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Culture Jamming: Ideological Struggle and the Possibilities for Social Change

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Culture Jamming: Ideological Struggle and the Possibilities for Social Change

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This dissertation examines the activities and texts of four groups of activists who use culture jamming as a tactic to challenge dominant ideologies as they advocate for progressive social, cultural and economic change. Culture jamming, as defined here, is a practice whereby texts critical of the status quo are created through the appropriation and/or mimicry of the aesthetics and/or language that are a part of popular, or at least widely experienced, culture. Exploring the work of the Yes Men, the Adbusters Media Foundation, the Billboard Liberation Front and the Illegal Art exhibit, I argue that

through their culture jamming these activists take critical theory into practice as a part of their goal is to raise the critical consciousness of the public. Confronting the issues of globalization, consumerism, and the political economy of the media in the United States, these culture jammers aim to highlight aspects of domination and oppression in their view results primarily from the corporate control of culture and politics. Using theories of ideology and hegemony developed by Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams to guide my analysis, I trace how each of these groups develop, present, and promote their critique. I steer clear of discussing the effectiveness of these culture jammers, focusing instead on the actions they take and theorizing some of the possible challenges and limitations they face in light of their own experiences. Differing requirements of cultural capital and deeper contextual information for most, if not all, of these culture jamming activities can make them especially complex forms of activism. What becomes clear is that culture jamming may be a tactic best suited to the maintenance of an activist community of people who already hold a critical position, as the jammer's challenges to dominant culture and ideologies can be lost because of the form of the critique, or marginalized or otherwise ignored by the mainstream media.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 3, 2004, Dow spokesman Jude Finisterra announced on BBC World that his company would be liquidating its Union Carbide division for an estimated $12 billion. The news in itself seemed routine business information until Finisterra said that the money from the sale would go to the hundreds of thousands injured in Bhopal, India as a result of an accident at a Union Carbide plant there twenty years ago to the day. “This is the first time in history,” Finisterra told the BBC World host, “that a publicly owned company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it’s the right thing to do.”

When I first saw this interview, I knew that Finisterra was actually Andy Bichlbaum, a member of the anti-corporate/anti-globalization group The Yes Men. I encountered it one day as I was surfing the web while researching a practice known as “culture jamming.” As an avid reader of *Adbusters* magazine, a publication of the anti-consumerism organization Adbusters Media Foundation, I was very familiar with culture jamming in the form of subvertising, where well known advertising campaigns are closely parodied in a way that attempts to critique and subvert the campaign’s original message. While I was not familiar with the many different forms culture jamming could take, I had always found this particular practice, a favorite of activists aligned with a variety of social movements, a curious choice for effecting social change. What Bichlbaum’s performance as a Dow Chemical spokesman on a global news program did, besides leave me awestruck at the audacity of the prank, was raise a host of questions concerning the practicalities and the potential limits of this kind of activism.

As I watched Bichlbaum perform, I was in an ideal position to understand the message the Yes Men were sending with this prank: I knew it as a prank, and had a host of links to news articles and further information on it, its execution, and the Yes Men organization. But this is not always how such culture jamming actions are encountered. Thus, I was struck by a number of questions: How does this prank advance the Yes Men's critique of corporate ethics? Is there a clear critique to begin with? To what degree is it necessary to know that this is a prank to understand its larger significance? What kinds of cultural capital does this prank call on for viewers to be able to understand it? After all, the Yes Men is an activist group that, through culture jamming, attempts to raise critical awareness of a host of issues related to politics, corporate responsibility, and globalization, the latter of which is a main focus of theirs.

The Yes Men's BBC World action will be explored in more detail in chapter two, but I bring it up here for how well it serves to introduce an investigation into culture jamming as activism for social change, a practice of critical theory, and part of a struggle over cultural and ideological hegemony. All of the activists and organizations that serve as case studies here – the Yes Men, the Adbusters Media Foundation, the Billboard Liberation Front, and the Illegal Art exhibit – have as a part of their stated goals to influence people who come into contact with their work in such a way so as to affect their consciousness. The desire is to encourage people to become critical of dominant culture, and the social, legal and economic structures that make up the context within which they go about their daily lives. The central concern of this dissertation is to understand how these activists use culture jamming to bring about change and some of the challenges they face.

This dissertation focuses on culture jamming in the United States during the years 2000 – 2005 and its role as a cultural form challenging a variety of dominant ideologies related to globalization, consumerism, and the political economy of the media. While culture jamming is treated here as springing from, and in dialogue with, earlier artistic and activist moments critical of the status quo, culture jamming's historical location in late capitalism ups the stakes somewhat. Not only can culture jamming be seen as a continuation of a long tradition of cultural criticism, it is a type of activism that is ensconced in a historical moment defined by a culture of consumption to a degree much larger, entrenched and pervasive than any previous. About this "post-industrial" period of history, Fredric Jameson (1991) notes that "late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great nineteenth century analysis, constitutes, on the contrary, the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hither uncommodified areas" (p. 36).

Furthermore, cultural critics have variously commented on the current socio-economic status of the United States as that of a close relationship between corporations and the state, a power relationship that bypasses the general population, the people who are supposed to hold them in check. These people are regarded by corporations *and* the state (i.e., in economic *and* political terms) as consumers as opposed to citizens. As a result, many activists believe corporations are disproportionately out of control with their vast amounts of economic, political and cultural power. Culture jammers identify the locus power at the cultural level and target various methods and channels of communication to disrupt the flow of corporate information manipulation (e.g., managed communication and public relations) and subtle social coercion (e.g., marketing and

advertising) which, from their perspective, benefit corporations over any concern about people or the environment.

Additionally, it will be argued that, to a large degree, culture jamming relies upon similar aesthetic and economic modes of communication as those whom they wish to destabilize. The crucial difference is that the culture jammer's communication operates as a type of counter-spectacle, an alternative which seeks to infuse the larger corporate, mainstream spectacle with meanings aimed at highlighting its perceived nefarious intents and consequences. In tracing the activity of culture jammers, and the response to them by those in traditional positions of power (e.g., corporate media), what will emerge are the various intricate workings of cultural and ideological hegemony, a multifaceted and, at times, contradictory struggle to control and contest symbolic meaning, expose dominant ideologies and alter the dynamics of power in the United States' cultural landscape. As such this dissertation is largely a project in mapping the cultural and ideological terrain in which culture jamming activists operate. Through an analysis of the various culture jamming organizations, their texts, and the veritable counter-spectacle they create, a complex and, at sometimes contradictory, struggle emerges. As critical analysis, this dissertation does not seek to merely explore the role culture jamming may play in the reification of systems of hegemonic domination, but also to explore the fissures that are created through their activism and how activists and others may negotiate and exploit those fissures.

After a brief exploration of some of the more prominent artistic and activist roots of culture jamming, this introduction will explore the concepts that make up culture jamming itself. What is evident is that culture jamming is very heavily engaged in the

hegemonic process, challenging dominant ideologies in its course of encouraging social and/or economic change. This ideological aspect of culture jamming will be tied to an examination of the connections culture jamming has to critical social and cultural theories, which suggests that it can be considered a practice of these theories. According to Douglas Kellner (1989), critical theory "provides criticisms and alternatives to traditional, or mainstream, social theory, philosophy and science, together with a critique of a full range of ideologies from mass culture to religion" (p. 1). He adds that critical theory is concerned with relating theory to politics and the emancipation of the oppressed from domination. As will become evident, culture jamming, much like critical theory, exposes the methods of domination in society as a contribution to bringing about progressive change. However, as a practice that works intimately with the different forms and aesthetic practices (e.g., advertisements, different types of corporate media) that are used primarily to represent and reproduce dominant ideologies, culture jamming can work against its own cause, reinforcing that to which it is actually opposed.

VARIATIONS OF CULTURE JAMMING FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

It has been noted elsewhere that culture jamming has much in common with various movements for change that have preceded it (e.g., Cammaerts, 2007; Carducci, 2006; Downing, 2001; Harold, 2004, 2007; Rumbo, 2002). Particularly, culture jamming's connections to some Dada and Situationist tactics and theories will be considered here. While there are plenty social and artistic movements that challenged and shifted the values or practices of that which they questioned, what makes Dada and the Situationists particularly relevant to culture jamming is the nature and similarity in how they identify and/or approach their practice of critique. In each case, activists associated

with these areas of expression present their frustration with a variety of contemporary issues in ways that are designed to challenge people to think outside of their common perceptions of art, society and culture in an attempt to change the status quo. Dada and the Situationists are also known for having developed some of the practices that would later become associated with culture jamming and are a part of its historical legacy. As such, similar philosophical and political impulses which drove these groups to action and guided their particular activities can be found in modern culture jamming.

As different forms of media made up the means by which Dada and the Situationists sought to challenge the status quo, the rich history of activism through media will also be touched upon. Various types of media, print and electronic, are crucial sites through which each of the culture jamming activists explored in this dissertation offer their ideological positions and urge others towards change. As a part of a vibrant and thriving community of alternative media, culture jamming texts share many of its forms, purposes and goals.

Dada

As an early twentieth century art movement, Dada sought not only to challenge many of the practices and perceptions of art that had become standard (more specifically those of Futurism and Cubism – see Huelsenbeck, 1993, and Tzara, 1993), but also to challenge audiences to question the whole of reality and its constructedness through language in the service of power (Richter, 1964). Coming into being in Switzerland as World War I began to spread across the European continent, the Dada movement appeared in a number of cities around the world, including Paris, Berlin and New York. Those who participated in Dada events were reacting in part to the unprecedented level of

destruction wrought by World War I and, according to Serge Limoine (1987), they sought to create an "anti-art" that would be "directed against Western art, which the Dadaists saw as the highest expression of the culture they abhorred" (p. 11). Dada rejected much that had become established in relation to art, culture and society, and at times slipped perilously close to nihilism in their attempts to develop a language and aesthetic – a mode of expression – that could project frustration with and thus challenge prevailing notions of what makes "art" and, consequently, culture. According to Malcolm Green (1993):

> Like his fellow protagonists, [Dada co-founder Hugo] Ball considered that language had been ravaged beyond all hope by jingoism, literary professionals and journalism. A mortal enemy of intellectual blathering, he believed that the rational and intellectualizing orientation that had produced western philosophy, art, music and religion had turned the word into a base commodity, a tool for upholding the ruling value systems and power structures, and above all such patriotic notions as fatherland, holy war, heroic sacrifice etc. (p. v).

Helen Molesworth (2003) argues that Dada went further than simply challenging prevailing concepts of art. "Dada's strategies of production not only try to render 'art' obsolescent," Molesworth writes, "but also are designed to demolish (or at least challenge) the capitalist-bound terms of labor that go a long way to circumscribe the category of 'life'" (p. 180). In this sense, the work of the Dadaists (both in terms of their labor and the product of that labor) created a series of artistic interventions designed to motivate people to question a whole host of relationships between art, its production and circulation, and thus transform the way life is experienced.

An early influence on Dada, the “readymade” as developed by Marcel Duchamp, would prefigure these artists use of everyday items in their art (Lemoine, 1987). The “ready-made” itself was generally any everyday object merely placed where “art” would normally be displayed. Duchamp’s first readymade was simply a bicycle wheel mounted to a stool, while perhaps his most famous, titled “Fountain,” was a urinal signed “R. Mutt” that he submitted to a 1917 art show. Duchamp explained that the readymade linked “the idea of what makes something aesthetic to mental choice, and not to the skill or talent of the artist’s hand, which is what I objected to in so many painters of my generation” (quoted in Lemoine, 1987, p. 10).

Additionally, in their pursuit to challenge the status quo, those who practiced Dada art infused “chance” into much of their work, which took many forms, from performance, to poetry, to various types of painted and assembled works (e.g., collage, watercolors, engravings, etc). Hans Richter (1964) tells the story of Hans Arp who, being dissatisfied with one of his drawings, “tore it up and let the pieces flutter to the floor” (p. 51). He would later notice the scraps of his drawing strewn about and come to appreciate the pattern that it created, pasting it down to make a new piece. “The conclusion that Dada drew from all this,” Richter writes, “was that chance must be recognized as a new stimulus to artistic creation” (p. 51), and it would enter into other Dada forms, such as performance and poetry.

Together, with the inclusion of art objects that could be found anywhere, Dada works offered positions regarding art that not only moved to erase the boundary between who can and cannot be an artist, but also the boundary between high and low art. This was a move in the direction of the kind of artistic practice that finds transformative value

in the creation of works that borrowed liberally from diverse sources. Walter Benjamin (1969) commented on this facet of Dada's work for its contribution to a movement of art away from the specialized realm of a bourgeois experience:

> Their poems are "word salad" containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language. The same is true of their painting, on which they mounted buttons and tickets. What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded reproductions with the very means of production. (p. 239 – 240)

Similarly, Werner Haftmann (1965) suggests that Dada aimed to influence life beyond art through art, as many of the objects of everyday life became the subjects of a practice which suggested that a better world was possible.

