasures, but is also fluent in the “ingenious pleasures” of Camp/irony. Irony takes a step even further here by not transcending the “nausea of the replica” but fetishizing it: the hipster is only able to make meaningful irony *because* he or she knows better, and has a true taste for the real.

48. The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves.

The value of irony/Camp is that it allows the vulgar to be re-read as a test of authenticity. Gnosis, as we have seen, is all about adding new information to an equation and thereby significantly changing the result. PBR, for example, becomes a good thing to drink not by any changes to its taste, but with the addition of the knowledge of who drinks it. Transcending the “nausea of the replica” is not about ignoring the nausea but rather having a strong stomach – because irony is primarily a condition excessive knowledge, it is necessary that awareness of that nausea be as full as possible.

2.6 Cultural Appropriation

In order to show how the influences of gnosis, irony and authenticity work together in the hipster’s behaviour, a good place to begin is by addressing the hipster’s habit of appropriating the signs and authenticities of other cultures and sub-cultures. Among those who are fully aware of the hipster, this is certainly the most common evidence used to argue that the hipster’s role in culture is a negative one. Cultural appropriation begins simply enough as part of the hipster’s ongoing search for authenticity – something that necessarily means, because hipsterdom comes out of a culture that has little or no authenticity left of its own, looking into outside cultures. The direct benefit of this behaviour is that new authenticity is almost always positive in a culture that has grown sometimes painfully out of touch with the real – the hipster’s insistence that consumers become more aware of the origins and nature of what they buy has almost certainly been a good influence on society. The issue, then, has less to do with *what* the hipster actually does than *who* the hipster is and what he or she represents to society. As a kind of consumerist bogeyman, made out of unintelligible symbolism

and inexplicable, trend-driven elitism, the hipster may have a great knack for finding genuinely good things, but his appreciation also taints those things by his association. Because hipsters naturally flock to any new discovery of authenticity, the hipster's engagement with any given authenticity turns "people who are doing a thing into a self-conscious scene, something others can scrutinize and exploit" (Horning, 2010, p. 82), and as we know, any "scene" is doomed to a short half-life at best. Worse yet, the hipster's attention, mediated and disseminated through Tumblr, Instagram and others, can be said to reduce these authenticities to simple aesthetics. As Dave Clooney, a participant in n+1's discussion panel on the hipster explains, this may actually detract from discussion of the issues that the hipster's conscientious consumption aims to combat:

There's money to be spent and nothing else really that's being demanded of the mass of youth, for them to do something specific, so they cannibalize older authentic culture to fuel consumerism. It just seems like a natural path at certain points in capitalism. And so the idea that hipsters have anything specific to do with homelessness, or actual social problems, or an actual critique of class issues – it's actually the alternative: to engage in an argument, an endless argument about aesthetics and taste, as opposed to an actual argument about politics and classism. (n+1, 2010, p. 40)

By attempting to engage more fully with their behaviours and purchases, Clooney claims, the hipster is actually drawing new fodder into the system of consumerism and turning otherwise genuinely meaningful things into fashion. The authentic, in this sense, becomes simply another aesthetic to be turned over, converted into a marketable product and eventually left behind, negating any of the actual social benefits that might otherwise have come with making the authentic cool. A good example of how this works is hipsters' passion for food. As something with an almost limitless supply of new ingredients, cultural styles and inventions, food has proved to be a natural fit for hipsters, who, as the foot soldiers of 'foodie' culture, have made boutique, regional and modernist restaurants relatively commonplace in major cities across the world. This has been an objectively good thing: the quality and variety of food that is available has increased, and the industry has thrived. However, many in the industry have reacted negatively to the increase in hipster enthusiasm. The hipster's confusing taste for irony and desire for things that are new and unusual has made an already fickle industry dangerously subject to the whims of fashion. The hipster habit of taking photos of their food as a display of taste has been banned in many restaurants, with the implicit complaint that food should be a gastronomic, rather than aesthetic experience. Another good example would be the process of gentrification, where hipsters move into a poor neighbourhood because it is authentic, but drive the rent on housing and business space up by their presence and force the area's original inhabitants, who

tend to be ethnic minorities with generations of history in the area, out (Clayton, 2010, p. 29). In both examples we see a well-meaning hipster contingent taking an interest in a culture that they appreciate and respect, but by using their market power to buy their way into that culture, they radically expand demand and then by in turn filling that demand, take it over entirely.

One key example of how the search for authenticity becomes cultural appropriation is the hipster's tendency to look to other popular subcultures for gnosis. The most obvious example of this is the Beats, which have been appropriated as a kind of historical proto-hipster as a result of the hipster's fetishisation of the post-war years. As an origin story, this could be said to lend some cultural and literary credibility to the hipster that is perhaps undeserved, but it is also something that the hipster has taken on without any evidence of irony or reserve – as far as I can tell, the hipster really does draw a direct line of history between themselves and the Beat Generation. Interestingly, the hipster is also hard at work appropriating the signs and gnoses of more recent, even contemporary subcultures. The hipster is a keen student of culture: shining light on bizarre and distant or previously forgotten cultures and subcultures is the major subject of Vice magazine, as well as that of many smaller blogs. When something worthwhile is found, the hipster naturally looks to make use of it by either becoming involved or picking up its remains. Previous generations of hipsters have done this with white trash and skate-punk cultures, and the contemporary hipster (particularly the younger subset of hipsters, who seem to focus more on the ironic nostalgia for the late 20th century) is displaying a particular interest in the gnoses provided by recently-dead subcultures like goth and grunge. The significance of this has to do with why the hipster has been so long-lived as a metamodern subculture – as Mark Greif explains:

The contemporary hipster seems to emerge out of a thwarted tradition of youth subcultures, subcultures which had tried to remain independent of consumer culture, alternative to it, and been integrated, humiliated and destroyed. (Positions, 2010, p. 6)

Greif makes the example of grunge, which began as “originally the most local of local scenes” but exploded into a popularity that quickly stripped it of everything that it stood for. More recently we can also make the example of goths, which had experienced numerous “waves” of popularity since the 1980's (Issitt, 2011), but which were brought into the mainstream and broken up into marketable products by ‘emo’ culture in the late 2000s. Both of these movements were effectively destroyed (although of course they continue to exist in pockets) because they had only one authenticity to sell, and once lured into parting with it, there was little left behind. The interesting thing is that the hipster has many authenticities to bring to market – when one gnosis becomes too well-known and falls into the mainstream, the hipster has already moved on. It has been argued that this is the purpose that



Figure 10: reblogged by Tumblr user urbanporn. The iconic waveform design from the cover of Joy Division's album Unknown Pleasures appears commonly on Tumblr as a tattoo or on tee-shirts. The shape is distinctive but also hints at the visual encoding of secret knowledge – the shape itself is a representation of radio waves emanating from a pulsar.

the hipster serves to society – instead of being an individual subculture that sells itself, the hipster might be more of a middleman – a subculture that exists to dig up new authenticities and beats them into a shape that is marketable as an aesthetic (Kinzey, 2010, pp. 54-58). Because of the flexibility that this role grants (and because the internet has abolished any of the real exclusivity that these groups previously had with their gnosis), the hipster is also able to pick through the remains of subcultures that have exhausted themselves and cannibalise the elements of gnosis that are worth keeping. We see examples of this in the various hipster sub-aesthetics that exist on Tumblr, such as 'pastel goth', 'nu-goth' and 'soft grunge', whose names are fairly self-explanatory. The actual nomenclature is essentially redundant – these appear to be simply aesthetic labels and a way for young hipsters to classify their style without actually saying 'hipster'. The ideologies and behaviours of these groups are imitated only so far as they are relevant to hipster culture already – I have seen plenty of existential angst and discussion of death and self-harm among

these young hipsters, but I see no reason to believe that this is not simply something that already applies to hipsters (as will be discussed in the next section) and young people in general. These hipsters take elements of goth and grunge and reconceptualise them ironically, mixing in current fashions in order to remain cool. The symbols associated with key early goth bands like Joy Division²⁰, whose first album cover is shown as a tattoo in the image to the left, and The Sisters of Mercy, whose logo is a very gnostic looking image from an anatomical textbook inside of a five-pointed star, appear regularly in popular images on Tumblr, often printed on items of clothing. Similarly, it is common to see popular images of hipsters wearing Nirvana Tee-shirts and flannel shirts, often oversized and tied around the waist Seattle-style. Some key signs such as the inverted crucifix (worn by goths) have even made it into the mainstream of ironic fashion – the inverted cross can regularly be observed being worn on the street, often with the unexpected contrast of brightly coloured fabric or images of puppies or kittens (a trademark of "pastel goth"). Where it applies, newer examples of music and fashion from these subcultures are generally ignored – the most authentic, "original" periods of these

²⁰ Joy Division existed and ended before the birth of the original goth culture, and can technically be considered a post-punk band, but their melancholy sound and tragic history was a key inspiration for many early goth bands and they have been posthumously accepted into history (particularly by goths) as one of the first 'gothic rock' bands (Bibby, 2007, p.233).

subcultures being around the late eighties and early nineties, which is crucial because it is a real authenticity (albeit a small one) that can be drawn from the times when most hipsters were children. The importance of irony in this appropriation of culture is that where there is a clear appreciation for the authentic kernel at the heart of the “original” period – where the scene was so small that engagement really did hinge on being let into some crucial gnosis in a way that it never quite could with the contemporary hipster – their signs are worn more like trophies than costumes. Where the hipster wears things like raw denim or brogued leather shoes because his appreciation for them is genuine and he wants to demonstrate his awareness of quality, a Nirvana or Joy Division Tee-shirt is a demonstration of his awareness of the short life that authenticity has in our culture, and the high price that is extracted from those who would like to keep hold of their authenticity.

2.7 The hipster and death

Death is central to all readings of hip literature in the twenty-first century. Of the Beat Generation’s authors, none remain alive today, despite being survived by many of their contemporaries. The brightest stars of the Lost Generation fared little better, nor have many of the writers from other periods that make up the hipster’s library. By the time that the current generation of young hipsters were old enough to read and appreciate these texts, their authors were long deceased. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Neal Cassidy and Jack Kerouac all died in their forties from health problems directly related to alcoholism; Philip K. Dick died at 53 of two successive strokes, having only lived to see the beginning of his popularity as a writer; William Burroughs died a methadone addict in 1997, and Hunter Thompson committed suicide in 2005. Only Allen Ginsberg’s death, also in 1997, can be considered to have come both peacefully and at a reasonable age. The hipster has also posthumously adopted a range of famous musicians²¹ who died before their time, including Kurt Cobain, Ian Curtis, Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls and GG Allin.

Given that many of the texts written or performed by these artists are fully or partly autobiographical in nature, the author’s death fundamentally changes how they are likely to be read. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the Popular Penguins edition of William Burroughs’ *Junkie*. The Popular Penguins series, which seems with its reproduction orange and cream covers (an authentic reproduction, down to the size and typefaces used, of the original penguin books, which sold for a sixpence in 1935) to be marketed directly to a hip audience, can be considered to be an essential delivery mechanism for hipster literature. Sold cheaply in university bookstores, this series, which includes works by Thompson, Burroughs, Fitzgerald, Kerouac and Ginsberg, takes a role in framing

²¹ Archival images of these musicians are regularly reblogged by hipsters on Tumblr.

these texts as historical by delivering them alongside the works of authors like Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, while at the same time preserving the hip validity of the texts by leaving it up to the reader to discover the relevant texts themselves among the shelves of visually identical books. The Popular Penguins edition of *Junkie* contains a crucial addition in the form of an introduction by Will Self. This introduction breaks down some of the text's key elements and serves to intellectualise the text somewhat, placing it in its historical context both generally and in terms of the author's life. Key omissions such as the death of Burroughs' wife, Joan Vollmer, are explained: where Burroughs himself chose to leave her accidental shooting out of the book, because it did not bear any real relation to his addiction (although drunk, he was clean at the time), instead stating simply that "my wife and I are separated" (p.152), Self explains the incident fully, even offering criticism of Burroughs' explanation of events. The text, for Self, is "not a novel at all, it is a memoir; 'William Lee' and William Burroughs are the same person" (p.xiv). Crucially this introduction, as all introductions do, precedes the text; it is not a post-script or an attempt to make sense of the text in hindsight. Burroughs, by death, is deprived of any ability to respond – Self gets the last word before the text is allowed to speak for itself. Self's most important admission here is of the nature of Burroughs' death:

"Burroughs never managed to recover from his addiction at all, and died in 1997 physically dependent on the synthetic opiate methadone. I find this a delicious irony: the great hero of freedom from social restraint, himself in bondage to a drug synthesized by Nazi chemists and dubbed 'Dolophine' in honour of the Fuhrer; the fearless libertarian expiring in the arms of an ersatz Morpheus, actively promoted by the federal government as 'cure' for heroin addiction. In the prologue to *Junky* and the introduction to *The Naked Lunch*, Burroughs writes of his own addiction as if it were a thing of the past, but this was never the case." (p.xv)

This very much changes the nature of the story. Burroughs' ending is hopeful but instead becomes simply naive:

"I decided to go to Colombia and score for yage. Bill Gains is squared away with Old Ike. My wife and I are separated. I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk.

Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix." (p.152)

Instead of being open-ended like the original, the Penguin Classics edition is boarded up by history. Burroughs, as Bill Lee, is transformed into a tragic figure before the story even begins, his every

movement shadowed by inevitable death. Yagé (pronounced yah-hey), which is more commonly known as ayahuasca, was ineffective at providing Burroughs with either the ‘kick’ or the telepathic powers that he sought it for. This is not an insignificant let-down: Burroughs was not entirely misguided in his belief that yagé would provide a cure for his addiction, in spite of the absurdity of some of his other hopes for it. The effectiveness of psychedelic drugs (psilocybin, LSD etc.) used to break the addiction cycle has been well documented, and a powerful dissociative called ibogaine (a ritual healing ceremony for which was recently documented on Vice TV) is used professionally and is legal in New Zealand.

This is not to say that all hipster texts from the twentieth century are preceded by introductions that give the proverbial game away, but rather that they might as well be. Most people know that Kerouac drank himself to death or that Cobain shot himself, and any new reader or listener who is unaware will never get far without being told. Literature is unavoidably tied to the life of its author, and when that life takes a grim turn – particularly a turn into self-destruction like addiction or suicide – that turn becomes part of the way that the text is read from then on. Although in the academy of literary criticism we tend to try to make the separation between text and author in order to avoid imposing artificial limitations upon it (Barthes, 1967), it is clear that for the average reader, particularly of a semi-autobiographical text, the idea of separating the two has little relevance. In the case of artists like Kurt Cobain or 2pac and Biggie, popular culture actually seems to know more about their deaths



A series of images posted on Tumblr by users fyeahcatsanddrugs, veraintheden, and p0kec0re (left to right respectively). These images are examples of common themes relating to death: self-destruction through consumption, the ironic display of violence (note that while this image is not, many others are quite graphic in their display) and the theoretical death brought about by consumerism. All of these images use iconic symbols of consumerism (the cocaine, the car and the neon sign) and twist their meaning around in a visually unexpected manner through the addition of a message or the shocking splash of blood.

than their music.

