

# The Pitchfork t-shirt festival

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## The Great American Novel

The best starting point for a discussion of hipsterwear would be *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. For those who haven't read it, the book is a road trip story, about a man and the 12-year old girl to whom he is a guardian. To research it, Nabokov traveled across America, collecting butterflies along the way. He himself is a Russian of the old world tradition of reading obscure literature and oozing erudition. Literary scholars can take the book as a puzzle, what with all those obscure references to obscure literature. The rest of us can take it as a catalog of Americana:

We inspected the world's largest stalagmite in a cave where three southeastern states have a family reunion ... A granite obelisk commemorating the Battle of Blue Licks, with old bones and Indian pottery in the museum nearby ... The present log cabin boldly simulating the past log cabin where Lincoln was born ... a collection of European hotel picture post cards in a museum devoted to hobbies at a Mississippi resort ... Collections of frontier lore. ... and Abilene, Kansas, the home of the Wild Bill Something Rodeo. ... Always the same three old men, in hats and suspenders, idling away the summer afternoon under the trees near the public fountain. ... Indian ceremonial dances, strictly commercial. ART: American Refrigerator Transit Company. ... A winery in California, with a church built in the shape of a wine barrel. ... A man having a lavish epileptic fit on the ground in Russian Gulch State Park. ... A chateau built by a French marquess in N.D. The Corn Palace in S.D.; and the huge heads of presidents carved in towering granite. ... A zoo in Indiana where a large troop of monkeys lived on concrete replica of Christopher Columbus' flagship. ... Lincoln's home, largely spurious, with parlor books and period furniture that most visitors reverently accepted as personal belongings.

[from *Lolita*, part two, chapter two]

So picture Vladimir Nabokov standing before the Corn Palace. Is he merely admiring the architecture with innocent awe? Does he approach it as a hick

attempt at splendor, with a touch of disdain and superiority? Is it merely an intellectual curiosity to be cataloged for future use? Is this his form of expressing admiration at a world filled with quirks?

## **T-shirts**

Anyway, on to the the Pitchfork Music Festival. It was great: the bands were all pretty good, I got to see Wilco's drummer do a drum kit interpretation of the Balinese epic of the monkey, the non-music parts of the festival (nonprofit booths, food, trees) were all pleasant, and the people-watching was amazing. After all, indie rock kids have the highest proportion of tattoos and amusing t-shirts per capita.

Hipster t-shirts are typically billed as 'ironic'. I put that in what are called 'irony quotes' because they are frequently not actually ironic like an O. Henry story, but just sarcastic. These folks are all collegiate, and generally an urban-oriented bunch, so we can ask the same question we asked for Nabokov, without the literary genius part: how do these well-educated individuals relate to working-class and rural institutions?

From here, I hoped to get a little more quantitative. How many people really were wearing such sarcastic shirts? Can I determine sentiment from the shirt? I wrote down as many shirts as I could recognize, probably about 150 total. Since a great number of people were in blank t-shirts or other non-t-shirt apparel, this was a less-than-trivial sample of the audience's messages. [Interested parties may inquire about the full inventory.]

**Sports jerseys** These are the t-shirts with a big number on the back and a team name on the front, and were by far the most common category of shirt. It is likely that many of these were 'ironic', in that the bearer wasn't really on the St. Vincent softball team.

The big winner among recognizable national teams was Brazil's futbol team, which scored four supporters, beating out the Irish for coolest nationality status. This may partly be because Os Mutantes, a Brazilian band from the 70s, was the headliner on the bill. [Incidentally, they rocked.]

**Band shirts** The next most common category. We can divide these into world-famous bands (Pink Floyd (4) and Rolling Stones (2)), indie-famous bands (Wilco (4), Clap Your Hands Say Yeah! (2), Ben Folds Five), and the wearer's personal faves (Flow Suicide Stimulus, Black Keys, Futureheads, Inferno, Red Five (which is also a Star Wars reference)).