> Dada was the effective…expression of a mighty surge of freedom in which all the values of human existence…were brought into play, and every object, every thought, turned on its head, mocked and misplaced, as an experiment, in order to see what there was behind it, beneath it, against it, mixed up in it: and in order to find out whether our well-known and familiar "Here" was not perhaps complimented by an unknown and wonderful "There." (p. 215).

At the center of Dada practices – performance, poetry, painting – was the desire to create change, to present the world with something *new* in the hopes that it would bring people out of their common experiences of life. Dada "is the bridge to a new pleasure in real things," co-founder Richard Huelsenbeck (1993) told an audience in Germany in 1918. "It is necessarily something new," he continued, "as it stands at the forefront of evolution and the times change with those who have a capacity for being changed" (p.

113). Reciting the Dada manifesto, Tristan Tzara (1993) would summarize it this way: "Liberty: DADA DADA DADA; -- the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and of all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE" (p. 132).

The Situationists

Formed in France in 1957, the Situationist International (SI) was influenced by Dada and Surrealism, combining the artistic techniques developed by those groups with a strong grounding in Marxist conceptualizations of society, capitalism and class struggle. While early Situationist work was primarily artistic, in 1962 the group's focus became overtly political with revolutionary aims (Barnard, 2004). Through a host of practices, the Situationists sought to infuse a radical critique of culture into everyday life in an effort to transform society to one based on freedom and spontaneity rather than domination by a capitalist economic system.

Situationists identified and critiqued what they called the "society of the spectacle," its main feature being the commodification of everyday life by capitalism. An influential figure in theorizing the spectacle, Situationist writer Guy Debord (1994) identified it as resulting from the domination of cultural life by commodity capitalism. For him, the spectacle is comprised of a large number of aspects of daily life, but mainly leisure and entertainment, which are organized around the consumption of images and commodities. For Debord, the consumption of images in particular has become totalizing, and he argues that in the spectacle, "[a]ll that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (p. 12). What is more, Debord sees the spectacle as a force that obscures reality. "What spectacular antagonisms conceal," he writes, "is the unity of poverty…it is

no more than an image of harmony set amidst desolation and dread, at the still center of misfortune" (p. 41).

Situationists argued that our experiences are not of our own choosing but instead are conditioned by the commodification of almost every aspect of our daily lives. The spectacle then compliments the alienation of our productive capacities (as explained by Marx), extending it to areas outside of work (Plant, 1992). The spectacle conceals the nature of human relationships in capitalist society. While the spectacle is not ideology in the terms of a false consciousness, it can be thought of as the material embodiment of a process that seeks to obscure the social conditions of capitalist relations which, in the view of the Situationists (and many of the culture jammers in this study), is based on exploitation. Thus, the Situationists argued that our lives are not of our own making but are in the service of capitalism and its voracious appetite for growth and the conquering of ever new and ever expanding markets. Debord (1994) writes:

> In all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself. (p. 13)

This fundamental aspect to the Situationists' conception of society extends to the domination and alienation that Marx identified in the realm of labor to the cultural field and that had been theorized by Horkheimer and Adorno. And because the Situationists

accused art of being part in parcel with the capitalist driven spectacle, they set out to become an avant-garde that would reunite politics and art to challenge the spectacle (Rasmussen, 2006). Unlike many critical scholars who saw philosophy and art as the cultural space where a revolutionary impulse could be fostered (Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse are just two examples), the Situationists argued against this and asserted that "everyday creativity" (Macdonald, 2006, p. 68) would lead to cultural change. According to the SI, "Revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention; and who have themselves intervened in the spectacle to disrupt and destroy it" (Canjuers & Debord, 1992, p. 310). To meet these ends, the Situationists developed a number of tactics through which they would apply their revolutionary, avant-garde art.

The Situationist tactic that garners the most attention, especially in discussions of culture jamming, is *détournemen*t. This is by far the most popular concept to come out of the movement and is regularly cited as a precursor to modern culture jamming (e.g., Barnard, 2004; Harold, 2007; Klein, 2001; Lasn, 2000). Loosely translated as "diversion" or "subversion" (Plant, 1992), *détournement* for the Situationists was an activity principally aimed at taking an existing cultural text and reworking it to infuse it with critical content. As a tactic linked to revolutionary struggle, Debord (1981a) explained the "methods of *détournement*" in which he argued that the practice, "clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions…cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle" (p. 11). Debord later elaborated on the function of *détournement*, writing in *Internationale Situationist #3* that it is "first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression" (Debord, 1981b, p. 55).

Acknowledging the rich history of parody in the arts, yet suggesting that *détournement* could be another stage in the history of parody, Debord and Gil Wolman (1981) wrote:

> It is therefore necessary to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity. (p. 9)

It is here where the activism of the Situationists sought to directly confront the spectacle by using the spectacle's own language and images against it. As Griel Marcus (1989) explains, "*Détournement* was a politics of subversive quotation, of cutting the vocal chords of every empowered speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated words and pictures diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up" (p. 179). As such, *détournement* for the Situationists was a practice aimed at destabilizing the spectacle through appropriation of the spectacle's own cultural products. It is important to realize, however, that the Situationist's conception of the spectacle was not solely that of images and texts, but also consisted of the underlying social and economic structures that enabled the spectacle. The Situationists were interested in freeing people from what they perceived was a life of enslavement. They sought to encourage people to "live without deadtime" and worked on different strategies – to create situations – that would transform society to a way of living that was free from the confines of the spectacle. Thus, détournement aims at laying the spectacle bare, to exposing the nature of its construction and the conditions of exploitation that it works to hide.

The moment the Situationists are considered to have peaked was in the student uprising in Paris in 1968. It was at this time that the Situationists were at their most visible as a revolutionary organization, but it would quickly pass and give rise to other cultural moments that would dedicate themselves to challenging a host of bourgeois assumptions about life, the arts, and society. The end of the Situationists would also effectively mark the end of the influence of Marxist politics in major social movements of its kind. But after the decline of the Situationists, punk would soon rise, which was in many ways, according to Griel Marcus (1989), a continuation of Situationist and Dada perspectives and challenges to everyday life.

The connections Marcus makes between these cultural movements is based not only on the content of their lamentations about the current cultural climate, but also the kinds of media that they made, their performances (both live and through media representations), publications and music. Like Dada and the Situationists, the punk aesthetic, in whatever form it is encountered, is not aimed at creating a comfortable exchange of ideas. As punks created a new fashion, ripping the artifacts of everyday life from their usual, expected uses, so, too, did they create a new sound from the mainstream of rock and roll, all a part of what Hebdige (2002) calls "self-conscious commentaries on the notions of modernity and taste" (p. 107). Through music, performance, fashion and 'zines, punks continue to contest, to varying degrees, their lived experiences and dissatisfaction with culture, politics and life in general.

Media activism

The use of media for oppositional purposes, entertainment, political or otherwise, has a very rich and detailed history, the exploration of which is not within the scope of

this project but is nonetheless directly related to it in important ways. Usually lumped under the term “alternative” or “radical” media, activist created media has its American roots in the pre-revolutionary pamphlets that argued for the colonies to separate from the British crown. According to David Armstrong (1981), no matter what historical moment it appears, alternative media “serve as the central nervous system in the body politic of the adversary culture. Throughout that culture’s media are transmitted ideas, values and visions that make up the shared language that radicals and dissidents use to communicate with each other and engage the dominant culture in dialogue” (p. 16).

John Downing (2001) identifies five aspects that help to identify what he calls “radical media” and set it apart from the mainstream. Radical media:

- Expand the range of information, reflection, and exchange from the often narrow hegemonic limits of mainstream media discourse.
- Frequently try to be more responsive that the mainstream media to the voices and aspirations of the excluded.
- Do not need to censor themselves in the interests of media moguls, entrenched state power, or religious authority.
- Internal organization is often much more democratic than hierarchical.
- Through their expression, influence the development of culture. (p. 44)

The history of alternative political, cultural, and personal media offers an abundance of examples of individuals and organizations working to create a space within which they express themselves and/or try to effect social change in relation to a vast array of political issues (see, for example, Armstrong, 1989; Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001;

Duncombe, 1997; Peck, 1985). Advances in the technologies of communication have allowed contemporary alternative media producers access to the tools and audiences unimaginable a generation prior. Literally no area of media production has been left untouched by individuals desirous of communicating ideas that challenge the status quo of any number of social or cultural conditions, including on community radio (Barlow, 1988), feminist and blacksploitation cinema (Kuhn, 1982 and Bambara, 1993 respectively), and independent/punk music (Moore, 2007).

Public access television offers just one example of activists taking advantage of media technology in order to challenge dominant modes of production while working to raise critical understandings about them . As explored by Laura Stein (2001), advances in telecommunication technologies made available to the public through local agreements with cable television service providers offered US citizens in the 1980's and 90's the opportunity to augment the content of mainstream media. One program, Paper Tiger Television, stands out for its similarity to some of the culture jamming activities to be explored here, not only with regard to its critical content, but also for how it conceptualized social change: "Developing a critical consciousness about the communications industry is a necessary first step towards democratic control of information resources" (as quoted in Stein, 2001, p. 310). Paper Tiger Television enacted this ethos with programs that were geared toward exploring a host of facets associated with the creation and distribution of mainstream media texts all the while subverting many, if not all, of mainstream aesthetic and production values.

Similarly, in her exploration of what she calls "citizen media," Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) documents instances where average citizens, with varying degrees of

technical sophistication and cultural capital, create media texts. Emboldened by advances in the technologies of media production that have brought such possibilities to those who would otherwise have never interacted with them, contemporary citizens can engage in a media landscape that otherwise works to structure them out. The continuing advancement of the capabilities of personal computers, combined with a number of developments with consumer electronics in general (e.g., video and audio recording equipment, printing and duplicating tools and services, and electronic distribution services through the internet) have increased the scope, reach and technical sophistication of activist media in the 21st century. In fact, all of the culture jamming activists explored here rely to some extent on all of these technologies to get their messages out. According to Rodriguez,

> Citizens' media emerge at the intersection of three elements: the citizens' will to reappropriate the media to satisfy their own needs and to seek their own information and communication goals; a historical, social and cultural context that poses unique obstacles while also offering specific options for the implementation of citizen's media; and citizens' enactment of creative strategies to exploit to exhaustion every fissure in the dominant media system. (p. 164)

As promising as they may be, such advancements should not cloud the reality of barriers to the dissemination of their messages which still exist, access to audiences being a major one. And while technological advancements put more communicative power in the hands of average citizens, this does not mean that the mainstream media have lost their traditional powers. As just one example, the same technology that has allowed for public access programming to be available on one or two cable channels has also allowed

for the expansion of commercial programming to hundreds, even thousands, of channels more.

The present moment: Late capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalization

Such technological advancement in the realm of communications has also been a factor in the rise of late capitalism and the concomitant rise of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology guiding the advancement of that economic system. As Marx has noted, one of the features of capitalism is that, in an effort to stave off the inevitable crises of overproduction, it must expand and conquer new markets. Such an expansion can take many forms and be for different reasons, including finding new resources necessary to increase production and finding larger, and even creating entirely new, markets within which to sell products and services. As David Harvey (1990) notes, since the 1970's, technological advances in the area of telecommunications have allowed for a compression of time and space with regard to world financial markets, ushering in the development of new financial and commodity schemes based on what he calls "flexible accumulation." According to Harvey, flexible accumulation,

> rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation. (p. 147)

Flexible accumulation, Harvey notes, is a move from the more or less modernist mode of production, which emphasized the mass production of uniform products, to one that is more specialized and can focus on niche markets. Such an expansion has also

called for the creation, or at least identification, of much more diverse and unique consumer desires through more aggressive, intrusive and persuasive modes of marketing and advertising. One key aspect here that Harvey identifies as a necessary element of this economic turn, is the increasing speed at which consumption trends would need to turn over, and the scale at which production would need to increase, in order to meet the financial demands and expectations of investors.

This is not just a development in the American practice of capitalism, but has also been exported throughout the world. The economic growth (benefiting some sectors of the population more than others) that results from flexible accumulation has been dependent upon the development of two essential variables: access and control of information that can be distributed and analyzed instantly, and the reorganization of the global financial system. While both have been dependent on technological innovation, the growth they have spurned has also been dependent upon a reconfiguration of how such financial and economic policies should be determined, implemented and enforced. Such an organizing philosophy would come in the form of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a political economic ideology guided by the assertion that all matters of human affairs can be addressed through the free and open functioning of markets (Harvey, 2007). According to Harvey's account in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, up until the 1970s, the main tenets of neoliberalism had been advocated by a minority. Harvey argues that the current influence of neoliberal ideology is the result of a successful attempt by economic elites to regain their class position which had been eroded by social and economic policies that favored (comparatively speaking) workers, consumers, and citizens over business interests. Through an evaluation of economic

policy activity principally in the United States and the United Kingdom, Harvey traces the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant lens through which all economic, financial, and cultural activity is currently understood. According to Harvey, "Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (p. 3).

