
“Lifestyle culture” is the broad, self-fashioned term that sits at the core of Hal Niedzviecki’s We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture. This concept is perhaps most neatly described as Niedzviecki’s attempt to shape a collective character to North American, post-Generation X, thirty somethings, born, like Niedzviecki, in 1971 or later. “Lifestyle culture” is the capacity to fabricate meaning from the self-referential circuit of signs in popular and consumer culture by taking elements from it and crafting something else. The “We want some too!” of Niedzviecki’s title is what he calls “lifestyle culture’s mantra” (p. 232). This is a culture in which, allegedly, “We are increasingly at odds with the mundane nature of everyday life, which we participate in but do not accept as ‘real’ for us. This is especially true for the newer generations, whose cup runneth over with the ‘useless’ knowledge of an entertainment universe we all want to be part of” (pp. 232-233).

Lifestyle culture’s “backbone” is Niedzviecki’s interpretation of “malaise” as a form of generational self-defence wherein the “campy, shrouded gloom of Goth” subcultures are, for him, the most flamboyant and theatrical example. Discontent to simply dismiss mass culture, as might Adorno or Neil Postman, neither will he simply assign malaise or irony as the outcome of a generation’s hypersaturation by media cultures. Niedzviecki earnestly writes: “Malaise represents our collective attempt to reach that pure state in which irony is not a sarcastic, disembodied wanderer but a physical presence, a comforting hug, the lingering warmth of Mom’s embrace” (p. 221). Along with a nostalgia for the lost Mother, Niedzviecki also expresses a desire for “The Real” (chapter 4, pp. 161-195), embellishing the narcissism of this cranky persona that figures so largely at the centre of the book.

Part rant, part manifesto, part loose ethnography of mass and alternative cultures, We Want Some Too is a journalistic weaving together of informal testimonies, quotations, descriptions, anecdotes, partial histories, illustrations, and facile dismissals of existing cultural theory. The book’s eight chapters cover a variety of loosely linked subjects. A rambling 60-page chapter 1 introduces some general facts about media and pop culture (such as “We watch an average of seven hours of television a day,” p. 59) and also introduces zines such as Heinous, devoted to the ’70s stuntman Evil Knievel, and King of the Fairies, dedicated to Cape Breton fiddler Ashley MacIsaac. Chapter 4 discusses “the real,” violence and (pre-Survivor) reality TV. Chapter 6 examines the role of work within lifestyle culture. Increasingly, the only connective tissue between these subjects, aside from the author’s sweeping notion of lifestyle culture, becomes the very performance and profusion of cultural examples themselves.

Niedzviecki casts a vast net onto art and alternative subcultures, including zines, pirate radio, visual art, photography, performance, and music, which he summons to show signs of critical and creative activity despite popular culture’s allegedly flattening effects. What emerges is a wilfully eclectic, frenetic journey across a mostly Canadian cultural landscape that includes vastly different samplings. These include: visual artist Germaine Koh’s found snapshots-cum-postcards, Sightings Postcards (1996); Toronto inventor Steve Mann’s wearable computers; and Merritt, B.C.’s first and only pirate radio station, Merritt Free Cast Radio, started by the DJ Bleek. Alongside these and many descriptions of artist and media works are scavengings from mass culture, ranging from Geraldo’s live broadcast liposuction treatment to discussions of Monica Lewinsky’s lipstick shade to the horrors of Reena Virk’s murder trial. Beavis and Butthead, The Simpsons, and reruns of Gilligan’s Island are among the many televisual points of reference sprinkled throughout. An equally haphazard grab bag of (dominantly male-authored) scholarly, philosophical, and theoret-
ical references to media and culture—from Adorno, Guy Debord, and the Situationists to McLuhan, Douglas Rushkoff, and Wittgenstein—hastens the dizzying effects of Niedzviecki’s cultural commentary, and offers a glimpse into the kind of cultural authority he is striving for.

Niedzviecki works hard to bewilder and surprise with his profusion of samplings from mass and alternative cultures. This might also be perfectly exemplary of what the book upholds: don’t try and make rational sense of this ensemble, because, like contemporary culture, there isn’t any, and that’s the point. Chapter 2: “Passive Resistance: The Myth of Underground Culture,” on the phenomena of culture jamming and other forms of creative protest, and Chapter 3: “Mutations: The New Language of Plunder,” on “plundering” and “plunderphonics” (a “superimposed pop mélange that connects a far-flung diaspora of creators and consumers” [p. 120]) come closest to encapsulating the style that Niedzviecki himself appears to be emulating in text form.

