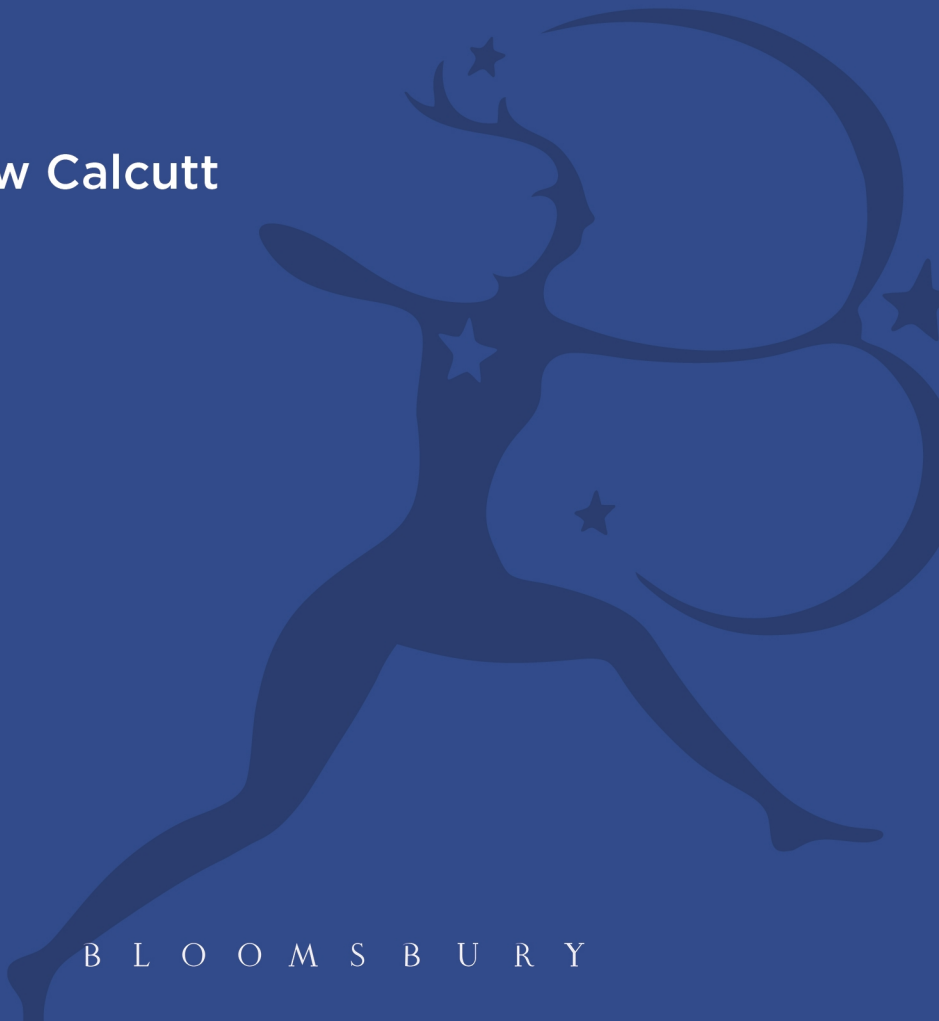


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ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

Pop Culture and the
Erosion of Adulthood

Andrew Calcutt



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Arrested Development

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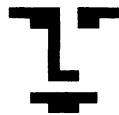
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Preface

‘There’s nothing left to rebel against.’ These words, spoken to me by a student in media and communications, prompted me to question my assumptions about the counterculture, and my own limited participation in it. Until recently I had always assumed that in my largely unsuccessful career as a musician and record producer I must somehow have failed to live up to the requirements of the counterculture; either I did not take enough drugs, or have enough sexual partners, or I never threw a television set into the hotel swimming-pool. But this student’s remark, which was made in the context of a discussion about the relative lack of rebelliousness in today’s society, prompted me to wonder whether in fact it was the counterculture which had failed me, by being too limited, too facile and not really ‘counter’.