The project of neoliberalism has spread throughout the world through a host of financial and economic incentives chiefly by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. The former of the two strictly tie economic reforms to their financial aid; any country who borrows money from these institutions is required to meet a host of economic requirements, including the privatization of many, if not all, state owned enterprises (such as utilities). In 1995, The World Trade Organization (explored in more detail in the chapter 1), a political body formed upon the founding principles of the Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and most closely associate with the term "globalization," was formed in an effort to effect some amount of enforcement to global trade rules established by GATT. But the WTO also has the distinction of helping to enforce the notion that the market is the solution to all problems (social or otherwise), and its mission to remove laws or policies that might hinder free trade between countries is evidence of this.

It is within this economic climate that culture jammers operate and work to effect change. While each culture jamming group explored in this dissertation takes issue with different aspects of the impacts of a late-capitalist, neoliberal order on culture, what unites them in action is their particular approach to activism. Contemporary expressions

of globalization, consumerism and corporate media are where these culture jammers identify injustice, exploitation, and inequality and critique their effects in various cultural and political realms.

CULTURE JAMMING

The existing literature on culture jamming is diffuse as there are few texts that devote themselves to a study of culture jamming, or theorize this type of activism, as a primary subject of inquiry (examples of those that do would include, Cammaerts, 2007; Carducci, 2006; Dery, 1993; Harold, 2004, and Harold, 2007). Instead, texts that address culture jamming tend to mention it within their larger explorations of activism, social movements or alternative media (e.g., Downing, 2001; Heath & Potter, 2004; Klein, 2000) or identify it as the kind of practice of a particular activist intervention they are investigating (e.g., Binay, 2005; Haiven, 2007; Liter, 2005; Rumbo, 2002).[1] Furthermore, the vast majority of these texts treat culture jamming mainly as an expression of the anti-consumerism movement; only Downing, Harold, Cammaerts and Dery discuss culture jamming beyond such a confine. In this regard, through my selection of case studies I apply culture jamming to political arenas outside of anti-consumerism, indicating that it is a tactic, as Cammaerts argues, available to "all actors within the political domain" (p. 78).

The striking similarity between all of the texts mentioned above is that they define culture jamming in essentially the same ways; as a practice that insinuates itself within some form of dominant cultural expression in an effort to critique it and promote change. Like Dada, Situationists, and media activists, culture jammers critique a number of social problems with a variety of cultural practices, as indicated by their various relationships to

different movements regarding globalization and consumerism. The term “culture jamming,” coined by the band Negativland (Dery, 1993), refers to a specific type of activity that draws critical attention to the corporate control of society and culture through the activist’s appropriation of mass circulated symbols and texts. The crucial aspect of culture jamming comes in the alteration of those symbols and texts, for it is in this alteration that critique is offered.

In his seminal essay on culture jamming, Mark Dery (1993) argues that culture jammers apply what Umberto Eco calls “semiological guerrilla warfare.” Since receivers of communication have the freedom to decode messages in a number of ways, culture jammers attempt to reconstruct the meaning of mainstream, corporate cultural products through a host of visual and textual methods. Describing the work of culture jammers in a way that harkens to the practice of *détournement*, Dery writes that culture jammers “introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations. Intruding on the intruders, they invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously, they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent” (p. 7). The key aspect of culture jamming then is that it critiques a particular cultural practice through the use of that same cultural practice’s forms, aesthetics, language and/or symbols.

It should be made clear that culture jamming is not a social movement. Social movements are generally defined as a coalition of groups working towards a common goal (Tarrow, 1998). Good examples of social movements include the civil rights and the feminist movements; in both of these movements a large number of different groups worked towards a common cause. Culture jamming is less about a specific grievance or

issue, and more about a particular way of expressing a grievance or issue and challenging the status quo. This is an important distinction. Understanding culture jamming as tool rather than a movement affords it broader potential in terms of its use in fostering social change. It is also through this conception that culture jamming can be identified with a number of different movements, as the groups analyzed in the case studies here are variously associated with the anti-globalization, anti-consumerism and anti-corporate movements. While these movements are by no means mutually exclusive, the different focus of each group explored here shows how versatile a tool culture jamming is for activists who align themselves with a social movement.

Rather than as a social movement, then, culture jamming is a tactic used by activists in what Kale Lasn (1999) describes as a "loose network." This network of activists encompasses a wide range of differing goals and conceptions of culture that are evident in their varied approaches to effecting change. Dery (1993) writes, "Culture jamming ... is directed against an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols" (p. 6). Thus, culture jammers generally (and all of the groups in this study) identify an imbalance of cultural power that favors corporations and the rich. As a result, culture is created and maintained by a power that is outside of our control. Through their positions and action, culture jammers argue that citizens need to reclaim the power to create a culture that better reflects and responds to the society of which it belongs. In this respect, Jesse Hirch (1997) indicates that

> culture jamming is a tactical and strategic approach to progressive change. It is about the synthesis of culture and politics, the combination of love and rage. It

> represents a new environmentalism, a new holism, that incorporates our immediate realities and environments into the struggle for equality, social justice, and democracy.

More often than not, culture jammers suggest that change can come through the reformation of existing laws or policies (such as advocated by the Yes Men and Illegal Art); yet others argue for a more do-it-yourself (DIY), individual approach in the promotion and creation of alternative lifestyles will effect change (such as Adbusters and BLF).

The term "culture" in culture jamming not only indicates that which is being targeted for change, but also that which is being used as a rhetorical vehicle to communicate the reasons for change. As Terry Eagleton (2000) notes, not only is the term "culture" a contested one, but it is a term that has a multitude of definitions. In general, the term "culture" refers to a way of life and a way of living, and as such encompasses various beliefs and practices. A way of life can be analyzed broadly, so as to be applied to large geopolitical regions (e.g., North American culture, Mexican culture, the culture of Los Angeles), it can be applied to identify particular practices (e.g., various business cultures) or narrowed down to refer to smaller, more localized and specific practices, sometimes called "subcultures" (e.g., punk, surfing).

There is no single, monolithic culture that culture jamming addresses. Like culture jammer's goals, which may overlap from group to group, the cultures which are jammed by these activists are various and multiple. Mediated and popular culture, however, relate to culture jamming as they are the primary vehicle through which culture jammers offer their critique. Popular culture is often thought of in relation to its opposite,

that is high, or elite, culture. For the most part, the culture jammers who are the subject of this dissertation communicate their ideas for social change through cultural practices, aesthetics and forms that are generally accepted, widely known and enjoyed by a majority of people. The mediated popular culture they target is also that which culture jammers claim is controlled by corporations. Popular culture is in contrast to high culture, which tends to have a narrow appeal and requires specialized knowledge to understand or partake. This focus on popular culture represents a desire by culture jamming activists to engage directly with a wider public, offering a critique of society and culture through texts that are instantly recognizable and accessible by large numbers of people. This approach is similar to that of Dada, the Situationists and punk as it is a recognition by culture jammers that the possibilities for cultural change reside with the masses, rather than any upper echelon of exclusive or specialized groups. "Culture jamming," Vince Carducci (2006) writes, "reflects a theory of culture as a site of political action" (p. 130).

A number of culture jamming tactics have been identified by various writers. For instance, Dery (1993) identifies four (subvertising, media hoaxing, audio agitprop, and billboard banditry) while Naomi Klein (2000) only identifies one (subvertising).[2] While culture jamming's potential application through practice is limited only by the activist's imagination, the main types of culture jamming tactics used by the groups explored in this analysis include subvertising, billboard banditry and media hoaxing.

Subvertising and billboard banditry

Culture jammers seem to have a particular affinity for wanting to detourn advertisements. Advertising's easily recognizable form, aesthetic strategies, and close relationship to dominant ideologies that attempt to sustain economic and cultural

practices associated with consumerism make them rich linguistic and symbolic playgrounds. The Billboard Liberation Front argues that advertising is where society "form(s) [its] ideas" and that it has replaced traditional sources for people to create their "self definition" (Napier & Thomas, 2001). DeMelle (2001) writes:

> We are constantly bombarded with advertising in today's world. We can't hide from its influence on our society. In order to combat this reality, we must resort to our own imagination and creativity ... People are learning how to confront the advertising giants, and are hacking away at them to weaken their power. (conclusion, ¶ 1)

As such, advertisements are irresistible to those culture jammers who seek to reverse, or otherwise render impotent, their messages with the use of their own symbolic markers. According to an article in Natural Life (www.life.ca), "these communication guerillas attempt to educate people about the dangers of advertising by using the 'enemy's' own resources, and are often very creative and artistic" (Using satire..., 1996).

Subvertising and billboard banditry are two ways culture jammers try to "combat" the influence of advertising on society. Subvertisements are advertisements that have been altered to present products in a different light, often highlighting any negative aspects of the targeted products, their marketing campaigns, or manufacturers. Often these subvertisements look similar to the original product, but have different text, an altered image, or both. *Business Week* notes that subvertisers "break through ... clutter by playing off the powerful messages and icons already out there" (Kuntz, 1998, p. 130). Through *Adbusters* magazine, the Adbusters Media Foundation have built a reputation for producing and disseminating subvertisements. Billboard banditry is similar to

subvertising. It is a practice that alters an existing billboard advertisement to draw attention to the ad in a new, and often oppositional, light. The Billboard Liberation Front is perhaps the most well known organization that practices billboard banditry.

Media Hoaxing

Media hoaxing is a type of prank where a culture jammer either tricks journalists into covering sham events and stories or otherwise tries to interfere with corporate media. According to Dery (1993), "media hoaxing, the fine art of hoodwinking journalists into covering exhaustively researched, elaborately staged deceptions, is culture jamming in its purest form" (¶ 40). Perhaps the most well known of these media hoaxers is Joey Skaggs. Some of his hoaxes have included news coverage of his creation of the Cathouse for Dogs, or "a canine bordello" (Dery, 1993, ¶ 42), and posing as Dr. Joseph Gregor who "convinced UPI and New York's WNBC-TV that hormones extracted from mutant cockroaches could cure arthritis, acne, and nuclear radiation sickness" (Dery, 1993, ¶ 42). Skaggs explains the efficacy of media hoaxing: "I can't call a press conference to talk about how the media has been turned into a government propaganda machine, manipulating us into believing we've got to go to war in the Middle East. But as a jammer, I can go into these issues in the process of revealing a hoax" (Dery, 1993, ¶ 43). The anecdote about the Yes Men's appearance on BBC World that leads this introduction is a more recent example of this tactic in action.

Another kind of media hoaxing involves the creation of copycat websites. These are websites that are intended to look like the official website of a certain person or company but are in fact created by critics. One of the more prominent examples to consider is the site GWBush.com, jointly created by Zack Exley and Yes Men Mike

Bonanno and Bichlbaum. This site (currently unavailable) was created just before George W. Bush's campaign for presidency in 2000 went into full swing. The site was an almost exact copy of Bush's official campaign website, georgewbush.com, except that the content was devised to highlight reasons why Bush should not become president. The site caught the attention of the would-be president who promptly filed a complaint with the Federal Election Commission (he lost) and subsequently told reporters about his position on this website: "There ought to be limits to freedom" (Nethaway, 2000, p. 5F).

Critiques of culture jamming

Culture jamming is far from being a problematic activity and criticisms of culture jamming tend to follow a line of argument that is related to the form of activism that culture jamming represents. One of these types of criticisms suggests that, since it is primarily a rhetorical based form of criticism that does not directly produce alternatives to the status quo, it has limited efficacy or, worse, none at all (Klein, 2000, Harold, 2004, 2007). The main focus of this critique is subvertising, which both Harold and Klein suggest comes too close in form and rhetoric to the object of critique (advertising) to be effective. I also suggest that subvertising, and other forms of culture jamming related to it, threaten to reproduce that which they seeks to critique. But unlike Harold and Klein, I suggest that the context of these tactics is an important aspect to its critique. Rather than only an attempt to uncover some hidden truth that advertising seeks obscure (as Klein and Harold argue), the critique that subvertising, or any of the other culture jamming tactics explored here, makes goes much deeper than that and works best when encountered (and analyzed) within its proper, larger context. While many critiques of culture jamming activity do a fair job of explaining the larger cultural critique of the organizations which

perpetrate them, they fail to ground their analyses within the context of the that critique or (perhaps more importantly) the goals of the organizations who create them. I correct this by grounding my analysis firmly within such contexts.

Other criticisms include the notion that tactics which directly influence the material reality of existing social conditions (including particular types of culture jamming) are more likely to effect change. The three texts most relevant here are written by Max Haiven, Harold, and Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter. The latter differs from the first two mainly because Heath and Potter argue that traditional forms associated with bringing about social change (e.g., participating in/organizing mass protests, lobbying for policy change, working phone banks) are more likely to create change than the more cultural based approach of practices like culture jamming.[4] While Harold does not take this particular approach to critiquing culture jamming activity, her critique, as explained above does include her privileging a form of this practice which interferes at a more material level. In this regard, she upholds the prank and Lawrence Lessig's Creative Commons (the latter much more in line with what Heath and Potter might approve of) as holding out much more possibility for contesting a cultural climate dominated by corporate interests.

