

ON DOUCHEBAGS

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“Now that we’ve infiltrated the mainstream, we have ample opportunity to mess with people... So far, we’ve done it in a classy way—we made music we like that’s weird, but it also got picked up on the radio.... There are so many clichés we can fall into. An ultimate goal [of ours] is not to become a douche bag.”

—Andrew VanWyngarden of MGMT, *SPIN Magazine*, Nov. 2008

I was 22 years old and about as stable as a three-legged chair—sleep-deprived, underfed, plagued by night terrors from the malaria medication—when I first learned that whiplashy sting you feel when your self-image is radically altered in a blink. Pierre and I were standing tenuously on the back bumper of a motor-rickshaw as we tore down a dirt road studded with skeletal cows, and Pierre said what he said, and I felt the funny feeling. My head did not feel like it was spinning so much as structurally reconfiguring itself from the inside out, recklessly, with great speed and considerable damage, as it must feel to undergo an Ovidian transformation. This happens to people every day. The corporate employee of 42 years finds out that he has become obsolete; the fashion model presses an index to the corner of her eye, gingerly flattening her first crow’s foot and wishing she’d finished high school. A soldier finds out the war is over, a prisoner is released, a former president leaves office; all three stare out a window and realize, with a growing sense of dread, that they are no longer equipped for life back home.

In my case, I learned that I came off as a douchebag.

The smoldering, wasted landscape of Bihar rolled by. Pierre blinked a few times, perhaps registering my wince with a feeling of regret. Manifold connotations clicked through my head: a rubber bulb with a hose attached; a guy I knew in high school

who nicknamed himself “The Hammer” and got laid off from Bear Stearns; a summer’s breeze through feathered, shoulder-length brown hair, and the words “Sometimes I just don’t feel fresh, even *after* a shower”; snickering in sixth grade French class; oddly, a tea bag soaked in vinegar; Jägermeister; toothy smiles; Jimmy Fallon. I performed a quick lexical dissection. Douchebag? Douche-bag? Douche bag? Sort of a douchebag. A *real* douchebag. That fucking *douchebag*. The word began to disintegrate. The closer I looked at it, the harder it was to discern exactly what it meant.

At the time, Pierre and I were living in a monastery in northeast India. Each year (the now-defunct) Antioch University took 20 students to the home of the Bodhi Tree to live amongst a handful of Burmese monks, to study the Dharma, and to adhere to the five precepts of a Buddhist pilgrim: no sexual acts, no intoxicants, no lying, no stealing, and no killing living creatures. There were no televisions or computers or even radios allowed in the monastery (in fact, only rarely was there electricity), so when we weren’t writing candlelit exegeses about the metaphysical implications of *Pratityasamutpada* or eating or meditating or sleeping, we resorted to other, increasingly outdated forms of human entertainment: we played chess, we traded books, we speculated about the sex lives of our professors, we crawled out onto the ledge where we weren’t supposed to sit and dangled our legs over the swampy vegetable patch, and most of all, we talked.

A favorite topic of conversations was to recount our first impressions as we first appeared to one another in the London airport. But it quickly became clear that this was not always a pleasant topic of discussion. In the hermetic environment of the monastery, where there was so much talk of deconstructing identity and fostering an understanding of no-self, old layers of social identity had a tendency to flake and shed. With a shaved head and more or less identical clothes, it was easy to forget who

you had been back home. Digging up those old social identities too often felt like unearthing a shoebox full of embarrassing middle school photographs.

It was clear that these first impressions were tricky things, often false, but they could also be terrifically revealing. As a cognitive process, snap judgments appear to be a primal function of our lizard brains, an instantaneous sorting method by which we weed out friend from foe. If we could look through the human brain as if through a Terminator's red-tinted gaze at the exact moment it first encounters someone new, we might see the mind's eye highlight and zoom in on a number of visual cues (anatomical, sartorial, behavioral), flit through a computation as quick as neural lightning, and then display, in glowing boxy letters, a pre-defined category into which the person should be filed, and by which his future actions will be predicted.

Apparently, upon first laying eyes upon me, Pierre's brain flashed:

DOUCHEBAG (var.: FRATTY DOUCHEBAG)

This is what stung.

"Fraty" was not a word I would normally use to define myself. Back at home and at college, among my friends, if anything I tottered toward the opposite end of the spectrum: I was bookish, left-leaning, a pacifist. My friends and I were not in fraternities. In fact we made fun of frat boys. And as for "douchebag," to my mind that just sounded like a slur. And yet, to Pierre, a fair-minded person and a fellow liberal arts student, as I materialized in the airport wearing a button-down shirt and a (non-Castro, non-trucker, non-porkpie) hat, with short-cropped hair and unexamined Midwestern sensibilities, the visual calculus of my appearance equaled 'fratty douchebag.' Something did not fit. We had stumbled into a linguistic gap, a divergence in perception, one signifier with split signifieds, a symptom of what I will call the Chasm.



It is no secret that the structure of colloquial speech is far less rigorous than that of the academe. Meanings of slang terms fluctuate according to geographic locality and personal preference, and only rarely does even a rough consensus form around the definition of a given term. One needs only glance inside the Urban Dictionary to find the myriad, haphazard and often conflicting definitions we give to young words. However, once every decade—due to some underlying social need for a new way to name, differentiate, or disparage—a given term suddenly jumps into sharp focus and is readable by all. Thus we receive the Beatnik, the Hippie, the Punk. What was once a put-down is sharpened into a full-bore social identity, and sometimes—as in the case of the aforementioned—adopted and celebrated by the once disparaged. I suspect this same process of sharpening (if not the reclamation) is happening right now with the word “douchebag” in our nation’s urban centers. I can see it taking shape in smoke-filled mouths, rolling around on tongues. The last flecks are being shaved from the mold; it is readying itself for re-release.