This book is the end result of that line of thought. It is not meant to be an indictment of the counterculture as the root cause of either my personal failings or the ills of society. However, it does suggest that the tradition which goes back fifty years to Existential Paris, bebop jazz and the first motorcycle gangs represents not so much the capacity to rebel, but the tendency to limit our capacity as human beings and to pretend to ourselves that this is what constitutes rebellion. Moreover, it is my suggestion that the sense of limits which was the founding principle of the counterculture has now crossed over not only into pop culture but also into politics. This means that pop and politics now share the same language of diminished humanity – a communal experience which has catalysed what is generally known as ‘victim culture’, and now facilitates the further negation of our human potential.

Again this is not to say that the counterculture *caused* today’s victim culture, but rather to suggest that the latter could not exist in its present form without the former.

I should add that, when I mentioned to a couple of academic

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colleagues that I was writing a book about the identification with children as a largely postwar phenomenon, they both replied along the lines that 'you can find it [infantilization] much further back than that'. As indeed you can, if you look hard enough. But that is exactly my point. Yes, the Romantic Imagination was ever obsessed with childhood innocence. But Romanticism was always a minority interest, until something akin to the Romantic Imagination became part of our mental make-up in the period after the Second World War. Furthermore, if you look at the creative work of the previous two centuries, you will find that literature which focuses on the child is far outweighed by the literature of leaving childhood behind and moving into new adult territory, as in the plethora of novels which are usually described as 'rites of passage'.

I maintain that this long-established balance has only recently been reversed, with an unprecedented number of authors and artists now suggesting that the only passage worth making is not onwards to adulthood and heroism (how quaint!) but backwards to childhood (how authentic, allegedly, and emotionally satisfying). To my mind, therefore, infantilism is not completely new, but its significance in today's society is entirely unprecedented.

Andrew Calcutt
Walthamstow, London
June 1997

To Alka, Cora and the memory of my mother ...
... and to Mick Hume, the magazine editor with *cojones*

Safe

By celebrating an idea of ourselves as vulnerable and childlike, pop culture has contributed to the development of a society obsessed by safety.

'It makes you like yourself and other people.' Speaking on BBC1's *Kilroy*¹ in a debate prompted by the death of Leah Betts (the Essex student who died in November 1995 after taking an Ecstasy tablet on her eighteenth birthday), an unnamed E-user explained that she would continue taking the drug because of the unique sense of warmth and security which she derived from it.

Likewise the singer Brian Harvey, in a widely reported statement (later retracted) which got him sacked from his band East 17 (he was subsequently reinstated), praised the drug for 'increasing the love' and promoting a sense of well-being among people who have taken it.

Most of the chroniclers of Ecstasy and the rave culture associated with it stress the feelings of warmth and mutual reassurance to be gained from the E experience. In a column in the *Observer*, Joan Smith likened rave culture to having safe sex with thousands of people at the same time.² Writing about the effects of Ecstasy, the novelist Thomas Pynchon noted the relaxation and relief arising from the temporary disconnection of the 'circuits of the brain which mediate alarm, fear, flight, fight, lust and territorial paranoia'.³ In *Ecstasy: The MDMA Story* Bruce Eisner also described it as a chemical comforter:

It is a room in which both your inner experience and your relations with others seem magically transformed. You feel really good about yourself and your life. At the same time, everyone who comes into this room seems more

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*lovable. You find your thoughts flowing, turning into words that previously were blocked by fear and inhibition.*⁴

The American cyber-journalist and essayist Douglas Rushkoff, who has been described as the Tom Wolfe of the New Edge, explains that Ecstasy is attractive to many young people because it 'creates a loving ego resiliency in which no personal problem seems too big or scary. This is why it has become popular in the younger gay and alternative lifestyle communities, where identity crises are commonplace.'⁵