Haiven's critique differs from Harold and Heath and Potter because, rather than focus solely on the form of culture jamming critique (in his case the subvertising work of *Adbusters*) he takes issue with its application. He not only takes issue with the AMF's lack of critiquing the capitalist material conditions that create a culture of consumerism (hence why he does not see the work of *Adbusters* as an extension of situationism), but he charges that the AMF is actually complicit in its reification by taking an individualist

approach to social change. Rather than seeing this approach as one that can help to create a groundswell of popular support for social change (which is how I theorize the social potential for culture jamming), he views it as the embodiment of the ideologies of neoliberalism and individualism that are dominant in US culture.

In many ways, all such critiques are evaluating culture jamming as an activist activity that, in and of itself, seeks to change society for the better. This is a view of culture jamming that Vince Carducci (2006) warns against: "Culture jamming," he writes, "has the greatest potential to achieve a useful end as a means in service to larger movements rather than as an end in itself" (p. 134). In this dissertation, I insist on referring to culture jamming as an activist tactic rather than a movement precisely because, on its own, it cannot effect change. It is also why I argue that the larger context of culture jamming activity, linked to critiques that are often found outside of the actual jam, is vitally important when considering what their efficacy might be.

What is more, the analyses of culture jamming which precede this project treat the practice as if it has been frozen in time. While some comment on how culture jamming is a dynamic form of cultural criticism (at least in how it can take different forms), none look at how it is practiced over time. This is unfortunate. In the case of two groups studied here (the AMF and the Yes Men), how they adjusted to feedback and appropriation and changed their approach to culture jamming offers a more complete understanding of how these activist's cultural interventions adapt in an effort to achieve their goals.

Culture jamming in action

What functions as the operating premise of a culture jam for the purpose of this analysis, is the production of a cultural form that, in an effort to bring about a critical reflection on the status quo, plays with what might be taken for granted or expected in an encounter with that form. With their use of widely circulated media texts and forms, culture jammers engage the materials of everyday life in a way that disrupts them. The desired outcome is that an encounter with this form will have an influence on a person's perceptions about the way things are and the way things could or should be. If enough perceptions are changed, culture jammers hope that this will bring about social, cultural and/or economic change.

One of the most distinctive features of culture jamming, and that is central to the analysis in this dissertation, is how, as a practice, it goes about addressing its audience. Culture jamming, by and large, does not directly confront its target of critique. Instead, the critique within culture jamming texts[3] shrouds itself in the very language, symbols and aesthetics of its intended target. Culture jammers, then, rarely present their criticism in a straightforward manner. Instead, viewers of these jams are first confronted by what seems on the surface to be an original, until further inspection reveals it as a copy that is a repudiation of the original. Culture jamming seeks to expose what Roland Barthes (1972) calls myth (his term for ideology) which operates as a "second-order semiological system" (p. 114) in cultural texts. The potentially troubling aspect of some culture jamming practices, however, is that, for the most part, they replicates that second-order system except for a turn of a phrase or of an image that is meant to render the myth transparent. In opposition to myth, which Barthes identifies as "depoliticized speech" (p.

142), culture jamming is political; it is a language that "speaks in order to transform reality and no longer preserve it as an image" (p. 146).

The concept of the spectacle, the domination of life by images, is one avenue that cultural critics have used to describe the condition of contemporary consumer society and media. One way to identify the rise of the spectacle is through the emergence of image-based consumer capitalism, from its beginnings in early 19th century print advertising, to the surging consumer culture of the post war years, to the "revolution" in advertising in the 1960s – when advertising became "hip" (see Frank, 1997). The latter condition is distinct from advertising's earlier tactics, which was less about a product's potential for personal image enhancement and more about emphasizing the use value of that product.

The postmodern theory developed by Jean Baudrillard (2001a, 2001b) is in conversation with Debord, particularly as it relates to how in the spectacle the image has come to dominate how we experience the world. But Baudrillard takes this concept a step further. For Baudrillard, contemporary culture is dominated by simulations. A simulation has no referent in reality; it exists as its own image and so is a part of a "hyperreality" – a world of self-referential signs. As such, the spectacle is a part of the postmodern phenomenon of late capitalism. David Harvey (1990) identifies a number of key features of postmodernism, some of which are worth noting here for how they relate to the spectacle and contextualize how culture jamming works against it. Perhaps most relevant, Harvey notes that postmodernism favors the signified over the signifier, thus giving postmodern expression a depthlessness and a favoring of style over substance. Furthering its depthlessness, the postmodern condition is an ahistorical one. Devoid of connections to reality or to a past history, all that is experienced in a postmodern cultural climate is

fleeting, fragmented and wildly subjective, all of which makes it particularly suitable to manipulation and commodification by the market (Harvey, 1990). These are but a few examples of aspects of a postmodern spectacle that explains how it works to advance a culture defined by consumerism and dominated by images.

As a practice that exposes and critiques dominant ideologies, culture jamming engages in the production of a kind of counter-spectacle. It is similar to the dominant spectacle in that it involves the use of images. But if the spectacle conceals, the counter-spectacle reveals. If the spectacle is a part of a "hyperreality," the counter-spectacle attempts to bind the image (signifier) to its reality (signified). If the spectacle is a reflection of the power of the current economic structure to dominate culture and imagination, the counter-spectacle unravels that domination with a clear demonstration that the texts of cultural producers are not monolithic entities but can be appropriated from below and injected with critical meaning. In this way, the counter-spectacle historicizes a spectacle that otherwise presents itself as devoid of history. "Any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character," Debord writes, "must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*" (p. 14, emphasis in original).

The production of such a counter-spectacle, in the manner that culture jamming approaches it, can be a dangerous game. Even if a culture jammer's intent is to unravel and reveal the superficiality of the spectacle, does not utilizing the aesthetics, language, and tactics of the spectacle to some degree reinforce that particular system of domination? It is not merely a question of, at what point do the oppressed become the oppressors. By engaging in a counter-spectacle, one still relies on the same *method* of

domination that the ruling economic and political order has created. The counter-spectacle then, while infused with libratory and progressive potential, to a certain extent may also reify and reproduce the very system against which it is situated, against which it is fighting. After all, as it takes root in a postmodern cultural condition, this counter-spectacle actively engages in and relies for its efficacy on some of the very aspects of the postmodern condition identified in the chart above, intertextuality being a key one.

Intertextuality, the reference to and connections between different cultural texts, complicates this matter further. What degree of cultural capital is required in order for culture jamming to create a coherently deconstructing counter-spectacle? The counter-spectacle is in direct dialogue with the spectacle and, if the former is going to work, it is going to require a certain level of cultural knowledge on the part of the viewer to be able to mark the differences and identify the critique. This is important because it has ideological implications. If a viewer is not familiar with the originating text, how can that viewer understand the culture jammer's subversion of it? The spectacle is successful precisely because it does not require previous knowledge. The counter-spectacle not only requires previous knowledge, but a deeper understanding of the practices and production processes being critiqued as well as a basic media literacy that includes an understanding of how cultural texts are produced and circulated.

Therefore, it is important to locate culture jamming within a history of critical social theory encompassing capitalism, consumer society and the media. Does culture jamming in general operate as a tactic that puts critical cultural theory into practice? If so, through what aesthetic, discursive and rhetorical methods does it accomplish this? And how is the practice of culture jamming a negotiation of the cultural and capitalist moment

in which it is located, including its relationship to dominant/mainstream aesthetics and modes of production? All of the above questions necessarily raise the issues of ideological struggle and hegemony. The sometimes contradictory practice of culture jamming is a perfect place to observe the hegemonic process in action: How, through their activity, do culture jammers negotiate dominant ideologies and, on the flip side, how do the mainstream, corporate media negotiate the ideological work of these activists? This dissertation seeks to address how the practice of culture jamming, commonly understood as a culturally progressive activity (Cammaerts, 2007), can also work to reinforce the very ideologies and practices it seeks to subvert.[5]

While some culture jammers have goals that fall nothing short of a total transformation of cultural and/or economic systems, their activity is first aimed at fostering a change in consciousness and thereby creating (and maintaining) a community of people who will support, lobby and/or work as activists for change. Approached at this level, culture jamming is an ideological project as it aims to transform, in the instances presented here at least, our understanding of the way culture and economics work. As such, this is a kind of activism that directly engages in the hegemonic process, offering a slew of moments which are intended to prompt audiences to reflect on the reasons why society and culture are structured as they are and operate as they do. Culture jams also suggest that the cultural and economic status quo is not in the best interest of a society of consumers and/or citizens, asking audiences to call up and question various ideologies that sustain current cultural and economic systems. What then becomes of utmost importance to the success of the jam is that numerous people “get it,” begin to change their minds about the issue at hand, and act on behalf of social change.

Studies on culture jamming to date have not explored the ideological dimensions of the practice. The rhetorical aspects (e.g., Harold, 2004, 2007), tactical strategies (e.g., Heath & Potter, 2004; Klein, 2000), and theoretical underpinnings (e.g., Haiven, 2007) of culture jamming have been addressed. This dissertation builds on and departs from previous research on culture jamming to conceptualize and analyze the practice as one that challenges dominant ideologies associated with various institutions and cultural practices. This ideological dimension then becomes a central frame through which the tactics of the culture jammers studied here is evaluated.

CONNECTIONS: CRITICAL THEORY, IDEOLOGY AND CULTURE JAMMING

On the surface, the connection between critical theory and culture jamming is evident in the critical position culture jammers take toward corporate practices, culture, and communication. However, culture jamming's connection to critical theory goes much deeper. In fact, it goes to the heart of critical social, political economic and media theory, including struggles over ideological and cultural hegemony. A rich history of critical theory has aimed to highlight aspects of domination, exploitation and injustice which occur within stratified societies, and between stratified nations, mainly as a consequence of economic disparities that create and maintain unequal levels of social and cultural power. Many scholars in a number of disciplines have followed the pioneering criticisms of capitalism offered by Karl Marx to explore how different areas of social life related to the economy, the state, and other institutions intertwine to influence how society and culture function.

While culture jammers may not explicitly make, or even welcome, being connected to critical theory, the connection is hard to ignore for the degrees to which the

practice of culture jamming validates decades of theoretical and empirical research developed within critical/cultural studies. On the flip side, an awareness of the difficulties inherent in economic, cultural and ideological struggles identified by critical/cultural studies can illuminate unexplored avenues of incursion into dominant power structures that culture jammers have yet to address in their practices.

My point here is not to say that culture jammers have much learn from critical and cultural theory. Judging by their rhetoric and actions they already (though perhaps unconsciously) evince a critical position. Instead I wish to identify the ways in which the practice of culture jamming might help to reinforce dominant power structures and ideologies, rather than destabilize them. Much of the literature on contemporary resistant cultural movements in general, including culture jamming, tends to be celebratory (Hamilton, 2000). These resistant cultural practices are certainly welcomed by progressive activists and other scholars, especially in the midst of a current of neoliberalism sweeping culture and the state. However, these celebrations have tended to overlook the ways in which the practices of cultural activists might participate in their own repression and the reproduction of some of the structures and ideologies they seek to destabilize. Critical and cultural theories of society and the media are possible avenues to understanding this relationship and how it can be negotiated to further the culture jammers' goal of realizing a progressive and/or egalitarian cultural, political and economic environment.

At the heart of any activist endeavor is a desire to change society or some aspect of it which is unsatisfactory. The reasons for this can vary from socially and politically conservative to progressive, but in each instance one basic underlying strategy an activist

must employ is the same: to challenge people's notions about what is considered a right, good or desirable course of action in order to raise awareness and create change. In this sense, an activist's call for change becomes an ideological struggle as they challenge basic values, some which are deeply ingrained in the cultural and/or economic spheres of life, in an effort to upend them. Activists can take very different approaches to this fundamental premise of social change, but no matter the level at which they seek to effect change (e.g., institutional or personal), through their efforts to convince others that one course of action is more desirable than another, ideology is engaged. Thus, much of the work of culture jamming operates at an ideological level, as activists work to illuminate aspects of dominant ideology which they argue are not in the best interests of the vast majority of people.

The term "ideology" has been hotly debated and has quite a number of definitions, so it is necessary to be clear about how it is to be conceptualized in this analysis. I take a rather broad approach to the concept of ideology, including accounts for how ideologies form, reproduce and circulate. As an analysis of ideological struggle is central to this project, keys aspects of various theoretical approaches to ideology will be explored here. Because of the complexity of the concept of ideology, and the complexity of the work of culture jammers, I will focus on those aspects of other scholar's ideological theory which are most pertinent to an understanding of culture jamming and most agreed upon by critical scholars today. As Terry Eagleton (1991) wrote about ideology, "to try to compress [ideology's] wealth of meaning into a single comprehensive definition would…be unhelpful even if it were possible" (p. 1).