The hipster displays a distinct fascination with death. Signs associated with death are a recurring theme on hipsters’ Tumblrs: skulls, cigarettes and guns are common motifs. Death is strongly associated with excess and consumerism: guns²² and skulls are often gold-plated or reconfigured as

²² In the context of hunting and the outdoors, guns are also a symbol of authenticity, but in each case they are represented very differently. For obvious reasons, the guns represented in connection with death and irony are generally handguns or automatic weapons like Uzis or Kalashnikovs.



Figure 14: A popular image showing a hipster (note the sweater) holding a packet of Marlboro Edge cigarettes, which are a premium brand, making them a more potent symbol of excessive consumption. The idea of death marketed as high-quality, high-cost product appeals to hipsters, who often show cigarettes alongside symbols of either wealth or destitution. In this case they are conveniently combined. The cigarettes that hipsters smoke tend to be either premium like these, or very cheap for an ironic experience similar to drinking PBR. Interestingly, pipe smoking has become a popular habit among hipsters as well, but it is depicted entirely differently, instead being an authentic activity and symbol of masculinity. This image was posted by Tumblr user showingq.

art objects. Cigarettes, which are already the perfect hybrid of death and consumption, are often shown in the hands of skinny, sick looking models, or in piles with sardonic phrases written on them to be smoked away. Alcohol and drugs are fetishized in a similar way as being marketable self-destruction: images of cocaine, a similarly iconic symbol of both death and excess, are also common, often with lines arranged on top of a famous image, or with the powder curled up into shapes or words. Even the hipster's iconic glasses – thick and horn-rimmed in the style of Elvis Costello or Buddy Holly – were allegedly²³ modelled after glasses originally used by the CIA, which had capsules of cyanide cast into the tip of the earpiece, where an agent could chew them in the event of capture, making them a potent symbol of gnosis and death (Palahniuk, 2008). Among the more aggressively irony-driven blogs, more directly violent imagery is common, ranging from stylised images of wounds, blood and bruises to actual images of dead animals or people. Cigarettes make a particularly clear symbol because of the many public service advertisements that have equated even individual cigarettes with death by branding them as 'coffin nails' that each take a day off the smoker's life, and so forth. They are so ingrained as a sign of death that their semiotic relationship to it is almost iconic. By showing an image of themselves smoking, the hipster communicates a distinct familiarity with death. Images symbolic of death almost always appear surrounded by ironic depictions of excessive wealth and consumerism, showing a firm association between death and inauthenticity – between the consumption of things and the consumption of the self. Participation in self-destructive consumerism becomes a way of understanding the decay of culture and meaning on a bodily level. As it did with the Beats, this serves as a way of escaping the cruelty of the Demiurge's grasp by pre-

²³ Aside from an exhibit in a spy museum, I have found no evidence that Palahniuk's claim relating to these CIA suicide glasses is actually true – being derived from a work of fiction, it may well not be, or at least is likely drastically overstated. Regardless, Palahniuk's work is popular among hipsters, and therefore this 'fact' is likely well known and believed.

emptying it and applying symbolic wounds to the hipster's own body. Interestingly, the authentic is generally spared any association with death in these images: it is the realm of irony only. By treating it ironically and as an aesthetic, the hipster is able to get very close to the idea of death.

It is not a coincidence that so many of the important figures in hipster culture are dead – the dead are perhaps the only people whose motives can be fully understood. With the Beats occupying such a key space in hipster history, it is not hard to appreciate why the hipster would internalise some degree of obsession, on a cultural level if not a personal one, with death. Crucially, death is associated with failure: for the vast majority of these figures, their death looks to history like the final cap placed on the failure of their ideals in one way or another. Kerouac's death was evidence that the Beats had failed to find what they were looking for, much as Cobain's was the end of Grunge. Whether or not there are individual deaths that stand as markers to the end of the various other movements that the hipster sees as predecessors in the search for authenticity, such as the hippies, the punks, and whoever else, there is always the sense that each movement eventually died, succumbing to consumerism, politics or even simple entropy, leaving their mission unfinished and allowing society to continue its creep away from anything meaningful. Given this history, the hipster is desperate to avoid a similar fate. This is why we see so many declarations that the hipster is 'dead', such as n+1's *The death of the hipster* (Horning, 2010) and *Epitaph for the white hipster* (Greif, 2010) or Vice Magazine's "Please, God, let 2014 be the year we retire the word 'hipster'" (Ozzi, 2014): these are attempts (by publications with strong links to hipsterdom) both to fight down the negative reputation that the hipster has by retiring the much-hated name, and to negotiate the movement's 'death' and experience it on their own terms. Even n+1's book, *What Was The Hipster*, which is certainly one of the most honest and thorough engagements with the concept available, is titled as a retrospective, as though in 2010 the hipster was already over and we could all stop concerning ourselves with the matter. We see the same thing when individual fashions or 'scenes' are declared to be 'dead' by hipsters, having sold out and become mainstream. By tearing sections off itself and offering them up, the remaining culture is able to stay fresh and functional; the only death that they have so far failed to arrange is the death of the word hipster. In a literary sense, the hipster refuses to die – or rather, the hipster refuses to die only once. By declaring itself dead again and again, only to grow and spread in influence, hipsterdom is defying the narrative conventions of what we expect from a subculture or movement – it is writing itself a story that has no beginning or end. Much like Burroughs' attempts to edit his life to fit in with the narrative that he needed, hipsterdom is attempting to write its way out of the problem of failure. Unlike Burroughs however, the hipster is able to write their own introduction (or

rather, epitaph) through appendages like Vice and n+1, who claim no involvement with the hipster, and thereby assume the role of observer.

2.8 Conclusion

The hipster's social structure is ordered around the use and display of secret knowledge. Using their unique metalanguage of membership, which takes many signs from the past and manipulates historical ubiquity and implicit authenticity, the hipster evidences something akin to a secret society played out in public on a subtle wavelength. Despite being commonly perceived as being driven by irony, the hipster shows a far more significant concern for the authentic. Irony, instead, serves as a way of participating in consumer culture and a nostalgia for childhood without the guilt that might otherwise be associated with it. The gnosis that gives meaning to the signs the hipster uses comes from a variety of sources, including personal nostalgia of various kinds, but significantly also including knowledge and aesthetics scavenged from other cultures and subcultures. This appropriation gives the hipster a sense for the impending doom of their own movement – something that the history of these other subcultures implies is inevitable.

The Hipster and space

3.1 Introduction

One of the things that makes the hipster so interesting as a group is the way in which they approach the distinction between real life and the images that they see and post on the internet. These images are often idealised and heavily edited, and come with little or no information about the people or places that they depict. Scrolling through pages of them at speed, one cannot help but imagine a kind of continuity between them, even though they come from a wide range of sources. I argue that there is, in fact, a degree of continuity to be found in these images, although it is of a spatial nature rather than a temporal one. There is an imaginary geography being mapped out in these media, and its application is crucial to how the hipster interacts with the real world. The following chapter will break down the semiotics of this geography and explain how, and most importantly why, it is becoming so important to hipsters.

3.2 The Hyperreal

The short life of any hip sign comes with a fairly straightforward explanation: the hipster is essentially a creature of the city, in spite of his vehement insistence otherwise, and as a consequence any objects of authenticity that the hipster carries into the metropolis inevitably become part of the economy of urban cool, which destroys them over time by replication. Crucially the hipster is not just a creature of any city – they are a creature of *The City* as an overall concept. The hipster's relationship to space, and even the world outside of themselves, is primarily a post-modern one – freed from the constraints of geography by their position in the late-capitalist marketplace, the hipster exists “bereft of spatial coordinates” in a vague international space that they have reshaped and painted over to look like home (Jameson, 1991, p. 87). By engaging with the world through the rubrics of the internet and city life, the hipster denies engagement with the specific geography of the real world. This runs contrary to much of the discussion about hipster enclaves like Williamsburg or Portland that seems to dominate discourse relating to the hipster (Greif, 2010), as well as their well-known inclination towards social initiatives like the ‘locavore’ movement, which encourages people to eat only locally grown food in order to reduce their environmental impact and support the community. We see this ethos at work most commonly in the popularity of farmers’ markets and restaurants that proudly serve only locally

grown and raised food. Many hipster businesses²⁴ promote themselves as being locally made (more often than not, American made) and make a point of detailing the supply chain that provides them with their cotton, iron, silicon or other components. Gabrielle Hamilton (2012, pp. 241-242) paints a particularly clear (if grim) picture of the common issues associated with hipster involvement in such culture:

There's always the girl with the bicycle, wandering along from stall to stall with two apples, a bouquet of lavender, and one bell pepper in the basket of her bicycle. A teeming throng of New Yorkers tries to push past her to get to the vegetables for sale, but she shifts her ass from side to side, admiring the way her purchases are artfully arranged for all to see [...] I struggle, as well, with the self-referential new kind of farmer, aglow with this own righteousness, setting up his cute booth at the market each morning, with a bouquet of wildflowers and a few artfully stacked boxes of honeycomb and a fifteen-dollar jar of bee pollen. And from what I've seen, that guy behind the table, with his checkered tablecloth and his boutique line of pickled artichoke hearts in their jar with their prissy label packed just so, he *wants* to talk to Miss Bicycle, to Miss I've-spent-four-hours-here-this-morning-to-buy-these-three-cucumbers. He gets off on it.

Hamilton's complaint, in essence, is that these hipsters have no interest in the stated purpose of the market, but rather are interested only in the experience of "righteousness" and how it makes them look. Beyond this, which is at its heart a fairly standard criticism that is often levelled at hipsters (and is doubtless true enough), we come to the question of who exactly it is that these hipsters are performing for. Hamilton and the rest of her "teeming throng" are obviously not impressed. The answer would appear to be that the hipster's interest in the local is primarily as a means of acting out the global – the produce at the market is a purchasable representation of an ideology and lifestyle that has no real connection to an actual place or local community. Miss Bicycle and her "self-referential" farmer friend are cultivating an ideal image, checking and re-checking their presentation of a set of signs that surely have no origins in New York City. "Local" becomes a signifier, a means of accessing the mythic "local" that exists, paradoxically, in the broader cultural sphere. Because much of hipster experience is learned through the internet, the real-world farmers' market (or any other hip location like a boutique store or secret bar) becomes a manifestation of a gnosis that is primarily encountered in images and other semiotic media. As such eating locally becomes a means of eating globally.

The Hipster origin story is of course full of geography – for the Beats geography was everything because it represented freedom. For Kerouac travel was a reel of experience through unmediated

²⁴ For examples of this, see chapter four.

spaces; this is why hitchhiking and road-tripping became such a central countercultural activity for the Beats (and the hippies): the spaces in-between were wild, and passing through them was to become at least momentarily wild yourself. Kerouac referred repeatedly to the scale of the world in *On The Road*, calling it “too-big” and “too-huge” as he left friends and lovers behind again and again, but for the hipster’s generation, who have the means to travel and a cosmopolitan outlook almost by default, the opposite is true. A frequent flyer since birth, travel means very little to the hipster because the journey is nothing more than a progression through what Marc Augé (1995) calls “non-places”:

Meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead they are listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory’, and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position. A world where people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital [...] (p.78)

The journey becomes simply a series of periods spent waiting, sitting in airports and on planes and in cars on motorways. As such, the distance between any two places becomes theoretical, and largely beside the point – travel is simply a matter of means. Of course, the hipster rejects this state of affairs explicitly: road trips through the countryside and nature hikes in the wilderness are an extremely common theme in hipster imagery. Pilgrimages retracing Kerouac’s journeys across America hold a particular significance, although in practice they do not appear to be common. The essential difference between a hipster road-trip and a beat generation one is that in the 1950s mediation simply could not extend into the wilderness. As Kerouac explains in *Lonesome Traveller* (1960):

No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength. Learning for instance, to eat when he's hungry and sleep when he's sleepy. (p.128)

Kerouac’s wilderness is pure solitude, where even the standard societal rules of when it is right to eat and sleep are irrelevant because nobody is watching. These days no space is unmediated, especially for the hipster: iPhone in hand, the hipster works deliberately to mediate the space around him, even out in the wild. Through the lens of a camera (and then again through image processing software like Instagram, Over and Photoshop) the hipster’s experience is transmuted into valued archetypes. Experiences are mined for their value in reference to the ideal experience (that is the hipster sublime)

and reconfigured after the fact in order to ensure that they comply. Below are some examples taken from Tumblr:



Figures 1 and 2 (left to right): posted by Tumblr users outdrr and yesesco respectively. Note the contrast of warm objects (coffee, boots) with the cold colours of the photographs. Note also how the photographer, particularly in figure 1, uses the camera to take a picture from his own perspective – like a novel written in first person, this method encourages the viewer to imagine themselves as the photographer rather than an onlooker.

Notice both the heavy use of photographic technique in both images: central objects are placed along the lines of halves and thirds; the short depth of field in the picture of the cups (likely indicating an expensive digital SLR camera); the corner vignettes and overexposed centre of the boat image (an Instagram filter); the expert colour balance (Photoshop) in the cups. There is a strong presence of the author in these images, and the intent is obviously that the viewer take the place of the author in viewing them. There is a common focus of comfort found among the uncomfortable: both images have cold colour profiles that are counterbalanced with hot coffee and warm, dry boots respectively. We are directed to experience this moment of warmth and respite vicariously and to remember such moments in our imagined and actual memories. Contrary to the regular focus of photography as a means of preserving social events, these photos become about preserving an intimate, personal and entirely individual moment in a way that can allow any viewer to take part in it as though that moment

was theirs. The subject is behind the camera, rather than in front of it. We see the same in the following two images, also taken from Tumblr:



Figure 3: posted by Tumblr user saltandsteel, which is a hipster tee-shirt company that markets itself using many of the methods described in sections 4.2 and 4.3. Note the use, again, of cold colours balanced against warm clothing and a campfire.



Figure 4: posted by Tumblr user One-last-night. Note the cup placed in the centre of the image, its logo facing outward and clearly recognisable, but cleverly obscured just enough not to be obvious.

The first image, taken from Salt & Steel Collective's Tumblr, shows the reduction of experience into archetype: no real relationship is cultivated between the photographer and his or her subjects. Their faces are obscured by distance, and we get the sense in viewing it that when we put down the camera and walk over, all the faces there will be old friends. Most of the significance of the image is in what should take place around it: the image merely presents the set-pieces. A degree of gnosis is again required: without an experiential reference against which to apply the image it loses meaning. The image is both intimate and impersonal: the very simplest of moments become suspect, nostalgic still-

lives built carefully out of real lives by a photographer who knows his craft too well to be naïve. The second image leaves the human element of the scene similarly open to interpretation, again presenting both the cold beauty of a windswept shoreline and the warm comfort of a protective windshield and a hot coffee. Note here the differing colour-casts of each part of the image: the windscreen might well be a stand-in for the computer monitor, the dashboard for a desk. The most important thing about this image, though, is right in the centre: the Starbucks cup. The people re-blogging the image appear to agree: a quote from Tumblr user “meggielynne” was re-blogged as a caption – “everything about this is perfection — God’s beautiful creation (including the coffee!)”. A tall cup of Starbucks coffee on an unpopulated shoreline is indicative of a profound breakdown of space when we consider that Starbucks is essentially (and symbolically) a city product. Is there somehow a Starbucks nearby? Is the cup empty? The cup is too perfectly placed – dead centre, the label turned to face the camera directly – to be there accidentally. The hipster is too aware of the importance of signs and branding to have left a branded object in the scene by mistake. Here the contrived nature of the image becomes most obvious: the city is never really absent, because it goes everywhere that the hipster goes. Even in the wilderness, brands like this appear incongruously because brands²⁵ become an integral part of the hipster’s lifestyle and self-conception, and as such find their way into these kinds of images almost accidentally.