In *Heaven's Promise*, probably the first novel about the E scene, Paolo Hewitt has his 'on one' protagonist feel 'a camaraderie for every smiling herbert I passed' and 'a surge of real companionship'.⁶ In *Altered State*, an account of Ecstasy culture and Acid House, the British writer and editor Matthew Collin chronicled 'spontaneous acts of kindness, of expressions of unconditional love, like the whole club singing Happy Birthday'.⁷ In a postscript to *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* Jay Stevens described Ecstasy as 'an empathy drug'. It is 'the perfect domestic psychedelic' which encourages users to 'become more loving' in that it 'eliminates the affect of the past, like fear'.⁸

The aspect of the E experience most frequently cited by its advocates is that the drug induces a wonderful feeling of safety and security. Ecstasy appears to function as the antidote to the prevailing atmosphere of risk and anxiety, in which growing numbers of people have come to feel permanently vulnerable and to define themselves as potential victims. The prospect of temporary respite from this overheated and overbearing risk-consciousness seems to be the main motivation for taking E.

The desire for safety on the part of those who advocate Ecstasy mirrors the demand for safety-consciousness on the part of those who warn against it. This means that in an important sense the discussion about the merits or dangers of Ecstasy is a non-debate. There is no divide between those whose priority is safety and those who might describe themselves as risk-takers or think of themselves as cultural adventurers. The non-debate about Ecstasy is the first discussion about the recreational use of illegal drugs in which all sides are using the same word as their touchstone. The magic word is: safety. The anti-drugs lobby warn that E can never be safe, and that large numbers of people will become victims of the drug unless its use is immediately curtailed. Their opponents claim that Ecstasy can be safe under the right

conditions, and recommend it on the grounds that it releases us from the perceived threat of victimization.

Noticeable by its absence is the traditional contest of ideologies, with one side insisting that the law on drugs must be obeyed whatever its merits, and the other side declaring that drugs might be unsafe but it is up to the individual to decide whether he or she wants to take a risk. Both sides have abandoned their traditional vocabulary in favour of a new language of personal safety.

The consensus around the notion of safety was summed up in the *New Statesman* by its (then) editor Steve Platt, who wrote, 'It is time to end the "war on drugs" and start thinking about minimising the risks.'⁹ The editor of this traditional political magazine was clearly thinking along the same safety-first lines as the managers of the Liverpool nightclub Cream, who began to deploy doctors in the house to look after overheated ravers, in a move which *The Face* subsequently described as 'a decision to make that world safe not sorry'.¹⁰

The privilege accorded to safety is even more forcefully expressed whenever sex is discussed. In the 1990s, you can have any sexuality you like, as long as it is safe. The irony is that the contemporary emphasis on sexual relations as one of the defining aspects of our lives may have well emerged in preference to the perceived risks of public life and ideological contestation. Sex and the preoccupation with it have functioned as a refuge from the difficulty of trying to deal with wider society. But once safety has been introduced into the body politic, it seems we can never get enough of it. Likewise the recent enthusiasm for cybersex was predicated on the assumption that it was safe, i.e. it did not involve the exchange of bodily fluids. But the notion of a digitized sexual playground where safety need not be a consideration was immediately replaced by the consensus that any kind of sexual contact, whether meat to meat or mouse to mouse, must be made safe.

Safety: the ultimate high

If everyone is indeed preoccupied with safety, then this decade truly deserves to be known as 'the nervous nineties'. And if, as E fans seem to be suggesting, safety is now the ultimate high, then surely we are living through a low point of human endeavour.