The perplexing thing about the word “douchebag” is that it refers to something specific that most of us know and can point out when seen, and yet we have trouble making explicit. (“You know one when you see one,” runs the tagline of *Obvious Douchebag*, one of the many new douchebag-focused blogs on the internet.) Our inability to form a working definition is perplexing precisely because the word is so widely used. Once you start listening for it, you will hear the word everywhere, spoken with increasing frequency and ferocity. It has been exploited of late to elicit cheap laughs—most notably by comedy shows like *The Daily Show* and *30 Rock*, those middle-aged miners of youth slang—to the point where it now risks

collapse from hyperinflation. This phenomenon appears to be systematic. As a particular epithet (“bitch,” “punk,” “idiot” and to a more obvious degree, “fag” or the vague adjectival usage of “gay”) gains social relevance by targeting and disparaging a certain demographic, it is inevitably adopted into the popular lexicon as a blanket insult. The epithet’s pointedness, precisely the reason for its ascent, then becomes blunted through sloppy or overzealous usage, and eventually the word grows stale, loses favor, and fades into the background. Once irrelevant, the word persists, fixed but distant, in the ever-growing catacombs of the English language, to be excavated by future generations as the need arises, but only rarely as it was originally intended.



We all know where the epithet originates, and in part why it was once so devastating; it refers to a soiled object, a private shame. ‘Shithead,’ ‘motherfucker,’ ‘piss ant’; all appeal to us, initially, on the literal level of their imagery. Perhaps just as importantly, ‘douchebag’ is fun to say. It rolls lushly off the tongue like a rush of water, with a big plosive burst at the end. It is nigh onomatopoeic, near pornographic. Pronouncing it feels like a release, with all the hearty thud of a kick in the ribs.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “douche bag” was first used to refer to something other than a female cleaning implement some time in the 1960’s, when it was used to describe “an unattractive co-ed, or by extension, any individual whom the speaker desires to deprecate.” Other sources imply that the term originally indicated a woman of “loose moral repute.” In Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, set in 1933, the douche is considered an effective contraceptive instrument, and so by extension any woman who was found using one was thought to be promiscuous. Knowing the way that social mores were structured in that era, it is not so far of a leap from “loose” to

“unattractive.” Where the term took a leap across the gender gap from describing unattractive women to describing contemptible men remains unknown.

Already we find the word slipping, morphing, its pleasant mouth feel and nasty connotations tempting it into sentences where it doesn't belong. In the 1980s, the term suddenly became popular among teens as a blanket insult—used for example to disparage a teacher that one does not like—though it lacked any attached cultural codes. (Unlike, say, the word “nerd”; there was never a film called *Revenge of the Douchebags*, and could not have been, for exactly this reason). It is perhaps out of a sense of 80s-inspired nostalgia that the term was resurrected in the early 2000s, along with various other appurtenances from that bygone era.

In reviewing the earliest literature on douchebags from the early 21st century, it becomes clear that the word was for a long time used to describe a certain kind of man—gelled hair, fitted baseball cap, multiple pastel polo shirts with popped collars layered one atop another—who is stereotypically thought to have originated in or around New Jersey, but who, sometime around 2002, suddenly began popping up everywhere (perhaps not coincidentally) just as the nation became familiar with the notion of “metrosexuality.” At the time, there was a cultural need to name and disparage these people, this aesthetic, and for a period the word “douchebag” filled that void. The words “tool” and the racial epithet “guido” now seem to have superseded “douchebag” to describe a person this mien, at least in New York, though that is not always true for all speakers. More importantly, even though we lack a unanimously agreed-upon name for them, their particular aesthetic has been ridiculed to the point where it has faded from the public dialogue. (See: “My New Haircut,” YouTube: June, 2007.) The result is that few slang-savvy people today would describe a douchebag as a greasy, Italianate, overtanned, testosterone-rich gym rat. We

know that kind of guy; he's not a douchebag; he's "something else."

Perhaps in an unconscious response of this shift in meaning, there has been a rash of hip publications declaring the word "dead," among them *Esquire*, *SF Weekly*, and Gawker.com (twice). Wrote one reader to the Gawker editors,

[the word "douchebag" has] been completely played out. the number of times i hear it now applied to any circumstance other than what i believe to have been its true intention is getting annoying. furthermore, i feel the douche's themselves have co-opted the word and use it against hipsters and the like. people who aren't particularly witty, or even funny, have begun throwing around the word douche (in my opinion denigrating the original beauty of what it represented).

Yet, despite all the ([sic]-riddled) clamoring about its demise, the term persists, though often with increasingly bizarre applications. In a September '08 *Radar* magazine article also titled "On Douchebags," Lynn Harris made a valiant effort to widen the term's definition beyond the confines of guido-style, but in implicating such figures as Roy Cohn, Henry VIII, and Jacob (son of Isaac), she effectively exploded the term beyond any usable proportions. So the question remains: What is a douchebag? What in its "original beauty" so enamored us to its use?



The answer to our question lies in the thicket of popular culture—specifically, in the structure within which the mainstream culture and the era's predominant counterculture are formed and interact. More specifically, we must examine the

peculiar way that these two spheres of social influence always seem to arise in a slightly staggered opposition to one another. It would seem reasonable that in any given decade, there is a mainstream culture and a predominant counterculture that rise and fall concomitantly. But this isn't how it seems to work. Indeed, the rise of a new counterculture does tend to give birth to a new kind of mainstream (a mainstream which either incorporates or repudiates the defining ethos and aesthetic of the counterculture), but the irony is that by the time that mainstream is more or less fully formed, the counterculture to which it is a response has already been gutted and replaced by a new one (which is itself a reaction to the new mainstream). In this way, we as a society define ourselves in overlapping waves, always through opposition, but all too often those we've set our sight on have already disappeared over the horizon.

America has always branded its outcasts: Greasers, beatniks, anarchists. Mountain men. Cowpunchers. Witches. However, it isn't until the culture wars that began in the 1940's, incubated

‘Like it or not, we have entered the Age of the Hipster Mainstream.’

throughout the repressed McCarthy era, and finally exploded during the Vietnam War that we see a particular counterculture rise to a position of power and vocality from which it was able to

spin around the looking glass and brand the mainstream. In the 1940's, these were the original “hipsters”—fiery bohemians and blacks who were “hip” to jazz. The buttoned-up mainstream, in this era, was branded as “square.” The counterculture was able to sharpen its identity by explicitly opposing the mainstream, and in being forced to craft a response to this assault, the mainstream redefined its own mores. This (at once mutualistic *and* antagonistic) form of cultural symbiosis was most pronounced in the years that followed Vietnam: first the

hipsters (and later, the hippies) had their squares, then the punks their preppies, the slackers their yuppies, and recently the emo kids their fratboys. In this dynamic structure, where the friction between the two opposing camps produces much of the creative energy that drives our trends, I believe that the hipster now finds his antipode in the douchebag.