The best way to explain this breakdown of space is in terms of a kind of hyperreality. Hyperreality is the false world that precedes reality in postmodernity: to use Jean Baudrillard’s example from the first pages of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), it is like the map overlaid perfectly onto the territory, a metaphor that anyone who has used a smartphone for navigation will know is becoming more and more literal. More than this, however, hyperreality is the abstraction of this overlay beyond any need for the reality underneath:

It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. (p.1)

The images above demonstrate how this applies to hipster culture: each picture is taken with reference to an ideal reality that precedes the real experiences that were taking place in front of the camera. Digital post-processing ensures that they conform to expectations. A camera, particularly for the tech-savvy hipster, will always mean mediation: a hip, gnostic experience is not complete until the

²⁵ Despite their size, Starbucks retains a surprising popularity among hipsters, who value its coffee as a signifier of a lifestyle that is both bohemian and wealthy.

photographic record of it is broken down into images that speak to the ideal experience rather than any specific one. As Umberto Eco explains, using Disneyland as an extreme example, the hyperreal is exemplified by the idea of something fake that is more real than the original:

Disneyland not only produces illusion, but – in confessing it – stimulates a desire for it: a real crocodile can be found in the zoo, and as a rule it is dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands. When, in the space of twenty-four hours, you go (as I did deliberately) from the fake New Orleans of Disneyland to the real one, and from the wild river of Adventureland to a trip on the Mississippi, where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and then you don't see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can. (Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality, 1998, p. 44)

As Cayce Pollard's MA-1 jacket (which is a reproduction deliberately exaggerated slightly so as to be more real than the original) has already shown us, the hipster is very familiar with the idea of this kind of hyperreality. All of the hipster's reproductions are more perfect than the original, rendered in higher fidelity and sanitised of any unwelcome inconsistencies. In digital photography this is especially easy to do: a scene only has to be perfect for one half-second among many, and even then it can be edited – creating a fake that is not just an object but a whole scene. Crucially, photographic fakes are more compelling than the ones at Disneyland because they have all the attributes of a hyper-real fake and yet are so much more subtle that it is easy to forget what they are. The reason that this transmutation of experience is so compelling to the hipster lies in the conceit of photographs themselves:

A photograph – any photograph – seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects.

Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively indiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity – and ubiquity – of the photographic record is the photograph's "message", its aggression. (Sontag, 1977, p. 7)

The photograph, for Sontag, is not the unimpeachable record that we so often assume it to be: like any work of art it is subject to the view of the photographer and the editor, reflecting their gaze and their intentions. For the hipster this is doubly true because of the influence of Instagram and the various other applications that include image filtering: by taking images that already focus on a subtle, personal experience (like the image of the coffee cups and the view from inside the tent) and passing

them through a filter that adds effects like film grain, oversaturation and vignettes, we are left with something that looks remarkably like memory. As Sontag argues, “photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal” (p.8). For the photographer who actually remembers taking the photo, it comes to occupy the same space as the real memory, becoming a kind of hyper-real prosthetic. Of course, this is false: such images are more artworks than they are records, but the desire to ignore that fact and accept the idealised fiction is certainly understandable. In some ways, this fiction may be more real than it would seem: because of the importance of the hyperreal in hipsters’ lives (or rather in the lives of postmodern youth in general) it could be argued that locating one’s memories in hyperreality simply makes sense. As Julian Murphet (2004, p. 117) explains, the postmodern body is essentially composed of information:

The visual Niagara with which our society deluges our bodies is now more vital to our apprehension of our own most intimate spaces than the blood and tissue of its organic being. “The body” for us has less to do with that brute biological substratum of pulsions and reflexes than with the cultural stream of messages that enters and fashions us through the eyes. Now that the human genome is being decoded, indeed, the distinction between biology and “information” is rapidly disappearing.

What this means is that for the hipster, who is surely at the forefront of any transformations being undertaken by the postmodern body, participation in online cultural locations like Tumblr can be in many ways more real and more compelling than the real memories that they sit in place of. It is in this same way that brands are able to become so tied to the hipster’s (or even any person’s) concept of self: now that the body is information, they are made of the same stuff, and seem to fit comfortably together. The postmodern body, like hipster culture in general, has a starkly diminished relation to space and geography. When considered as a signal, something that can be broken down into signs as reassembled, this postmodern body is perfectly designed to be transmitted between realities: the hipster can exist in both worlds at once by placing a more-perfect-than-reality copy of him or herself in the hyperreal. This is achieved either by participating in behaviours that they have seen to be a part of the hyper-real world and imagining themselves in front of the camera or, more importantly, taking a photo of themselves at the perfect moment. Because of the verisimilitude of the simulation (that conceit of photography), this exchange demands nothing of the hipster and is simply a natural part of how digital photography and social media have come to work. The importance of this is that it allows for the generation of something akin to a landscape within hyperreality.

This hyperreality is the source of the only geography that really does matter to the hipster. Because hipster imagery is largely consumed as a single image at a time, often with no attribution or explanation, among the “visual Niagara” of similar and yet unrelated images on the internet and its

various image-based social networking sites, the way that location is constructed changes significantly. Like the scenery used in advertising, images of cities, forests, mountains and houses all blur together, losing their relation to real space and its specific geography. As such we are left with a hyperreal 'landscape' where no map can exist and the closeness of any two locations is better determined by the signs that they share than by the measurement of distance. This space influences the hipster's interaction with the real world significantly: real-world locations are selected for photography based on their ability to conform to the imagined shape of a location that does not exist. Reality becomes like a film set where the hyperreal can take place and be participated in. This hyperreal geography is essentially divided between two locations that I have termed The Outdoors and The City, whose dualism (although not quite so Manichean) mirrors the dualism inherent in the gnostic outlook. Through these two locations, the hipster is able to mediate and conceptualise the significance of their engagement with the world. It is important to note that we never see any suburban landscapes in this hyperreal: representing the most hollow and irredeemably banal aspects of culture, the suburbs are discarded completely from the hipster's world. If it could be said to be so linear, the hipster's City would end where the inner-city apartment blocks stop, perhaps degrading into industrial areas and overgrown urban decay, but never the unconscionable half-life of suburbia. The City and The Outdoors have a lot in common with myth (in Barthes's sense) – as amalgamations of smaller concepts, they function in very much the same way, except with regard to their relationship to the real world where, because they are hyper-real, they take precedence, which myth normally would not do. The semiotics of which they are made also contains myths: The Outdoors for example contains the myths of the American dream and the authentic, among others. Where myths are "second-order semiological chains" (Barthes, 1972) that are made up of smaller signs, these locations function as third-order chains, flattening myths in the same way and pulling them together into one conceptual location. This serves to provide crucial order to the world by allowing concepts and images to share space in a very functional way, giving the hipster a perfectly semiotic place to work at their gnostic re-reading of the world.

3.3 Location one: The City

The City is the more complex of the two, and as such is a difficult thing to organise into any set description. If it had a name, it would almost certainly be New York or Los Angeles. As these locations are some of the original centres of hipster culture this is unsurprising, but it is important to note that hipsters display no particular interest in the sites of their subcultural heritage (like Williamsburg) there. The real-world spaces in which actual images of The City are constructed vary out of necessity; these two locations are simply nexus points of wealth, Avant-garde culture and most importantly

media saturation. For those who grew up in the 80's and 90's these locations have been preceded so thoroughly by movies and television that the real place could not possibly matter: it seems only rational for those children, now adults, to recolonize those representations without reference to the original. The same is true of America in general, which is part of why so much of the hipster imaginary takes place in something so resembling America. It might just as easily, however, be Paris or Milan. The City is the location from which technology and culture are projected, and as with any projection, the image is all that really exists; the projector itself contains only mechanisms. The hipster's ubiquitous iPhones and MacBooks are essentially the projectors here: their real value is in the cultural technology that they facilitate access to. These cultural technologies (of which Tumblr is a prime example) allow for the breakdown of space because projection has no relation to space; The City is overlaid concurrently onto all parts of the world that have cell network or fibre optic coverage, eliminating distance.

The signs that are associated with The City include the obvious buildings and streets, as well as a range of other signified concepts, including a number that could be considered to be mythic. These concepts, and some examples of commonly used signifiers, are listed below:

- Communication
 - Crowds
 - Bars and nightclubs
 - Parties
 - Communication technology (cell phones, computers etc.)

- Wealth (including the wealth-gathering element of the American dream, which is mythic)
 - Architecture
 - Interior design
 - Money
 - Fashion, clothing and jewellery
 - Cars

- Consumption, death and inauthenticity (myth)
 - Garbage
 - Fast food
 - Violence and weapons
 - Cigarettes and drugs

- Sexualised female bodies

➤ Gnosis

- Drugs
- Food
- Secret events/brands
- Tattoos

The City is where hip communication takes place. Like a great marketplace, signs and gnosés are brought into The City and traded, assessed for their value and commoditised, with some returning to the real world as products. Commerce and communication go hand in hand for the hipster, and in The City they can become one and the same. Gnosis and taste are shown overtly, taking a form that is equal to and almost always associated with signs representative of wealth such as expensive clothing or luxury food. The language of The City is one of overt signs like advertising images, and as such much of the hip communication there is similarly overt and commodity-centric. One of the major forms that we see The City take in Tumblr images is pedestrian streets as a kind of natural catwalk: because The City buzzes already with signs and semiotic communication, fashion becomes the natural method of making oneself heard. In order to wear his or her clothes in The City, and thereby take part in this semiotic conversation, the hipster must go to *a* city and be photographed, ideally by someone with a lot of followers on Tumblr or Instagram. The real-life city is largely irrelevant, because although there is certainly a visual discourse of fashion and signs taking place in real cities, the hyperreal City is much more accessible, and only the best photos need be selected. Because all of the hipsters in the real cities are also participants in the discourse of The City, the hyperreal becomes the more real point of reference, becoming the font from which new fashions flow. Even if new fashions come into being only blocks away in any respective city, those fashions will likely move through The City first, because The City is always closer, no matter one's real location. Another major communicative activity that is represented in images of The City is that of nightlife, which includes such things as parties, bars, nightclubs and restaurants. These places and events are crucial to The City because they play key roles as expressions of gnosis: with things like pop-up restaurants or 'secret' shows, the crucial determinant is not whether a person can afford to buy a meal or a ticket, but whether they know to. The images from these events are similar to what we see on the sidewalk, depicting nameless people in carefully chosen clothing in locations that often avoid any specificity – this is particularly true of images that



Figure 5(left): posted by Tumblr user unapologeticallyimperfect. Note how the background is blurred and readable only as being vaguely metropolitan. The focus instead is on the model and her semiotic possessions: the fashion that she chooses and the tattoos that she wears. The tattoos are particularly significant: they display authenticities that she has brought into The City and (literally) converted into flat, representative images. These images display her participation in the authentic and also serve as markers of gnosis for people with similar inclinations: a cook will recognise the bundle of rosemary, a tailor the fabric scissors, and so on.



Figure 6(right): posted by Tumblr user meninthetown. Images located in The City often show a model in the process of walking through a busy city street, and sometimes, as in this case, (presumably) staged interaction with others. This creates an equivalency between taste and gnosis – the taste displayed by the man's clothes are evidence of his involvement in the discourse of the street, which is represented literally here. Although it displays many of the same conventions, this is not an advertising image, and is simply derived from a style blog. In The City the everyday street is converted into a catwalk where the passing observer (either on the street or on the internet) only has time to momentarily evaluate an individual's semiotics. Note how the only part of the image that is in focus is the human subject: the location that the photograph was taken has no relevance because it has been absorbed into The City.

depict fine dining or formal events, and are often semiotically indistinguishable from street-as-catwalk images. In The City, everything is liberated from the need for a purpose or a function, and anything that enters its economy does so as a semiotic object only. The people who travel through this world are similarly liberated of their utility, becoming like flâneurs whose purpose is something entirely more abstract, seemingly assembled and animated out of their own symbology. We almost never see an image of a human figure actually *doing* anything: instead they are like the figures in the images above, captured in the act of discourse.

The City is also the symbolic source of much of the hipster's guilt. It is representative of consumerism and all of its associated pollution, exploitation and greed. Although the modern city is no longer the centre of production that it once was, it is still the nexus point of capitalism in which the trade of guilt-ridden commodities takes place. The tools of communication themselves, the iPhones, computers and digital cameras, are all such items, assembled in sweat shops, shipped to the first world and then discarded after a life-cycle of a few years at best. The City trades in economies of inauthenticity, of advertising slogans and the need to have the newest and the best of everything. Images taking part in



Figure 7: posted by Tumblr user Sparhk. Note the juxtaposition of fatty foods with the skinny model, which is a trope that often appears in ironic images. This image draws upon advertising forms to show an ironic vision of consumerism that revels in it as much as it mocks it. Note also how the model is anonymised by her hair, glasses and makeup obscuring her face – she becomes a collection of semiotics and consumables instead of a person.

the visual discourse of The City are often strongly influenced by advertising, displaying the same conventions and compositions in order to highlight the semiotics (and therefore branding) of their subjects. Advertising, by sheer force of economics, is the dominant structure for semiotics in any city, and as such its forms become the default language for visual communication. Because of the hipster's awareness of this and the problems that it creates for authenticity, representations of The City are often deeply ironic, either contrasting these forms with images of moral or economic squalor, or overtly fetishizing wealth and consumption at its most absurd. We see a good example in figure 7, where a woman poses on the street in front of a drive-through In-N-Out Burger²⁶: her provocative pose, bright red lipstick and dark, oversized sunglasses could all be taken straight from an advertisement for perfume or makeup, but placed in front of a fast food restaurant, with a busy multi-lane road visible to the left, the image becomes absurd, implicitly asking us why the model and the drive-through seem to be in such stark contrast, when in reality they are two sides of the same coin. Irony is essentially The City's only defence mechanism against its own nature, the only available method of justifying the fact that participation in consumer society – be it in the form of a cheap drive-through burger or a fleeting investment into the fantasy presented by a perfume advertisement – is simply part of life in any city, even for the hipster. We see similar expressions in images of parties and nightclubs, which often focus on the consumption of alcohol and drugs as a parallel to self-destruction, as discussed earlier. Similarly, the bodies of women in such images are often sexualised, shown posed

²⁶ In-N-Out burger is also popular among 'foodie' hipsters because, as well as being highly regarded by local Californians, it also has a "secret" (although actually well known) second menu that has a range of unusual food options, and even a further "super-secret" menu, the specifics of which can be found, in parts, online.

in revealing outfits as anonymised accoutrements to wealth, reduced to objects as a visual demonstration of what consumerism implicitly does to everyone.