This is the decade which has diminished the meaning of ecstasy (once an experience associated with the awesome and the infinite) to the point where it entails nothing more extravagant than cosy feelings

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of closeness, empathy and a temporary lapse in risk-consciousness. No wonder Marek Kohn, a leading commentator on drugs and lifestyle, was prompted to say that 'the E culture is remarkable in its banality'.¹¹ Comparing the E-induced feeling of love to an anorexic's belief that she is fat, newspaper columnist Charlotte Raven agreed that E makes you 'smug'.¹²

Drug culture was not always so 'banal' or 'smug'. In the 1960s Dr Timothy Leary's acid-driven 'politics of ecstasy' entailed an abortive attempt to transcend the ego. For the safety-conscious ravers of the 1990s, however, the special joy of E is that it allows the user to 'take your ego with you'. It seems to soothe today's fragile psyche in the same way that the infant Linus draws comfort from his security blanket in the *Peanuts* strip cartoon. Even former *Face* editor Sheryl Garratt, who is generally sympathetic to club culture, had to admit that 'ecstasy over amphetamines' means 'escapism over anger'.¹³

Snapshot: Stay safe

It was in Liverpool 8 that I first heard 'safe' used as a word with which to sign off a conversation. This was in the late 1980s, when, as a campaigning journalist, I was trying to draw attention to the plight of black youth in what outsiders referred to as 'Toxteth' (locals always preferred 'Liverpool 8'), who were the victims of a style of policing more readily associated with the townships of South Africa under apartheid. I wrote a number of articles in collaboration with a local hero by the name of Delroy Burris. As I left his house at night, with a half-finished typescript in my bag, he would say to me 'stay safe', or just 'safe'. The threatening figures from whom Burris exhorted me to 'stay safe' were not drug dealers or some other criminals, but the police: we knew that they knew what we were doing; and we also knew that some of them were unhappy about it.

By the time I moved back to London on the cusp of the 1990s, the phrase 'stay safe' had already made it on to the club scene. DJs would advise dancers to 'stay safe'; and 'safe' functioned as a term of approval or a form of assent, like 'cool'. The anti-authority sense in which Burris had used it was already absent.

A couple of years later 'stay safe' became one of those phrases that kept appearing in leaflets and advice booklets issued by youth and community projects which saw themselves as streetwise. In the new usage of the phrase, however, the nature of the perceived threat had

changed dramatically. No longer referring to the menace of the police, as Burris had done, the term was now being used to suggest that other people on the street could turn out to be a threat; and even to hint that young people could be a threat to themselves unless they behaved responsibly and thereby guaranteed their own safety. From being a word which had connoted an anti-authoritarian stance, 'safe' has become a word that sums up the new form of authority, which works by encouraging us to think of ourselves as essentially vulnerable individuals who must pay heed to the never-ending task of making ourselves 'safe'.

In its emphasis on safety and security, the E scene is probably more immature than any previous incarnation of youth culture. In some ways it seems out of kilter with the reckless rebels of yesteryear. But the banality and infantilism of E culture is not without precedent. It is more than a quarter of a century since Jimi Hendrix remarked that 'music is a safe type of high', and today's music-related culture might well be summed up as the logical outcome of a fifty-year-old tradition which has become more and more preoccupied with safety even as it has grown in popularity and significance.

Forever young

What was once the exclusive preserve of youth – 'youth culture' – is now a popular culture (pop culture) which commands the allegiance of almost everyone under sixty. 'Youth culture . . . has become the whole of culture', observed columnist Bryan Appleyard in the *Independent*.¹⁴ It is a lens which both reflects and refracts the experience of its many adherents. The vast majority of people in the Western world now look to the forms of personal expression associated with pop culture as the means to find their self-image and define their experience. In historical terms, this is extraordinary; only during the past fifty years has pop culture become elevated to the point where it has surpassed politics, economics and traditional forms of religion as the primary means of self-definition and the premier thread of public discourse.

What this means is that pop culture, more than politics or religion, is the domain which most people now enter in order to find the iconography which describes their own lives back to them. We come to know ourselves by the images and metaphors of pop culture – a culture which is currently bound up in images of safety and metaphors for risk

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avoidance. An examination of the iconography of pop culture, therefore, gives us a picture of individuals in society who now see themselves primarily in terms of the quest for safety and the avoidance of risk.