**Location markers** Like sports jerseys, the thrift store is full of these. They are almost certainly worn 'ironically'. The Colorado flag. Washington, DC (3). Ten Mile Lake. Great Lakes (with an abstract mountain and sunset theme). Mississippi (picture of fish). Virginia is for Lovers. Nabokov could have done his research just wandering the average hipster hangout.

**Abstract designs** Two categories had a strong showing, the first being girls' shirts which were mostly blank with an abstract design at the wearer's lower left. I was amused that there was such consistency, which gave me the impression of a fashionista conference that voted on it. The other category were silhouettes of animals, mostly birds and deer. As a category, this was the overall winner with ten or so, but they were diverse designers and critters.

**Local shirts** Few as well. I believe the Chicago Reader was handing out shirts and bandannas, so it scored well. I spotted one TMLMTBGB (Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind, local neofuturist theatre) shirt, but that's as much a hipper-than-thou thing as it is a local organization. Goose Island Brewery, also hip and local (2). If there were local Chicago bands, I'd have trouble recognizing them.

**Political shirts** I counted three. Maybe it's just outrage fatigue, but Dubya had a weak showing.

**Attempts at humor** Actual attempts to be funny are not hip. Too Hot Topic. But let me repeat a few for you so you can get the quarter-chuckle these shirts are worth:

Ninja, Please!

Vote for Jesus

Shakespeare got to get paid, son

A *trompe l'oeil* shirt of a pocket holding a banana.

Better are the semi-weird vaguely humorous one, such as:

Plate of spaghetti, cowboy sitting on top, using a strand as a lasso

Computers are fun and useful

A Mexican wrestler yelling "Escuche"

**'Ironic' shirts** Finally, we get to the kitsch, irony, or sarcasm. The winner in this category, with an amazing four shirts, was the worn shirt with an airbrushed cat or tiger. Other kitsch items included shirts for the St Louis Girl Scout Council (on a boy), United States savings bonds, and Westerville Parks and Recreation.

Shirts directly referencing solidarity with the laboring class (a pose originated by Bertold Brecht, I am told) were barely to be found: I counted one Teamster's local shirt, and that's about it unless you want to count the Pabst Blue Ribbon and the Old Style shirts. So for almost all cases, the class warfare story often given with regards to trucker's caps doesn't work.

So I'm stuck again about what message these shirts, and some of the above categories like the tourist locale shirts, are attempting to send. Perhaps the main message is merely 'I bought this at a thrift store', which translates to 'I buck the fashion mainstream—in exactly the same manner as everybody else'. Perhaps it is merely an aggregation of quirks.

But in some cases, I don't see a love of quirk, but something more negative. Consider how an interaction between a hipster guy wearing an airbrushed cat shirt and a woman wearing her crisp new airbrushed cat would play out. The girl would probably be offended, and the boy would probably not want to continue the conversation. There's no innocent admiration of simple fun as Nabokov may or may not have had, no wannabe attempts to be a working-class Joe like Brecht, but simple mocking. Fortunately, shirts with an obvious mocking tone were a minority.

## **Findings**

The t-shirt world is delightfully fragmented. The dominance of 'ironic' shirts a few years ago has diminished, I like to think because they are mean-spirited and ham-fisted, but who knows. Things look a little more like the t-shirts of old, when people just wore whatever they happened to get from the kickball team (2) or logos for things that they actually like. I personally like the animal silhouettes as well, harking back to our simple associations with deer and birds.

Personal PS: On day one of the festival, I wore a t-shirt for the Valois Cafeteria, a place on the South Side of Chicago that is famous for its motto: See Your Food. The second day, I wore a shirt with the logo for Hair: The American Tribal Love Rock Musical. I've been a happy consumer of both, and willingly endorse them both for their own sakes. I have a long story behind both of them, and both started brief conversations at the show. Of course, we can only guess at the personal stories behind the t-shirts listed above.