3.4 Location two: The Outdoors

The other pole of the hipster's hyperreal geography is what I have termed, for lack of a better name, The Outdoors. The Outdoors is by definition a wild and varied place, but in a semiotic sense its meaning is fairly straightforward. Where The City writhes with irony and guilt, The Outdoors represents a place of calm and serenity. The images set there that we see on Tumblr are usually dominated by the open sky and filled with the patient figures of mountains and tall trees. In keeping with what we would expect from outdoor photography as a genre, human figures are often depicted from a distance, and where they are not they look away from the camera, often engaged in classic outdoor pursuits like fishing, shooting (although not often hunting), hiking or simply taking in the view from a high point. Building fires is an especially common scene, as is cooking and socialising around the resulting campfire. We might never know that these images had hip value if it were not for the careful and subtle placement of items, clothes and other laden signifiers around the bodies and campsites of the human subjects. As with The City, American geography provides a key source for the images that make up The Outdoors, generally because the various stories through which we understand its myths of freedom, such as Kerouac's *On the Road*, use America as a backdrop. The semiotics of the American journey west, with its gold-rush promise of self-determination and an authentic frontier lifestyle, is key here, although unlike the historical frontier there is no evidence of native opposition: only open space waiting to be settled. As with The City, this American history is informed by the perspective of popular culture, mediated through television and film, with little regard for historical reality. Historical images of outdoor locations, taken alone and de-contextualised, are often posted alongside new images of hipsters in The Outdoors, both as historical curiosities (sources of gnosis) and as inspiration for authentic present-day activities.

As with The City, The Outdoors is identified by a wide selection of signs, and is composed of a number of myths. The following is a list of some of the most common of these signs and myths, some of which apply to multiple myths:

- The American Dream (myth) and the Journey West (myth)
 - American flags
 - Wide open spaces, national parks etc.
 - Arrows and arrowhead motifs (often as artwork or tattoos)

- Authenticity (myth)
 - Hiking
 - Wide open spaces
 - Cabins
 - Wood-chopping
 - Campfires and campfire cooking
 - Vegetable gardening, farming and nose-to-tail cooking

- Masculinity (myth)
 - Wood-chopping
 - Campfire building
 - Hunting

- Nostalgia/Conservatism (myth)
 - Hiking
 - Hitch-hiking
 - Cabins
 - Farm houses and farmhouse style decoration
 - Old cars
 - Nostalgic clothing

The Outdoors functions as the source of a very practical and straightforward kind of authenticity. The activities that take place in The Outdoors are humanistic, deliberate, and, ignoring for a moment the presence of the camera, are immediate in a way that is rarely possible in city life. The Outdoors takes place in a kind of permanent and half-remembered past, filled with the idealised authenticity of cultural memory. Essentially absent most of the markers that we associate with society and the passing of time, the wilderness becomes the best place to act out this past: because the only human signs that exist there are the ones that you bring with you (ideally), all it takes to go camping in a more authentic era is to bring the right set-pieces.

The Outdoors, then, seems to function like a kind of safeguard against all of the inauthenticity of life in The City – a location for the figurative heart. A post on the Sanborn Canoe Company website (a hipster company that will be examined in greater detail in section 4.2) makes for a very clear example of how the relationship between The Outdoors and regular city life works:

Make your 5-9 better than your 9-5: we all know that the 9am-5pm time block can be monotonous. But what are you doing with the 5pm-9am time block? Are you making your evenings worth it? Here's an idea: take a drive to the nearest forest, mountain, or lake and sleep there a night instead of going home. Prepare beforehand, obviously, but use that block of time to escape and recharge somewhere that makes you feel alive. You may be a big groggy the next morning when you come in to the office, but I bet you'll be a lot happier too. Climb a mountain; fish for your dinner; sing around a campfire; have a beer under a pine tree. The possibilities are endless when you realize all the time you COULD be spending somewhere during your evenings. (Miller, 2014)

The Outdoors is positioned as a salve, an authentic location or behaviour by which participation in an inauthentic society is neutralised, and more importantly is made acceptable. Simply walking into The Outdoors is sufficient – as one commonly re-blogged Tumblr post says, “Time spent amongst trees is never wasted” (livinginhisgratefulness, 2013). The Outdoors becomes a kind of meditation machine, a deliberate silence in contrast to the constant screaming signals of City life.



Figure 8: posted by Tumblr user *rainydaysandblankets*, this image shows a man gathering firewood, which is an especially common subject for photographs of The Outdoors. Note how the focus is directed towards the button detail on the jacket's cuff, and the white shirt underneath. The model's head is obscured to allow the viewer to imagine themselves or a friend in his place. Despite the subject, this image has more in common with a fashion image than a real depiction of a camping activity.



Figure 9: posted by Tumblr user *justmyfavthings*. Note the use of post-processing techniques to make this image appear sun-damaged and over-exposed. Although it is likely that this image was taken recently, it is deliberately impossible to tell.

We cannot forget, however, the fundamental importance of the camera (undeniably a City product) in how hipsters make use of The Outdoors. In its full hyperreal sense, The Outdoors cannot exist without observation by the camera, because the conceit of the lens (and subsequent posting online) is what allows a personal experience to be transformed into a universal one. The very nature of the place appears to preclude any discussion of this intrusion: where images in The City are very aware of

the camera's presence, creating images that are carefully posed and constructed, photographers in The Outdoors take pains to hide the presence of their camera as a tool of authorship, attempting to refigure it as an apparatus for capturing experiences rather than making art. Of course, once again, this is false: much of what we see as The Outdoors is undeniably constructed and staged, and all of it is meticulously edited. Because of the invisibility of the camera, there is no real irony in The Outdoors. In order to avoid disrupting this illusion it is popular for hipsters to bring old film cameras with them and scan the prints afterwards for use online, but in practice it seems (based on what I can tell simply from the appearance of the resulting images) that these cameras are more often used by (or as) the subject than the photographer. It is a testament to its necessity as a source of absolution for the sins of The City, and to the earnestness of the conservatism that it represents, that none of the vices or



Figure 10: Posted by Tumblr user *h-o-r-n-g-r-y*. Notice how the Polaroid camera is placed within the image: at the centre, obscuring the man's face and replacing one of his eyes; it is the subject of photography, rather than a tool for it. Note also the man's cable-knit sweater, metal-frame backpack and moustache, all of which work to create an appearance that is distinctly reminiscent of the 1970s and the kind of fashion that his father (or at least the ideal 'dad') might have worn at the same age.



Figure 11: posted by Instagram user *@noeltheartist* and reblogged on Tumblr. As with many Outdoor images, this explicitly references the American Dream, communicating a message of hope, enthusiasm and hard work along with it. This is interesting because in images of The City, the American Dream is never a positive myth, but rather one of exploitation, cruelty and meaninglessness. It would seem that this is a side effect of The Outdoors' nostalgia: in the past, the Dream is not yet dead.

ironies of The City ever make it into The Outdoors. We never see the images set in The Outdoors depicting the excessive consumption, nudity or drug use that we commonly see used to satirize the vacuity of City life. To do so, it would appear, would be to profane something that hipsters take very seriously.

We see enough evidence in how hipsters interact with The Outdoors to make the claim that hipsters treat it as a sacred place, and to see its use as a kind of ritual. What this means is that although The Outdoors is primarily a hyperreal construction – that is, a product of postmodernity at its most extreme – what it means for those who value it has roots in something much older. Although there is no impulse, as there was with the Beats, for hipsters to declare places or things to be “holy” in one way or another, stepping out of city life and into the wilderness appears to be a very transformative action. Like the priest stepping into the circle with the sacrifice, the hipster feels the weight of his ties to the profane world lift from his shoulders. As a hyperreal location, The Outdoors exists outside of the constraints of normal time. More than this, while normal images are abstracted and severed from their temporal context by having been *taken*, images of The Outdoors, rather than having temporal referents and losing them, are simply crafted with none. The wilderness has no memory, and the signs that hipsters carry into it, by their variety, offer no other specificity than ‘the past’. In order to access it properly there is a necessary ritual: one must be wrapped in symbolic clothing (the hand-me-down sweaters of one’s ancestors, even) and take part in ritualised activities such as the felling of a tree and the building of a fire (for a good example of this in practice, see the case study of Best Made Co. in section 4.2). In terms of defining these Outdoor rituals, the most common catch-all term used by hipsters is simply “adventure”, a word that appears often in posts about The Outdoors and outdoor pursuits. In enacting an “adventure” ritual, the hipster enters something that Mircea Eliade (1957) calls “sacred time”, where a person steps outside of regular time and takes part in a mythical event.

By its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a *primordial mythical time made present*. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in the mythical past, “in the beginning”. [...] Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable. From one point of view it could be said that it does not “pass,” that it does not constitute an irreversible duration. [...] With each periodical festival, the participants find the same sacred time – the same that had been manifested in the festival of the previous year or in the festival a century earlier. (p.68-69)

The event that Eliade describes takes place multiple times and yet only once: by entering “sacred time”, the participants are taking part in the actual event, re-actualising and sustaining it. This is possible because the event never happened in real time, but rather only in myth and “sacred time” – just like the half-history of The Outdoors. In practice, of course, interaction with The Outdoors is rarely anything so grand, for the hipster, as the festivals that Eliade wrote about, but the sense of being outside of time is equally valid on a smaller scale. The hipster hiking in the woods might find themselves acting out, and thereby actually participating in, the hiking trips (whether real or imagined)

taken by their parents or grandparents in bygone eras. Historical (or literary) events, such as Jack Kerouac's time in Cascades National Park in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), might also be enacted. These are ancestral myths that engage with both a person's personal ancestry, but also an ancestry on a national and cultural level (such as culturally inherited myths like the American dream). The ability to enact this "sacred time", and thereby feel a genuine connection to the past, is crucial to hipster culture because it facilitates the continued engagement with authenticity that allows hipster culture to continue. It allows the hipster to participate in a *new past* – to turn over fresh experiences of something that was by definition already over (or more likely, never really happened), and already confirmed to be permanently authentic. Being an engagement with their own cultural history, it also provides a rare link to an authenticity that the hipster can actually claim genuine ownership of, rather than being appropriated from other cultures. The hipster is able to return to a simpler time and bring enthusiasm back, reaffirming the value of their culture in the present.

3.5 Imaginary America

The importance of these two hyperreal locations is not found in an attribute of either one but in how they interact. The two are obviously opposed in many ways: where The Outdoors represents the past and authenticity, The City is all about the future and mass-production. Moreover, these two essential locations in hipster communication represent very different *kinds* of communication: the semiotics of The City are drawn from advertising and form high-value, high-impact semiotic clusters, showing fashion and products, where images of The Outdoors communicate an open emptiness, sourcing their subtle signs from culture's collective memories²⁷. Because the two essentially serve as foils to one another, we often see them used in juxtaposition, either with elements of The City bleeding into The Outdoors and vice versa, or simply with images of both blogged together in the same stream of images. Bringing authenticity back from The Outdoors neutralises some of the guilt associated with City life, and bringing communication (both technological and semiotic) into The Outdoors serves to bring the "sacred time" of the wilderness into the 'real' world and make it accessible.

Between the two of them, they form a complete world that is surprisingly compelling. The incredible volume of images that Tumblr turns over every day means that the hipster hyperreal exists in an extremely high level of fidelity, and the ease with which hipsters can bring it into their own lives makes it an extremely personal space. This landscape is a palpable example of the value that gnosis has for the hipster: it is a place that cannot be visited or even imagined without gnosis, and yet it exists in parallel to reality, visible everywhere the hipster goes but unnoticed by everybody else. Unlike reality,

²⁷ This format has, of course, now been co-opted for the purpose of advertising.

this hyperreal is an ordered universe, where the evils of the modern world can actually be overcome on a personal level by engaging with the authentic. This is a world where being white and American is neutral, and where disengaging with politics is enough to avoid responsibility for the actions of one's government. This is a just world, where everyone has not only a right to be alone in an unspoiled forest, but a responsibility to be there, now and again. Perhaps most importantly, doing 'good' things like walking in the woods and buying quality clothing gains an equivalency with doing *good* things like eating locally grown food (which reduces a person's carbon footprint) and not buying new electronics (which are filled with 'conflict minerals' and poisonous chemicals). Because these authentic behaviours are reduced to flat aesthetics in the hyperreal, it becomes very hard to tell whether or not they should be weighted differently when they are returned to form as real-world actions. This is not to say that both of these kinds of things are not good in their own ways, but when the authentic and the inauthentic are binary absolutes, it can be entirely too easy to keep one's conscience clean. All of this matters because of how real it actually is: the hyperreal, being hyper-real, takes precedence over reality. It is simply too believable, too easy to want to trust. This is why so many of the hipsters at the farmer's market have iPhones²⁸: although they realise it is bad, their other authentic behaviours strike an acceptable balance with their personal share of Foxconn's suicide nets and the wars being fought for tungsten mines in the Congo. This is also why irony allows the hipster to engage so fully with aspects of consumerism: a positive aesthetic too easily cancels out a negative one, even if the negative is hardly an aesthetic issue at all.

The other effect of how convincing this hyperreal geography is is that, as already discussed, it begins to take the place of real geography. By giving this space precedence over real space, the hipster cultivates a relationship with the real world that manages to be both very open and surprisingly closed. Because of the precedence given to American history²⁹ as a source of the idealised past and American locations as the template for the ideal City or Outdoors experiences, the hipster's world is distinctly dominated by a sense of American-ness. This is unconnected to America as a nation or a nationality, but instead has to do with the adoption of its sense of entitlement to empty outdoor spaces and the 'American Dream' as general hipster properties – or rather, properties that apply to everyone in the hipster's world. The hipster becomes, by default, an imaginary American: a participant in all of the myths of America, and a citizen of the mediated dream world of American film and television. To the hipster, the whole world becomes a collection of territories incorporated into this imaginary America. It is almost wrong to use the name America – the ubiquity that it presumes is such that referring to it

²⁸ iPhones are a popular scapegoat, of course, and this could be said for the majority of similar technology.

²⁹ This refers only to the history of the 20th century – I have seen no evidence that the hipster has any particular interest in the periods that we might normally associate with "American history", such as its revolution or civil war. This history is more concerned with the iconic cultures of prosperity in places like New York and Los Angeles.

by the name of a real country is ultimately reductive. Still, the myths of this culture are American (and white), as is the way in which they are incorporated into history. This imposes a curious kind of cosmopolitanism on the hipster's world, where a degree of Americanisation is expected from everybody, thereby conveniently normalising everything on which the hipster bases their critique. Instead of being a rich white person, in this world, the hipster is simply a person with taste. Of course this is absurd, but there are no real barriers to entry into the hipster's hyperreal – all one needs is the inclination, which looks a lot like taste when viewed from a distance. Perspectives that might disagree are left out because they cannot communicate in the hipster's space. Because of the way that hipsters place value on the 'local' as a means of ensuring that a product is authentic, this has a compressing effect on real-world distance. Many of the hipster companies that we see becoming popular on Tumblr³⁰ cultivate a sense of local-ness through their use of semiotic media, promoting themselves as a local butcher or greengrocer might in a real local economy by fostering a personal connection with customers and advertising that they source their raw materials locally. The fact that ordering these products online generally means shipping them far outside of that local area is never addressed. The interaction between seller and buyer, which emphasises the easy authenticity of the farmer's market (or actually over-emphasises it), entirely disregards the reality of placing an object on a plane and flying it between the two. The seamlessness of the courier system serves only to complete the illusion of local-ness. In this way, the hipster's America is overlaid onto the globe, part grand post-spatial network, part small town.