At its core, ideologies are beliefs that inform our conceptions of what is good, right and desirable. As such, there any number of ideologies that inform individual, social and cultural behaviors. Some of these ideologies become dominant, either because they are popularly held or are otherwise strengthened by their association to power structures (i.e., governments or other repressive social apparatuses). It is then through the structures and practices of various institutions that ideological positions are expressed and reproduced. Accordingly, ideologies do not form in a vacuum and instead tend to be a reflection of the social reality within which we operate our daily lives.

Earlier conceptions of ideology notwithstanding, perhaps the most influential figure to address the topic was Karl Marx. Marx is the philosopher most closely associated with critical theory, and his body of work has inspired and influenced more than a century and a half of critical, cultural and economic theories of society, many political parties and even a handful of revolutions. Written in the mid 1800's, Marx's work is mainly concerned with understanding the social and economic relationships between classes in capitalist society. Marx identifies a number of features of the capitalist economic system that contributes to the exploitation of a working class (proletariat) by a capitalist class (bourgeoisie). While Marx's writings on ideology are quite limited, scholars have used his and Frederick Engles' discussion on the topic where addressed as important foundational points in understanding the connections between the ideas we have in our minds and the world we live in. In this regard, there are two key aspects to Marx's conception of ideology that are important here: its connection to material conditions and its function of masking an exploitative structure of economic producction.

Marx is widely identified by the maxim that he "turned Hegel on his head," and the reason behind this phrase is vitally important to understanding a materialist conception of ideology. For Hegel, our relationship to the world is an idealist one in that the ideas in our heads are what shape the world around us. Marx, however, takes an opposite approach, positing a materialist understanding of our relationship to the world outside our minds; it is the world that we live in that shapes the ideas in our heads. As Marx and Engels (1978) wrote in *The German Ideology*, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (p. 155).

Equally important for Marx is that, as human beings, we create the world around us through our labor; we are a productive species, though what separates us from other beings is our consciousness. Thus, our labor is a conscious activity. And it is through our labor that we first transform nature in order to survive. Since our labor constructs the material world around us, and the material world around us shapes the ideas in our heads, it is the practice of our labor that helps to determine (this divisive term will be addressed in a moment) how we understand the world around us. But in order to develop a theory of the connection between the world we produce and the ideas in our heads, Marx needed to understand our practice of labor. This is what *Captial* set out to accomplish, understanding the structure of capitalism and the relationship between classes, their material conditions, and their consciousness (Larrain, 1979). To radically summarize the multi-volume work that is *Capital*, what Marx found in his analysis was a system filled with contradictions, the most important being the exploitation of the labor power of one class (the proletariat) by another (the bourgeoisie).

For Marx, ideology is a way of understanding how contradictions can exist without being resolved. For if material conditions are what shape our consciousness, and the material conditions under capitalism are defined by exploitation, why would the proletariat continue to work under such conditions? Ideology is one way to explain why; Marx argues that ideology works in our minds to resolve contradictions that exist in the material world, in what he called "false conscsiousness." So any contradictions that cannot be resolve in real life find their resolution in ideology without having to change or challenge the material conditions of capitalism. Obviously this benefits the dominant class, as ideology sustains a system that operates in their interests.

In order for such a system to be sustained, however, ideologies must be reproduced throughout society. Louis Althusser (1971) notes that in order for a social formation to exist, it must reproduce the "productive forces" and the "existing relations of production" (p. 128). Althusser argues that such a condition continues because of the functioning of the "ideological state apparatus," those institutions which help to reinforce dominant ideologies that reproduce the social conditions necessary to maintain the status quo. Among these are schools, religious institutions, legal and political systems, and the media (p. 143).

Considering the role of the media in regard to ideology necessarily involves a discussion of the culture industries and the critique of the ideological dimensions of everything from their production practices to the content and the reception of their texts. Much of the influence of this strand of critical theory is associated with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2000) and a chapter of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* titled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Horkheimer and Adorno

were members of the Institute for Social Research, also known as the Frankfurt School. While founded in Germany, many members of this group of Marxist philosophers, Horkheimer and Adorno among them, immigrated to the United States in the 1930s where they wrote some of their most influential critical theory.

Horkheimer and Adorno begin *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by noting that the Enlightenment, which was intended to emancipate society from domination by the church, has instead become a new dominating force. The opening sentences of their book set the tone: “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened Earth radiates disaster triumphant” (p. 3). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Enlightenment was an age of questioning and criticism of established ideologies, which were dominated by religious thought and institutions. But, they argue, this critical aspect of Enlightenment has been lost because of scientific rationalization and “blindly pragmatized thought” (p. xiii). In essence, these critics argue that humans have lost their ability to critically assess and question their world. Instead of being a vehicle to challenge the standard view, enlightened thought has become the standard view, a way of thinking that simply accepts the status quo. Scientific rationalization, combined with the demands of capitalism, has created a society interested in dominating and controlling nature. As a result, science, technology and capitalism end up dominating and controlling society and people as well.

Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that what has evolved through Enlightenment is a civilization in which the productive capacity of society is used to maintain the power of people in control of the means of production. They write:

> The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. (p. xiv)

It is here that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the mass media, or what they term the "culture industry," becomes relevant. Written in the 1940s during the rise of the mass media and a burgeoning consumer society, the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" argues that the mass media do assert some level of social control. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the same process of mass production that brings standardized and homogenized products to the market is also at work in the mass media. In effect, this gives rise to a "mass-produced culture" (Kellner, 1989, p. 130). As Douglas Kellner (1989) explains, for these philosophers, culture was supposed to be "opposed to industry and expressive of individual creativity" but instead "culture has come to function as a mode of ideological domination rather than humanization or emancipation" (p. 131). As mass-produced commodities, the products of the culture industry similarly homogenize the public mind as a reflection of the products they produce. In this sense, capitalist production promotes ideological standardization, homogenization and conformity. Adorno and Horkheimer termed this "totalitarian capitalism." Kellner (2001) writes:

> Thus, the Frankfurt School theory of "the culture industries" articulates a major historical shift to an era in which mass consumption and culture was indispensable to producing a consumer society based on homogenous needs and

> desires for mass-produced products and a mass society based on social organization and homogeneity. (¶ 9)

Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industries helps to explain how capitalist society reproduces itself and keeps revolutions from happening; the culture industries are a powerful instrument of social control under the auspices of ruling political and economic forces. It is this determinist aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis that has drawn the most attention and, consequently, the most criticism. Many critics have pointed out that a simple bottom up theory of cultural and ideological domination does not account for the complicated performance of cultural and ideological power in society. Such a conception of a determinist relationship between culture and economic forces was addressed and significantly revised by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci's (1971) reworking of Marx's conception of base and superstructure is essential to his theory of ideology. Gramsci argued that, rather than a one-way flow of ideology from base to superstructure, there was a necessary reciprocity between the two: The one-way flow would suggest an element of force is in play, when, for a social structure to be stable, there must be a level of consent from the dominated. This means that, in a very real way, the subordinate sectors of society must see their interests reflected in the dominant. Eagleton (1991) suggests that hegemony is not ideology per se, but that ideology is a fundamental part of the hegemonic process. So the struggle for hegemony is the struggle between competing ideologies. The dominant order can effect force through various social institutions (the judiciary, for example). The dominant order

can win consent from the masses through various means. What is also key is that there are a wide range of institutions involved, both state and private.

The most important aspect of hegemony, however, is that it is a process in which ideologies compete to become dominant. In this regard Rayomond Williams (1977) asserts that hegemony is a

> complex of experiences, relationships and activities with specific and changing pressures and limits...It does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. (p. 112)

The result is a very dynamic process of opposition, incorporation, domination and subordination. The strength of the dominant, then, is in its ability to use the ISAs to convince the masses that it is operating in their best interests and for the masses to act accordingly. This is why Williams insists we refer to “the dominant” rather than “dominance” (p. 113) because cultural and/or ideological hegemony is never total or exclusive. What Williams describes then is a process wherein the dominant changes along the lines of what Gramsci (1971) referred to as a “war of position” (p. 229). Gramsci uses this analogy to express the idea that, in a war of position, advancing troops will move forward a little at a time, perhaps even retreating before advancing again, in a trench style war. This is in contrast to a “war of maneuver” (p. 233) when an advancing army will, in effect, blitz the enemy, taking over in one swift move.

Like Gramsci and Williams, Stuart Hall (1996) challenges the base/superstructure model offered by such critical theorists as Adorno, Horkheimer and even Marx, by

problematizing the notion of ideology which had been circulating among theorists following Marx's initial writings on the subject. Hall critiques several aspects of the classical Marxist conception of ideology, namely its structural premise and the fixity of the dominant relationship of the economic over the ideological. From this, Hall questions the notion that ideology is a type of "false consciousness," as classical Marxism has alternatively termed it. Ultimately, Hall argues that this conception of ideology fails to account for subversive ideas and ideological struggle. In other words, a classically Marxist conception of ideology does not give enough attention to the complexity of culture or human thought. According to Hall, "Marx's model of ideology has to be criticized because it did not conceptualize the social formation as a determinate complex formation, composed of different practices, but as a simple structure" (p. 29).

For Hall, ideology is a complex of many factors – "languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" (p. 26). He ultimately argues that placing the locus of ideological formation in any deterministic way (particularly in terms of economic determinacy) is a mistake. To argue that there is a predictable relationship between ideology (or even that there is a monolithic ideology) and an economic base ignores the fact that culture is comprised of a variety of social formations (dominant, subversive and everything in between), with their own ways of understanding the world. Hall argues for a conception of the determinacy of the economic base on ideology in terms of limits rather than as a direct influence. He writes:

> Understanding "determinancy" in terms of setting of limits, the establishment of parameters, the defining of the space of operations, the concrete conditions of existence, the "givenness" of social practices, rather than in terms of absolute predictability of particular outcomes, is the only basis of a "Marxism without final guarantees." It establishes the open horizon of Marxist theorizing – determinancy without guaranteed closures. (p. 45)

The influences of Gramsci's and Althusser's theories of ideology on Hall are clear. But taken together there is a kind of circularity. If, as Gramsci argues, the key to a successful challenge of the dominant is through a war of position, and if, as Hall argues, the dominant generally sets the limits of the cultural circulation of ideology, it seems that any effort at change will go nowhere very slowly. Perhaps this is a rather pessimistic attitude on my part. While I do not disagree with Hall's position that there is no guarantee in the determination of ideological positions, I tend to put the emphasis on his notion that there is a "setting of limits." It is important to note, however, that while limits might be set, this does not keep resistance from happening.

To use a concrete example in the current political climate (which has a very strong history), one of these "limits" to ideological challenge in consumer society in North America is the notion that capitalism, currently in its neoliberal form, is the only, and best, way to run an economy. In some cases, ideological positions that come from outside the capitalist milieu (i.e., communism, socialism) are promptly deflected as if a part of a war of maneuver (i.e., outright revolution), either through political intimidation or marginalization to the point of obscurity (i.e., they are summarily ignored by everyone). Ideological limits can also be considered as they relate to the organizations

and activists that make up this study of culture jamming. In each case the underlying economic structure of capitalism is not considered to be contributing to the problem; the culture jammers focused on in this study do not explore alternative economic approaches to solving the problems they identify. That these groups adhere to the ideological limits set around the concept of capitalism, it is not so surprising that these organizations represent some of the most visible culture jammers (at least in terms of media exposure). Thus, while it might be prudent for critical theorists to problematize the power of economic determinism, the power of capitalism as a force in organizing and maintaining the hegemony of dominant ideologies should not be underestimated. It is apparent that a vast majority of people, either in or without power, now see the neoliberal practice of capitalism as in their best interests.

So how does a society overcome a dominant ideology that is argued by activists to be detrimental? Many thinkers, particularly those who have held a negative connotation of ideology (e.g., Hegel , Antoine Destutt deTracy, Paul Henri Holbech) have suggested a host of intellectual pursuits that could work against it, including science, philosophy and education in general (Larrain, 1979). Since Marx argued that ideology was a product of the material conditions of society, for him only a revolutionary change in those conditions could combat the problem of ideology. But Marx also argued that revolution would not come about without the formation of a class consciousness. In this regard, what is necessary is that is that there is a move from a class in itself, to a class for itself. The former is a condition where individuals do not see their common class interests. “In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants,” Marx (1977) wrote of the French living under the second Bonaparte, “and the identity of

their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class" (p. 317 – 318). A class for itself, however, is a class consciousness that goes beyond knowing what is true or seeing beyond a veil of distortion, but of recognizing a common position in society that is based on domination and exploitation. So what needs to happen before revolution is that a class consciousness needs to be fostered. Thus enters Gramsci's "organic intellectual."