I am confident this is true because I keep hearing the word “douchebag” used by hipsters—in all the little farflung boho corners of New York City: Williamsburg, Bushwick, Astoria—to describe people who are unassumingly rooted in the realm of the mainstream. Since returning from India, I myself have been called a douchebag no less than six times by hipsters. (Once, in print.) On one occasion I pressed for further explanation. I asked a 19 year-old RISD student if I was acting like a douchebag. “No, you’re nice enough,” she said. “But you’re wearing a collared shirt, and loose jeans, and that’s what douchebags wear.” Everyone knows this. “I bet you even have abs,” she said, with a smirk.

This, then, is the new douchebag: collared shirt of any kind (besides flannel), pants that don’t cling, physically fit. As the prevailing style and ethos (post-modernism, hyperactive trend-following, esotericism) of the hipsters gains visibility and begins to shape the mainstream through fashion and advertising (just as that of the hippies and punks and grunge rockers before them), this particular image of the douchebag—an after-image of the previous, now diminishing mainstream style—will develop alongside. In point of fact, this process has already officially begun. It occurred at roughly around 6 p.m. on September the 6th, 2008, when Kanye West hung up his preppy gear and chose instead to don a starched white dress shirt, top-button buttoned, a David Byrne-esque gray flannel suit and oversized sunglasses to perform songs off his newest album for the MTV Music Video Awards. So goes Kanye, so goes the nation. Like it or not, we have entered the Age of the Hipster Mainstream.

And so our primary task in this essay becomes, paradoxically, the simple aim of defining what exactly a hipster is and what mainstream cultural image he is resisting. This task is surprisingly difficult, and not (as it might at first appear) simply because the term “douchebag” is inchoate and half-formed, or an empty mask. After all, *you know one when you see one*. (You just can’t describe what you’re seeing.) This issue—the difficulty of constructing clear definitions and delineations—is at the very heart of the problem, both in the way that the douchebag defines himself and in the way that he is defined by his namers. Like the hipster, he bristles at the mention of his name. Unlike a square or a preppy, he finds no solace in shared identity, no strength in numbers. And this is problematic. We are becoming afraid, all of us, hipsters and douchebags alike, to peak around the easel of cultural taxonomy and examine our caricatures.



The douchebag can most succinctly be described as a posture rather than a style. I say “posture” because it is deeper and more functional than “style,” which connotes superficiality, and yet is not purely behavioral or psychological, either. A posture is an attitude made physical, and can be read in a glance, before the subject even opens his mouth. Though television is chockablock with douchebags and people calling each other douchebags, and thus is a ripe hunting ground for examples, the douchebag posture is for me perhaps best typified by Andy Bernard (as played by Ed Helms) from the NBC version of *The Office*. You can read him from his smirk—that a unique mixture of unflinching entitlement, measured success, and undue sense of self-worth. When he opens his mouth, his words only confirm what his posture telegraphed. “I went to Cornell. Ever heard of it? Yeah, I graduated in four years...”

But that’s just me. Someone else might say that Ryan is the

biggest douchebag on *The Office*, while someone else might say it's Michael. (The show, it turns out, is positively rife with douches.) Part of what makes the show so successful is that each character represents a different facet (indeed, archetype) of the mainstream—the preppy mediocrity, the arrogant 20-something, the desperate corporate clown—which correlate to figures in our lives. As to which of those people you perceive as a douchebag, well, that depends on who you are. A true hipster might look at *The Office* and declare that they are *all* douchebags, none more than Jim, because he alone had the potential to be something else. In other words, “douchebag” is purely a *subject-variable* designation, but I hold that it always retains a similar (if not identical) *relationship* to each subject. Like shadows—all douchebags look different, but the relationship between douchebag and the perceiving subject they reflect is always the same.

In India, Pierre thought I was a douchebag because of my hat. James, a rather insecure pseudo-hipster himself, at first glance thought I was a hipster, because I was wearing a t-shirt from American Apparel.

You think I am a douchebag for writing this. I think it actually looks kind of pretentious (ergo, hipsterish).

This is how the Chasm begins to form.



Last weekend I was walking down Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg, what was once and to some degree still remains a sort of Haight-Ashbury for hipsters, when a friend from out of town started pointing at people and asking if they were hipsters.

“What about that guy?” he whispered. “Oh, what about her, with the glasses?”

My roommates Jordan and Spiel patiently answered that yes, the guy in the lumberjack print jacket was a hipster, and definitely

that guy on the fixed-gear bike in the 20 degree weather, and no, well, it's a little harder with girls, but she was probably just a trendy Upper East Side high school girl slumming it for the day. The out-of-towner, perplexed, finally broke down and asked, "So what the fuck is a hipster, exactly?" Jordan and I, pensive as ever, balked. Spiel, who was wearing a Wake Forest hoodie and baggie jeans and who knows how to fix dirt bikes and has absolutely no fucking clue who Nico is, and therefore by virtue of distance sees these things a bit more clearly than the rest of us, answered without hesitation:

"Skinny jeans, dude."

While it seems simplistic, that is perhaps the clearest and most elegant taxonomy that has ever been devised for identifying a male hipster. (Identifying female hipsters, as was mentioned, tends to be a bit more problematic, for various reasons that we don't need to go into here.) Every other physical characteristic that we might elect as a telltale for the hipster male—the thick-rimmed glasses, the faux-blue collar attire, the mustaches and beards and shaggy hair, the eclectic musical tastes, the vintage bikes—can be shed or altered as the need arises. (The adoption of the fixed-gear bike as a hipper alternative to the traditional racing bike a few years back is a great example of this.) The skinny jeans, however, persist through the incarnations, but only because a viable alternative does not yet exist. On this front, the hipsters have unwittingly painted themselves into a corner; anything looser than skin-tight is deemed mainstream, unhip, douche. What else is left for them to wear to cover their asses in the wintertime? Parachute pants? The only other alternative, the one they seem to have chosen, is to simply grow slimmer, more rail-like legs, to allow a yet further slimming down of the jeans, until, presumably, they wither to stems and altogether disappear...