3.6 Conclusion

The hipster displays an approach to space that is extremely unusual. The global and the local are flattened into signifiers, becoming one of many tools used in an economy of communication that is neither and both at once. Real space, which is ultimately disappointing, is replaced with a hyper-real geography that is maintained and fuelled by the intensity and verisimilitude of this communication. This hyperreal underlies every aspect of hipster communication, and provides the tools that allow hipster culture to maintain itself, including a connection to a kind of "sacred time", where the hipster is able to participate in the otherwise implausible, media-derived nostalgia that defines their ideal. America, as the source of all of the myth and nostalgia that the hipster uses, becomes like a blueprint for this new geography, lending its image and its illusion of local-ness to the hyperreal. This way of looking at the world is ultimately a privileged one, arrived at out of the conflict between a lack of

³⁰ This is easily discerned by looking at how many hipsters post and reblog images that include their products, and also at how many followers they have. Section four will look at this more fully.

means-driven need to be concerned about space and an ethical responsibility to be concerned with it. It is also a unique window into the way that image-driven cultures approach space in the age of the internet – something that is sure to be a sign of things to come.

Hipster businesses

4.1 Introduction

The following section looks at a small selection of businesses, each of which is a good example of a common business model and a demonstration of how many of the concepts outlined earlier work in practice. Businesses are an important window into hipster culture because of how central commodities are to the hipster: instead of resorting to politics, hipsters use their purchasing power to encourage business practices that reflect their ideals. Five companies will be examined: 1924.us (www.1924.us), which shows how Tumblr and the internet are used intuitively; Best Made Co. (<http://www.bestmadeco.com/>) and Sanborn Canoe Co. (<http://sanborncanoe.com/>), who use conservatism and The Outdoors to market luxury goods; Relic NYC (<http://relicnyc.com/>) who use stylised gnosticism to sell their brand in The City; and Naked and Famous Denim, (<http://nakedandfamousdenim.com/>), whose Japanese denim jeans reflect America's lost innocence. All of the businesses detailed here have displayed a degree of success in the hipster market. Although I obviously do not have access to their sales figures, their engagement on social networking sites is significant and appears to be reciprocated by hipsters, who I have repeatedly observed posting images on Tumblr showing their purchases from these companies. Although there are many businesses that fit this criteria, these also provide some of the clearest examples.

4.2 1924.us

In all of the businesses that I have examined, the use of semiotic imagery precedes the products and surrounds them, seeking in practice to make the distinction between the two either non-existent or irrelevant. The use of Tumblr is often key to the establishment of this precedence, with many companies using it to deliver a stream of thematic imagery that serves to place their products in context and involve the company in the narrative of the hipster hyperreal. In those cases where Tumblr does not take this role (most of the examples keep a Tumblr, but in some cases it takes the form of a more straightforward product blog) it is filled instead by videos and 'look books'. A good example of the use of Tumblr galleries is visible in the 1924.us store, which sells an assortment of "reclaimed goods" (second-hand objects) and various "handmade crafts" produced by other hip



Figure 1: Reclaimed cast ship floodlight, \$275, taken from 1924.us



Figure 2: Navajo stitched rug found in Oregon, \$480, taken from 1924.us



Figure 3: 1950's folding camp stool, \$78, taken from 1924.us



Figure 4: Posted by Tumblr user soeursimone and reblogged by 1924. This image appears in 1924's Tumblr feed alongside images like the ones shown above, which are products. Note how this image emulates the colour palette and photographic style used in the product shots.

companies³¹. Although 1924 is the best example that I have seen, there are many other online stores that are similar. The reclaimed objects range from old clothing and cameras to seemingly random curiosities presented as art objects, such as a “reclaimed cast ship floodlight” for \$275 or an “antique hand cranked drill” for \$32, while the “craft” items include scarves made from 100 year old Japanese dead-stock fabric and leather iPhone cases and camera straps. When we visit the 1924 website, contrary to what we might expect, these products are not displayed directly: instead we are greeted by a Tumblr gallery that seamlessly intermixes product shots from the 1924 store (which is accessible through a link at the top of the page) with various lifestyle, gnostic, fashion, and outdoor images, resulting in a product-oriented blog that looks at first glance simply like the very carefully curated Tumblr of an individual person. These product images blend in because they share a common palette of rich browns and reds that stand out against

³¹ One of these companies, Atelier de l'Armée, is an interesting example of a significantly more hip version of Herschel Supply Co., whose bags were discussed in section 2. Instead of mass producing items, they make bags and leather goods from deadstock fabrics and reclaimed materials from vintage military surplus, including fabric cut from tent canvas and straps made from leather rifle slings. This means that no two items are the same, and each has gnosis and history woven into the fabric.

a cool grey or blue colour-cast and a white background. These characteristics are evident in the images shown on the previous page, which share a similar colouring that is set against the minimalist white of the photographic background paper. The image of the floodlight is a fairly standard example of the product shots, which are sometimes also held up by vintage coat hangers or arms with prominently displayed hipster tattoos. The various non-product images, such as the example to the left, are almost semiotically indistinguishable, including indoor spaces with wooden countertops and minimalist white walls or outdoor images with expanses of white sky – images that are common to many hipster blogs and are absent any irony. Thematically there is a kind of timeless³² modernism displayed throughout – objects and scenes are simplistic and clean but well-worn with age and use. Where new objects are shown, such as clothing or boots, they are contextualised with worn-in examples of similar products, giving the impression that the cultural production of a much more authentic era never really ceased, and that one simply had to know where to look for it. In this way the age and authenticity of The Outdoors is conveniently distilled into something that can be used in The City – in the hipster’s white-walled and open rooms, these items fill the space and seem to radiate the warmth of a more authentic time. 1924’s images paint a picture of a lifestyle that is authentic, intimately unique and on the bleeding edge of gnostic cool, and by placing product images that are immediately available within this stream (and near it; the shop page itself looks very much like a Tumblr), the customer is empowered to directly purchase elements of this ideal lifestyle for themselves. Although it is hard to judge how successful this method of selling products is in practice, the people behind 1924 evidently believe that it is. Recently 1924 has added a page to their website labelled “Collective” (<http://uscollective.com>), which, although written with some evident distaste for the idea of marketing, offers to include posts for others’ products on their Tumblr and Instagram blogs for a fee. Given the size of their network (65,000 followers on Tumblr, 41,000 on Instagram) it is not hard to imagine that for the right products, this form of advertising might be highly effective.

4.3 Sanborn Canoe and Best Made

Establishing a narrative that places a company and its products in the context of The Outdoors is key to the marketing strategy used by many companies. The Outdoors, as opposed to The City, is the major hyperreal location selected for hipster marketing, largely because of its status as the more directly positive of the two locations – marketing with The City must necessarily walk a delicate tightrope of gnosis and irony (although plenty of brands do, as we will see later in the example of Relic). The City,

³² Much of the hipster’s nostalgia is diverted into discussions of “timeless” aesthetics that avoid the discomfort of real history, and this is no different, although this particular case is especially convincing.

therefore, is visible most often only by the shadow of inauthenticity that it casts over regular life. An association with The Outdoors makes a product symbolic of the myths of adventure, freedom and authenticity, and is therefore a reasonably uncomplicated brand image to maintain. We find two useful examples of how this association works in *Best Made Co.* and *Sanborn Canoe Co.*, two American companies that produce camping and outdoor supplies aimed at a hipster audience. Best Made is a high-end outdoor and camping supply store that sells products online and also has a store in New York. Sanborn makes handcrafted canoe paddles and sells them online alongside a number of other similarly themed goods. Both have evidenced significant popularity among hipsters, who regularly re-blog promotional imagery and post images of their purchases from these companies. These companies make for an interesting (although hardly anomalous) case study because their products appear, at first glance, somewhat incongruous: Best Made specialises in distinctively painted felling axes, which sell for between 275 and 350 American dollars, and Sanborn's primary product is its range of canoe paddles (also brightly painted), which sell for between 140 and 210 American dollars. Both of these products are handmade in-house and are extremely high quality, genuinely practical tools, which begs the question of what exactly an inner-city hipster wants with a nearly metre-long axe designed for felling trees.

Both companies make extensive use of a feeling of historical continuity in their branding. The addition of Co. to a company name (as with Herschel Supply Co.) is a common device for implying a company's connection to the past – a connection that, in these cases, is largely symbolic: both were established in 2009. A customer might easily visit the Best Made website and imagine that their business had existed for decades, and that they had stumbled into popularity among hipsters perhaps by accident. Their products are branded in a way clearly designed to suggest that the Best Made name carries significant weight among campers – a good example being their “Famous Red Wool Blanket”, which, rather than actually being famous (how could it be, after only four years in business?) simply has the word FAMOUS woven into the corner. Despite this conceit, the blanket borrows some credibility from a more legitimate source – the blanket itself is actually made by Pendleton Woolen Mills, who they call “undoubtedly the nation's oldest and most legendary maker of wool blankets” and whose history is perhaps close to a real-world approximation of the image that Best Made seeks to cultivate. Similarly, Sanborn's website places their business and its practices within a “heritage [that] had been bred in the early years of the 1900s (and most certainly earlier still), through past generations of our families' paddling in northern Minnesota and beyond”. We see a different method of establishing this same continuity in some of the products for sale by 1924, (made by companies like Atelier de l'Armée and Kiriko) that are made from vintage dead-stock fabric such as tent canvas used in the second world war. It is clear that, for stores that deal in The Outdoors and its associated



Figure 5: a promotional image showing the Best Made axe case, reblogged by Tumblr user wilddirt. Tumblr users often reblog or post images like this, showing that they associate brands like Best Made with the authenticity in their own Outdoor experiences



Figure 6: "Our wall of assorted things is filling up..." posted by Tumblr user sanborncanoecompany. Sanborn deliberately cultivates the atemporal, lived-in aesthetic that might be found in the collection of items in a family cabin.



Figure 7: Posted by Tumblr user Djmase and re-blogged by Sanborn Canoe Co. Note that this image, which includes a Sanborn branded cup and what could be a Best Made axe, did not come from a product blog, but rather an individual who has evidently been won over by Sanborn's marketing.

authenticity, the pedigree of age – or rather, agelessness – is considered to be essential. Sanborn's statement about its history is deliberately absent any real temporal referents, and Best Made makes no effort, in spite of a clear and consistent overall design ethic, to tie their products to any time period outside of a generalised past – what we see instead is a range that resembles the kinds of things one might find in the musty drawers of a family cabin. As we can see in figure 6, which shows the wall of Sanborn's offices, this cabin-drawer eclecticism is a popular motif among hipster companies because it allows the customer to imply a wide history of experiences and gnosés rather than only one – to fake the mystery and sense of lived-in antiquity that one gets from rifling through a real cabin's drawers.

Both companies work to associate their brand with The Outdoors and its authenticity in various ways. The most straightforward of these is Sanborn's Tumblr (sanborncanoecompany.tumblr.com), which is much like 1924's in that it places Sanborn's products within a gallery of other visually and thematically relevant images. These images are generally of The Outdoors and for obvious reasons the majority involve canoeing or show large bodies of water. Many show camping and hiking, and as discussed earlier, most deliberately obscure the faces of human figures, either by distance, angle, or cropping, in order to allow the viewer to place themselves in The Outdoors in their place. Many of these images place focus on the accoutrements of camping trips, showing fashion items like clothing or backpacks, or practical equipment like axes and enamelled mugs (branded with the Sanborn logo), thereby fetishizing their connection to authentic activities and providing a case for their use value. By

doing this Sanborn gives context to their products and positions them as necessary for engagement with The Outdoors, a quality that is important given both the high cost of their paddles and the relative rarity of their use.

Although Best Made uses their Tumblr page only as a product blog (i.e. simply as a means of announcing new products and the like) they have employed similar strategies of contextualisation through the use of documentary style promotional videos, which are a common tool for hip businesses. There are a number of such videos on Best Made's website, the most interesting of which is *Whole Foods: a short film about Best Made* (2012) produced by online magazine Dark Rye. The film begins (after an introduction with text superimposed over a roaring fire, and shots of a man sanding an axe handle and another cutting down a tree) with members of the Best Made team leaving their offices in New York and travelling into the country for a camping trip, and then interviews them about their relationship to the outdoors and the experience of chopping wood. The video is almost unwatchably corny in parts, including an introduction that refers to Best Made's staff as "true stewards of the land" and a lot of self-satisfied proselytizing about the importance of axes and campfires in human history. In spite of this, the video is very well-shot and well-edited, showing clearly the presence of high-grade equipment and the high level of skill required to get the most out of them, delivering a video that is filled with scenes that would not look out of place if they were posted as an image of The Outdoors on Tumblr. The video makes a very clear distinction between The Outdoors and The City, drawing them and their relative authenticities into contrast. When the group leaves New York it is a dreary, overcast place dominated by imposing buildings that frame each shot like prison walls, giving an oppressive, confining feeling. Filming inside the car, they travel through a similarly claustrophobic traffic tunnel that gives way incrementally to the view through the metal struts above the Brooklyn Bridge and then the open road. The camp site is lush, beautiful and verdant, with the background kept out of focus in order to make it appear endless, and the camera begins to shoot scenes of the process of cutting down a tree in slow motion, set to the slow, soulful sound of what could be a violin. The effect is very clear: no moment is allowed to be imperfect or unmediated in The Outdoors. Excluding the intrusion of narration from some Best Made staff, who without visible embarrassment deliver lines like "*that's what's so powerful about [an axe]: it's on the one hand the giver, but also the taker*", this film comes very close to depicting the idealised Outdoors, showing wood-chopping, camaraderie and cooking over a campfire, as well as a location that radiates beauty and serenity. As one narrator explains, these authentic behaviours represent "*a return to something that they, I think, they didn't even know that they had lost*" implying that their trip into the wilderness, which has all of the trappings of a ritual, is very much a dip into sacred waters. When the time comes to return to the city, they will do so cleansed and redeemed. These behaviours are shrewdly associated

with Best Made products: the wood-cutters use Best Made axes, the cook uses knives, a cooking pot and cutlery that Best Made sells, and most of the people shown have Best Made clothing on. The authentic experience, although it is oversold here, is directly connected with having the right products to take advantage of it. These products, at least until they arrive in the mail, are now known to exist in, or be artefacts of, the authentic Outdoor experience. As we see from the regular appearance of images that show people prominently displaying products like Best Made's in their own wilderness adventures, this connection between products and the hyperreal is crucial and ultimately very convincing.