As well as surpassing traditional politics as a focal point in society, pop culture has often been anti-political; indeed, pop culture's anti-political element is what made it appear radical, once upon a time. At its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War it went against the grain of the big ideas, left and right, which had informed political debate and social reform for two centuries. Hence in its original incarnation it was known as 'the counterculture'. But with hindsight we can see that this was a misnomer: the counterculture was not a challenge to the rest of society so much as a preview of where it was already going.

In the 1950s and 1960s the counterculture was developed by the front-runners of a generation whose lack of faith in existing society was exceeded only by disbelief in their own ability to change it. In retreat from the problems of their age, they created the counterculture as a relatively low-risk play area where high-stakes questions about the future of humanity could be avoided. They also originated the combination of childishness and cynicism which has since spread throughout society, and is now writ large in today's pop culture.

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The classic dilemma of the modern adolescent is whether to become part of society or to attempt to transcend it. Pop culture describes this moment of indecision, cultivates it as a way of life, and invests the resultant juvenilia with a significance which is hard to justify. What began in the counterculture as a refusal to accept the norms associated with adulthood is now a sad reflection of the successive generations who could not find it in themselves to grow up and instead have lived their entire lives permanently poised on the cusp of the adolescent dilemma.

In the 1950s and 1960s, pop culture was often described as the test-bed for the future development of society. Forty years on, it can be seen as an experiment in arrested development. Unfortunately, the lessons of this experiment remain unlearned; and what should have been discarded as an occasionally brave but always misguided attempt to transcend the limits of society has now become the mainstream model in which limits and constraints upon human endeavour can be re-presented with even greater force and authority.

Youth came into its own when, despite the economic prosperity of the period, post-Second-World-War society proved unable to develop a credible model of adulthood. Writing in the 1960s about the 'country of the young' which had emerged since 1945, the American critic John W. Aldridge observed that 'anyone in his right mind might hesitate to embrace the joys of adulthood in a time like the present'.¹⁵ Pete Townshend, songwriter and guitarist in The Who, was more succinct; the soundbite in the lyrics to his 'My Generation' is a line which many an ageing pop star has subsequently lived to regret: 'Hope I die before I get old.'

Aldridge noted that the failure of his generation to provide a new model of adulthood had the effect of fetishizing youth, inflating it from a phase to be outgrown into a lifelong excuse for immaturity and childishness. He also recognized that the limited character of youth culture was not the sole responsibility of young people; rather that youth culture and the general preoccupation with it were the joint expression of America's failure to renew itself as a grown-up society. Castigating the intelligentsia for its infatuation with pop culture, Aldridge identified the 'cult of youth' as the avant-garde of a society which had lost the ability to go forward.

These observations seem to have been borne out by subsequent events. Western intellectuals are now obsessed with pop culture. Policy-makers share many of the assumptions which originated within it. Where there used to be a 'generation gap', the preoccupation with 'youth-oriented' cultural forms now spans the entire population. In the 1990s, to say that you have grown out of pop music and its attendant sensibility is to invite accusations of senility. To paraphrase the song by rock artist Bryan Adams, we are eighteen till we die.

Impasse

Widespread infatuation with pop culture is underpinned by the common experience of impasse, i.e. the equally widespread recognition that we are living in a society which cannot understand the problems of its own making, still less overcome them. Standing before the elephantine chaos of today's world, we all have a tendency to feel like children; and pop culture is the focus of everyone's attention because it embodies the pervasive sense of childlike vulnerability which we experience in the face of social problems which seem to be as imponderable as they are gigantic.

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This is the overarching context within which we have come to look upon the world through the prism of the child. It is hardly a ringing endorsement of our adulthood, for the measure of us as adults is surely the extent to which we refuse to accept the sense of powerlessness which external circumstances might impose upon us. But in today's context we seem more than ready to give in to the sense of our own impotence, and even to celebrate it through our perverse identification with those who are necessarily the weakest members of the human race, namely children.