The problem, as you no doubt have noted, arises when non-hipsters start wearing skinny jeans. In say three years, once

more or less *everyone* (save the diehard fratboy, who will be left frozen in time like a curio in our collective cabinet of wonders, along with the zoot and the disco fan and the head-banger) starts wearing slimmer-cut jeans, how will we parse out the hipsters from the rest of us? More importantly, how will the hipsters parse *themselves* out? To put it another way, our problem is that as the mainstream slowly assimilates and consumes the hipster aesthetic, we necessarily lose sight of what a hipster *really* is.

As is evidenced by the above two paragraphs, a hipster is, by design, easy to mock, easier to loathe, and yet very hard to pin down. Because, unlike the hippies or the punks, the hipsters lack a central *storyline* (a defining manifesto, a set of shared moral values, a historical narrative), which we can seize upon and use as a pigeonhole. This lack of storyline leads many to mistakenly assert that the hipsters have no ethos, no guiding light. This is wrong. But it's exceedingly tricky to explain *why* it's wrong. In order to pinpoint a hardier defining characteristic than "skinny jeans," we must wade into some pretty murky, mercurial depths; we must define that which willfully resists definition.



The first and most obvious reason why most people (including many critics of the hipster movement) cannot properly grasp the significance of this counterculture is because they fail to follow its roots to their base—namely, in postmodernism. For the phenomenon of hipsterism is, first and foremost, both a symptom and a cultural iteration of postmodernist developments in theory, literature, fashion, and art.

In his much-discussed article entitled "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization" in the July 2008 issue of *Adbusters*, Douglas Haddow writes,

An artificial appropriation of different styles from different eras, the hipster represents the end of Western civilization – a culture lost in the superficiality of its past and unable to create any new meaning. Not only is it unsustainable, it is suicidal. While previous youth movements have challenged the dysfunction and decadence of their elders, today we have the “hipster” – a youth subculture that mirrors the doomed shallowness of mainstream society.

What Haddow's thesis so plainly fails to take into account is the fact that artificial appropriations, in a post-modern world, are in fact a creation of something new and significant. He—like the magazine for which he writes—too often falls into the trap of pre-postmodern literalism, yearning to find some tangible “meaning” (by which I think he means “philosophy” or “moral agenda”) in the hipster movement, which he can then begin to plug into his own social framework and criticize. But the hipster movement has never really been *about* meaning. Jacques Lacan laid a finger on the heart of postmodernism when he famously elaborated upon Freud's findings in psychoanalysis; namely, that “truth manifests itself in the letter rather than the spirit, that is, *in the way things are actually said rather than in their intended meaning.*” In much the same way, the hipster movement is more about the method and tone of expression than the expressed meaning; as deconstructionists emphasized the surface of language, hipsters celebrate the surface of modern life. “Meaning” (in the way Haddow defines it) has become a cliché, and beside the point. The political causes, liberal social mores, and revolutionary mythos to which previous countercultures subscribed have all been co-opted by the mainstream, printed onto bumper stickers, used to sell Priuses, parodied on *South Park*. In a perverse twist, capitalism has managed to make personal “depth” appear

shallow, and “shallowness,” somehow, deep. What hipsters concern themselves with (in their literature, their music, their fashion) are the ways that past phenomena can be clipped and combined, snipped of their attached “meaning” but not of their engrained aesthetic appeal, and in that way made shiny and flat and cool. Cloud-like, without noumena, the true hipster is immune to attack or parody. So in this sense, Haddow is dead-on, but unwittingly so: hipsters are *intentionally* shallow; they are *intentionally* doomed.

The definition of a hipster (like that of the douchebag) can best be described as a posture (or, some might say, a *pose*), which is a contradictory reading of the mainstream at all times and at any moment. As far as I can tell, the most common symptom of this posture is a distinct allergy to repetition and a revulsion for cliché. Indeed, the primary process by which a hipster defines himself is through labeling (and subsequently eschewing) other things as clichéd, old, or played out. And so, the hipster finds him or herself on the cutting edge of fashion, music, literature, and film, precisely because he or she is a fan of all things that resist the mainstream, more or less regardless of quality. If a new movement is to emerge, it will be on the cusp, never in the middle, and thus in the domain of the hipster. The flipside, of course—and this is their curse—is that the moment that a given trend catches on and becomes socially visible, it is assimilated by the mainstream, and becomes unhip.

In his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin foretold how mass production would “emancipate the work of art from its parasitical dependence on [bourgeois] ritual.” While he was prescient in many of his predictions, he failed to envision the rapidity with which capitalism and advertising would rush to fill the void left behind by the loss of “aura” surrounding that antiquated mode of production. These days our most visible and talked-about aesthetic objets have become both symbols and products of

mass production, stamped all over with logos: MacBook Airs, Volkswagens, Calphalon pans, Pepsi cans, Nike kicks, the sleek new interface of Google Chrome. Consequent to this rise in design-capitalism was the co-opting of identities (particularly youth identities) to brand and sell these items. The hipsters—who have read Benjamin, as well as Derrida and Barthes and Foucault and Bakhtin—are sharp to the “withering effects” of mechanical reproduction, of commodification and advertising. Moreover, they were born in the miasma of hyper-consumerism (their first glimpse of life was the silvery glimmer off the logo on their obstetrician’s Armani frames, the snowy cap of the Mont Blanc pen tucked into his shirt pocket, and behind that, a poster for Pfizer), and they grew up in an era that was, by any objective measurement, exponentially more saturated with advertising than any that had ever preceded it in the history of man. They’ve watched closely as each previous counterculture was processed, purchased, caricatured, and made into Halloween costumes—the beat with his beret and bongos, the hippie with her tie-dyes, rose-tinted glasses, and plastic oversized flower. It makes them sick.