4.3 Naked and Famous Denim

For an example that shares a lot of attributes with William Gibson's fictional Gabriel Hounds brand, we look to Naked and Famous denim (hereafter N&F), a Canadian company that specialises in jeans made from rare and unusual denim. Like Gabriel Hounds, they also produce a range of other items, such as shirts, denim jackets and leather belts. Unlike Hounds they do engage in advertising and retail sales, and function like a normal clothing company. N&F is, in the same way as Herschel Supply, a hip company whose growing size and popularity are beginning to negatively impact on their credibility among hipsters; still, their prominence makes them a good example to study. In the same way as Gabriel Hounds, N&F uses a minimalist design for their jeans, adding none of the embellishments such as back-pocket stitching and pre-faded or ripped fabric that appear on most jeans. Because the jeans come unwashed, or 'raw', the denim fades according to the way in which they are used, developing patterns unique to the wearer's body and the motions that they make while wearing them. Raw denim is popular among hipsters because the unique fading patterns build up only slowly, meaning that they must be worn for long periods of time (a year of regular use, often with minimal washing, is generally necessary for pronounced fades), ideally while engaging in vigorous physical activity. In this way a hipster's jeans become a record of his³³ engagement with authenticity, showing clearly that he has an active lifestyle and a commitment to taste. Rips and tears are also valued for this reason, although it is considered to be very inauthentic to create these on purpose. Better quality fabric also produces better or more unique results, allowing for this to also become a display of taste and gnosis; many of the best fabrics are produced only in limited runs, and more obscure brands (which are often Japanese) can be hard to locate in shops or available only through arcane and confusing (often poorly translated) websites, therefore requiring significant foreknowledge and dedication. The signs that

³³ Most raw denim fans appear to be male: few companies make women's cuts. N&F has a small range of women's denim but they appear for sale only rarely.

hipsters use to identify these jeans are also very subtle: because of the lack of branding (except for a leather patch, which is covered if worn with a belt) a casual observer would never realise that they are anything more than a normal pair of jeans, and yet, the wearer presumes, their inherent quality attracts a degree of appreciation all the same.

Naked and Famous Denim presents an interesting example of the hipster's perceptions of authenticity as it relates to geography. Where many hipster companies focus on locality as a key way of achieving authenticity, such as Relic's tee-shirts or Sanborn's paddles, which are made of American-grown products, raw denim derives its authenticity from being an international product. Some raw denim is made in America and elsewhere, but the highest quality and most respected fabric always comes from Japan. As discussed earlier, the curious thing about this is much of the authenticity that Japanese denim has is actually derived from nostalgia for post-war American products. Japan becomes like a time capsule for Americana – a place where the authenticity of the post-war years has been preserved and kept away from the prying eyes of the uninitiated. This fabric is made on antique looms, shipped from Japan to Canada, sewn, and then shipped worldwide. Instead of being a negative feature and an extensive debt of carbon, this becomes positive because the Japanese product is more authentic – the concern for local-ness is essentially written out of the equation by the importance of taste and gnosis.

4.5 RELIC NYC

Relic NYC (styled as RELIC) is a small company from Williamsburg, New York, that exemplifies and very effectively capitalises on the hipster's obsession with secret knowledge. Relic presents an interesting example of how gnosis is used as a marketing tool in The City by displaying an aesthetic that has a lot in common with the secrecy of Gibson's Gabriel Hounds brand. Relic sells tee-shirts, posters and branded patches and runs a Tumblr blog that plays a key role in their branding. The tee-shirts, which are Relic's primary product, are high-quality and expensive, made from American-grown cotton and sewn in Williamsburg, selling for 85 American dollars each. Relic's current collection shirts includes four designs and is titled 'Sacred Youth'. These shirts come in black and white, and are printed with black and white images by photographer Tommy Nease, whose photographs are also on the Relic's posters³⁴. The prints show a number of semiotically unclear scenes, including a hand dropping a crystal, wilting roses, a pair of glowing hands held aloft, and some fern leaves against a black

³⁴ As of January 2014 these posters are no longer available. They were sold during early 2013, alongside an earlier line of similar Tommy Nease tee-shirts for a significantly cheaper price.



Figure 8: a promotional image showing one of Relic's tee-shirt designs, titled "the pursuit of inner silence".



Figure 9: an image posted to Relic's blog, showing an ornate crucifix with a short knife attached to the bottom. This image blends signs of ritual and violence, evoking the gnosis of a secret and dangerous religious order. Another similar image shows an ornately decorated golden dagger.

Figure 11 (below): An unsettling image of masked figures inside a car covered with what appear to be light bulbs. The masks imply secrecy and anonymity, and their bizarre appearance implies that the secrets in question are strange ones. The figures in the car are clearly hipsters, as we can tell from their clothing.



Figure 10: Christian Schloe - Portrait of a Heart (2013) – a painting reblogged by Relic. This is a contemporary reworking of a classically styled portrait. It therefore signifies both refined taste and knowledge as well as avant-garde sensibility. Many art images posted by Relic signify similar concepts, for example another recently posted image shows a sculpture by Tony Cragg, in which a human face carved out of wood is distorted in a manner resembling interference on a television screen.

background. They are captioned with esoteric sounding phrases such as “the art of relinquishing control” and “the pursuit of inner silence”. These shirts are evidently designed to confer upon their wearer the appearance of being in possession of gnosis. Relic goes to great lengths to evoke a feeling in their customers that this is actually the case – the company gives very little explanation for itself, deliberately cultivating the aesthetic of a secret society. For a number of months before the release of their current tee-shirt collection, Relic sold only patches (of the kind that are sewn onto jackets or bags) which were triangular³⁵ and featured the images of a coiled snake, an eye, a key, and a hexagon, in a deliberate play on various gnostic symbols, the most obvious of which is the eye of providence (or all-seeing-eye of God) which is a well-known symbol of freemasonry. The implication behind this (aside

³⁵ The patches currently being sold are circular and all black.

from having no other product to sell) being that these patches were somehow significant beyond their (non-existent) practical value, displaying loyalty to some undisclosed secret or larger institution. Like a real relic, which serves as a connection to the flesh-and-blood truth of something that might otherwise be myth (in the traditional sense of the word), Relic's products and marketing strategy imply a similar connection to the myths of gnosis in The City.

Relic uses its Tumblr blog expertly to develop this connection, posting images (almost never with text) that have gnostic significance, often including signs that are symbolic of death such as skulls and knives, and images that involve contemporary art such as sculptures, paintings and architecture, which are evidence of a more cultural variety of gnosis. The blog's header is a moving image with the company logo and the words *RELIC* and *Sacred Youth* superimposed over a series of gnostic vignettes, including a hooded figure with a flaming torch, a nude couple walking through a dark forest, and a man running with a blank white flag through brick streets at night while fireworks go off around him. The message here is that there is a secret society of some sort behind the brand (and that it is not a brand at all) that engages in dangerous, transgressive activities and ancient rituals, but is also articulate and cultured. The inclusion of art images in the blog is important because it equates education-derived cultural capital with gnosis, implying that an ability to accurately understand and appreciate the messages and symbolism of these pieces (which generally combine avant-garde and historical styles, as shown in figure 10 above) is evidence enough of the awareness required to be initiated. The header image takes its subject perhaps too far – although it is well filmed and edited, some of the figures involved are too obviously New York hipsters in skinny pants – but the overall aesthetic that the brand cultivates is impressively restrained and finely tuned, considering the extremely stylised image that they are trying to present. Of course, this branding is not really designed to genuinely fool anybody: being a City product, Relic only needs to maintain a level of exclusivity in order to stay credible. Flattened by hyperreality, the distinction between this aesthetic and a more genuine secret society is minimal at best – Relic is more compelling in fact because, like the animals in Umberto Eco's Disneyland, their version of secrecy is violent, intensely symbolic and larger than life.

4.6 Conclusion

Hipster businesses provide an excellent window into hipster motivation because of how commodity-driven hipster culture is. All of the companies that we have examined make shrewd use of the ways that hipsters communicate and the symbology that they use – in most cases, presumably because they share the same values. All five of these enterprises can be considered archetypal; many more businesses exist in similar forms to each of them. They give us a clear view of how authenticity, gnosis

and the hyperreal work in the real world as marketable commodities, and how hipsters are working to sell these values not only to other hipsters, but to the rest of the world as well.

VICE and The City

5.1 Introduction: VICE Magazine

In the discussion of hipster culture, it would be impossible to avoid addressing Vice magazine (stylised as VICE). Vice began as a print magazine in Montreal, Canada, in 1994 and has since expanded drastically in scale and moved its headquarters to New York. Vice addresses issues of world culture, delivering stories that expose strange new trends and movements that fall outside of what the ordinary news media would cover. Vice articles tend towards an informal style, but deliver content that is often of a high quality. Although the print magazine is still run, Vice (www.vice.com) is primarily an online entity now (technically now Vice Media), and has split off into a number of sub-magazines, including *Noisey*³⁶ (www.noisey.vice.com), which deals with music, *Motherboard* (www.motherboard.tv), which deals with technology and futurism, *Thump* (www.thump.vice.com), which deals with the emerging trend of American EDM music and clubbing, and *The Creators Project* (www.thecreatorsproject.vice.com), which deals with art and the artistic community. Vice has also run documentary shows on MTV and HBO and has a news-based YouTube channel. Vice has special editions for over 30 countries, including foreign languages, and has recently begun opening newsrooms in many countries. A 5% share of Vice Media was sold to Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox in 2013 for \$70 million (Quinn, 2013), giving some idea of the scale on which it now operates. It has been suggested that Vice has lost some of its previous credibility with hipsters by expanding too far and becoming too popular (Kinzey, 2010), but I have seen little evidence, apart from the standard ongoing criticism that all hipster media is subject to (including, paradoxically, accusations of hipsterism), that Vice's popularity among the majority of hipsters has waned at all. It may be that whatever credibility it did lose as a small magazine that got too big has now returned in a different form as Vice works its way into a different role as a worldwide alternative news provider.

Vice prints work from a wide range of contributors from around the world, resulting in a balance of content that reflects the tastes of the City-oriented hipster extremely well. Because of this, it makes a very good case study into hipster taste, and a demonstration of many of the behaviours and sentiments that have already been discussed herein. The tone taken overall is more ironic than

³⁶ Noisey serves as Vice's own version of Pitchfork Media, which was particularly influential on hipster music tastes in the past.

enthusiastic, and more concerned with the evils of consumerism and authoritarianism than attempting to find an alternative. As such, Vice is primarily a product of The City, and does not reflect the more Outdoors-oriented hipster very well. This is not surprising: no magazine (online or otherwise) that I have seen balances both varieties of content in any serious capacity (an example of Vice's opposite might be Kinfolk magazine, which is nostalgic and authenticity-driven) although many hipsters might read examples of both.

For a good example of Vice magazine's broad focus and the kind of journalism that they publish, we can look at the articles posted on Vice's website on January the 2nd 2014, which included a selection of 2013's best pieces. Some (selected) titles included:

White Student Union

The new Roma ghettos

Satanists turned the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church's dead mom gay

The Barbie Dream House Experience is the scariest place on earth

I went to the Playboy Mansion (and it was kinda depressing)

Did Enbridge use toxic chemicals to clean up their oil spill in Kalamazoo?

You can eat brunch in Black Flag's old practice space (if you're terrible)

Colorado's legal weed edibles are high on sophistication

Happy 20th birthday, Zapatistas!

As we can see here, Vice provides a key window into how the hipster gaze works internally, as a functional way of looking at the world. There is a deliberate slant towards the "sociological" perspective overall, as well as a general attempt to cultivate a cosmopolitan realist (and implicitly leftist, anti-establishment) perspective (Zapatistas, Roma, Kalamazoo) in spite of a stance that is unavoidably American (Westboro, Colorado, the Playboy Mansion). The overall tone is transgressive, humorous and irreverent. There is also a strong criticism of capitalism, consumerism and its inherent culture of artifice, as we see in their criticisms of the Playboy Mansion, the café in Black Flag's old practice space, and Barbie's dream house. This criticism also extends to many of the hipster's more overtly negative behaviours, such as gentrification and cultural appropriation, as shown again in the article about Black Flag's practice space, and many others in the same vein.

5.2 Cosmopolitanism

The life of a Vice journalist has a lot in common with our ideal hipster, Cayce Pollard. Just like Pollard they are paid to travel the world and hunt down pockets of authenticity, searching like a dowser for little rivulets of the unique among a downpour of the ubiquitous. Funded by a worldwide media organisation and surrounded by interpreters, guides and cameramen, the Vice journalist descends into darkness swathed in an invisible but impermeable bubble of outsider-ness and wealth. Unfettered by barriers of nationality, language, or class, they are (at least as far as the camera can see) true cosmopolitans, free citizens of the world. Using this freedom and protection they engage in “new journalism” style reporting, engaging in events as apparent participants, often making a show of putting their bodies, sanity, or even lives on the line in the name of journalism by travelling to warzones and sites of protest or ingesting strange food and drugs. In the style of Hunter S. Thompson’s famous gonzo journalism, they meld personal experience and reportage to create a product that is inseparable from the reporter’s own experience, thereby taking the hipster reader along on their cosmopolitan journey. On a practical level, they serve as a stand-in for the hipster watching through the computer screen, whose distance grants a comparable protection. Vice’s influence and scale means that nothing is out of reach and that local knowledge is never lacking – no matter where their journalists travel, they do so as honorary locals, waving away their status as Americans as though it has no significance, which is a crucial hipster conceit. As such, Vice demonstrates for its readers what Johnathan Corpus Ong (2009) calls “instrumental cosmopolitanism”:

Instrumental cosmopolitanism is an important category because it captures a rather selfish expression of the cosmopolitan ‘openness to others’. While it is not its absence, as with closed cosmopolitanism, instrumental cosmopolitanism makes use of one’s knowledge of the world to promote oneself. In other words, it uses otherness for the sake of the self and to further delineate self from other. (pp.456-457)

This is the kind of cosmopolitanism that is “a property of class and commerce” (and, in this case, cultural capital) rather than openness – an internal experience that takes place globally, for the journalist but especially for the reader. We see a good example of this in a short article titled “I learned to make blow in Colombia” (Guzman, 2012), where the author visits a cocaine factory in San Agustin and helps to make a batch of “artisanal blow”.

The proprietor of the cocaine factory’s name was Pedro. He greeted me warmly on a portion of his property that served as a coffee farm, and told me our class would last about two hours.

A heap of fresh green leaves sat atop a canvas bag on the table. They were so fresh that the fields they were picked from must have been very close. Not wasting any time, Pedro put a razor sharp machete in my hand and told me to start chopping.

Over vigorous hacking, Pedro's story was revealed. He had learned his trade during eight years of service in a cocaine kitchen—a kitchen once visited by Pablo Escobar himself during a casual pickup of 70 kilos of pure cocaine, fresh off Pedro's production line.

After the leaves were sufficiently minced, I was told it was time to add a binding agent. If he had asked me to guess what this agent would be, I would have said an egg, or something equally benign. I would have been wrong. Pedro pulled out a bag of cement, sprinkled it all over our wonderfully chopped leaves, and began to knead the dough by hand.