The end of ideology and the cult of the loser

During a Channel 4 documentary on Ecstasy and the dance culture (*Rave New World*, 1995), a spokesman for multimedia artists The Future Sound of London (FSOL) declared that it would be better if consumers felt impotent rather than sexually aroused by FSOL's sounds and images. This statement exemplifies the celebration of powerlessness particularly explicit in today's E culture, to the point where numerous commentators have recommended it as a sexual suppressant which serves to protect women from the unwanted attentions of rampant males. Ecstasy, it seems, is a contemporary substitute for bromide.

The rejection of sexual potency is unusual, although not unprecedented in pop culture (the amphetamine-driven asexuality of punk was a short-lived precursor); however, the renunciation of social power is a long-standing motif in pop culture which can be traced all the way back to the first incarnation of the counterculture in the early 1950s. But whereas the counterculture claimed that the renunciation of power over society would be liberating and somehow empowering for the individual, FSOL and others have now drawn out the logic of abdication from the question of social relations and extended it into the terrain of personal relations.

When asked to explain what the Beats were all about, founder-member Jack Kerouac said that they were 'beat' as in 'beatific' and 'beat' as in 'beaten'. Acceptance of impotent defeat was an intrinsic part of the state of grace to which Kerouac aspired.

While Kerouac was on the road, his fellow American Daniel Bell was moving towards *The End of Ideology*. Bell's thesis was that the great battle of ideas had ended (a notion which had already been mooted by the existentialist Albert Camus and the sociologist Raymond Aron):

ideology on a grand scale had made itself redundant, and pragmatism would henceforth be the key to politics.

On the face of it the two young writers were poles apart. Bell was to become part of the new academia; Kerouac, after breaking his leg playing college football at Columbia, had hobbled away from his chance to become part of the government-sponsored élite. However, what they had in common is of more significance than the different social strata in which they happened to be living at the time.

Both Bell and Kerouac were heralds of the post-ideological era. Bell championed a pragmatic form of social democracy within a reduced terrain of political contestation, while Kerouac stressed the anti-politics of personal experience and self-expression. But in their different ways they were both describing the disaggregation of society and social theory. Furthermore, they described a world without ideological combativity, in which humanity would no longer struggle against its circumstances en bloc; rather (beaten, beatific but above all pragmatic) we would agree to live without combativity and within a more limited range of experience and expectations.

Bell was guardedly optimistic about the prospect of a world without ideology and its attendant aspirations, while Kerouac and his fellow Beats were happy to re-present this loss by initiating the cult of the loser and popularizing the notion that the mad or lost people of the world had a monopoly on authentic experience and true understanding. They advocated what amounted to an abdication from rational calculation and a retreat from the contest for power, which embraced madness as a metaphor for a way of life beyond the traditional politics of collectivized self-interest.

It was against this post-ideological, anti-political background that William Carlos Williams, in his introduction to the *City Lights* edition, described Allen Ginsberg's influential poem *Howl* (1956) as a 'howl of defeat'.¹⁶ Ginsberg, who was born into a family of communist sympathizers, began his poem with a post-political dedication to Kerouac, 'the new Buddha of American prose'. The second dedication was to 'William Seward Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch*, an endless novel which will drive everybody mad'. The poem is subtitled 'for Carl Solomon' – a reference to the close friend whom Ginsberg met while they were both resident in the same New York psychiatric hospital. It was Solomon who introduced Ginsberg to the work of Antonin Artaud, the French theatre director and certified

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lunatic, who died in 1948 but was just then (in the late 1940s) coming into vogue.

