COOLNESS

At the end of Godard's *Breathless*, Jean Paul Belmondo is trapped in a police dragnet and shot in the back as he runs down the street, staggering for nearly a block before falling face-first on the pavement, casually puffing a cigarette even as his knees buckle and his eyes begin to glaze over. In the face of death, he remains blasé and imperturbable, exhibiting an unearthly sangfroid that can also be seen in the surly punk in *Rebel Without a Cause* who, during a game of chicken, casually combs his hair, gazing admiringly at his image in the rearview mirror, while he slams the gas pedal to the floor and speeds towards the edge of the cliff. Similarly, the beautiful blonde in Paul Morrisey's *Mixed Blood* continues speaking after she is shot point-blank in the head, turning to her lover, as

she slumps in her chair, her hair matted with gore, and apologizing, with implausible presence of mind, "I must look like a mess."

The stylish unflappability of these martyred saints of coolness has a number of cultural antecedents: the brooding virility of the detectives in film noir and hard-boiled fiction, the studied hipness of beatniks and jazz musicians, and, perhaps most important, the repressed violence of proletarian youth, of home boys and gang-bangers whose phlegmatic, "don't-fuck-with-me" poutiness is more than just a colorful affectation, as insignificant as their Tommy Hilfiger parkas and Nike sweats. Their contemptuous disengagement serves a utilitarian function in an increasingly uncontrollable urban environment, where chaos breeds fantasies of exaggerated self-possession. Coolness is an aesthetic of the streets, a style of deportment specifically designed to alert potential predators that one is impregnable to assault, to prevent skirmishes with lurking thugs ready to waylay nervous cowards who let down their guard and betray their faint-heartedness while scurrying through bombed-out barrios. Far from reflecting confidence, coolness grows out of a sense of threat, of the strain of living in metropolitan war zones where our

equanimity is constantly being challenged, giving rise to a hyper-masculine folk religion that fetishizes poise and impassivity. Its often hilarious mannerisms, its swaggering gait and hostile stares, constitute a pragmatic form of aesthetic self-defense, a disguise that fends off aggression through a flamboyant charade of toughness and authority, a truculent insularity that provides psychological camouflage for the ghetto dweller, projecting fearlessness and tranquillity amidst danger.

As one pop culture pundit has so succinctly put it, "where the ghetto goes, the suburbs follow." Attracted by the menacing nonchalance of coolness, prosperous white youth have turned a form of behavior adapted for a very specific social milieu into an aesthetic plaything, mimicking gestures and facial expressions designed as deterrents to attack even in situations in which there is no threat, in which the glowering introversion of the mall rat seems entirely gratuitous, having been removed from its original context, where survival often depends on feigning an air of unruffled calm. The worship of the ghetto has even led the white rapper Vanilla Ice to invent for himself a spurious war record, complete with mendacious scars, the proud stigmata of the five knife fights that this self-styled gang

member asserts he only miraculously survived, an unsubstantiated claim that has since been refuted by the press, which has revealed that he grew up far from the fray, in a wealthy suburb. Suburban coolness, in short, is mean-street behavior without mean streets, the bedroom community in search of the ghetto, the inner city bused into the burbs for a party on a cul-de-sac, where it has become part of the imposture of privileged youth desperate to rid themselves of what they perceive as the taint of inauthenticity.

The chic of poverty is central to advertising directed at the youth market. The origins of coolness in the instability of the inner city can be seen in ads that confront us with a wall of scowling teenagers in dark shades, their arms folded threateningly over their chests, looking bored and volatile as they light their Lucky Strikes and thrust out at us huge, glowing sneakers made for "urban and suburban beat warriors." Photographs advertising bands, in particular, explicitly evoke images of delinquents from the projects, gangs of unemployed youth hanging out on street corners, often shot from below so that they tower above us, hurling insults, blocking our way, and daring us to pass. CD covers and clothing advertisements often have an underlying plot, that

of the ambush, a figurative re-creation of a physical confrontation on the streets, where we turn a corner only to find ourselves face to face with the skater-punk band Rancid sprawling against a chain-link fence twisted with barbed wire or with the heavy metal group ProPain standing before the dilapidated shell of an abandoned crack house covered with graffiti. The subtext of many cool ads is imminent attack, a message that takes the saber-rattling defensiveness of urban youth, an attitude with a clear, self-protective purpose, and reduces it to pure style, to a fashionable sulkiness useful in selling tracksuits and CDs.