According to Gramsci, the organic intellectual aims to bridge connections between philosophy and everyday life, between theory and practice. Gramsci (1971) argued that "everyone is a philosopher" (p. 330), suggesting that the everyday worldviews of the average individual have more of a chance in effecting change than more lofty philosophical endeavors, and so fostering, or seeing, critical thinking as already a part of the masses was of upmost importance. "For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world," Gramsci (1971) wrote, "is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of a small groups of intellectuals" (p. 325). Those who would encourage this kind of critical thinking were "organic intellectuals," people from amongst the ranks of the dispossessed (in Gramsci's case, the proletariat) who take a leadership position. For Gramsci it does not matter from which occupation organic intellectuals derive their identity, but that they work to bring cohesion to a social or political bloc in order to unite theory and practice to undo the constraints and injustices of what Williams calls the dominant.

It will become clear that the culture jammers discussed in this project make up a constituency of a variant of Gramsci's organic intellectual. While not dedicated to raising

class consciousness per se, these are activists who, through differing culture jamming practices, challenge a range of dominant ideologies as they work to bring about a critical consciousness that will lead to progressive social change. In each case, the hegemonic process is in play: Culture jammers identify the material grounding of dominant ideology through the practices and cultural products of state and private entities. In some cases, the limits to ideological challenge become clear through various moments when the activists' incursions into the dominant are co-opted, reframed by media attention or, perhaps more limiting, ignored all together. Sometimes the nature of culture jamming practices themselves lend to this outcome. As this analysis will show, culture jammers are constantly adjusting their practices, in some cases in an attempt to avoid appropriation (e.g., *Adbusters*' use of subvertising), and other times in an attempt to reach a certain goal (e.g., the Yes Men working to create "realizations" about the harms of current globalization policy).

All of the culture jamming groups and activists explored in this analysis aim to reclaim cultural power from private interests (invariably identified as the modern corporation). The common assumption is that corporate interests, which have come to dominate the economic and cultural spheres of life, are detrimental to the lives of everyday citizens who fall under their control. The activists identified in this volume use culture jamming as a tool to critique the ideologies behind dominant cultural and economic practices as a means to create, and also sustain, a collective consciousness that will work for change. How these groups go about this task, and the challenges they face, is the subject of the analysis that follows.

A NOTE ON METHOD

Through a rhetorical, semiotic and, ultimately, ideological analysis, what will be argued here is that the tactics of culture jammers are very much a praxis of critical social theory. The AMF, the Yes Men, the Billboard Liberation Front, and the Illegal Art exhibit comprise the culture jamming groups in this study and are presented here, not for comparative purposes, but because they are the most prominent examples from a much larger field of activism. Consequently, they offer the best opportunity, especially in terms of finding resources, to explore this rich tactic. The primary sources for this analysis, then, come from the texts produced by and about these culture jamming groups.

Texts for the Yes Men come mainly from two different sources, the Yes Men themselves and the Lexis/Nexis database. The Yes Men's website (www.theyesmen.org) has extensive archives in which the activists involved have chronicled their actions and written about their goals, expectations, and results of all of their major pranks. One page on the website provides a list of links to news articles written about them and their actions in a variety of publications and websites around the world. In each case I chose texts that referred directly to the action/event that I included for analysis. The film *The Yes Men,* and the companion book, also became sources for the Yes Men's own thoughts on their mission and actions. Texts on the Yes Men and their actions from outside sources were found through a search of the Lexis/Nexis database. The search terms used to find articles included "Yes Men" and the location of their actions (e.g., Tampere, BBC World) and were limited to between the years 2000 – 2005. I was also fortunate to personally interview one member of the Yes Men, Andy Bichlbaum. I have IRB approval and

followed the organization's guidelines to protect his identity, which is enhanced by the fact that the name he gives in connection to the Yes Men is a pseudonym.

The AMF is perhaps the most well known of the culture jamming organizations included for study in this dissertation. It is also the most prolific in terms of the output of printed material produced (a bi-monthly magazine plus additional web content) and has garnered quite a bit of media attention. One source of texts from the AMF is the bi-monthly magazine *Adbusters* from the years 2000 – 2005. These magazines are from my own library, as I have been subscribing to the magazine since 1999. I looked at each magazine in whole to draw on the more general issues they address, as well as to get a sense of their approach to culture jamming. I focus, however, on texts related specifically to subvertising and the Blackspot campaign. Writings about the AMF, *Adbusters*, and the Blackspot campaign from outside sources came from a Lexis/Nexis search using the terms "Adbusters" and "Blackspot," limited to the years 2000 – 2005.

The BLF and Illegal Art exhibit proved to be the most difficult to find material written about. Searches on Lexis/Nexis provided very limited results (using their names as search terms), so in these cases I also did a Google search to find other material on the web that might have been written about them. Texts were chosen from the Google search for their relevance to the two group's culture jamming activity. Mostly, however, information about these two cases came primarily from their own websites. Not only does the BLF website provide a number of member-written texts about the organization and it's philosophy (e.g., a manifesto, a document on how to do billboard liberations), the group provides web pages dedicated to each of their actions which include a press release on the action and links to press coverage when available. Likewise, the Illegal Art

exhibit website contains descriptive materials related to the different works of art and links to artist's websites when available. An additional text used in my analysis of the Illegal Art exhibit is the "Copyright" issue of *Stay Free!* magazine, which was available at the touring exhibit as a companion piece and guide to the artwork.

The dates from which these materials are culled span over five years: 2000 – 2005. There are a number of reasons for choosing this frame of time. For one, it is a time when these groups produced considerable culture jamming material, thereby facilitating my search for texts by them and about them. The five years from 2000 to 2005 also represent a time ripe with ideological ferment. For example, with the heavily publicized World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, the issue of international trade became a hot one for activists and the general public in the ensuing years. This was especially so with subsequent protests at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund conventions in Washington, DC and Geneva Switzerland, respectively. Both of those protests were heavily covered by the press and were often compared, by the press and activists alike, to the 1999 WTO protests. These issues would be compounded with the heavily contested U.S. presidential elections in 2000 and 2004. This is to say nothing of the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which continue as of this writing.

While these events do not encompass topics for analysis raised by culture jammers, they do serve as an important sociopolitical context within which culture jammers are operating and, to a very large degree, are in dialogue. Other contextual issues of note include the corporate control of information (both politically and economically) and the rise of global consumer capitalism. All of the contextual issues

mentioned above intertwine and together comprise core issues that concern contemporary U.S. culture jammers and become the target of their collective actions.

CHAPTER MAP

The case studies that follow engage the issues explored above in turn, through analyses of the various materials (textual and otherwise) produced by the Yes Men, the AMF, the BLF, and as a part of the Illegal Art exhibit. Thus, chapters one through three follow a similar structure in how I present each of these groups and the issues they address. After a discussion of the main subject of the group's critique (e.g., globalization, consumerism, etc.), background information on the group and how it explains its purpose are explored to elucidate the main threads of their critique. This leads to an understanding of the goals toward which the group are applying its culture jamming techniques. I then turn to the examination of that group's culture jamming texts, evaluating how they relate to critical theory and demonstrate and engage in ideological struggle, while also considering some of their limitations and drawbacks.

The culture jamming activity of the anti-globalization group the Yes Men is the subject of chapter 2. The Yes Men, comprised primarily of two members, Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonano, are anti-globalization activists who impersonate World Trade Organization (WTO) representatives at economic conferences and events throughout the world. In 1999, in solidarity with the Seattle WTO protests, Bichlbaum and Bonano created the website www.gatt.org which is an almost exact copy of the WTO's official website except with information critical of the WTO and current globalization policies and practices. The fake website fooled a number of conference planners who contacted the Yes Men asking if a representative would come to speak at

their events. The Yes Men were more than happy to attend, giving presentations wherein they would make outrageous claims based on the tenets of globalization taken to their logical extreme. Their creation of a fake Dow website, www.dowethics.com, is what led to Bichlbaum's appearance on BBC World.

Of the culture jamming material the Yes Men have produced, I analyze four lecture-based presentations and two media hoaxes, all within the context of their group's expectations and goals. The central questions guiding this analysis seek to understand how their particular strategies engage a criticism of dominant globalization ideology while also being a practice of critical theory. How do the Yes Men articulate their goals and what particular methods to they take to present their critique? In light of some of the reactions to their work, viewed through the Yes Men's own observations, what aspects of their actions can limit the realization of their goals? And since they engage their activity in a variety of contexts (e.g., lectures, on live television), what further implications does the context present? The Yes Men adjust how they address their audiences in response to the audience reactions they get. The resulting evolution of their tactics illuminates the challenges inherent in such an approach to activism.

Like that of the Yes Men, the evolution of the AMF's culture jamming, primarily through *Adbusters* magazine, offers an opportunity to see how the AMF has shifted its tactics over time in an effort to provide the strongest critique of consumerism it could. Chapter two then takes up the major culture jamming activities of the AMF and how it challenges dominant notions of consumerism and work to subvert the kinds of behaviors (both corporate and individual) it fosters. As AMF co-founder Kale Lasn's book *Culture Jam* (1999) offers clear insight into the AMF's conception of consumerism, my analysis

of it is used to draw connections to critical theory on the very same subject. Included in this exploration of *Culture Jam* is a look at how Lasn defines culture jamming and the techniques he argues will lead to a revolution in the realm of cultural production and representation in the United States.

Of the AMF's culture jamming techniques focused on here, one concerns the organization's use of subvertising and its evolution from a relatively straightforward presentation of critique (what I call "traditional subvertising") to one that becomes more esoteric and demanding on the part of the reader to make the connections necessary for critique to be understood (what I call "neo-subvertising"). This transition occurs along with other shifts in how the AMF approaches its challenge to consumerism within the pages of *Adbusters* magazine and in the market of consumer goods, in this case the introduction of the Blackspot campaign which led to the release of a Converse All Star-style sneaker called the Blackspot sneaker. I am interested here in understanding how both subvertising and Blackspot (the sneaker and the larger campaign that surrounds it) operate to challenge a number of ideologies, not only associated with the dominant practice of consumerism, but also in relation to the AMF's larger critique of it. In this respect, how does the culture jamming activity of the AMF operationalize their critique? As this activity mimics closer and closer to the aesthetic form of the subject of their critique, what are some of the dangers that confront the AMF's message about consumerism? Because these culture jamming activities copy the formal properties of that which they critique (corporate advertisements and the Converse sneaker more specifically), I theorize how consumer capitalism can structure its own critique.

While corporate media are involved in both the Yes Men and AMF's culture jamming in a number of different ways, in chapter three the focus turns to groups that directly challenge the practices and policies of corporate media industry in the United States: The Billboard Liberation Front and the Illegal Art exhibit. The Billboard Liberation Front is comprised of San Francisco activists who scale billboards around the Bay Area with the intent to alter the advertisements that appear on them. While the resulting alterations of the billboards represent another form of subvertising, the reasons that the BLF gives for engaging in these "liberations" reflect some of the reasons posed by critical political economists of the dangers of concentrated, conglomerate media structures. Through some measure of sarcasm, the BLF articulates a desire for a more equitable playing field in the realm of mass communication (the billboard, specifically) as it relates to the social, cultural and political power it affords those who can use it.

The main challenge that faces the dissemination of the BLF's criticism of the media industry is very similar to the other culture jammers above. It is a bit more pronounced for the BLF, however, as their critique of the corporate domination of mass communication rarely, if ever, appears in the liberations themselves; Their critique is inscribed in the performance of the liberation (climbing on the billboard in order to alter the message there), but not the text of the liberation (the jammed advertisement itself). There is extensive information available on the BLF's website, including a manifesto and an extensive "how to" document with detailed tips on how to practice billboard liberation, but the BLF relies on media coverage of their organization and their actions for opportunities to explain what they do and why they do it.

The Illegal Art exhibit is not a culture jamming group per se, but instead a collection of works from artists who directly appropriate copyrighted material. While the Illegal Art exhibit, the other culture jamming organization explored in chapter three, has toured a number of cities across the nation, there is also a permanent exhibit online at www.illegal-art.org. Intellectual property laws can, according to critics, stifle cultural innovation and criticism. Many of the works on display in Illegal Art have run afoul of corporations who own the copyright to images that appear in them, or have been censored (or censored themselves) out of a fear of legal threats from copyright owners. Of interest in regards to the Illegal Art exhibit is how the artwork, and exhibit materials that explain them, work to provide a critique of culture and/or intellectual property.

The central concern for both the BLF and Illegal Art is their reliance on third party sources to help get their critique out to a larger audience. Through an analysis of the primary texts of both of these groups, it is clear that their culture jamming embodies many of the tenets of critical theory, particularly as they relate to the political economy of the media. Thus, questions guiding the exploration of the practice of billboard liberation and the display of "illegal art" seek to address how the mainstream media structures and limits these culture jammer's actions. In what ways do the BLF and Illegal Art exhibit critique the policies and practices of the media with their texts? How do other texts these groups write (e.g., press releases, articles), and texts written by third party sources (e.g., journalists) factor into the clarity of their critiques?

