

Is Youth Culture Dead?

Youth Culture, the counter culture, is and always has been paradoxically linked to a wider popular culture, because while youth culture appears to distance itself from the mainstream it feeds off a sub-strand of the popular, claiming it and modifying it. Pop culture, in turn, absorbs a diluted version of this modification and makes it more palatable for mass consumption.

In the movie *The Wild One* (1953) Johnny (Marlon Brando) is asked “What are you protesting?” to which he sneers: “What have you got?” thus summing up youth culture from its post world war II birth to its slow just-won’t-die comatose body today. But whereas in the fifties, sixties and seventies the youth had something to say, today’s youth have either lost its voice or can’t find anything to protest.

There may be a number of factors at work here:

In the fifties the word ‘youth’ would have described a teenager it has now grown to mean pre-teens, with their increased spending power dubbed Tweenagers, and the mid to late twenty-somethings. Ironically, marketing has been able to cater for both extremes by making the same things desirable: mobile phones, computer games, branded labels. ‘Youth’ has been extended and compressed at the same time. (www.researchandmarkets.com Nov 2006)

The generation gap has shrunk. It’s been thirty years since the Sex Pistols’ *Anarchy in the UK* reached no. 36 in the UK pop charts (26 Nov 1976). The song is still played on mainstream pop stations but it’s no longer seen as anarchic. The song, like the group, has become acceptable. However, *twenty* years prior to the Sex Pistols the likes of Pat Boone, Jimmy Young and Doris Day were gracing the UK Top Forty and they would never have been played on BBC Radio 1 in 1976. So while songs of a generation ago are now readily given air time the songs of the preceding generation is not.

The gap between the Baby Boomer generation and their parents is much wider than between them and their children. They are also less authoritarian than their parents.

A study was undertaken to compare attitudinal differences between generations of people of the same age at different periods.

“--misanthropy is the only category that showed a widening of the generation gap across all three periods-- which begins by looking at the early 1970s when the expression ‘generation gap’ first gained wide usage.

“The distrustful generation also is a disconnected generation. Compared with previous generations of young people, as well as contemporary older people, today’s young people are less involved in their communities. “They are less likely to read a newspaper, attend church, belong to a religion or a union, vote-- or identify with a political party than previous generations-- Moreover, on all these measures, the generation gap increased from 1985 to 1997.”
(<http://chronicle.uchicago.edu> Nov 2006)

Maybe the counter culture is failing to generate any momentum because the current culture itself is as insipid as it is overwhelmingly inclusive. What is the mainstream now? More and more reality television that claims to feature ‘people like us’, pop stars put together by a voting public (at 75p per minute), the cult of fame where anyone can become a celebrity. The mainstream doesn’t even pretend to be culture, let alone *high* culture.

The twenty-somethings are too burnt out from work or depressed at their financial hardship, trying to either get on the property ladder or pay off the student loan. Rather than protesting they’ve decided to end it all (a 400% increase in student suicide in recent years) or to forget it all and party. Looking back into their recent past being one of the new fads such as *School Disco*,

“...currently Britain's most successful club night where clubbers dance to cheesy pop, in school ties, shorts for the boys and short skirts for the girls.”
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk>)

There hasn’t been enough of a breakthrough recently in popular culture to inspire a counter culture.

Nothing comes from nothing, but there have been times where artists have managed to create something that seems brand new. The Beatles shifted gears on *Tomorrow Never Knows*, the last track on their 1966 *Revolver* album. Back masking and other studio effects gave them a new unique sound that put them in the forefront of musical innovation and experimentation rather than just a rock 'n' roll band.

Equally other pop musicians Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Roxy Music, Kraftwerk, The Human League all brought something new and original to music — a sense that you hadn't heard anything like it before you heard them.

The mid-nineties Brit Pop explosion seemed to herald the beginning of something fresh and new. These fresh, cool, trendy new bands had something to say. Unfortunately, according to Noel Gallagher, Jarvis Cocker (Pulp), Brett Anderson (Suede) and Damon Albarn (Blur), “supposedly well educated pop stars were being very ironic about being in the charts.” (**Front Row**, Nov 2006) On closer inspection it was all very similar, if not to the late seventies post-punk era of The Police, the Specials and Talking Heads then to the mid-sixties Beatles and Stones.

Popular music and fashion has become derivative or bland or both and any possibility that some form of revolution is beginning is quickly scuttled with an all singing all dancing media marketing campaign. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised. Music is after all a business. Strangely, the ones we would expect to be at the forefront of these cultural revolutions are in it for the cash. Noel Gallagher, leader of Oasis admitted that fame is “everything I'm about. Being in the charts... that's what I joined a band for: the top ten and red carpets...” (**Front Row**, Nov 2006)

In conclusion, youth culture is dead and has been replaced by a youth mainstream. Maybe it's the fact that for the first time in history younger people are the minority percentage but it's everywhere: a cool pop star type Prime Minister; a leader of the opposition who raves about the Arctic Monkeys; parents clubbing with their kids; anyone can become famous, even without talent. Even counter culture icons The Who, The Stones or Morrissey are mainstream. What is the youth protesting? What have the mainstream got? Nothing apparently. (www.licc.org.uk Nov 2006)

Bibliography

<http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/3915>

28 Nov 2006

<http://www.chronicle.uchicago.edu/001102/generation-gap.shtml>

28 Nov 2006

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/2180552.stm>

28 Nov 2006

Front Row, BBC Radio 4, 24 Nov 2006

<http://www.licc.org.uk/node/188?PHPSESSID=1b5daf13017273cfba3c085d42359850>

24 Nov 2006