Coolness offers the disaffected middle class an enticing fantasy, that of going downscale, of descending into abysmal yet liberating poverty, as in the film *Desperately Seeking Susan,* in which a bored housewife, the angst-ridden consort of a wealthy businessman, attempts to alleviate the psychological burden of affluence by modeling herself on the life-force figure of Madonna, a slatternly hedonist who robs her tricks, cadges off her friends, and dries her armpits under restroom hand dryers. And yet the class devolution involved in this odyssey of imaginary indigence presents an extremely stylized vision of destitution, one based, not on auster-

ity, but on conspicuous consumption, on the acquisition of enormous quantities of clothing and kitsch, from bell bottoms, mini-skirts, and go-go boots to snow globes, lava lamps, and ceramic Minnie Mouses. Long stretches of the ultra-cool film *Liquid Sky*, for example, consist of a systematic investigation of the way its demi-monde of urbane lowlife—narcoleptic junkies and homicidal androgynes—decorate their squalid hovels, which are crowded with self-parodying displays of thrift store refuse that attest to the characters' contempt for bourgeois tastefulness. In the cool caricature of bohemian life, Mother Hubbard's cupboards are rarely bare but are often crammed with bric-a-brac, with a strangely abundant kind of poverty whose over-accessorized copiousness exposes the fraud of coolness and its Dickensian cult of make-believe mendicancy, a game infused with an ineradicably middle-class sense of comfort. Just as the vision of history behind quaintness is based on a modern concept of abundance, giving rise to the characteristically cluttered look of quaint rooms, so the vision of poverty behind coolness presumes prosperity and the connoisseurship of an eccentric collector who has the leisure and wherewithal to amass tacky curios and far-out knickknacks.

While quaintness often disguises shopping as curating, coolness disguises it as scavenging, as prowling the streets for battered windfalls left at the side of the road, as in Andy Warhol's *Trash*, in which Holly Woodlawn and Joe D'Allesandro comb through garbage cans for salvageable pieces of furniture and chic items of vintage clothing. Shopping in funky boutiques is central to the myth of coolness, which strips consumption of its materialism by portraying it as the ingenious foraging of a new type of inner-city bottom feeder, an urban hunter and gatherer, a discriminating rag-picker who despises brand-new commodities and makes do with serendipitous finds that have no clear provenance, no price tag that identifies their place of origin. Coolness takes the traditional consumer cycle, the rapid decline of a recently purchased article of clothing or appliance from ultra-modern newness to obsolescence, and reverses it, making the waste product itself, not the brand-new acquisition, the valuable commodity, the piece of detritus the coveted fetish item. Even an advertisement for such an archetypal factory-made luxury as a Ford ZX2 capitalizes on the cachet of trash and the myth of the nattily dressed derelict scrounging for retro debris:

> Stacy just got a "hip" transplant. And I'm not talking about a medical procedure. See, she bought a new Ford ZX2 and her whole image changed. First she switched her major from Accounting to Graphic Design. Then, she started buying these "funky"' clothes from a second-hand store. Pretty big changes. But I guess we should have seen them coming. Because with a Ford ZX2, you're pretty much telling the world you've decided to excuse yourself from the predictable.