This was one of the first episodes in a saga of relationships linking the emerging counterculture to the idea of madness as an elevated and even enviable state of mind. Frustrated by the failure of their parents' big ideas (Ginsberg's left-wing father could never understand what had happened to his son's 'former zeal for a liberal progressive democratic society'), the 'best minds' of Ginsberg's generation attempted, as Burroughs (following Nietzsche) put it, to 'destroy all rational thought'. If the Enlightenment had come to a dead end, they opted to abandon history and invent a timeless new paganism in which rationality was the only heresy. Henceforth madness was regarded by the counterculture not as an affliction but as the mark of superior insight.

The most succinct definition of the new sensibility came from the other side of the Atlantic. 'Good for the imbecile', cried Jean Dubuffet, painter and founder of Art Brût, 'he is our man.' In Britain Dubuffet's paean to imbecility was translated into music-related culture in the form of the 'leapniks' – the precursors of 'slam dancers' who followed the trad jazz bands of the 1950s. Some years later it was re-formatted into the 'idiot dance' originated by singer Roger Chapman of the British 'progressive' group Family. The 'idiot dance' was subsequently imitated by thousands of hippies all over the Western world, and then recycled for the next generation in 1976 when the punks performed similarly deranged and childish movements which they dubbed the 'pogo'.

In the last forty years there have been many other instances in which pop culture has elevated and celebrated the idea of madness. When Pink Floyd vocalist Syd Barrett left the group as a result of mental illness, he entered the holy of holies. After killing off his Ziggy Stardust persona, David Bowie re-invented himself as Aladdin Sane (a lad insane) and paraded his temporary mental instability in what is generally regarded as one of the best arts documentaries ever made (*Cracked Actor*, Arena, BBC2, 1974). Actor Jack Nicholson continues to be revered for his part in Milos Forman's film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), in which he played a prankster mental patient struggling to retain his identity in the face of bureaucratic lunacy.

The message of this film, and of the novel by Ken Kesey from which it is taken, is that the bureaucratic madness of mental institutions far exceeds that of their inmates, whose lunacy is not really lunacy at all but a personal and potentially creative vision. This message was repackaged

in the 1997 movie *Shine*, which, according to Cambridge don John Casey, 'has invested heavily in the 1960s idea that the mentally ill may really be more sane than the rest of us', particularly in its depiction of pianist David Helfgott as 'a "Holy Fool"'.¹⁷

The 1960s and 1970s were also the period in which the clown, symbolizing childish innocence and naive irrationality, came to be a favoured icon, featuring in a wide range of films from *Godspell* to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up*. And when Federico Fellini wrote his autobiography at the end of the 1960s, it was published under the title *I, Clown*.¹⁸

More recently, the canonization of Kurt Cobain in the wake of his suicide in 1994 shows that the cult of the unhinged loser is still alive and kicking. Moreover, the song that broke the increasingly successful American singer-songwriter Beck into the British market was entitled 'I'm a Loser, Baby (So Why Don't You Kill Me?)'; although Beck's intention was ironic, this aspect of the song tended to get lost over the airwaves. Even the Royals are getting in on the act. In her infamous *Panorama* television interview (November 1995), Princess Diana advertised her experience of bulimia as proof of psychological trauma and victim status. The overwhelmingly favourable response to the interview indicates that the loser's part is the one which almost everyone is now keen to take, especially when it encompasses more than a hint of mental instability.

We know what's good for you

In a radio interview in 1995, soon after announcing that he would not seek re-election to Parliament in the general election of 1997, Conservative MP George Walden remarked that those in positions of authority now treat the public like children with learning difficulties. If Walden was right, and it really is the case that those in authority treat the rest of us like social inadequates who are incapable of making rational decisions on our own behalf, it is important to find out how the great and the good have come to think of the general public in this unusually derogatory fashion. Is it too fanciful to suggest that their mental model of the vulnerable, unstable, childish member of the public is drawn from the canon of pop culture and its 'countercultural' antecedents? It may even be the case that, forty years on, the politicians of today are enacting and enforcing an idea of the inadequate, incapable individual which the Beats and their successors could only dream of.