My conclusion draws the major threads that unite all of the culture jamming activities above in terms of both their limits and their possibilities. While acknowledging the limits that I identify in my analysis, I also reinforce the notion that culture jamming

does offer a serious challenge to dominant ideology. Furthermore, I argue that culture jamming cannot be considered only in so far as it serves as a tactic to change people's minds, but must also be understood for the function it can serve as culture jamming texts circulates throughout activist communities. In this regard, culture jamming can have strong motivational qualities while reinforcing, challenging, and shaping the development of the movements within which these activities and texts might circulate. In this regard, this dissertation follows the suggestion of Max Haiven (2007), who argues that research on culture jamming should not focus on how the tactic "can forge a revolutionary strategy" but should assess where "culture jamming tactics become useful in an overall struggle for social change" (p. 106).

NOTES

[1] Curiously, each of the authors identified for this last type of literature has *Adbusters* as a subject of their analysis. Not only does this show how visible *Adbusters* magazine and the Adbusters Media Foundation are, but it indicates the degree to which the organization and their magazine are associated with this activist tactic.

[2] In fact, in Klein's entire chapter on culture jamming, she limits her discussion to subvertising without acknowledging any other forms of culture jamming. It is curious she would do this as she identifies culture jamming as "counter messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended" (p. 281).

[3] The types of culture jamming texts that make up the objects of analysis in this dissertation include print publications, video, film, the web and performative actions.

[4] In addition to this, Heath and Potter seem unwilling to acknowledge that culture jammers may participate in these more traditional forms. As just one example, the Yes Men write in their book about their participation in anti-globalization protests in Geneva, Switzerland. I discuss more on this below.

[5] As John Downing (2001), notes, radical media is not the exclusive domain of those fighting for progressive movements and he suggests a number of examples which includes Ku Klux Klan hate media. Likewise, Bart Cammaerts (2007) demonstrates that "political jamming is not only 'performed' by progressive voices and activists but also serves to ridicule, humiliate or victimize the common enemy or the personification of evil at that given moment" (p. 84).

CHAPTER 1

JAMMING GLOBALIZATION: THE YES MEN

> *"The Nazis actually had a reasonable trade policy, you know. Maybe they've never really been given proper credit – maybe they're not so bad after all."*
>
> – Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer, spokesman for the World Trade Organization, October 27, 2000.

On October 27, 2000, Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer spoke at the Conference on International Services in Salzburg, Austria. Speaking on behalf of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Dr. Bichlbauer lectured the attending lawyers on various barriers to trade, including Italian sleeping patterns and democracy as it is currently practiced in the United States. In regards to the former, Dr. Bichlbauer argued that the Italian penchant for taking naps lay at the bottom of the failed merger between airlines KLM and Alitalia. About the latter, Dr. Bichlbauer suggested that current political practices are an inefficient use of resources and, rather than donating to campaigns in order to influence elections, corporations should be allowed to buy people's votes directly.

But Dr. Bichlbauer's comments were a part of a hoax. Dr. Bichlbauer was, in fact, Andy Bichlbaum, a member of the Yes Men. This would be the first of many instances spanning a couple of years where Bichlbaum, assisted by Yes Men partner Mike Bonanno, would appear around the world at various conventions and events as an "official" WTO spokesman.[1] At times, the Yes Men's presentations would get rather outrageous as when "WTO representative" Kinnithrung Sprat (Bichlbaum again) suggested that, in an effort to relieve third world hunger, McDonalds sell hamburgers

made of reconstituted human waste. All of their presentations, however, were performed with the intention of sparking some kind of realization in audiences that the WTO's practices do not match its stated goal: "to improve the welfare of the peoples of the member's countries" (WTO, 2006a, ¶6).

With the Yes Men's various actions, which Bichlbaum and Bonanno call "pranks" (I will refer to them as "actions"), the Yes Men provide an example of an active critique of corporate and political practices in the United States and the world. This critique targets the dominant ideologies related to the advancement of globalization that find their expression in the behaviors of corporations and other economic institutions. How do the strategies of Yes Men actions, as reported by them and other media outlets, engage in the criticism of globalization? Also, how do the Yes Men's actions relate to, and become an extension of, critical theory? Through my analysis in this chapter, it will become clear that the Yes Men aim to expose the method, and ideology, behind the capitalist exploitation of workers and citizens around the world. As such, the Yes Men's actions are related to critical theory in that the rhetoric of their actions reveals aspects of injustice and domination that find their expression in the economic policies of a number of different institutions.

As a group that directly engages in ideological criticism, however, what are some of the limits inherent in the Yes Men's strategies, limits that can have implications for the realization of their goals? Some limitations are built into the tactics of the Yes Men actions, whether they be lecture or media based. These limitations are influenced by external factors, such as particular knowledges possessed by those who might witness an action, and the risks inherent in relying on commercial media coverage to convey a

message critical of the status quo. Thus, the Yes Men's approach to activism is rather complex, with many facets in which the messages they wish to deliver can be misunderstood or even completely ignored.

I have organized my analysis of the Yes Men in this chapter around the different actions of the Yes Men, the media publicity these actions produce, and the media produced by the Yes Men. After an introduction to the Yes Men and a brief overview of globalization and the arguments against its current practice, I turn to an analysis of the Yes Men's lecture-based actions. Information on the events that transpired in these actions come from a variety of sources, but mainly the Yes Men's website (www.theyesmen.org), book (*The Yes Men: The True Story about the End of the WTO*, referred to here as *The End of the WTO*) and two documentaries, *The Horribly Stupid Stunt* (The Yes Men, 2001) and *The Yes Men* (Price, 2003). While other, third-party sources (such as other accounts in the media) do appear here, they are mainly used with regard to information on events that transpired, not for how the events were reported. This use of media coverage for lecture-based actions is for a number of reasons, the most important being that a Lexis/Nexis search provided no direct coverage of the lecture-based actions. As a consequence, this section focuses primarily on the Yes Men's goals as they relate to the lecture-based actions. As I trace the evolution of this tactic, an evolution that moves away from the initial attempts to offer critique through increasingly absurd presentations, I also assess some of its limits.

The lack of media coverage of the lecture-based actions can be contrasted to coverage of the Yes Men's media hoaxes, particularly the BBC World action. The Yes Men's media hoaxes make up the second part of this analysis and cover questions about

their culture jamming actions related to their reliance on third parties to disseminate news about their hoaxes. Not only do their media hoaxes offer more opportunities to explore how the Yes Men critique globalization, but coverage of the BBC World hoax provides a clear example of the risks inherent in mainstream media attention to activism like culture jamming.

The reliability (or lack thereof) of the mainstream media in presenting activist critique in a favorable light can be contrasted to the possibilities of producing one's own media. It is here that my analysis turns to the media produced by the Yes Men themselves. While having to overcome limitations of their own, the Yes Men's media are considered here for the degree to which they can function, not only to present the Yes Men's actions in a way that is true to their intentions, but also to reach larger audiences.

THE YES MEN'S PREHISTORY – FROM BARBIE TO FREE TRADE

The origin of the Yes Men goes back to the 1990s when Bonanno and Bichlbaum participated in separate culture jamming operations. At the time, Bonanno became involved with the Barbie Liberation Organization, a group of activists who switched the voice boxes between talking Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls. In Christmas, 1993 children were playing with new Barbie dolls that would say, "Dead men tell no lies" and G.I. Joe dolls which would suggest that they go shopping. In 1996 Bichlbaum was working as a programmer for the Maxis computer software company on a game called SimCopter, for which he wrote code for characters that appear in the game's background environment. But instead of passive characters simply wandering in the background, Bichlbaum created an army of scantily clad men who would occasionally kiss each other and the

player's character. Eighty thousand copies of the game were shipped to stores (Gilson, 2005, p. 82).

By the late 1990's Bonanno and Bichlbaum were working together at ®^{TM}ark (pronounced "artmark" – www.rtmark.com), an activist community on the web. In 1999 they developed two parody websites: www.gwbush.com and www.gatt.org. Gatt.org a website that parodies the official website of the WTO (www.wto.org) and, at first glance, it is difficult to tell the official and parody websites apart. But a closer examination of the content reveals that the parody site offers a sharp rebuke of the work of the WTO. For example, a page about trade liberalization on the parody site notes, "current trade liberalization rules and policies have led to increased poverty and inequality, and have eroded democratic principles, with a disproportionately large negative effect on the poorest countries" (Trade liberalization…, 2006, ¶ 1). It is also on this website that the "WTO" announces plans to disband and reform "as a new trade body whose charter will be to ensure that trade benefits the poor" (WTO to announce…, 2006, ¶ 1).

Despite statements that criticize the WTO and globalization, the site proved to be such an effective copy that visitors were sending emails intended for then WTO president Michael Moore to Bonanno and Bichlbaum instead. According to Bonanno, "People started emailing us, asking if Mike Moore … would come and give a talk at their conference or meeting…The first few we sent on to [filmmaker] Michael Moore…We thought it might be funny if he went along instead, but he didn't reply. But then we thought, 'wait a minute, we can go ourselves.' So the next one that came in, which was to a law conference in Salzburg, off we went" (Kingsnorth, 2002, p. 17). And thus the Yes Men were born, as Bichlbaum and Bonanno attended the Salzburg conference posing as

WTO officials, and Dr. Bichlbauer made outlandish remarks which went largely unchallenged by those in attendance. From this inaugural action, the Yes Men have similarly infiltrated other events, with Bichlbaum posing as variously named trade representatives and Bonanno as his assistant. The Yes Men have also created other parody websites, including www.dowethics.com, which facilitated a number of actions, most notably Bichlbaum as Dow company spokesman "Jude Finisterra" interviewed on BBC World in 2004.

THE ANTI-GLOBALIZATION MOVEMENT

In the time frame that is the focus of this chapter (2000 to 2005), the Yes Men's actions mostly involved the WTO. In fact, the majority of Yes Men activity, even when not directed toward the WTO, targets multinational corporations. So it is apt to say that the Yes Men are anti-globalization activists, especially in light of a chapter in *The End of the WTO* which details their participation in the 2000 International Monetary Fund (IMF) protest in Geneva.

While anti-globalization has existed as an organized movement for decades, the movement was thrown into high gear with protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization's ministerial meeting in Seattle, Washington. There are a number of reasons why this particular protest is important for the movement. For one, it was the largest anti-globalization protest to date, with an estimated sixty to one hundred thousand protesters on the streets. But perhaps most importantly, the Seattle WTO protests brought together a wide variety of anti-globalization groups under one umbrella, the most notable of which was the alliance of the environmental movement and labor organizations

(DeFilippis, 2001), an alliance acknowledged by the oft cited protest slogan, “Turtles and teamsters, together at last.”

The coalition in Seattle was the product of decades of anti-globalization work brought about by a succession of events. One was the creation of the WTO in 1995. Prior to 1995, the economic mission known as globalization was not overseen by a governing body but instead was a global economic treaty known as the Global Agreement on Tarriffs and Trade (GATT). The creation of the WTO was an attempt by member countries to add an aspect of enforcement to the global trade rules that were established by GATT. The project of globalization itself can be summed up as a liberalization of trade rules between countries. According to the WTO, it is “the only international organization dealing with the global rules of trade between nations. Its main function is to ensure that trade flows as smoothly, predictably and freely as possible” (WTO, 2006a, ¶ 1). As a body that is comprised of 150 member nations, the WTO is a forum where global trade regulations between countries are hammered out and/or various countries’ trade regulations are contested.

The WTO, however, is not the only organization tied to the economic globalization that has motivated criticism from activists around the world. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) are two other organizations whose policies and practices have caused considerable condemnation, and provoked massive protests, by various groups in many countries. Both of these organizations are responsible for influencing the flow of capital, mainly in the form of loans, between countries. The financial assistance provided by these organizations is often tied to

borrowing countries liberalizing their financial markets and privatizing many, if not all, of their state-run industries.

What has had the most impact on and raised awareness of the anti-globalization movement is the contestation of trade regulations by various countries, and the rulings handed down through GATT and the WTO. Frederick Buttel (2003) identifies a number of events directly related to the enforcement of globalization rules that in part contributed to the creation of the unprecedented anti-globalization coalition seen on the streets of Seattle. An example of a WTO ruling that invigorated the anti-globalization movement in the United States involves the United States' ban on the importation of tuna caught in a manner that endangers the lives of dolphins. In the early 1990s, Mexico challenged this ban under the rules of GATT and, as a result, the United States removed the ban. The concern for anti-globalization activists here is twofold: one concerning the environment and the other a perceived loss of national autonomy in the face of a de facto global trade police. Perhaps as important as environmental and national sovereignty issues to the anti-globalization movement, mid 1990's revelations of the labor condition of sweatshops around the world in the manufacture of Cathy Lee's clothing, as well as Nike and Reebok athletic gear, also helped to galvanize activists against globalization.