The worship of kitsch is so important to coolness because the hand-me-downs sold in trendy junk shops have been liberated from the stigma of consumerism and the tyranny of the brand-new, thus elevating shopping into an activity of a higher magnitude, that of exhuming priceless artifacts from the bottom of the bargain barrel. Kitsch, in short, is to the hipster what quaintness is to the homeowner: a way of sanitizing consumerism, of endowing it with moral and aesthetic respectability.

While coolness toys with the fiction of grinding poverty, evoking the romance of the scruffy, middle-class pack rat, the creative recycler of orphaned objects, its masquerade of destitution involves an act of

bad faith in that it also fetishizes all of the appurtenances of high technology, the twenty-first-century gizmos that its would-be ragamuffins are constantly pulling out of their backpacks: their cell phones, Motorola pagers, and Pioneer Compact Disc Players. The company Target claims to specialize in "cool" merchandise, offering everything you need to "transform your abode into a den of chill repute"—PlayStations, joy sticks, boom boxes, and stereo systems—electronic status symbols for the hip young consumer who is "technologically aggressive and style-progressive, an information addict and an inspector of gadgets." Despite its pretenses of insolvency, coolness revolves around the worship of big-ticket items, the very mechanisms that make the status quo possible. This apparatus of power represents the most conventional aspects of our society but has nonetheless become integral to the distinctly futuristic image of the digital dropout, the cyberspace rebel whose coolness inheres in his graceful mastery of machines, his effortless ability to crack the codes of ATMs and hack into his high school's computer. Even in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a novel that is said to have "defined a generation," the suave virility of his bon vivants is bound up with the distinctly mas-

culine ease with which they operate large vehicles, as in the case of a parking lot attendant so skilled at his trade that:

> he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into a tight spot

Coolness offers a cartoonish portrait of a technological pastoral, a world we have mastered with our bravura skills as crackshot engineers. For this reason, coolness plays a key role in staffing the firms of Silicon Valley, which revel in a quixotic mystique, promoting the enticing stereotype of the software designer as a wizard who magically designs complex inventions inaccessible to the technologically illiterate.

Such novels as *On the Road,* as well as the films of the French Nouvelle Vague, draw upon another related aspect of coolness: cool tourism, its obsession with aimless travel, with the picaresque journeys of rambling vagabonds constantly on the move, goaded on, not by curiosity, but by their own internal demons. Directionless spiritual odysseys are basic to the narrative of cool

art and advertisements, which celebrate the freedom of the open highway, of a life without responsibilities, the unambitious insouciance of the corporate hobo, as in Sony's ad for its new Discman player, which advises the viewer to "buckle your seatbelts, hit the gas, put in some tunes and don't look back. . . . [Y]ou can rock & roll down that highway called life and never miss a beat. . . . Ahhh, the open road, the wind in your hair, your favorite CDs." These myths of existential tourism, of the wanderlust of rambling itinerants who have rejected the tedium of a settled domestic life for the nomadic existence of a motorized gypsy, have proven especially important for the automobile industry, whose advertisements play upon one of the central fantasies of coolness: of dropping everything, turning one's back on the little cottage with the white picket fence, and speeding away in one's car. Companies such as Ford, Jeep, and Chevrolet describe their evocatively named Mustangs, Wranglers, Renegades, and Rovers as getaway vehicles that enable the staid middle class, the prisoners of monotonous jobs and demanding families, to break loose and roar off into the sunset, leaving in their wake the acrid scent of burned rubber. When Harley-Davidson tells us that "all we know for sure is,

the road is infinite," they have turned gas guzzling into a Zen-like meditative state, promoting mindless locomotion as a sedative for bourgeois restlessness and dissatisfaction.

