

Reflections on Hipsterism (1957)

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Les folios

En passant la souris sur une vignette, le titre de l'image apparaît.

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Paris, September 4, 1957

Editorial

Once upon a time there was a myth named le prolétariat. Though obviously socialists baby true to the scriptures, baby being long overdue, the non-reeling cheated, never allowing that they may have misread the Book, they eluded flock, they started to shop around for a better, less sterile myth. Great schisms followed, yet few of the flock turned cynical. Quite the contrary. Prompted by their thirst for eternal values, many made dangerous rediscoveries, amazingly new and refreshing reasons to live awaited the bold myth hunters: Liberalism, Democracy, Free World, Peace, Dispute-All-Experiments, etc., and - honor to whom honor is due - the long neglected bastard-brother of le prolétariat: marijuana soaked hip.

That hip found in Herman Miller its most outstanding and original theologian (I don't say apologist), seems quite alive in the light of his essay. He may be correct in stating that hip and psychopathology follow two narrow parallel paths, but he has still to persuade this reader that the American Negro behavior and his white imitator embody a special brand of the human species. Starting with the fact that the Negro's status within the American community is a marginal one, Miller is not content to allow him his particular or characteristic psychological bent, he bestows upon him a Messianic mission. He seems to forget that the American hipster has his counterparts and equivalents in countries with no Negro population: Sweden, England, Russia, Poland, France, to name only a few places. The Swedish youth runs properly amok. The British Teddy, the Russian besprizornyy, the Polish hoodlums, the French pseudo-existentialist fauns, don't behave differently toward life than the hipster. All are the product of an identical social phenomenon prevailing in highly industrialized and more or less paternalistically ruled countries: extreme inner insecurity dipped in a state-sponsored "wallfare" at the price of a terrific loss in the individual's self. That's one reason why, as a rule, they react on the level of a purely personal idea of "recovery" - but from what and toward what none of them really knows. When Miller says of the hipster that he has "converted his unconscious experience into such conscious knowledge", he may speak of the hipster's knowledge in a very narrow practical way, like for instance knowledge to momentarily survive in a black alley, but he is mistaken if he takes it for more than it is: an instinctive and empirical know-how. The remarkable thing about hipsters of all kind and variety (and they vary indeed in many aspects) is that, except for one or two in a generation, there are as a body they are sooner or later swallowed up by the most confining routine ever. Hip is but another name for lunacy, and lunacy makes excellent conformists and the best or potential lunacy for "savior's" sake. Even before they fall into the dream of rape and murder in idiotic alleys, viciously, with a hand from the tabloids and other such literature. Yet if a handful among the tens of thousands, as Miller numbers them, do go through rape and murder, it is mostly by accident, by a tragic mistake, almost never by deliberate clear choice, and then only once, for they are subdued as soon as they have ripped up their pants. One other reason why lunacy of all kind are but a myth in terms of social action, except possibly a small lunacy made proper with the implicit or explicit blessing of state and municipality, is that they do not form any coherent social body. Negro shop-

keepers and white sheepkeepers, should their sheep be endangered, would forfeit all color lines and slaughter hand in hand Negro and white lumps. There is more real solidarity (class solidarity) between white and Negro "law abiding citizens" than between people of "Caucasian" or "African" complexion.

Moreover, there is hardly a hipster alive who doesn't long to conform (like his extreme representative, the psychopath, he is always a case of a frustrated conformist), and there is hardly a conformist alive, white or Negro, who doesn't long to rage and murder (like his extreme representative, the nihilist, he is always a case of a frustrated rebel). The difference is that the conformist (all exceptions granted), that the lumpen almost always becomes a conformist relationship in modern society's property relationships. In turn, the difference is due to the only way to become a lumpen means to give up his actual or virtual property, which he cannot do by free choice, for the lumpen to become a conformist means to acquire property, which he always wills by free choice — however strong his overt desire, the rebel who outgrew the romantic stage of his rebellion, who knows himself to be a grown up rebel — which is quite different from being a "radical", he moves about within the bonds of social and cultural institutions whose weight he cannot shake off in his private way, but who keeps within his conformity a lucid mind and a clear heart as to what conforming and what rebellion mean in terms not of his subjective immediate I, but in terms of man as such, of man as a social creature. To make an image, the lumpen yells sh... to the cop on the street-corner and feels purged, the conformist lifts his top to the same cop and feels censured in his pants, the grown up rebel ignores the cop (though he may summon his help in an emergency) and applies his energy to fell the tree that breeds cops, conformists and lumps.

The amusing thing is that one can read into Miller's essay precisely the proposition that the hipster is nothing but a conformist in reverse. "If", says Hip in Miller's words, "if the fate of 20th century man is to live with death... why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, etc." Now if man's fate is to live with death, how does the hipster manage to divorce himself from society since he does accept "the terms of death"? If the terms are death, and if he accepts the terms — may, if he so to speak actualizes the terms generally prevailing for his private use, why he conforms also and obeys, he is at the avant-garde of conformity. "Death you want?" says Hip to society. "Good, death there'll be!" And there he goes, the small entrepreneur in death competing with industrial death. One Mr. Verdoux once made a superb parody of our death-bent hipster. But no. Hip, says Miller truly, Hip wants love, wants peace in a nice bishimoto with a white apron around his girl's waist, all the "systolic", all the "diastolic" conception of existence! Miller so generously bestows upon Hip, as far as I am concerned, a gorgeous flower of Miller's romantic idealism.

Jean Malquais

*Miller is much on
the white Negro & hipster*