Without any explanation, Guzman is allowed into a Colombian cocaine factory and given the tour. He seems to take his welcome for granted, as though the facility were an artisanal bakery or a grower's co-op. If an English-speaking journalist stands out in San Agustín, it is never mentioned. Instead, the friendly proprietor gives his name and life story up without any concern. As the implicit customer whose needs the factory exists to serve, the hipster/American is welcomed. In this way, the hipster's street knowledge – in this case how to find cocaine in his own city, and what good cocaine is like – becomes applicable and recognised elsewhere. Because he has recognisably good taste, he finds his way to the best product, as though the agreements of customer service that we accept as normal when buying artisanal products in the city somehow apply here. As one popular (with 63 'likes') reader comment jokingly notes,

“They should bring back the organic method. I would pay four times as much at a farmer's market for that shit”

The product, despite of its implicit violence and political circumstance, is de-contextualised and reframed into an American setting as a luxury commodity. This returns us to how, as discussed earlier, the farmers' market becomes a method of consuming locally in a global context; here, real global consumption plays out an echo of the hyperreal experience of the farmers' market. We see a similar example in one of Vice's short documentaries, *The Japanese Love Industry* (2013), where journalist Ryan Duffy investigates Japan's sex industry. Although Duffy points out that they are known for their distrust of western media, he finds himself having dinner with three members of the Yakuza, Japan's secret criminal society. In order to build trust with these men (whose faces are blurred), Duffy gets a tattoo of what appears to be a lotus symbol on his leg and drinks a glass of snapping turtle blood mixed with ice water. He is then given access to “locals-only” services, which turns out to be a bizarre display of rope bondage and coprophagia by a prostitute in a hotel room. Although the documentary adopts

a humorous approach to Duffy's adventures with the Yakuza, the fact remains that this is a rare opportunity, the details of which are never explained. All it seems to take to become worthy of initiation into local knowledge is to be cool enough to appreciate the local pleasures at their most unadulterated, be it turtle blood or cocaine made with gasoline and concrete. The hipster's desire to consume new authenticities becomes a key cosmopolitan trait, as does their willingness to consume bad things as a test or display of authenticity (and an implicit display of masculinity). Other examples of this include an article about eating boiled and pan-fried horse rectum in Kazakhstan (Hay, 2014) or a short documentary called *Meet Brooklyn's Voodoo Queen: Edeline St. Armand* (2014) where a Vice journalist participates in a Voodoo ritual and attempts to become possessed. In each case, the centre of the story becomes the consumption of an experience, allowing cosmopolitanism to take place literally within the journalists' bodies.

5.3 The death of culture

Vice's critique of consumerism is an excellent example of how the hipster's social guilt manifests itself, and how, in the context of The City, the hipster deals with that guilt. Almost all of Vice's articles have an element of critique, often ironic or implied, about the capitalist/consumerist system, and the authoritarianism/imperialism that is implicit in that system. As with the hipster, they avoid any political leaning (particularly with American issues) instead aiming their critique at the system as a whole. This criticism does tend, however, to address issues that are important to the left, such as climate change, environmental pollution, western cultural imperialism and the costs of consumer culture.

These critiques are often framed in the context of the decay of culture, which is developed as a theme through articles that use irony and humour to engage with the excesses of consumerism, such as "What is this terror before me: a review of the new Taco Bell grilled stuff nacho" (Butler, 2014), and "The Barbie Dream House experience is the scariest place on earth" (Sunderland, 2013) and through content that explores places where decay has already become extreme, such as "Austerity's drug of choice" (Miller, 2013) or "The Brazilian slum children who are literally swimming in garbage" (Corrêa, 2014). Vice addresses the concerns that these situations present alternately through ironic mockery or simply by generating awareness. Many of the situations that are given non-ironic coverage are generally unknown to the public, thereby providing gnosis as well as information, giving the reader key tools for any theoretical discussion of world politics. Crucially, Vice makes the implicit link between these two kinds of stories: the fact that the American public would never accept their own children swimming in lakes of garbage means very little when they happily pay Taco Bell for a different kind of garbage. Both are evidence of the loss of some vital dignity in society. Vice's treatment of decay echoes

much of what we see in hipsters' use of cocaine and cigarettes and signs in Tumblr images – it becomes something to be consumed, sometimes literally, internalised and (hopefully) survived. In this way the death of culture becomes real, bodily death. The things that Vice journalists engage with serve to locate the implicit violence of capitalism explicitly, either within their own bodies or those of others. We see a good example of the former in “What is this terror before me: a review of the new Taco Bell grilled stuff nacho”, in which the author eats an unpleasant new product from Taco Bell:

Taco Bell is more like drugs than food. It beats you open from the inside with beef and cheese and bread, and in so doing makes things seem great for a while, until your body realizes what you've done to it. No matter how many times I've eaten at Taco Bell and then immediately regretted it—sometimes with the food still in my mouth—it always seems like a great idea when I'm caught up in the moment. It's like it's going to save my life, and then it's like my life isn't worth saving.

My bite into the first corner is pretty much all sauce. It squirts out of the cruddy tortilla into my mouth all lukewarm and globular. I don't know how Taco Bell is able to create such a plasticky tone to their sauces, but sometimes I get the sense that their flavor designer also works for NASA. I can't help but think of all the chemicals that have come together to provide me with this experience, unattainable anywhere but from the Bell itself. It's supposed to be spicy, but it's not really spicy. It reeks of toys.

While letting the ooze seep into my taste buds I realize I've made a huge mistake in allowing the nacho to cool a little between buying and eating, a no-no of gargantuan implications in the realm of 99-cent (or \$1.29, as the case may be) food. For every degree of heat you lose off of something whose proper name is intentionally misspelled, its possible reception as the fantastically nasty monolith your brain had led you to believe it could be falls a mile closer to the stinking, rotting face of reality.

Butler's language here is clear in its violence – the food “beats you open from the inside out” “like a wounded animal” and is clearly conceptualised as being a cruelty inflicted upon the poor by the institution. Like a kind of Soylent Green made out of melted down toys instead of people (or rather, made of people only figuratively), this nacho is an exercise in basic sustenance at its most desperate and shameful, somehow dressed up as being something that people ought to want. Butler's article is essentially an ironic inversion of the cosmopolitan-consumption articles discussed earlier: where, for example, Mark Hay expected to be disgusted by the plate of cooked horse rectum that he was served in Kazakhstan, but instead found a complex dish that traced back to a rich history of nomad culture and nose-to-tail eating, Butler describes nachos as “the perfect food” and “nearly impossible to screw

up”, only to take a bite and be revolted. The nacho is a hollow shell, tolerable as food only when the consumer ignores what is on his plate and consumes the advertised image instead. In reality, this is the food that Ginsberg’s Moloch feeds his captive workforce, the kind that keeps them alive no longer than necessary. It is economic violence in food form. By consuming it, Butler takes all of this conceptual violence and inflicts it upon himself, using his gnosis of the Demiurge to fully appreciate the horror of what might otherwise simply be cheap food. Because sacrifice allows for the temporary movement of the victim (which in this case is the author) from one world to another (Bataille, 1997, p. 210) Butler is momentarily uplifted by his suffering and enabled to see his nacho as more than a single unit of processed food. The reader, positioned as the sacrificer (he writes for our benefit after all), is pulled up along with him and given the same view. In this way, Taco Bell becomes a close-to-home method of experiencing the more cosmopolitan cruelties addressed in other Vice articles such as “Austerity’s Drug of Choice”, which discusses a mixture of amphetamines and “filler ingredients like battery acid, engine oil, shampoo and cooking salt” called sisa that is consumed by the city-dwelling victims of Greece’s “total economic collapse” (Miller, 2013). In this way Taco Bell can be re-read as the drug of choice for a less obvious kind of economic collapse. Butler’s ironic self-annihilation echoes the behaviour of Allen Ginsberg’s hipsters who “drank turpentine in paradise alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night with dreams, with drugs and waking nightmares,” whose behaviour was entirely more serious, but very similar. Butler makes clear the comparison between Taco Bell and drugs, but it is the dreams that the hipster finds most concerning – particularly the way that the American dream, which features so heavily in hipster literature³⁷, has been corrupted. For Ginsberg the dream was (by association) as cruel as any other vice, and hipsters often also look to experience the wreckage of that dream now that it has been fully overtaken by consumerism. By using irony they keep their psychological distance in a way that the Beats never managed, experiencing cultural failure as a bodily and aesthetic affair rather than a personal one. We see a good example of this when another Vice writer visits the ‘Barbie Dream House Experience³⁸’ in a Florida mall (Sunderland, 2013):

The *Mail* described the life-sized replica of Barbie’s Dream House as a “10,000 foot pink paradise.” But to my friends in Florida, the Dream House sounded like another cruel reminder of what it’s like to grow up in another person’s paradise.

³⁷ The Great Gatsby and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas are the clearest examples of this, but the theme is common throughout hip literature. It is also a common topic for Vice articles.

³⁸ Barbie, being a very popular girls’ toy in the 90’s (and now, presumably) is a relatively popular ironic symbol among hipsters. The Barbie logo (California Dream Barbie in particular) is commonly printed onto articles of clothing such as tee-shirts and sweatshirts.

“That’s Barbie’s Dream House?” said my friend Alex, who still lives in Florida. “Yeah, F. Scott Fitzgerald was totally thinking about a fake house in the middle of an outlet mall built in the shape of an alligator when he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. This is the fucking American dream.”

[...]

Barbie’s interior decorator had installed mirrors on the end of the two walls that made up the room to make the closet look never-ending—a metaphor, I thought, for how all this pink glamour was a corporate mirage.

[...]

It wasn’t even pop culture. It was just pop—a plastic pink promotion for a plastic doll that told girls they had to be plastic too.

Sunderland frames the “dream house” as a bizarre indoctrination camp for children, where they can put makeup on and use touchscreens to try on virtual clothes and bake virtual cupcakes – a place designed to firmly assert the understanding that Mattel’s fake world (another hyperreal, except of a lower order) is perfectly acceptable, and even that there is no need to pay attention to the difference. She describes this experience as “more terrifying than the Haunted Mansion could ever hope to be” – a vision of the death of authenticity in real time. Sunderland begins the story with a recollection of her own childhood, where she spent her teen years in the mall where the Barbie Experience is now located. The implication is that this overly-fake dream house (where the bed is literally a painted block of plastic, and nobody bothered to write names on the books in the bookshelf) has positioned itself within in her own childhood, and by visiting it in the present, she investigates her own relationship with the hyperreal and its roots in a period of her life that she ought to be able to be nostalgic about. The experience, in spite of how unpleasant it is, strikes a chord with her accomplice, who asks for a job application, only to realise, after leaving, that she has been tricked:

“I would never work there,” she said. “What was I thinking? Those pink and blue lights were so dreamy. You know, they were just like pink strip club lights.”

Because they lived their childhood out in a world where this kind of thing made sense, the hipster has a weakness for the unreal seemingly programmed into them, even though they have grown up to know better. The grim appeal of these places (and foods) is both nostalgic and masochistic – a journey that helps the hipster understand their own motivations, even if the answer is an unpleasant one. The appeal of the Dream House Experience, then, is that it represents a world in between reality and the hipster’s more subtle, seamless hyperreality: a hyperreal so shoddy that without a child’s imagination to help it along the real and the unreal begin to drift apart like oil in water. In a place like this, criticism

is much easier because the fake is functionally distinguishable from the original, and the threshold into the unreal world is an actual doorway – when the visitor leaves, the spell breaks.

By engaging ironically with the excessively fake, such as cold Taco Bell or Barbie’s Dream House, the hipster forces open the otherwise invisible gap between reality and unreality and is granted a momentary look at things as they are, not only in the context of the fake in question, but the world in general. The Demiurge’s true face, as the many Vice articles in this vein make clear, is never pleasant to gaze upon directly. The value of this for Vice’s hipster audience is that this sudden clarity is very affirming: as reminders (hyperbolic and humorous though they may be) that culture really is being driven into the ground by consumerism, these articles serve to confirm to the hipster that they and their search for authenticity are not only valid but necessary.

5.4 Gnosis and City discourse

Gnosis is the crucial currency of The City, and Vice trades in it expertly. This is as much out of necessity as for its readers’ enjoyment: without the credibility that Gnosis affords, Vice would never have achieved any authority among hipsters. The importance of this is such that Vice moved from Montreal to New York (the closest thing that we get to a real location for The City) in order to properly engage with the relevant gnosis. Now that Vice has expanded and become a global entity, this is less important, because gnosises are reported from many different locations, but New York remains the symbolic source. The value of this for the reader is that reading Vice becomes a method of taking part in the discourse The City in a more functional way than what we see on Tumblr – there is a distinct voice and editorial perspective that escapes the chaos of unmediated discourse. In places like Vice, essentially, we see that discourse condensed into something clearer and more functional, which helps to ground the whole system and keep it from dissolving into confusion. Vice’s use of Gnosis, as with the hipsters on Tumblr, relies on the controlled release of information. On Tumblr, we often see this in the form of interesting looking images with no attribution or explanation, which are designed to imply that the poster knows or has participated in something cool that we viewers were not aware of or invited to. As with any good fiction, the value of this gnosis is generally determined more by what the poster chooses not to say than what they actually let slip. Vice’s writers do the same thing in their articles, often casually making reference to secret parties, drug deals and other gnostic City events in order to establish their status. The space in between what they choose to say (which in reality could only be far more mundane than it sounds) fills up with the fantasies that we see played out visually on Tumblr: secret events full of attractive, stylish people whose excess of cultural capital makes wealth irrelevant. By doing this, Vice reminds its readers that there is something worth striving for in City culture, which might otherwise look very dark and unpleasant. Sometimes, however, we also see more

concrete expressions of gnosis as well. A good example of this the article “A brief history of 285 Kent through Yelp comments” (Marcus, 2014), which uses the comments from Yelp.com (a website where users can rate businesses and leave comments) in order to build a picture of a recently closed “secret” music venue in Williamsburg, New York. These comments paint a picture of a place that exists, unmarked, in a “shady looking warehouse” with “little to no rules” and “gross” bathrooms that is “not known by too many people”. Because the venue in question no longer exists, its value as gnosis has changed – instead of wanting to keep it a secret, its regulars now want it to become well-known because they went there but now nobody else can – the gnosis in question is thereby preserved, no longer subject to the risk of dilution. Regardless of the venue’s validity as a worthwhile place to go, it is cemented now in history as being one of the last vestiges of the more authentic Williamsburg from before gentrification took hold. Another example is “I got buzzed on ‘cold tea’ in Toronto’s Chinatown” (Knight, 2014), which explains an “off the menu” item available in Chinese restaurants, called “cold tea” – which is actually cheap beer served as tea. This discovery is interesting because most authentic Chinese restaurants stay open later than bars are allowed to in Toronto, and serve significantly better food. Most importantly, it presents an unusual experience that few are aware of:

I wasn’t surprised to see fellow food industry people in our blurry tea rendezvous, because this is a shared sacrament of Toronto chefs, line cooks, and after-hours imbibers. Tyler Shedden, the executive chef at Café Boulud Toronto, swears by cold tea as a well-rehearsed practice. According to Shedden, cold tea also exists in Vancouver and Manhattan, where he first discovered the off-the-menu Chinatown beverage.

This kind of gnosis gives its knower a level of secret access to a scene that would otherwise have passed unknown, hidden in unassuming late-night teapots passed around circular tables. Knight’s description is colourful and poetic, deliberately emphasising the authenticity of the experience. By mentioning a number of well-known chefs as participants in this scene, she establishes its exclusivity, and by comparing it to (and casually revealing) another, less refined gnosis, we get a sense for its value:

It’s not the cheap, dirty thrill of the booze can [an illegal bar], where you’ll end up snorting shitty coke and making out with some busboy(s) from Bar Isabel, but drinking cold tea feels like an innocently illicit act out of adolescence.

Knight is right to call the beverage a sacrament: by consuming it the drinker becomes an initiate of a sort, empowered to walk into Chinatown in a foreign city and participate in something special and

authentic as though they were a local. Vice, in this way, becomes like a practical window into the gnostic economy of The City – a means of re-reading a real engagement with city life as a gnostic experience. This is something that we see often in hip media (another good example of this is Anthony Bourdain’s work, which will be discussed in the conclusion), where travel writers or television presenters will travel to a new location and let on about their favourite local places, some of which are positioned as being ‘secret’ or ‘unknown’.