The basic credo of coolness is nihilism, the apocalyptic and somewhat theatrical belief that the American Dream has failed, that success is a trap, that, as one popular hip T-shirt puts it, "life sucks and then you die," a philosophy of affected gloom that suggests that all that matters is the present: getting high, hanging out, indulging the senses, ignoring the rat race. As the Goth rock musician Marilyn Manson has said, "I was a nihilist and now today I'm just too fucking bored." This pretense of anesthetized cynicism inevitably leads to its opposite, to frenzied epicureanism, a carpe diem tendency to equate meaning with pleasure, with the instantaneous gratification of desire. While cool nihilism would seem to represent a wholesale rejection of the materialism of consumer society and its spiritual bankruptcy, in fact it is the ultimate consumerist worldview in that its decimating negativity encourages conspicuous consumption and impulse buying, a permission to purchase stimulated by its transparently literary despair. Nihilism becomes a rationale for consumption,

the bitter hatred of the corporate world a license to pamper oneself with its luxuries. The anti-materialism of coolness is thus conveniently expressed in highly materialistic ways.

But hipness is more than just a futile attempt on the part of unglamorous Caucasians to rationalize their extravagance and refashion themselves in the image of brutish proletarians, the "white Negroes" (or, in contemporary Ebonic parlance, the "wiggers") celebrated by Norman Mailer in his seminal 1959 article, in which he stated that, in coolness's "wedding of the white and the black, it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry." Like the anti-cute, coolness represents a denial of innocence on the part of youth culture, which has begun a full-fledged campaign to accelerate the process of aging in a world in which the demeaning infantilism of childhood has been prolonged well beyond its developmental limits in adolescence. Far from being the threshold of adulthood, puberty still remains mired in the trappings of the nursery, in a sexless limbo in which individuals who have reached physical maturity are nonetheless held captive in their cribs, their sexual impulses kept carefully in check, policed by censorious guardians intent on turning back the hands of their bio-

logical clocks. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the romantic cult of the child resulted in the forcible infantilization of children by over-protective parents, who clung to seraphic visions of their offspring's innocence even as the social conditions in which they were raised were changing dramatically and adolescents spent less and less time jealously sheltered in the bosom of once-insular families, forced instead to fend for themselves on the playgrounds of public schools and in such social organizations as the Boy Scouts and Little League. Coolness represents the final collapse of the romantic movement's adoration of the child, the demise of the religion of innocence, the destruction of sacred tenets of artlessness and chastity hastened by the impatience of sexually informed teenagers fed up with their chimerical status as angelic eunuchs.

The adolescent's rebellion against centuries of child worship takes one of its most violent forms in its extreme humorlessness and its emphatic rejection of the smile, of "niceness," of the amiability of the service economy, which has been supplanted by a sepulchral air of gravity. The typical cool facial expression is not an actual expression so much as a categorical refusal to betray even a hint of a smile, of a desire to please, and

the substitution of a mask of characterless nullity, as in the "gangsta" rapper Ice Cube's signature snarl or the unforthcoming rudeness of innumerable bands intent on showing that, far from being cherubs, they are actually ghouls, decades older than their years. The romantic movement's cult of the child has created a foul-mouthed enfant terrible who has turned the playground into a necropolis, where prematurely aged Byronic figures stagger from the merry-go-round to the seesaw to the jungle gym, striking poses of misery and ennui, convinced that their solemnity lends them an air of sophistication and maturity.

Although adolescents would like to believe that the aesthetic of coolness is entirely their own invention, in fact it stems directly from parental hysteria, from the anguished hyperboles of nail-biting moms and dads terrified that their children are drifting toward delinquency, swept up in the recreational drug use and reckless promiscuity of the "wrong crowd." Far from being a fresh and innovative expression of their own culture, coolness is an expression of another culture altogether. It simply brings parental fears to life, providing a grotesque embodiment of a distinctly middle-class projection of freakiness, of what lies beyond the pale of re-

spectable society, where grungy cokeheads with communicable diseases deflower nubile daughters, and the truant sons of upstanding citizens jeopardize their futures by scuffling with the law.

