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

Editor:

Once upon a time there was a myth named le prolétariat. Though obviously a male, the myth was believed to be pregnant with child — a well conferred socialistic baby true to the Scriptures. Baby being long overdue, the congregation of the faithful first became skeptical, then frankly disgusted. Feeling cheated, never allowing that they may have misread the Book, they repudiated le prolétariat, sued for divorce, and being an idealistically inclined 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 inroads into heretofore unchartered lands. There, like in a secret Eden happily rediscovered, amazingly new and refreshing reasons to live awaited the bold myth hunters: Liberalism, Democracy, Free World, Peace, Stop-the-H-Experiments, etc., and - humor to whom honor is due - the long neglected bastard-brother of le prolétariat: marijuana soaked Hip.

That Hip found in Norman Mailer its most outstanding and original theologist (I don't say apologist), seems quite clear 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, Mailer 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 populations: Sweden, England, Russia, Poland, France, to name only a few places. The Swedish youth runs properly amok. The British Teddy, the Russian beepritcorgd, the Polish hooligans, the French pseudo-existentialist female, 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 'welfare' 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 Mailer 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 a case or two in a generation, as a body they are sooner or later swallowed up by the most conforming routine ever. Hip is but another name for lumpen, and lumpen make excellent conformists and the best of potential lumpen for 'easier's' sake. Even before they fall into rank and file, rather than raping and murdering they blather of rape and murder: they dream of rape and murder in idiotic clichés, vicariously, with a hand from the tabloids and other such literature. Yet if a handful among the tens of thousands, as Mailer 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 swallowed as soon as they have ripped up their pants. One other reason why lumpen of all kind are but a myth in terms of social action, except possibly a small lumpen made progress with the implicit or explicit blessing of State and municipality, is that they do not form any coherent social body. Negro shop-

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keepers and White shopkeepers, should their shops be endangered, would further all color lines and slaughter hand in hand Negro and White hoodlums. There is more real solidarity (class solidarity) between White and Negro "law abiding citizens" than between people of "Damnation" 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 rape and murder (like his extreme representative, the pulpit moralist, he is always a case of a frustrated rebel). The difference is that the conformist (all conceptions granted). In turn, the difference is due to the only real relationship in modern society: property relationship. For the conformist to become a lumpen means 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 denial. (As a matter of fact, lumpen is a way of making a living). On the other hand, 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", for after all a McCarthy too was a "radical" - knows also that he conforms, that 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 cap to the same cop and feels reassured 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 treads nops, conformists and lumpen.

The amazing thing is that one can read into Mailer's essay precisely the proposition that the hipster is nothing but a conformist in reverse. "If", says Hip in Mailer'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 diverse oneself from society, etc." But if man's fate is to live with death, how does the hipster manage to diverse himself from society since he does accept "the terms of death"? If the terms are death, and if he accepts the terms — nay, if he so to speak naturalizes the terms generally prevailing for his private use, why he conforms nice and clean, 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 Mailer truly, Hip wants love, wants peace in a nice kitchenette with a white apron around his girl's waist. All the "mysticism", all the "dialectical conception of existence" Mailer so generously bestows upon Hip is, as far as I am concerned, a gorgeous flower of Mailer's romantic idealism.

Jean Malaquais

Fichier en anglais sur
"The White Negro" de Mailer