Corporate powers have already begun trying to capitalize upon the hipster movement, with limited results. One need only look at how long it took them to adopt the hipster’s love of irony (an early, failed attempt at cultural resistance) and deploy it for its own purposes: in the production of Burger King advertisements, retro lunch boxes, trucker caps, and graphic tees; or to surf the flashy new hipster-targeted website of Colt 45 malt liquor, which invites burgeoning artists to “ink” the design of their new can; or watch the online ads featuring Paul “the Original Dollar Menunaire,” McDonald’s ironically mustachioed, exceedingly flat-intoned cartoon spokesperson; or walk inside an Urban Outfitters, just once, and really look around. It will make you sick as well.

Hipsterism is in this sense a pure, almost enlightened

kind of rebellion. They know that the game is rigged, that the counterculture always gets swallowed. So, in the only way they know how, they turn off, tune out, rise above.

Of course there are other, less noble factors at play in the recent move towards hipsterism: a thinly veiled vanity, the thrill of keeping a secret or knowing more than your neighbor, a desire to vindicate or erase vestiges of high school or middle school awkwardness, the sense of community that

‘It may very well be that hipsters are the best-prepared group of people in America for the looming economic apocalypse.’

shared but esoteric interests can foster. But first and foremost, I would argue that hipsterism is *a natural and inevitable backlash against the universalizing forces of capitalism and, more specifically, advertising*. The work of the market is to widen, to broaden, to debase; to make a product available (and appealing) to as many people as possible. The hipster is the latest iteration of a long intellectual tradition which seeks always to sharpen, to restrict, and to heighten, and which in the process, invariably fetishes the obscure, the enigmatic, and the absurd.

The hipster's allergy to repetition and capitalist co-opting might even be laudable, if it were not so manifestly hypocritical. If, for example, the hipster movement had given birth to a series of cottage industries, the flowering of individual style, and a do-it-yourself philosophy of material production, if it had in other words truly been what it always showed promise to be—a trend without trends—then we might have seen the birth of a sustainable response to the problems that fashion and trend-ism engender. Instead the hipsters took an alternate route; unwilling or unable to achieve an atomization and hyper-

personalization of style, they tacked towards the postmodern, creating a sartorial *bricolage* of fashions clipped from the pages of history and trimmed to match. Certain trends—the scarves and the oversized glasses, the infamous skinny jeans—caught on, and in this way the image of the hipster started to develop in the darkroom of our public consciousness. The 21st century hipster, who understands this process on a molecular level and whose hackles raise at the first whiff of it, is then forced to switch up his or her style, to abandon his or her favorite artists, and to denounce and cannibalize those who have yet failed to adapt, labeling them, somewhat cleverly, as “hipsters.” The hipsters are quick, you must give them that. Unfortunately, the Age of Mechanical Reproduction is quicker, better financed, and has been doing this for much, much longer. It will subsume these new trends as quickly as the hipsters can create them, at an ever-increasing rate, as long as the hipsters continue to do so in a collectivist manner.



In recent months, a slew of eulogies have been published declaring the death of the hipster. Some claim that growing media awareness of the hipster aesthetic and lifestyle has ensured its demise. However, as was addressed above, this does not so much portend the death of the hipster movement as it ensures the death of that particular incarnation and aesthetic. Because of their uniquely amorphous and decentralized outlook, hipsters can always shed their skins, to strip off their tattered tights and toss out their non-prescription glasses and slip into some new, less-easily codified disguise. The demise of the hipster will not come at the surface, in the growing staleness of their “look”; it will come in the failing of their modes of operation and their impetus for rebellion.

Another, slightly more convincing argument says that the

ascendance of Obama and the dawning of a new political era will melt away the angst and cynicism that defined the hipster movement. This might be true. It certainly seems difficult to maintain the same level of hostility towards the mainstream when that mainstream has elected a president who is so clearly aligned with the hipster political ethos (what little of it there is). The problem is that, in order to assuage the hipster's feeling of unease and cynicism, Obama needs to reform not only all three branches of government, but also the media, the advertising industry and much of the business sector, which are not under his control. In all likelihood the hipster movement will die of its own attacks long before Obama or anyone else in government is able to radically overhaul our current (cynicism-inducing) system of consumption.

Finally, with an historic recession already underway and a full-out Depression looming on the horizon, some claim that an economic downturn might take the sexiness out of the hipster lifestyle. Indeed, if one looks across nations and across generations, it is difficult to find an economically hard-pressed community who intentionally tries to look poor. Hippies and backpackers are despised in India, because the locals see them as they appear—dirty, sloppily dressed individuals who take little care with their appearance. To this day it is exceedingly rare to find a rich person in India who intentionally tries to dress poor, much less one among the vast majority of the less privileged. The logic then goes that, as the failing economy drives America into a state of real and lasting destitution, ironic approximations of poverty will suddenly lose their appeal. Of all three major arguments for the demise of the hipster, this seems the most convincing, but it too has its flaws. Because, although hipsters may actually become poor in the years to come, they still hail from a certain socioeconomic and cultural background which in some ways immunizes them from the demoralizing effects of poverty. They still have their college degrees, and

their long-cultivated sense of style, and their unique aversion to overt wealth and status. In fact, it may very well be that the hipsters are the best-prepared group of people in America for the looming economic apocalypse: as the rest of the country suffers and scrounges and grows depressed, the hipsters will flourish like drought-resistant ferns in the newfound paucity, luxuriating in a truly bohemian and ascetic lifestyle. Having practiced for this day for years, the hipster will finally find him or herself living in his or her long-imagined dream, where simulated pauperism has become real, where hardship is other than self-imposed, where shopping at secondhand stores and drinking cheap beer is a necessity rather than a choice, where artists really starve.



