The Diminishing Subversive Potential of Subcultural Antifashion Movements

Thorstein Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption has dominated theories of the development of fashion trends since the publishing of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899. Although it is accurate in its descriptions of the behaviors of the upper class and the attempts of the mainstream middle class to follow their lead, it does not predict the effect of countercultural movements of the twentieth century on fashion. These subcultures used their unique styling to make political statements against the consumerism of mainstream fashion and align themselves with the working class, but are each absorbed by the mainstream in turn. As more and more outrageous fashions are integrated into mainstream ideas of what is acceptable, the potency of these subcultural political statements will inevitably diminish.

While Veblen describes a “chase and flight” system of fashion, in which the working and middle classes are perpetually trying, but never able, to catch up to the fashion trends set by the upper class, subcultural fashion trends are instead based on the categorical rejection of this system as a whole (Kaiser 484). Modelling instead what Francois Simon-Miller calls “conspicuous counter-consumption,” they appropriate and subvert elements of mainstream fashion in order to “carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination” (Hebdige 18).

Historically, conspicuous counterconsumption movements, also generally understood as “antifashion,” begin through the pursuit of a distinctive, collective identity. Designer Ronald Kolodzie describes the progression of the creation of these fashions:
The marginal groups – blacks, Puerto Ricans, gays – are barred from conventional culture, and so they develop their own unique look. At that point you can say it’s progressive, it’s authentic, it has an historical edge. Some of that progressive content remains as the style travels up the social scale, even while it’s contradicted by the people who are wearing them. (Davis 166)

Though they often originate with the disenfranchised working class or the socially deviant, the “disaffected and rebellious middle-class youth” typically compose the majority of any antifashion movement as they adopt the aesthetics of marginalized groups in order to show their solidarity with their struggles or reflect their similar political associations (Davis 184). Their iconoclastic disdain for the conformity embodied by the mainstream middle-class serves as the eventual primary rallying point, no matter the nature of their origins. For example, though their aesthetics could not be more different, the hippies of the 1960s and punks of the 1970s demonstrate the various forms this sort of rebellion can take as they each assert their disdain for the status quo: “the former accomplished this through a kind of romantic pastoralism while the latter is more partial to dystopian postures of sadomasochistic nihilism. In either case, as intended, many ‘ordinary people’ respond with revulsion to the outlandish representations of self that hippie and punk dress parade before them” (Davis 183).

The problem inherent in the creation of subcultural fashion in opposition to consumerism is that it can only be done through the consumption of goods. In order to rebel against fashion through satirization or rejection, antifashion must still utilize or comment on the popular styles of their time. They are still required to “communicate through commodities even if meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown” (Hebdige 95). This reliance allows for and even creates a parasitic relationship between fashion and antifashion, as
these material representations will inevitably be copied and adopted by those who wish to profit from their use. As formerly avant-garde looks trickle down to the masses and designers are in search of new inspiration, the outrageous and shocking styles of youth counterculture movements are adopted as the new avant-garde. This inspiration is occasionally taken by those who have first-hand experience with these movements, but more often it is those designers on the periphery, especially “younger ones wishing to make a name for themselves by ‘doing something different’” (Davis 186). In either case, fashion designers, attracted to their authenticity and unassuming edginess, become unwittingly complicit in weakening the viability of the subcultural fashion statement by reproducing it for a mass audience.

The punks of 1970s England embody this rapid rise in visibility and the eventual diminishing of subversive potential. The punk aesthetic, capable of inciting a moral panic when first covered in newspapers and on television, became “bowdlerized, drained of surplus eroticism, and any hint of anger or recrimination” in favor of something “innocuous, generally unobtrusive, possessing a broad appeal…a laundered product which contained none of the subversive connotations of its original sources” (Hebdige 46). A bridge to this mainstream version of punk was designer Vivienne Westwood, despite her subversive goals. Though often deemed the creator of the punk aesthetic, she actually has a more complex relationship with its fashion history. Her London store underwent several transformations as it attempted to appeal to a variety of British youth subcultures: to the Teddy Boys, under the name Let it Rock in 1971; to the Marlon Brando look-a-likes, under the name Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die in 1974; and finally to the punks of 1974 under the name SEX (Price). Her association with punks began through her relationship with Malcolm McLaren, the eventual manager of the Sex Pistols, and they opened the SEX store together. With his connection to the punk music scene of the 1970s,
her designs did not have to struggle for authenticity or acceptance among actual punks, but the visibility gained through her association with the Sex Pistols brought commercial success as well as they served essentially as advertisements for her designs. Together, Westwood and McLaren “were instrumental in defining and marketing the punk look at the precise moment that it was taking the streets of London by storm” (Price).

Despite her reputation as authentically punk, the original roots of the style began with the youths of 1970s England during a period of deep economic depression. With shocking and offending the bourgeois middle-class as a central goal, they “used bondage gear, army surplus clothing, ‘trashy,’ kitsch textiles such as lurex and fake leopardskin and non-dress items such as plastic bags and safety pins, to create a form of sartorial collage…items that that cost little, the disregarded detritus of the fashion world” (Wilson 173). They frequently took thrift store purchases and deconstructed them to create clothing that “has been destroyed, has been put back together, is inside out, is unfinished, or is deteriorating…or is dirty, ripped, scarred, shocking, spectacular, cruel, traumatized, sick, or alienating” (Price). A common motivation for adopting the style is described by one female punk:

I hated the world…that thing of everyone trying to be nice and well-mannered, and behind the scenes, people weren’t really…so I ripped my clothes, scalped myself, pierced my ears. I was dyeing my hair; I used to get old grannies’ corsets and things from thrift shops…it was my hatreds coming out with a sense of humour. John Lydon came up to me because he couldn’t believe I dressed like that. He asked if I’d ever been in a shop called SEX; there was a girl called Jordan there who dressed like me. (Wilson 174)
While this woman describes an overwhelming anger that must be released though the destruction of her clothes, creating a political statement out of a deeply-felt emotion, Westwood’s designs allowed those who might not be so viscerally connected to the movement to still adopt the aesthetic. It seems ironic for a style defined by an appearance of decay and of the violent destruction of “normal” clothing as described by this woman to be purposely made and commodified for the public at large. However, due to Westwood’s legitimate understanding of the look and her connection to the punk music scene, SEX quickly became a gathering point for punks, whether to shop (although high prices prevented many from being able to make purchases there), work, or just hang out (Price). Although her work was assisting with pushing the aesthetic into the mainstream, she was nonetheless still creating a product that captured the “energy and iconoclastic tendencies” of those who opposed the mainstream. In spite of, but partially due to, her influence, the punk movement became fully commercialized with five years, but has never gone entirely out of style since (Price).

In this way, efforts at counter-consumption, though initially successful, tend to ultimately reaffirm Veblen’s theories. Their appropriation by the fashion industry causes any political message to be lost, and fringe styles become the new status symbols of the elite (Simon-Miller 504). While these styles begin as challenges to the mainstream, they “must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries, or rejuvenating old ones” (Hebdige 96). The contemporary hipster perfectly embodies this process of subcultural resistance and diffusion described by Hebdige. Originating in the indie youth culture of the 1990s, it began as a movement that defied consumerism and drew on the fashion of historical subcultures in order to physically demonstrate their shared goals and political beliefs.
They mirrored many qualities of those at the forefront of punk in the 1970s, particularly through their shared status as white, urban, middle and working class, and anti-establishment youths.

Over the next ten years, the hipster identity was appropriated by rich white young people some of whom possessed no sense of the history of the fashions they valued for aesthetic rather than political reasons (Grief 34). With their punk skinny jeans, bohemian interest in locally produced goods, and history rooted firmly in anticonsumerism, hipsters are now universally maligned for the perception of their blatant conspicuous consumption. In fact, Mark Grief describes the hipster instead as the “rebel consumer,” who “adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinces himself that buying the right mass products individualizes him as transgressive” (Grief 35). This creates a market for stores like Urban Outfitters that sell clothes intended to appear as though they were purchased in a thrift store, with the political intention behind a second-hand purchase lost. Possessing no authentic connection with the movement in the way Westwood did with the punks, stores catering to the hipster aesthetic often sell hastily-produced clothing to keep up with (and capitalize off of) trends as soon as they arise. This speedy mass-production, relying heavily on cheap foreign labor, completely ignores and suppresses the original intention of the aesthetic itself. Also known for the many scandals relating to the commodification of garments with religious or cultural significance, Urban Outfitters serves as a symbol of the overly commodified and mainstream version of the hipster aesthetic. Even after criticism for marketing the Palestinian kaffiyeh as an “anti-war scarf” and illegally labeling a clothing line with phony Native American symbols as “Navajo,” they continue to appropriate items with political significance for an audience that appreciates their aesthetic value with no concept of their full meaning.
With these choices available, it becomes impossible to discern the “authentic” hipsters from those who are simply following the rising trend of shabby clothing, and the movement has been condemned as a whole due to the nebulous and muddled attempts to create a cohesive identity. The word “hipster” itself is understood culturally as an insult, with no members of the subculture willing to adopt it proudly in the way the punks did. Publications ranging from subculture-affirming magazines to mainstream newspapers publish articles featuring titles such as “Hipster: The Dead-End of Civilization” by Douglas Haddow in Adbusters or “Kill the Hipster: Why the Hipster Must Die: A Modest Proposal to Save New York Cool” by Christian Lorenzen in Time Out New York. The commodification of the hipster aesthetic has led to its status as both ubiquitous and universally loathed.

Historically, antifashion, anticonsumerist movements have been unable to remain distinct for very long before being absorbed, making them a more and more integral part of the mainstream fashion system itself. With their political symbols sanitized by fashionable revisions, subcultures have been forced to “search for new, more subtle, and, perhaps, harder to purloin symbols of group differentiation” (Davis 167). This may be where the modern hipster movement of the early twenty-first century has failed: by making their symbols too obscure or unidentifiable, they have opened themselves up to criticisms concerning their lack of direction, unity, or defining purpose. Facing increased accusations of amalgamating various subcultures preceding them rather than creating their own distinct style, Fred Davis’ sociological analysis of the future of subcultural antifashion (which predates the rise of hipsterism) seems almost prophetic:

Amid today’s cacophony of acceptable fashions, it is difficult to register a riveting antifashion message. What is being opposed? What can opposition mean when
from within the spectrum of mainstream fashions there already is to be found a reasonable facsimile of the antifashion gesture? The sepulchral aura of punk black soon looks hardly any different from that stepping out of the smartest boutiques; proletarianized jeans, faded by years of hard wear and vigorous washing with brown laundry soap, find their manufactured acid-dyed equivalent at the nearest Gap store. (Davis 187)

Past movements have not only lost their political power after their aesthetics have been coopted by the mainstream fashion industry, but future movements have lost a primary site of resistance due to the increasing multiplicity of acceptable modes of dress. When a girl wearing a men’s sweater from a thrift store, chosen consciously in order to make a personal anti-consumerist statement, cannot be visually differentiated from a girl who has purchased a “boyfriend sweater” new from the mall, supporting (whether purposely or not) a capitalist system that does not care about its workers or even the product they are selling, the original political statement is lost.