The origin of coolness in the squarest of all possible things, the nightmares of familial worrywarts pacing their living rooms well after curfew, is confirmed by the dependence of cool imagery on highly moralistic caricatures of the demonic and the sacrilegious. Inspired by their love of horror movies, members of the rock group Kiss, for example, assert their coolness by sticking out their bright red tongues dripping with drool and by slathering their faces with cadaverous grease paint, a style of B-grade monster makeup as gruesome as the trademark Bride-of-Frankenstein toilette of Marilyn Manson, who calls himself "Anti-Christ Superstar" and an "Ordained Minister of the Church of Satan." In its effort to scandalize credulous moms and dads, who wring their hands over bad report cards and phone calls from guidance counselors, coolness never succeeds in detaching itself from our society's traditional notions of evil but has created a Halloween aesthetic that conjures up images of abnormality, of an infantile diabolism, refracted through the paranoid parental imagination.

One of the showcases of coolness is the teenager's bedroom, the impenetrable lair of the disgruntled malcontent holed up, in all of his ornery, hormonal testiness, in a dark cave plastered with posters of Puff Daddy and Funk Master Flex. The cool bedroom is not a tasteful nursery painted cheerful colors and equipped with airplane mobiles and shelves of Furbies and Pooh Bears, but a raucous sound studio with speakers the size of refrigerators vibrating with the sounds of Metallica, Neurotica, and Nebula. Such "dens of chill repute" represent an architectural rejection of the whole premise of collectivity on which the nuclear family is based, a solipsistic retreat into the anti-social individuality from which the grouchy teenage crank launches his assault against the same spirit of togetherness that quaintness attempts to preserve. In the film *House Party*, for example, the camera enters the room of a black rapper and, with the alienated objectivity of an anthropologist examining aboriginal artifacts, begins to inspect what its occupant refers to as "my shit," from a stolen road sign stenciled with the suggestive warning "SLIPPERY WHEN WET" to the immense collage of *Penthouse* centerfolds covering the walls from floor to ceiling. Such anti-interior decoration offers an aesthetic affront to

the quiet, understated tastefulness of the rest of the house, whose conformity to traditional notions of elegance our sons and daughters satirize with their self-conscious indecorousness. Despite its seeming nihilism and amorality, coolness is an aesthetic with a mission, a tendentious style that ridicules the good taste of the suburban split-level, which it associates with the status quo, with the conventionality of parents who have wasted their entire lives scrimping and saving to acquire all the necessary accouterments of respectability. Coolness thumbs its nose at good taste on moral grounds, inciting a full-scale aesthetic riot, full of political implications. This stylistic mutiny demonstrates a surprising streak of righteous purism by denouncing Mom's immaculate French Provincial interiors as symptoms of her compliance with the rules of propriety.

One of the appeals of coolness to insecure adolescents is its cultivation of obstreperous ugliness, as in the case of the musician Rob Zombie who, with a hex mark carved deeply into his forehead, models himself on a decomposing corpse, wearing a grizzled, Whitmanesque beard and a tangled mane of frizzy grey locks, or Ozzy Osborne, whose face is framed by the greasy strands of his shoulder-length hair. Part of the success of coolness

among self-conscious teenagers stems from the fact that it is so physically forgiving and democratic, so inclusive, rejecting as it does the cookie-cutter aesthetic of "normal" people, of Barbie and Ken, of the voluptuous blond cheerleader and her lantern-jawed, all-American boyfriend. Cool people actively deride conventional notions of physical beauty, associating wholesome, rosy-cheeked good looks with conformity and devoting themselves instead to the cult of the grotesque, which forms a key part of their attack on respectability, on go-getting student council presidents and smugly virtuous teachers' pets, who are polite, presentable, and deferential to their elders. The transformation of the former supermodel Nico from a beauty queen into a scarecrow, a junkie with sinister boiled-egg eyes and rotten teeth, provides an allegory of coolness, which conflates loveliness and elegance with dullness and mediocrity. Nico's defacement of her own beauty to acquire the glamor of coolness shows how the aesthetic of ugliness, like the aesthetic of the teenager's bedroom, is extremely moralistic, based on an almost evangelical contempt for the body, a Gnostic, self-hating puritanism as fanatical as any fringe sect's insistence on the virtue of plainness, severity, and lack of ornament.