We see the other side of this in Vice’s mocking *Do’s & Don’ts* feature, which shows images of people, generally in the city, often somewhere in public like a subway, along with a short humorous statement and a judgement of either *Do*, or *Don’t*. Regardless of the verdict, the editorial statement is often rude, sarcastic and ironic. These are interesting because they amount to a rough semiotic analysis of their subject, delivering responses that assess the signs displayed by their victim’s appearance. Here we see some selected examples:



Figure 1: “Do: We went to see Maiden this week and happened upon hundreds of unintentional DOs. They had perfect Harley purses and hot feathered hair and were so far gone into white trash land, they had become haute couture.”
(Taken from www.vice.com/read/dos-donts-greatest-hits-v11n7)



Figure 2: “Do: This girl looks like Silly Putty except, instead of pushing it on to the Sunday Funnies to get pictures on it, she got smushed all over the 80s.”
(Taken from www.vice.com/vice/dnd/1590)

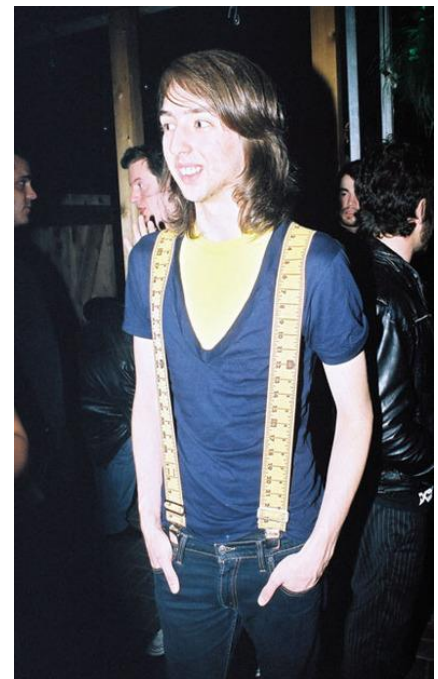


Figure 3: “Do: The blue and yellow tee-shirt collage is pretty ballsy on its own but throwing in the uncle suspenders takes it so far you want to follow him into battle.”
(Taken from http://www.vice.com/en_au/vice/dnd/967)

This feature, which appears in the side bar beside all of Vice stories online, is a reflection of the importance that semiotic presentation holds for the hipster. To exist in The City, Vice implies, is to participate in its visual discourse, whether intentionally or not. These images form part of the hyperreal easily because they avoid any geographical specificity, focusing on human figures against



Figure 4: “Don’t: What are the limits of “cultural appropriation,” you ask? For starters, you’re well out of bounds when patterns that at one time held religious significance to aboriginal peoples are used to decorate your cutoffs in hopes that strangers will look at your crotch.”
(Taken from http://www.vice.com/en_au/vice/dnd/81812)

unresolved backgrounds that could be taken from any city. On Tumblr we are used to seeing images that are almost impossibly perfect, where even the filth of the city has a certain poetry to it, and definitely a clear symbology, but the Do’s & Don’ts deny this easy hipster self-conception, to the point of intentional cruelty. The images shown on the previous page, and the many others like them, capture a different side of the hipster that does not appear on Tumblr: the images tend to be selected to show their subjects at their worst, often using direct camera flash to wash out the skin and pick out details that would be invisible in natural light. Not all of the people featured in these images are hipsters, but most display some element of hipster sensibility, as we see in figure one, where the Iron Maiden fans shown are not hipsters at all, but are used to reflect and critique the hipster’s ironic use of white trash culture (as well as providing an interesting sociological aside). In this sense we come to see that one of Vice’s most important contributions to hipster discourse is its willingness to be directly critical of the hipster in a way that the culture on Tumblr never quite manages.

Where a regular hipster photographer would make use of their skills to show the subjects above in a positive way and make them look good (which, if we imagine them posed and treated in the same way as the models for some of the other pictures included in this thesis, would not be hard to do) Vice chooses images that are the opposite, reflecting an effort (and failure) to look cool from the subject, but no such effort from the photographer. What we see, instead of a perfectly selected moment of surrogate memory, is the hipster as they look to the real world, their careful ironies and nostalgia giving way to an awkward mess of “silly putty smushed all over the 80s”. This serves as a reminder of how important it is to avoid excessively ‘hipster’ behaviour and clothing – although it may be easy to look good on Tumblr, Vice’s street characters present hipster aesthetics that look foolish in the hard light of day. If the hipster is to maintain any widespread legitimacy – and given Vice’s focus on hipster-led cosmopolitanism and alternative culture, the feeling there is that they must – then the kind of excesses that we see in the Do’s & Don’ts, whose semiotics would be unintelligible and annoying to the disinterested public, must be prevented by an internal mechanism. This is clearly visible in figure 4, where we see an explicit, albeit mocking response to the issue of cultural appropriation. Similarly, many of Vice’s articles deal with subjects like gentrification, directly criticising a well-known hipster behaviour, often without ever actually using the word hipster.

We see some of the same mechanism in the very existence of n+1's *What Was the Hipster*, which breaks down the issues with hipster culture as a means of facilitating their elimination. Whether this was n+1's intention (or Vice's) is beside the point: being naturally inclined towards semiotic criticism the hipster thrives on subculture-wide introspection and self-consciousness, and this behaviour rewards literature that makes introspection possible. Vice, then, serves as a monitor for the hipster, a self-control mechanism that keeps tabs on not only the Demiurge but the hipster as well.

5.5 Conclusion

Vice magazine plays the role of the hipster's society-wide introspection mechanism – a large-scale version of the hipster's own tendency toward internal speculation. They are not the only magazine or group that does this – almost any hipster organisation could be said to do it in some manner – but they are the best and most important example. By reading their articles we see many crucial elements of hipster culture laid out in detail that would otherwise have only been implicit in images, showing us how ironic consumption and hipster cosmopolitanism work as internal, personal processes. In this way we can see what the hipster's behaviours really mean to them, and how they inform the hipster's interaction with the wider world. The hipster has a strong stomach for both the strange and the inauthentic, and consumes both as a means of engaging with the world, on their own terms, including, necessarily, the Demiurge of consumerism. Through Vice's engagement with that Demiurge, we do see a glimmer of the specific ideology and purpose that the hipster is generally considered to lack. Vice's expanding size and influence can be taken as a representation of the hipster's growing influence as well; the market for such a view of the world is evidently large and, crucially, international. Vice's cosmopolitanism, although intrinsically limited in its own ways, bodes well for this continuing growth: this is a culture that is genuinely concerned with meaningful movement towards a more positive world (and even a more positive City), although with Vice's news network still in its infancy, it may be a while before we can judge what value, if any, this will turn out to have. The pendulum of metamodernity seems poised to swing backwards.

The Motor City and the future of the hipster

One final example comes in the form of an episode of the documentary show *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*. A hard-edged, cocaine-snorting chef turned writer and travel show presenter, Bourdain is a very hip literary figure (to the extent that hipsters can be said to agree on any contemporary writers) and is about as close as it gets to a real-life Cayce Pollard. In the tradition of hip media, Bourdain is well known for expressing distain for hipsters and their influence on the culinary scene, but his opinion in recent times has softened into acceptance, likely owing in part to his popularity among hipsters. As with some of Vice's features, Bourdain's shows often involve travelling to places that the mainstream world ignores, exploring local foods made from authentic ingredients by authentic people. Like a Vice journalist, Bourdain has a strong stomach for the unusual, and is well known for his celebration of regional peasant food. In the fifth episode of the first season, he even makes a trip to Tangier, the inspiration for William Burroughs' "Interzone" from novels such as *Naked Lunch* (1959), and frames it as a journey into a secret holdout of the past, where literary myth somehow still lives. Crucially it is his trip to Detroit, in the final episode of the show's second season (2013), which provides us with not only an excellent summation of the hipster's ambitions, but also gives us a chance vision of what the future of the hipster might look like.

The history of the city of Detroit is perhaps the most accurate real-world approximation of the hipster's understanding of the world. Once a bastion of the post-war American Dream – as a voice-over from the city's glory days played in the introduction explains, it was Detroit's manufacturing capability that made America "the arsenal of democracy in wartime and the economic pacesetter in peacetime" – Detroit has now fallen into ruin, losing more than half of its population and declaring bankruptcy in 2013. Slowly sapped of its strength as the automotive companies that formed the backbone of its economy folded or moved production overseas and then driven into the ground by institutional corruption on a level not seen elsewhere, Detroit is now a wasteland of abandoned houses and encroaching wilderness. "The only place I've ever been that looks like Detroit does now," Bourdain declares, as he drives down a street lined with boarded up houses and waist-high grass, " – Chernobyl. I'm not being funny. That's the truth". Detroit is like a grim hipster fantasy come to life, a place where the Demiurge, driven insane by the promise of wealth, has feasted until nothing remains

but bones. Its wild decline is a validation of everything that the hipster fears about the Demiurge's world, but it is also an unprecedented opportunity: a relic of American history and the myth of the American Dream, emptied out and abandoned, Detroit is ripe for re-colonisation. With nothing left to feed on, the Demiurge seems to have withered up and died: even the usually ever-present chain stores have picked up and left town. Critically the city's buildings retain plenty of their original post-war splendour, offering a chance for the hipster to remake the landscape in their own image and yet to participate in nostalgia at the same time. As Bourdain explains, the city's architecture, frozen in time by its decay, "speaks of those industrial-age dreams of an endlessly glorious future. The people who built these structures, they were thinking big: they were looking at a new Rome". Detroit represents the very height of the post-war American dream. Houses in Detroit's empty suburbs, even in what were once wealthy neighbourhoods, can be bought for as little as 500 American dollars (Philp, 2014). Dilapidated and overgrown, these areas have a lot in common with the rough neighbourhoods that hipsters flock to in other cities, like Bushwick or Williamsburg before gentrification began; the crucial difference here, however, is that moving into these areas is not gentrifying in the common sense: no locals are left to be pushed out, and where they do remain they actually welcome new neighbours. There, the hipster's most reviled habit is suddenly positive. Empowered by the authentic skills and gnosis that they have worked so hard to develop, the hipster is perfect for such a life, and it represents a chance for the hipster to finally show why their lifestyle has been meaningful and be redeemed in the eyes of the rest of the world. While these neighbourhoods are often dangerous, and therefore will reject all but the toughest hipsters, they also offer a degree of freedom not seen elsewhere, especially in a city environment – with whole streets to themselves the hipster is able to live as they desire, unbothered by the world. Using this space, they have a chance to remake the world correctly, and to bring it into line with the ideals of the hyperreal. In this sense Detroit represents a unique combination of The City and The Outdoors, a place of wide open spaces and verdant nature, somehow integrated into a landscape of skyscrapers and palatial houses. This vision shows us why the hipster fetishes the death of culture so much: when the body dies, life springs up in the ruins and the hipster, like a different kind of post-apocalyptic survivalist, has all the tools required to move in and turn things around.

Interestingly, there will be no politics to this peaceful hipster takeover – as one local guest explains to Bourdain, the city's leadership has a long history of excessive corruption, and there appear to be no idealistic young people campaigning for political office in the area. To the hipster's mind politicians are meaningless, and Detroit's revival will take place not because of them, but in spite of them. As another guest, local TV personality Charlie LeDuff explains, when Bourdain insists on the necessity for political leadership: "sometimes political leadership grows up out of what's happening; we don't have

any political leadership and *this is happening*". The hipster's Detroit is almost libertarian, and under the threat of city-wide defeat, it is certainly a meritocracy of sorts. This transformation, indeed, is already underway. Bourdain explains, narrating over a series of shots of young hipsters in the city, that there is a "vibrant, new, do-it-yourself culture of urban renaissance, young entrepreneurs and artists," beginning to grow in Detroit, "transforming the city, one block at a time". He visits a hip pop-up restaurant that serves gourmet food out of the back room of an art gallery during off-hours, where the chef is a native who recently gave up a life cooking in high-end restaurants in Manhattan in order to return and help to revitalise Detroit. "Kids," he says, over a shot of the restaurant's hip clientele, are "flooding into the city". The ownerless urban landscape, already nostalgically, ironically beautiful to the hipster's eyes, is transformed into art: brick walls are painted over with vibrant street art (we see shots of the words GO HARD in bright letters on one wall, and a colourful mural being painted on another) and the ruins are lit up at night with multi-coloured lights. Given this wealth of free space, the hipster is working hard to make use of it all. As Bourdain explains, their nostalgia for the American Dream becomes a crucial aspect of this movement:

Young, idealistic, true believing, hardworking creative people are indeed doing their best to bring light, and hope, and beauty to this greatest of cities. You've got to start with the deeply felt and absolute belief that Detroit is indeed a great city, and that it is worth saving. As utterly screwed as Detroit may be, you'd have to be a twisted, unpatriotic freak not to believe that.

To the hipster's brand of patriotic, almost foolhardy optimism, a place like Detroit looks like a unique opportunity, something to pounce on while the time is right and there is still space to be had. To this end, Bourdain admits to aestheticizing Detroit's decay somewhat, reflecting, as the camera lingers on shattered stairway of the abandoned Packard Automotive plant, on the meaninglessness of "wallowing in ruin porn". The show is expertly shot and edited, achieving a quality of production that rivals any of the most meticulously crafted imagery on Tumblr – a beauty that, it must be noted, belies a real danger. If they really mean to take it back, the task will require a very different breed of hipster, one that is tougher and more hardy than what we have seen before. The hipster's authenticity will meet a real test, one finally not measured internally but simply by practicality and ultimately by survival. As Bourdain notes when he visits an 'urban farm' in a disused park on the edge of town, many of the things that the hipster likes to dabble in become entirely more serious in a place like Detroit:

In many cities so-called urban farming may be looked upon by cynics like me as an affectation. Here in Detroit, it's not. With nature taking back the landscape block by block, the urban farm is really the last line of defence.

This represents a crucial change: when it is no longer a mark of distinction, will the hipster still value the authenticity of this kind of experience, or will they pick up and go searching for something new and more exclusive? This turn would represent a de-ornamentation of the hipster in the spirit of Adolf Loos' vision of modernity – a genuine paring-down, not only of the aesthetics of ornamentation but of their very human attributes – something that it is very reasonable to doubt that the hipster may never be ready for. A commitment on this level represents a key departure for the hipster, but also one that they have given every evidence of a willingness and intention to make. As more of the world succumbs to the forces of greed and consumption, Detroit is a window into a future where the authentic may need to see a revival not out of nostalgic sensibility but necessity. Without a doubt, more cities will fall this way. The hipster claims to be prepared for this eventuality, ready to step in and kick start a new age of prosperity, based on the blueprints of their hyperreal. The effort is certainly underway, and Detroit's future may tell us all that we need to know about the value of the hipster's true nature: if the Motor City survives and grows again, it may not be the last city to be saved by the hipster; if it burns out and the buildings rot, the hipster will be forgotten too.

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These are the internet sources from which the images in this thesis are derived. Most are Tumblr blogs, some of which may have been deleted or renamed. For a full list of the blogs that have indirectly informed this work, my own Tumblr blog (which was used exclusively for this study and has not been used for communication) can be visited at <http://seventhtime.tumblr.com/>. Under the “following” section, the full list of 174 blogs can be found. Many images that were relevant but not ultimately included in this thesis can also be found there.

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