In the end, his chaotic, journalistic collage is an approach that is neither conceptually nor methodologically convincing. There is a lack of cohesion between the art and media samples that he brings together, which are left to free-float, and a lack of specificity between the different media, their histories, and their contexts of usage. The counter-strategies of zines, pirate radio, actions, and happenings, as well as their historical precedents, are well-documented terrain within accounts of alternative media. In this sense, We Want Some Too covers ground that related non-scholarly accounts such as Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America, by Adbusters founder and editor Kalle Lasn (1999), and Jamming the Media: A Citizen’s Guide: Reclaiming the Tools of Communication, by Gareth Branwyn (1997), do far more effectively, particularly in the enabling politics to which these latter books overtly commit themselves.

What does run consistently through We Want Some Too is the (often arrogant) centrality of Niedzviecki’s perspective, expanded into the presumptuous “we” of the generation for which he is purportedly speaking. Writing of malaise, he reveals the problematic presumptions and limits of his own subject-position, and excessively generalized statements.

After all, what do most of us have to be down about? We’re well fed, well educated, and generally pretty lucky. In contrast to those who, only a generation or two ago, suffered through the horrors of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and other inconceivable tragedies, it seems almost ridiculous to admit that we are, collectively, a society plagued by a profound, petty sense of despair. (p. 203)

Niedzviecki is at his weakest in his overt contempt of cultural theory and academics. Early in the book an unnamed Carleton Media Studies professor who condemns Beavis and Butthead on Niedzviecki’s radio show comes to represent everything wrong not only with academia, but with “the inability of the majority of those who comment on the arts—journalists, academics, professional artists, producers, editors, information-age cultural critics—to come to terms with new ways of living with and through mass culture” (p. 20). Yet Niedzviecki’s dismissal of scholarship and theories of culture robs him of the ability to shape his own material in any original or substantial manner. His anti-academic stance simply limits his ability to work with a vast range of substantial and varied perspectives and analyses on subcultures, alternative media, and communication theories.

Niedzviecki is most interesting when he plainly draws on his knowledge of the 700 zines from his periodicals database on Canadian zine culture (p. 60). As editor of Broken Pencil (a journal on Canadian zine culture he has published and edited since 1995) and as a freelance journalist on alternative culture for Adbusters, Utne Reader, the Globe and Mail, and This Magazine, Niedzviecki has many points of reference, and engaging descriptions of dozens of obscure zines are sprinkled throughout the book. The immediacy of the
zine voices he quotes from, such as Kiki Bonbon’s “Alanis” in the Calgary zine In Grave Ink, perfectly capture what his meandering, strained attempts to (pseudo-? anti-?) theorize lifestyle culture try to achieve. Bonbon writes:

“I can’t go tripping off on spiritual pilgrimages around the globe cause I’m stuck working my ass off at the fucking Bay.”

“Yeah and like listening to this stupid satellite radio all day with Alanis [Morissette] and her likes whining about their great therapy and giving head to losers and traipsing around raping so called exotic cultures for their own mental cleansing purposes makes it any better.” (pp. 190-191)

Strangely enough, what emerges from We Want Some Too is Niedzviecki’s desire to validate alternative zine culture for mainstream consumption. In his concluding chapter, Niedzviecki characterizes writing on indie-zine culture in the National Post as some kind of triumph and bemoans the general lack of coverage of independent-zine culture. Yet Bleek is described as embarrassed and confused when he shifts from broadcasting within a range of a couple of miles to a Merritt audience of 20 to having a feature profile on Much-Music (p. 129). Similarly, Niedzviecki might have gleaned some greater insight into his own paradoxical relations to mainstream culture, a mainstream that seems to be so strongly beckoning him.

As early as the 1980s, cultural studies was considering the implications of representing “subcultures” within academia and the mainstream, a self-reflexivity that might have nuanced Niedzviecki’s own bombastic approach and had him asking instead, What happens when you broker Kiki Bonbon to the National Post?

References

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