Despite the high-handed moralism of the aesthetic of coolness, which is at its most tendentious when it is at its most perverse, youth culture secretly subscribes to the middle-class ethics and sensibility it professes to abhor. One telling indication of the self-contradictory nature of coolness is that, while adolescents persist in believing that they are bad and sinister and unfit for respectable society, the coolest advertisements featuring the hippest kids giving us the dirtiest looks are often selling the cleanest things: pristine white Calvin Klein underpants, immaculate blue jeans, clean sneakers, and sporty colognes. The corporate vision of coolness is inextricably linked with fastidious grooming, with a well-scrubbed subculture whose members' pestilential taint has been eradicated with freshly laundered clothing, deodorant soaps, and a wide variety of shampoos, astringents, and perfumes. (The conventionality of coolness is also revealed in its obsession with such expressions as "strange," "weird," "bizarre," "gross," "wow," and "far-out," exclamations of dismay that reveal that hipness has a distressingly low threshold for the abnormal and that its apparent tolerance for eccentricity masks acute sensitivity to even the subtlest gradations of deviance.)

The hipster not only makes a pigsty of his bedroom and even, despite the prevalence of wholesome advertisements, of his own person, but also engages in noise pollution, in environmental terrorism, another way of defacing the body politic. Breaking the domestic sound barrier with the earsplitting din of car radios and boom boxes becomes a harmless way of disturbing the peace, of shattering the bourgeois tranquillity of bucolic neighborhoods, the ultimate anti-social assertion of the unfettered self. Panasonic even goes so far as to describe its stereo speakers as accessories in these acts of sedition, placing a screaming black teenager next to the words, "Blast it. Crank it. Blare it. Let everyone know you're there. . . . It's louder than your mother." Turning up the volume and blowing the roof off is a symbolic way of destroying property, of rattling windows without breaking them, a form of sonic vandalism that produces the effect of chaos and destruction but nevertheless leaves everything unscathed. Noise, like the affectation of nihilism, constitutes the perfect consumerist rebellion, a clean rebellion, an apolitical radicalism that reduces activism to aesthetics and carefully preserves the world it so blusteringly sets out to destroy.

The centrality of music to the subculture is also related to the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde aesthetic of coolness. No sooner does the record begin to play than the suave demeanor of the introverted hipster gives way to the rage of the savage beast who, far from being soothed by the proverbially civilizing effects of music, is violently stimulated by them, his composure collapsing on the dance floor into an epileptic flailing of arms and legs. The hero of the movie *Airheads* prides himself on his "quiet cool" until he and his band take to the stage, whereupon they swing their electric guitars like sledgehammers and, amidst showers of sparks, smash their equipment to pieces, all the while screeching the words "degenerate, degenerate," the lyrics of their new hit song. The Janus-faced dichotomy between the primal rock-and-roller and his preternaturally serene daily self reflects the wholesale co-optation of youth culture by the record industry, which has supplied an entire generation with a new opium of the people, with pop music, a type of commercial communication that has supplanted all other forms of social intercourse, such as conversation. The glum taciturnity of coolness represents the tongue-tied silence of a culture that has been rendered mute by its favorite pastime, listening to

records and CDs, stricken dumb by the cacophony of superstars whose angry laments prevent conversation, rendering the very need for it superfluous.