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Pop culture is certainly the *lingua franca* through which those in the corridors of power seek to engage with those outside. Legend has it that Bill Clinton won the United States presidential election in 1992 because he kept reminding himself that 'it's the economy, stupid'. If that was the catchphrase which got Clinton into the White House, his admission that he had smoked dope 'but didn't inhale' may turn out to be the watchword of his extended tenure there.

New power generation

Clinton is as old as pop culture. As he grew up, so its significance became inflated; hence his eagerness to show awareness of its nuances. During the 1992 election campaign Clinton played the saxophone on nation-wide television, and his younger supporters came to identify themselves as 'the saxophone club'. After the election, the president celebrated his inauguration with a concert that featured a wide range of pop performers, from soul diva Aretha Franklin to a toned-down version of rap. It was broadcast live, with plenty of footage showing the Clinton family tapping their feet and nodding their heads to the music. Clinton's appreciation of pop culture was reciprocated by the music industry, which gave him a Grammy award (spoken-word section) in February 1997.

Clinton's presidency is indicative of a generational shift in the White House. The most powerful people in the most powerful country in the world are now younger than the Beatles; and the culture with which they grew up may well have furnished them with an idea of themselves and the public as permanent adolescents.

With pop culture as its backdrop, the Clinton generation is introducing a new state religion into the United States: counselling. The counselling faith is based on the belief that, left to their own devices, ordinary human beings are so adolescent, immature and unstable that they are always on the point of turning into either another Charles Manson (psychopath and predator) or a Sharon Tate (defenceless victim). This is the nightmare of the counterculture translated into the new mysticism of public policy. It is tantamount to assuming that the average individual is incapable of rational thought and action, and must therefore be a trauma waiting to happen.

A similarly degraded idea of humanity was expressed at the fiftieth Cannes film festival by the actor-turned-director Gary Oldman. Making his directorial debut with *Nil by Mouth* (1997), a film about

his alcoholic father's abuse of his mother, Oldman, who has himself undergone treatment for alcohol abuse, declared: 'The sins of the father are visited on the son. We are a lot sicker than we think we are. Most people need therapy.'¹⁹ His combination of religiosity and therapy, patched together in a low opinion of his fellows which is in fact more anti-human than most previous religions, would make Oldman a welcome visitor in either the White House or Number 10 Downing Street.

The religion of counselling conjures up an extremely patronizing image of the permanently 'at risk' individual, prone like a child to uncontrollable and apparently demonic urges and, also like a child, unable to cope with the consequences of such urges in the behaviour of others. The spectre of the immature individual, which is now being projected on to the general population by those in positions of authority, bears an uncanny resemblance to the self-image of childlike vulnerability and madness which, as we have seen, is a staple of pop culture and the counterculture which preceded it.

If the iconography of the counterculture is taken at face value, as an accurate portrayal of everyday behaviour, the only possible conclusion to be drawn from it is that we are all hopelessly alienated, irredeemably childish and permanently hovering on the brink of madness. In which case it really would be the primary duty of government to provide us with counselling and therapy from the cradle to the grave. Thankfully, this is not the case.

We are not half as dumb as our self-image, and the iconography of pop culture needs to be interpreted not literally but metaphorically, as a projection by imaginative means of a broader sense of the inadequacy of society. But the picture is further complicated by the fact that ours is an age in which the distinction between that which is real and that which is metaphorical is increasingly blurred. A growing number of people are now prepared to believe in the bad publicity about themselves and everyone else; and there is a whole new power generation geared up to enact this kind of negative self-image and to factor it into the institutional fabric of society.

Accordingly a new kind of legislation is currently being enacted which corresponds with the picture of widespread inadequacy that originated in the counterculture and has since become a mainstay of pop culture. By enacting such legislation, far from 'selling out' their youthful ideals, the Clintonsque intake into the corridors of power