

Introduction

SHOREDITCH, APRIL 2009

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking nineteen. My chin nuzzled into my breast in an effort to escape the breeze; I am stood by Christ Church Spitalfields waiting for my friend Leo Belicha, stylist extraordinaire and top party promoter.

We're going to a special exhibition by Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, an eminent fashion designer who shows his collections on the most prestigious catwalk: Paris Fashion Week. In this east London 'hood, however, he is known simply as JCDC. He was given this nickname by a faction of the local underground scene who were fascinated by his street art and cartoon-inspired fashion. JCDC found kindred spirits on the scene, and remains a staunch endorser of cutting-edge innovation, despite his status among the fashion elite.

Tonight, 2 April, is the opening night of JCDC's art exhibition ("Triumph of the Sign") staged in an east London warehouse, deliberately off the fashionable track (the aftershow party will be even further off-track, deep in the council-estate land of Dalston, an area on the brink of generating the interest of the cool hunters who follow the arty crowds). The event itself will be low key, but will draw all the significant people solely through word of mouth. The press too will be select, consisting of authentic scene journalists, or so it would appear. All this I am to discover later. Meanwhile, I wait for Leo.

Across the road from me is Spitalfields Market, which has become one of London's 'cool' tourist attractions following the old market's redevelopment in the mid-noughties. At one end is a street sign that reads: 'Tourist information...

[...]

How does the initiation (or revival) of a trend on a specific underground scene progress to becoming all the rage in the corporate boardroom? And why is it that only select scenes have the power to influence such decision-making processes? For my purposes, London's Shoreditch provides one of the richest ponds for cool fishing, so much so that it became a byword for the wave of hip that defined the noughties. I won't be chasing fads in this tale. I am interested in the processes that trigger transformation: from 'ghetto fabulous' to 'crafts chic' in the case of Timberland, though Timberland is just one among the early-adopter brands that shifted from 'ghetto' to 'crafts' to create a new story that influenced mainstream retail thinking. In turn, mainstream retail is just one industry among others that also adopted crafts thinking in their own ways. This book is not about cool hunting, though. It is about the big picture.

In order to talk about hip in the noughties, I shall begin my story at the turn of the 1990s, when other neighbourhoods were drawing in an earlier wave of underground communities that inspired their contemporary new entrepreneurs. Having found myself in the right place at the right time at three seminal moments in the history of popular culture, I'll take you on three journeys from the underground to the mainstream: the rock 'n' roll movement that brought communism down in the former Yugoslavia; the rise of MTV Europe from a five-person start-up into the greatest empire of 1990s cool; and the spectacular development of London's Shoreditch neighbourhood from a perilous urban dead zone to an ultra-fashionable area initiating global trends in the noughties. I'll use this as a backdrop to describe two decades of European history as seen through the lens of hip, since the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. By contrasting the 1990s and the noughties, I'll look at how the notion of hip has evolved cyclically to cause a paradigm shift in each decade.

This is the tale of how underground scenes and the maverick businesses that shared their ideals and aesthetic sensibilities together shaped the zeitgeist. My interest is in success stories: the businesses that made a quantum leap (and changed established professional mindsets) as well as the subcultures that inevitably sold out. By using the simple model of crossing over and selling out, I shall explore the trajectory of leading-edge subcultures from underground incubation into the mainstream and their impact on driving societal change (through their adoption by maverick businesses). I shall look at their role as a resource for innovation

in brand-led economies and as a positive force in shaping identity politics in an age where consumerism and citizenship have become blurred. (Here, new communication technologies act as catalysts.) Hip cultures are therefore a paradox: they are at the frontier of independent thinking and innovation but, as such, they are also the lifeblood of consumer societies.

As an alternative to the mainstream, hip ideologies have both commercial and social implications. Be prepared for a radical challenge to the marketing mantra that the youth market alone is an indicator of early trends. This book taps directly into a global web of what marketing professionals categorise as ‘the notoriously difficult-to-reach’ hipsters. Influential but invisible for the most part, they are the ones who opinion leaders listen to, the ones who dictate the trends that mainstream brands get their cool cues from, and the ones who initiate the fashions that mainstream consumers will eventually buy into. Could it be that for the first time in (marketing) history, we have a case of parents being cooler than the kids?

Brace yourself for a fresh critique of the ‘celebrity’ culture represented by *Big Brother* and driven by crass materialism. (Top marks to readers who spotted my homage to George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at the outset.) More than a mere dismissal, I shall concern myself with the way that vacuous ‘celebrity culture’ promoted by the likes of *Big Brother* has eroded merit-based values in favour of complacent ignorance in greed-led economic climates. This trend is even more pronounced in former communist countries where *Big Brother* is not just an entertainment format but also – I would argue – a new form of censorship. Could it be that Orwell’s totalitarian scenario is becoming a 21st-century reality?

Welcome to the world of the first to know. I hope you enjoy the ride.