The rock band and the inner-city street gang are two of the major inspirations for the look of coolness, which serves a specific sociological function for tightly-knit groups whose very survival depends on their ability to create for the public a unified aesthetic identity. Members of gangs in particular use a complex set of visual symbols to express their allegiance to one another (often sealed through sadistic rites of initiation), from mismatched shoelaces and the position of the belt buckle in relation to the fly to plastic bracelets in coded colors and the menacing hieroglyphs of graffiti that delineate their turf, their sphere of influence. Bands engage in a similar sort of aesthetic demarcation that sets them apart from their competition and creates an instantly recognizable market identity, as can be seen in Korn's matted dreadlocks, Marilyn Manson's gruesomely asymmetrical eyes (cleverly created with color contact lenses), or Kiss's infamous clown makeup, complete with Cowardly Lion whiskers and painted Batman domino masks. Coolness is an aesthetic of trademarks, of the passwords and Masonic handshakes through

which card-carrying initiates gain entrance into the clubhouse. Just as affluent youths decontextualize the self-protective surliness of their inner-city peers, so they adopt, like designer labels, the identifying badges of exclusive fraternal societies who create solidarity by wearing black bandannas tied around their thighs or medallions featuring six-pointed stars flanked by flaming pitchforks, emblems that have a specific economic utility, either of mapping out the boundaries of a particular crime syndicate's drug empire or of raising a rock band's profile in a music scene crowded with rivals vying for the media's attention.

But whereas gangs and bands use the aesthetics of insignia to create clannishness on a local level, young people in general use trademarks to create allegiance on an international level, so desperate are they to overcome the barriers that divide them and share in the camaraderie of such groups as the Crips and the Bloods. Coolness has therefore proven to be an enormous boon for manufacturers. If companies like Nike and the Gap can get *their* insignia adopted as the symbol of the pack, *their* "swoosh" trademark, *their* signature leg stripes, *their* headbands decorated with *their* corporate names, they instantly acquire several million freelance

advertisers willing to pay for the privilege of spreading the faith and, simultaneously, of achieving visual solidarity by wearing the firm's logo. Clothing is now being explicitly designed, not just with inconspicuous designer labels sewn onto back pockets, but *as* designer labels, with the company's copyrighted art emblems playing an integral part in the garment's design, as in the case of Ralph Lauren's Chap sweatshirts, Benetton's T-shirts, or brands of underwear that feature elastic waistbands as wide as cummerbunds emblazoned with "Joe Boxer," "Yves St. Laurent," and now even "FTL" (Fruit of the Loom). Manufacturers have recognized that the urgent need to create a pack identity in youth culture can easily be used to consolidate corporate identity. In this synergistic relationship, companies provide the products that foster togetherness among the young and the young in turn line the coffers of the CEOs who invent the aesthetic markers that have become the patriotic symbols, the consumerist rallying cries, of teenagers the world over. In a fragmented society in which major institutions like the church and the community no longer play the same role of bringing people together, owning identical possessions becomes one of the chief ways in which we experience

community, overcoming our isolation through shared patterns of consumption, communing with each other by acquiring the same cars, Walkmans, and basketball sneakers.

The commercialization of youth culture and the rise, for the first time in history, of a monolithic teenage "look" in most Western countries have intensified the psychological instability of adolescence. The aesthetic divisions between the in-crowd and the out-crowd, so integral to the sociology of the schoolyard, have become even more oppressive as manufacturers begin to use peer pressure as a calculated marketing strategy, setting up shop right out on the basketball court and in the school cafeteria. The victory of the designer label over the playground has led to the ostracism of those who refuse to carry the most fashionable lunch pails or wear this season's de rigueur dungarees, which advertisers portray as keys to acceptance and popularity, ways of preserving peace of mind in a world in which social success requires the systematic elimination of differences with one's peers. It is this uniformity, however, that coolness cleverly disguises as its opposite, as nonconformity, as the rebellion of the nay-saying oddball, the fish out of water, who, even as he suppresses socially

unacceptable idiosyncrasies from his personality and reinvents himself in the image of the generic teenager, is magically transformed into an ardent iconoclast for whom shopping becomes nothing less than a subversive form of civil disobedience.