Heretofore, there has been a certain unspoken conceit to this essay; namely that I, as someone who has been called a douchebag, am somehow more knowledgeable or reliable a source on this subject than say, a hipster. While a first person perspective is necessary to convey the experience of being *called* a douchebag, it is not necessarily best for conveying the experience of actually *being* a douchebag. In fact, the great majority of douchebag theory published on the internet has been penned by professed fans of the word, those who apply it liberally and with a certain sense of vindictive joy. The word, like “hipster,” is one that is almost never reflexively applied. It takes something extra, some outside and objective force, to jar one into realizing that he is in fact a douchebag, and just exactly what that term means.

“So I started Googling myself, you know,” says John Mayer, to a TMZ cameraman, “And I had to kinda put it all together at once to realize, at the end of it all, *I’m kind of a douchebag.*” This last clause it not one that you hear very often. But what is

striking about this confession is not the fact that Mayer admitted he is a douchebag (he is, almost definitively), but rather that it was only by viewing his atomized and refracted image via the internet, among his fans and detractors alike, that he came to realize this fact.

It took the internet to jar John Mayer into realizing that he is a douchebag, because in some very real sense *it was the internet that made him a douchebag in the first place*. Without surfing the web (or watching MTV, or flipping through gossip rags), John Mayer to himself is just one man. He is blind to his many two-dimensional avatars running around LA pouting, smoking, simpering, wearing sunglasses, going boogie boarding, carrying the tote bags of his current celebrity girlfriend, eating ice cream, flirting with Ellen, bar-hopping with other quasi-celebrities, tearing down Rodeo Dr. in a vintage Land Rover, glibly collecting speeding tickets. In fact, it is entirely possible that John Mayer, due to the sheltered nature of the Hollywood lifestyle and a natural human aversion to seeing oneself from a hostile third person perspective, was one of the last people on earth to know just how incredibly saturated the world is with John Mayer.

One month after staring into our cultural lens and conceding himself a douchebag, Mayer took to his blog to defend himself, not by denying his label, but by disassembling it. (His task, one might argue, is not all that different from that undertaken here.) In his (admittedly, more ham-fisted) analysis, Mayer posits that the epithet is launched out of jealousy, or a sense that fame has been dealt to the undeserving.

“Is being a douchebag actually all about having a bigger smile than someone else deems you deserve to in life?” he asks.

This question deserves asking, because many of the people on the internet who are most frequently deemed douchebags (Brody Jenner, Dane Cook, Kevin Federline) have accrued a level of fame that far outstrips any real or perceived talent.

And indeed, this must be part of the impetus to originally label a person a douchebag. Fame is a social equivalency to ego, and as has been stated before, unwarranted egotism is a telltale characteristic of a true douchebag. (The reasons for this will be addressed a bit later.) However, I would argue that something else is at work in the labeling of douchebags, because this notion of undeserved fame does not explain the widespread usage of the term to describe thoroughly talented individuals (Sean Penn, Bono, Paul Krugman), who are nevertheless over-exposed. Or what of those other celebrities, who have gained a considerable (but not tabloid-worthy) amount of fame with little-to-no visible talent? Why is Dane Cook considered a douchebag but Larry the Cable Guy merely a hack? And more importantly, why is fame an indicator of douchiness at all? Whose decision is it to make someone an object of public interest, the object, or the public?

In his blog post, Mayer launches a spirited defense of Pete Wentz, the bass player for the band Fall Out Boy, who, according to Google (via Mayer), has been called a douchebag over 11,000 times. However, from the start Mayer departs down the wrong track, assuming that Wentz's perceived shortcomings lie in his music. If he had taken the time to closely read some of those 11,000 blog posts, Mayer would have found that the prevailing criticisms center not around Wentz's artistry but rather around his hairstyle, his clothing, his wearing of eyeliner, his dating of Ashlee Simpson, even his decision to have a child at such a young age (which was widely regarded as a celebrity stunt, part of a rash of celebrity pregnancies—what will one day be known as the “babies-as-accessories boom” of the late aughts). Note that the very language of these criticisms are structured around and through the filter of gossip news. The central complaint is that Wentz is both too affected and too common. Numerous references are made to his shopping at Hot Topic, a popular teen goth clothing store found in most American shopping malls. What then is Wentz's crime? It is that he dresses like someone

that we have met and, probably, disliked. He is both too visible and too vulnerable, and for whatever reason, this combination invites relentless attack.

This brings us to the central question of this essay: If the hipster is in fact a creature who is first and foremost allergic to repetition, what then is the douchebag? Answer: The douchebag is exactly that— a repetition, a living cliché. If the hipster celebrates obscurity and his image is a cultural obfuscation (a fractured scattering of the light thrown off from past styles), the douchebag's crime is that he is, in a cultural sense, *too legible*.

Since celebrities are both shapers and reflections of the mainstream—shaping, due to their enormous influence and visibility; reflecting, because of stylists and personal shoppers and PR managers and agents and focus group researchers who are paid to maximize their public appeal—it is wholly unsurprising that they are the people most often labeled as douchebags. Celebrities are the most hyper-legible people on the planet. The only ones who manage to escape the label are those who manage to somehow obscure themselves, who shy away from the public eye or surround themselves with mystery. This creates a peculiarly disillusioning effect, where the more one zooms in on the life of a famous person, indeed the more *human* a celebrity appears, the more he or she diminishes in our eyes. Scarlett Johansson appears on Letterman and reveals herself to be just another jappy girl from Manhattan; it comes out that Vin Diesel is a lifelong fan of Dungeons and Dragons and has a dorky laugh. (This is phenomenon is true of literary celebrities as well; I cannot think of a single author who rose in my estimation after I glanced at his or her dust jacket photo—with the twin exceptions of Joan Didion and Samuel Beckett.) We don't want our celebrities to be human, to have depth and imperfections, those real, schlubby, pathetic, every day imperfections that every real human being has; rather, we prefer the cool, tragic flaws of the historically beautiful and

short-lived. We too want shallowness. We too want doom.

While the rise of the hipsters cannot be blamed for this phenomenon (the real has always disappointed in the face of the imagined and unknown), it is a central tenet and core malady of their lifestyle. Though the attraction to irony faded long ago, its impetus did not; namely, the fact that hipsters find earnestness unattractive. Countless times I have heard hipsters use the word as an insult or a value judgment. (“I respect Conor Oberst, but Christ, he has got to be the most earnest guy alive.”) Earnestness is after all a kind of emotional legibility, a straightforward and unadulterated display of one’s inner workings. It is also an incredibly vulnerable and scary state of being, particularly to one whose chief stance in life is defensive.

