
The Relationship Between the DIY Work Ethic and Underground Culture

The Underground is an umbrella term for a variety of subcultures, who are not, or do not want to be, associated with the mainstream. Their characteristics include locality, personal connections with their audiences/members, open mindedness, intimacy, and, most importantly, a DIY (do-it-yourself) work ethic. The do-it-yourself aspect is one of the biggest telltale signs of an alternative culture and is extremely valued by its members. In this paper, I will explore the relationship between this DIY philosophy and underground culture, how it was enacted in our course materials and what are the implications of this relationship as presented in those course materials.

To begin with, most of the people who belong to the underground scene place a lot of importance on originality and authentic content. The people who do not produce and create things themselves and sign contracts with labels or songwriters are not considered underground and are usually frowned upon. This is why the DIY aspect is so important. It means that one is “real”, creative and passionate enough to put a huge amount of effort into a project that is not going to create any profit and, most likely, will result in loss of money. It means that there is a message, an idea behind the project that has some real meaning and was not created solely for the purpose of earning money. The do-it-yourself philosophy also allows people to express themselves without anyone else’s intervention, making them free to share their ideas in any way they deem fit.

One of the best examples of this free expression that has been analysed in class is the existence of zines. Zines are a type of publication that typically is written, put together and published by one person. They have no set theme and are usually a collection of what the author finds interesting, be it essays, pictures, reviews or a collection of their favourite song titles. The thing that makes a zine a zine and not a professional magazine, is the DIY aspect of it all. They have to be self-published, self-assembled and not funded by corporations. Stephen Duncombe goes in depth about this topic in his essay “Zines”, explaining their theoretical part, describing the most popular types of zines and how they influenced alternative and mainstream culture throughout the years. Zines were also the primary focus of our class excursion to Quimby’s, where Liz Mason, the manager of the bookstore and also the creator of the zine “Kaboose”, told us about the reality of making and selling a zine and why the DIY aspect is so important throughout the whole process.

Another great example of this relationship was given to us in class by our guest speaker Liz

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Panella. As she herself is actively involved in the underground punk scene, she has authority to speak on issues concerning it and its functions. Liz mentioned the DIY aspect and how important it is in the underground music industry. If a person wants to create music and put it out there, he has to do everything by himself every step of the way, from the song writing, to editing and mastering the record. If he can't do that, he must call friends, ask for favours and try to get people to help, because usually he has no means of paying for their services. That is why underground music has that real, raw feeling to it and why it matters so much to people who like it - it means that the original idea was present every step throughout the process and was not tampered with by a person who wanted to change it in order to make it more profitable.

However, the punk scene is not the only one that values the DIY philosophy. Underground rap can be considered even more relentless when it comes to artists selling out or being not "real" enough. As the guest speaker Add-2 mentioned, the lyrics, the beat, even the videos are usually created by one person, sometimes with the help of their friends. This lets the artist fully express themselves and create exactly what they want to. Staying true to the content helps a rapper get his name out and become popular, connect with the people that listen to them and broadcast his intended message to the world. It's a way to further agendas and make people pay attention to things they never noticed. For example, social issues, inequality, classism, and racism were common topics to rap about when rap first emerged as a genre. Marshall Berman talks about this in his essay "Justice/Just Us': Rap and Social Justice in America". Those rappers were taken seriously and helped divert attention to these pressing social issues. If they hadn't done it all by themselves, hadn't lived through it all and just hired a songwriter to create the lyrics for them, their songs would not carry as much weight and wouldn't seem authentic, therefore, wouldn't be able to draw as much attention and help their cause.

Yet another subculture that lives by the DIY principle is graffiti artists. It's easy to guess why they must do everything without mainstream intervention – most of their work is illegal or at least frowned upon. Our excursion guide Tony from Grimetime Magazine explained the subtleties of graffiti art and the dangers that come along with creating it. The same could be said about guerrilla art. The DIY aspect is crucial to it as it's used to express one specific person's (our group's) views on an issue that they feel needs to be addressed, for example, discrimination, abortion, minimal wage or poverty. These messages can be controversial and not easy to communicate to the masses by conventional means, like billboards or advertising, therefore people turn to more alternative forms of expression, like DIY posters and graffiti.

But what effect does the underground culture have on the world? Socially, it lets people express themselves more freely than any mainstream corporation would, and by doing that, diverts the masses' attention to issues that would not receive any coverage otherwise. It might take some extreme measures for it to achieve this, i.e.: putting up illegal, shocking posters, but it's a noble goal. Hoss Jooten talks about this topic at length in his essay "Taking It To The

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Streets”. Economically, the DIY aspect helps create profit for things that are not in mass production. It also benefits local businesses and other underground spaces that people gather to put on shows or discuss projects. Sometime, underground culture is appropriated by the mass media and is used to make money for big corporations, like Thomas Frank wrote in his essay “Commodify Your Dissident” or used to decide what’s going to be trendy and cool, like Malcolm Gladwell described in his article “The Coolhunt”. Politically, the underground has proven to be a powerful force that demands change and protests inequality. Once ideas from the underground spread to the masses, it’s only a matter of time until they become popular and start changing people’s opinion on certain questions. Karrie Jacobs and Steven Heller discussed the power of the underground culture throughout history in their preface for the book *Angry Graphics*.

To sum up, the underground is a very culturally important place and provides many benefits to society, even though most are not aware of it. One of the most important aspects of it is the DIY philosophy, which helps spread the free expression of thought, relieves the need to rely on corporations, maintains the feeling of pure authenticity and helps a person directly connect to society and his peers. Most of the materials we went through in class at least touched upon this philosophy and its importance. It was mentioned by all of the guest speakers as well, and the class excursions reflected that idea, too. The underground very fascinating and all those who contribute to it are trailblazers and I’m glad to have had the opportunity to get to know at least some parts of it.

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