Perhaps this explains why hipsters are so drawn to illegible fictions, obscure texts. Specifically, why they seem to flock around those great name-droppers of the modern canon—Borges, Rushdie, Murakami, Kundera, Coetzee, Sebald, and, most recently, Bolaño. This name-dropping (which permeates hipsters’ conversations, their music critiques, their blogs) is symptomatic of a curious and perhaps detrimental attraction to the unknown and the exotic, and aversion to the known. A page studded with names that one only vaguely recognizes, obscure poets and philosophers and painters, is illegible but attractive, like a page of Sanskrit script; the known and great, on the other hand, appear stale in comparison, shrug-inducing, the way we react upon seeing Monet’s water lilies or watching the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Hipsters are both incredibly competitive and monumentally insecure; theirs is a restless reordering of the pyramid of genius, and a continual reevaluation of where they fit into that architecture. Everyone below is a douchebag, especially if they have happened upon any success; everyone above is a genius, except if they are tarnished by the stigma of being a genius that everyone has read. The legible geniuses all fall beneath these

conquerors, this withering gaze of the literate hipster. Joyce remains a genius, because he is very hard to read. Pynchon, Faulkner, Beckett, to some degree Wallace—geniuses, all. Hemingway, in contrast, is a douchebag, as is Vonnegut and Salinger and London and Twain and yes, Eggers. Anyone whose prose is plainspoken and earnest and unadorned suffers, for the basic crime of not talking over our heads, and not exasperating (or, they might argue, *elevating*) us in the process.



The question of legibility, or rather the phrasing of the douchebag question in those terms, is quite attractive, not just because it fits quite nicely into this essay, but moreover because it can serve as a useful key for cracking the cipher of just exactly why douchebags act the way they do.

The douchebag, above all else, seeks a kind of internal legibility, or in simpler terms, *normalcy*. (And make no mistake, legibility is a kind of textual normalcy; without the normative rules of grammar and spelling, without common idioms and known conceits, without overarching institutions like the OED or the *Académie Française* to regulate and cement the structures of language, written discourse would very quickly vacillate towards illegibility, wobble towards nonsense, grow to resemble the work of children, or madmen.) If you listen to his judgments of others, the douchebag reveals that, above all else, he strives just to be normal, to not be “weird”; in fact, to not be labeled at all. Who strives for something so mundane? In a culture where normalcy is as quicksilver and fleeting as ours, where trends seem to shift at an ever-increasing rate, and norms are demolished and reconstructed yearly—in a culture such as this, achieving a state of normalcy can be a kind of triumph, like remaining atop a spinning log amidst whitewater whirls. The hipster, meanwhile, deftly throws pebbles at the douchebag

from atop his own spinning log, slipperier still, while smoking a cigarette and smirking at the douche's pathetic effort.

So where the hipster veers away from the mainstream, the douchebag veers toward it; that is just his way. He yearns more than anything for a stable, non-shifting center, where he can comfortably reside without receiving derision or ridicule. When he succeeds in this task, he is free of stigma, not invisible so much as omnipresent. For that moment he is structurally centralized, an every-widening nucleus, invisible to himself but projected everywhere he looks. He *fits in*. And yet the center shifts, inevitably it shifts, and with it shifts popular taste. The douchebag shifts with it, but glacially, he is too slow, too rigid. Against his best instincts, he goes out and buys a pink polo shirt, because that's where the mainstream has shifted (as he has divined from television and movies, pop stars in music videos, models on billboards for Ralph Lauren). And, to his amazement, for a short while his pink shirt receives newfound attention from the opposite sex. For that brief moment, he is again well dressed, well adjusted, normal; a figurehead on the bow of the mainstream. But that moment passes, and soon he finds himself being called a douchebag once again.

In order to not be labeled, one must now trade in his jeans for new, skinnier jeans, his hats for new, more eccentric hats. But because of the rapid rate at which hipsters adapt and reinvent themselves, these too he will have to change in less than a year's time, lest he again be called a douchebag. There is no semblance of a stable mainstream. The douchebag, only wanting stable ground upon which to stand, must leap from style to style, playing a game he never wished to play in order to attain a normalcy that never seems to come. The hipster, not wanting the mainstream to catch onto his style, keeps changing, and dragging the mainstream behind at a quickening clip. The cycle is vicious: the douchebag will always be called a douchebag; the hipster, always a hipster.

The famous douchebag arrogance comes with the false assumption that normalcy has been achieved. The douchebag who considers himself “relatively normal” thinks he is speaking from a centralized location, a place of authority. To the outside observer, however, he simply looks mediocre and smug. Although that mediocrity is sometimes genuine and innate, as natural as having a funny nose or crooked teeth, oftentimes it is an act of almost gracious restraint, a self-humbling, a dumbing-down of one’s persona in order to not appear arrogant or pretentious. I should know, I did this for years. The problem is that this act of humbling rarely coincides with actual humility.

And indeed, why should the douchebag be humble? He is at the center and apex of all things. The average American douchebag is a model citizen of our society: masculine, unaffected, well-rounded, concerned with his physical health, moral (but not puritanical or prude), virile without being sleazy, funny without being clever or snide; he is at all times a faithful consumer, an eager participant and a contributor to society. He buys what the mainstream tells him to buy; he listens skeptically to the

‘The Jonas Brothers have already started wearing keffiyehs.’

current hits and reverently to the hits of the past. In all respects he is the Hegelian synthesis of the sixties culture

war: taking a hit off his bong during the timeouts in the Packers game, he keeps his eyes on a flashing advertisement for the Marines. If he is high (or poor) enough, who knows, he might just enlist. He is everything he has been taught to be; he does everything society asks of him. And for all of this effort, he assumes that he will be granted a slight, unspoken modicum of respect and admiration.

This respect—respect predicated upon normalcy rather than superiority—is exactly what the hipster withholds.

What's worse, the mainstream seems to become more elusive each year. Already, we can see social norms drifting towards those of the hipster. Just as the stain of twee, glum nerdiness, which spilled over from the emo movement, is slowly leeching out of the hipster aesthetic and being replaced by a hardier, woodsier tone, so too is the spirit of the frat boy fading from the mainstream, and in its place appears the douche in the skinny jeans.

Undoubtedly, decades or years or perhaps even mere months from now, these mentions of specific fashions will look painfully outdated, as frivolous as the 19th century concern over the trend towards increasingly outlandish collars, or a conservative bemoaning JFK's scandalous decision to forego a hat when stepping out of the oval office. But the unspoken philosophical underpinnings behind the fashion shifts will remain relevant and worth discussing. The problem with this fashion shift is that hipsterism was never designed to be a mainstream movement; in fact quite the opposite, it is functionally incompatible with the mainstream and structurally dependent upon that incompatibility. Its integration into the mainstream would, in all likelihood, result in a kind of cultural schizophrenia. Without a postmodern philosophical backing and resistance to capitalism, hipsterism quickly devolves into just what it always appeared to be to the uninitiated: a shallow, meaningless, vain, hyper-consumerist, self-hating and poisonous system of living.

The most obvious flaw of the hipster posture has always been a peculiar and nagging sense of inauthenticity, a self-consciousness and insecurity, which draws them like moths to the seemingly solid and unpretentious aesthetics of the blue-collar and urban poor. When the hipster aesthetic infiltrates the mainstream, this duplicity becomes refracted and magnified. For a visual explanation, a ghost of douchebags future as it were, turn on MTV's *The Real World: Brooklyn*, get real close to your television, and stare into the blank visage of Chet, the

Mormon virgin, the aspiring video jockey, he of the Buddy Holly glasses and faux-hawk and v-neck t-shirt. Look into those blank, blinking, wide-set eyes and behold the conflict and inconsistency that lies therein, and you will see where we are headed in the years to come.



The Chasm exists because our culture is in a state of flux. We are in the process of reevaluating our norms, and as soon as this process is complete, the Chasm will close again and our judgments of other people will firm up. It is not necessarily a bad thing that the same person will appear to be a hipster to one person, a douchebag to another, and something else entirely to himself. It merely means that our definition of “normalcy” is momentarily in question. Like hermit crabs, we are in the process of sloughing off one aesthetic and adopting another. In this case, the mainstream is picking up the style that the hipsters are leaving behind. I imagine a similar thing must have happened in the mid-1970s, when the symbols of the hippies (the shaggy hair and mustaches) began bleeding over into mainstream culture, or in the mid 1990s when the mainstream swallowed the Seattle grunge movement. The inaccuracy of labels at these points of transition highlights how very superficial and unimportant they ultimately are. And yet we still must live in a world where these labels are the basis of snap judgments, and those judgments the preliminary basis of friendship.

At this point in an essay, the Greifian move (which is to say the sincere, neo-intellectual move) would be to give some pithy, modest proposal that could conceivably remove us from this mainstream thrust towards superficiality and historical derivativeness, since I fear that they will lead to those other hallmarks of hipsterism—namely, quasi-nihilism and a creeping feeling of inauthenticity. And so I give this humble plea to those

of my generation: craft a new kind of mainstream, which is a reaction to rather than an imitation of the hipster aesthetic.

But somehow this does not seem likely to happen. The wheels are already in motion, the Jonas Brothers have already started wearing *keffiyehs*, and more and more the people on my television resemble the people I thought were hipsters six months or a year ago. Douchebags have never been good at cultural rebellion anyway, and there is no reason to think they will start now.

Perhaps the only solution, then, lies in appealing to the other side. If the hipsters could craft a style that was truly impervious to the co-opting influence of the mainstream, then the well would run dry as it were, and the mainstream would be forced to redefine itself on its own terms. One possible way to achieve this solution has already been suggested, which is to opt for a movement based upon purely personalized expressions of style. The DIY (do-it-yourself) movement is already picking up steam in many parts of the States. Its incarnations are wide-ranging, from DIY fashion websites and one-of-a-kind jewelry to ultra small-scale farming (less pretentiously known as “gardening”) and the newly formed Church of Craft. A movement composed purely of individual styles (with their only defining characteristic being the mode of production), would be equally as resistant to the commodifying effects of capitalism as the hipster’s current bricolage style, and it would be even harder to replicate for economic gain. However, the shift to a purely DIY aesthetic would take an enormous investment of personal time and possibly money, and moreover, it just might not look that good. There’s a reason we allow specialists to manufacture our clothes, because they have devoted their lives to the study of design. That’s what the division of labor is all about: it frees us to live our lives while maximizing the quality of our purchased goods.

The only other option then—and I propose this purely for the good of the hipster, to save them from their feelings of cultural persecution—is a willful laying down of arms. If hipsters truly wish to live a life free of the debasing influence of the mainstream and its pathetic approximations of their meticulously curated style and interests, maybe they will need to try a new tactic: to pick one style and stick with it, to opt for classic timelessness over a kind of protean freshness, and to, in essence, grow stale. (One might also say, *grow up*.) Just like the hippies and proto-hipsters before them, the hipsters must allow themselves to be swallowed by the mainstream, to stand up in its full light and be passed through its machinations and emerge on the other side, naked and legible to the world, open to ridicule but free from self-consciousness—to in effect, become douche bags. Christ-like, they must sacrifice of themselves so that the rest might find some cultural redemption, and they might find some lasting peace. Indeed, with their beards and long hair and wasted, sunken physiques, many of them already look the part. Now all they must do is raise their arms, hang their heads, and wait for the spear that will set them free.

But then again, this would spell death for the hipster movement as we know it. In fact, one might argue that this whole essay has been a trap, baited with promised enlightenment, camouflaged in academic jargon, poisoned with injurious advice. Or, even more precisely, maybe it is a snapshot of that which demands fervently not to be photographed—like the pygmy deep in the jungle suddenly brought to light, given universal visibility in a flash but robbed of its soul.

Revenge of the douchebags, indeed.