As the diversity of organizations at the 1999 Seattle protest indicates,[2] there are a wide variety of interests that make up the anti-globalization cause. While environmental and labor issues are certainly among them and may, to some degree, dominate the public's understanding of the anti-globalization cause (Boykoff, 2006), they are by no means the sole interest of anti-globalization activists. Kieran Allen (2002) offers a useful

number of “themes” of anti-globalization that go some way to describe the anti-globalization movement:

- The polarity between corporate power and economic democracy. This theme is exemplified by the power of the WTO, based on global trade rules imposed by an unelected international body, to force countries to nullify laws ratified on democratic principles. But this theme also includes issues related to the increasing disparity between rich and poor, not only between nations but within them as well, and the corresponding power differentials.[3]
- Commodification versus public services: This theme mainly concerns the economic, health and class impacts of the privatization of public utilities and other services. Mostly privatization is tied to economic incentives (imposed primarily by the IMF and WB) in third world/developing countries. And often privatized companies end up being owned by foreign corporations based in developed nations.
- Financial freedom versus regulation: Many financial markets (e.g. in the forms of speculation, insurance and real estate markets) have expanded across the globe as regulation has relaxed or been eliminated. Allen states that these markets have increased from $618 billion in 1986 to $12,207 billion in 1997. Anti-globalization activists seek to add regulation to these markets.

How activists go about challenging the dominance of neo-liberal globalization depends on many factors related to their organizational structures, resources and

personalities. Amory Starr (2000) offers three "modes" by which anti-corporate (a term she uses which includes anti-globalization) groups operate. Nick Crossley (2002) has added to this by identifying five "ideological positions" (p. 673), for each mode:

- Contestation and reform
    1. Fighting structural adjustment
    2. Peace and human rights
    3. Land reform
    4. Explicit anti-corporate
    5. Cyberpunk
- Globalization from below
    1. Environmentalism
    2. Labour
    3. Socialism
    4. Anti-FTA
    5. Zapatismo
- Delinking
    1. Anarchism
    2. Sustainable development
    3. Small business
    4. Sovereignty movements
    5. Religious nationalism

As Crossley (2002) argues, "At the level of [social movement organizations] and networks we find a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of both ideologies and tactics"

(p. 672). Each of these modes and ideological positions suggest different tactics. In fact, looking across the list of example groups Crossley provides for each mode indicates a robust field of protest action, from primarily print-based *Adbusters* to the radical, eco-protest actions of Earth First!

As anti-globalization activists, the Yes Men articulate concerns that involve many of the critical themes Allen attributes to the anti-globalization movement while straddling a number of the modes and ideologies offered by Starr and Crossley. In an interview on National Public Radio, Dave Davies asked Bonanno to explain the Yes Men's problem with the WTO. In his reply, Bonanno hits on many of the themes mentioned above, arguing that the WTO helps business interests at the detriment of the environment and those people who are in need. "What [the WTO is] doing in fact is undermining democracies all over the world because what they do is create rules that allow corporations to do what they want no matter what the will of the citizens are, and that's our biggest problem" (Davies & Bonanno, 2004).

As will be demonstrated below, the Yes Men's WTO actions cover all of Allen's themes (though "financial freedom versus regulation" is addressed to a lesser extent) as their lectures and presentations aim to highlight the flawed logic behind the various policies and ideologies which form the foundation for globalization. Furthermore, the Yes Men cover a wide variety of Starr's "modes" of anti-corporate activism, as well as the "ideological positions" that follow from them. In most of their actions discussed here, however, the Yes Men do not explicitly state what is wrong or how things should be changed. Instead, the Yes Men expect the audience to confront these issues as the prank unfolds before them, motivating them to become motivated to do something.

TACTICS AND GOALS OF THE YES MEN

The Yes Men's ultimate tactic is to pose as officials who suggest policies and courses of action and make assessments based on various ideologies related to globalization and laissez-faire capitalism that have been taken to logical extremes. Rather than being outside the target and directing criticism towards it, The Yes Men infiltrate the offending organization by impersonating members of those organizations they wish to criticize. As WTO spokesmen, Dow representatives, and supporters of George W. Bush, among others, Bichlbaum and Bonanno criticize the dominant ideologies behind world trade, and corporate and political practices. In general, the Yes Men's actions are intended to highlight the malicious intents of practices they deem are dangerous, unjust or both. Bonanno explains:

> These things that are not really presenting themselves honestly, or that hide something about their nature that is really scary, we want to bring that out, we want to show that, we want to demonstrate that. And so, like for the WTO … we think that the WTO is doing all these terrible things that are hurting people, and they're saying the exact opposite… So we're interested in correcting their identity. (Price, 2003)

They have approached these actions mainly through delivering lectures to audiences at various venues around the world, although they have also participated in television interviews which have been broadcast to audiences around the world.[4]

The Yes Men's approach to creating moments such as these as a way to provoke reactions they hope will create more anti-globalization sentiment is certainly a channeling of the Situationists and Dadaists who prefigured them. While the Situationists and

Dadaist were concerned with transforming notions of art and social practices, their main strategy for accomplishing this was in the creation of moments (through various means) which would generate dissonance, and thus raise critical consciousness and political activity among spectators/audience.[5] The purpose behind Situationist activity was not unlike that of the Yes Men: "to energise passive spectators into action" (Barnard, 2004, p. 113). In fact, Adam Barnard specifically identifies the anti-globalization movement as part of a "legacy of the Situationist International" in that it carries the spirit of the Situationists as "they aim at forms of creative and artistic expression on a human scale, to challenge dominant forms of consumption and to produce cultural, artistic and political forms of resistance" (p. 119).

The Yes Men's sometimes absurd actions also resemble the Dadaists. In part through outlandish performances, Dadasists were attempting to shock audiences into realizing the tenuous grasp between artistic labor and art, as well as proposing new ways of conceptualizing what art is (Molesworth, 2003); Through their performances, the Yes Men aim to shock audiences into realizing that the WTO's insistence that neo-liberal economic policies create a just economic system is false. In their earlier actions, the Yes Men used increasingly absurd and grotesque presentations but, as the reaction of the CPAs in Sydney attests, it appears a simple criticism of the WTO and, by extension, dominant globalization policy coming from one of its own members was surprising enough for the Yes Men to get a reaction they wanted.

In looking at their actions, it is clear that the Yes Men have different types of audiences, with differing goals for each and different tactics for reaching those audiences and achieving those goals. According to the Yes Men's website (www.theyesmen.org),

the tactics they use are how they engage in the practice of "identity correction" which is distinctly different than identity theft: "Identity theft: Small-time criminals impersonate honest people in order to steal their money. Targets are ordinary folks whose ID numbers fell into the wrong hands. Identity correction: Honest people impersonate big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. Targets are leaders and big corporations who put profit ahead of everything else" (The Yes Men, 2006, ¶ 1). Bichlbaum points out that "identity correction" is "in no way a movement, which is what's called for and being developed." Instead, what the Yes Men are doing is "a gimmick to get a certain amount [of] press attention for a certain number of issues" (personal communication, January 27, 2007).

There are two general tactics to challenging dominant ideologies that can be employed by activists. One is directly targeting and challenging those who believe or otherwise enforce or promote a particular ideological position different from the activists. This can be accomplished a number of ways, but directly confronting people or institutions that identify with a particular position and then subjecting their underlying beliefs and actions to criticism is undoubtedly a foremost method of activist work. Another, more indirect, way to challenge dominant ideologies is to produce and distribute information, through various texts, that are critical of them without a concern for reaching an audience specifically identified with the subject of criticism. Mass protests are probably the best example of this tactic. On the one hand, the participants of the protest most likely hold a similar (though to varying degrees) ideological position in relation to the target of the protest. On the other hand, in terms of audience, a protest

casts a wide net, reassuring and confirming an identity and community of critics while at the same time, through publicity, challenging those who may disagree.

As activists who produce a variety of texts and actions that are critical of globalization, The Yes Men's tactics involve both approaches. In the actions they perform in front of an audience believed to be proponents of neo-liberal globalization, the Yes Men directly confront the target of their criticism. In the wider dissemination of their actions through the press or their own media, the Yes Men reach broader audiences with varying degrees of sympathy with their critique. In all of these actions, the Yes Men deliver information that is critical of globalization. But their critique does not openly criticize the ideologies that underlie globalization, preferring instead to convey their critique through the use of parody. As Simon Dentith (2000) explains, parody is "any cultural practice which makes a polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (p. 20). In this regard, the Yes Men parody the language and behavior of the WTO in an attempt to critique the ideology which sustains the practices of globalization. For example, instead of telling an audience of globalization proponents, "current globalization polices are at odds with democratic principles," the Yes Men will suggest this by acting as a representative of the WTO arguing that citizens should be able to sell their votes to the highest bidder.

There is an additional dimension to the Yes Men's ideological challenges, and this comes through the reporting of their actions. It is through publicity that the Yes Men's critiques are disseminated and reach wider, more ideologically diverse, audiences. Sympathetic and self-produced sources (such as the Yes Men's documentary, book and website which will be discussed in more depth below) play an important role because

they are more likely to present the Yes Men's critical content in a favorable light. Such sources allow the Yes Men's criticism to avoid containment or other attempts to reinforce dominant ideology by third parties at the expense of the criticism being offered, as is exemplified in media coverage of the BBC World action discussed below.

Bichlbaum identifies what he considers to be a crucial goal of the Yes Men when he states that the success of an action is determined by "how much press it gets, and how clearly the press publicizes the issues we're trying to publicize" (personal communication, January 27, 2007). Other goals follow from this. Ideally these actions would provoke a reaction in audience members, a realization that current globalization policies, and the ideologies they stem from, are flawed. The Yes Men are also trying to raise a critical awareness of globalization beyond the immediate audience who may be witnessing the action. By creating media attention for the issues of which they are attempting to raise awareness, the Yes Men hope to increase the range of their critique and draw people to identify and take action along with the anti-globalization movement.

In this regard, there is a two-pronged approach to how the Yes Men tactics convey their criticisms to audiences. First, there is what I will call appealing to the "direct" audience. This is not necessarily the target audience, but an audience comprised of those who are present and immediately affected by the action (conference goers at a lecture, for example). Second, there is the "indirect" audience, those who gain a second-hand account of the action and are made aware that the action was a prank (which is not always the case for lecture attendees). Far more often than not, this audience hears about the action as a revelation of a prank. The "indirect" audience is also a more politically and ideologically diverse as it is primarily composed of those who may learn about the

action through a third party, such as a news report. There are instances when Bichlbaum has appeared in television news interviews (as a pseudo-representative and as himself), which suggests that the Yes Men have the greatest potential of reaching a more diverse audience without the need to rely on a third party reporting on their actions.

The point here is not to suggest that the "direct" audience members are uniform in their beliefs and actions. Even in conference settings such as those mentioned below there are bound to be differences among audience members, not only in their level of commitment to various ideologies, but their specific stances on policies, particularly as they are promulgated by the organization affiliated with the conference. What is of import here is that the Yes Men believe that these audiences contain proponents of globalization, which in turn directs how they construct their action. About their direct audiences at their WTO actions, the Yes Men (Bichlbaum, Bonanno and Spunkmeyer, 2004) write, "These experts, after all, are the foot soldiers in the WTO's war on trade unions, environmental protections, and indigenous rights. If they blithely followed us down such nightmarish paths, the *real* WTO must be able to convince them of *anything*." (p. 9, emphasis in original).

Bonanno indicates that the "indirect" audience is actually the Yes Men's target audience. At one point in the Yes Men documentary, Bonanno and Bichlbaum are sifting through magazines and newspaper clippings. Bonanno explains:

> This is basically the core of what we do. All these newspapers and magazines have articles on the Yes Men and this is why we are doing these things, this is why we go and do these conferences. It's not for the 200 people or hundred people that might see us give a lecture. Although we like them to come away with

> an interesting experience from a lecture, the reason we do it is so that people who read *Bizzare* magazine or the *New York Times* or *Fortune* or *Harpers* can read about it in the mainstream press. I mean, this is how millions of people can read about it and potentially get turned on to some of the ideas of anti-globalization. (Price, 2003)

Unfortunately for their aims, as Bonanno and Bichlbaum make clear, the messages they are trying to send are not always understood the way they would like. "We're realizing…how much crap people will take if it comes from a person in a suit," Bonanno notes (Kingsnorth, 2002, p. 18). And it is not only conference attendees and journalists who become the target of Yes Men actions; through other various actions (such as appearing on BBC World or even the existence of their parody websites), the general public can also be caught up in a prank. For example, in the summer of 2004, Bonanno and Bichlbaum collected signatures for a "Patriot Pledge." A part of the pledge supports the notion that global warming should be used as a weapon, as it would sink Europe into an ice age and leave America relatively unscathed. Signers pledge to pollute as much as they can. In an interview in *Mother Jones* magazine, Dave Gilson (2002) asks the pair how many signatures they got. "A few hundred," Bonanno replies. "It was devastatingly disappointing to have people sign it" (p. 82).

As the brief examples above indicate, a variety of ideologies, issues, people, organizations and corporations have been the focus of the Yes Men's brand of activism. Baring the brunt of their attention during the period that is the focus of this study is globalization and, as globalization's main proponent, the WTO. The Yes Men's attention to this organization comes at a time when the world's attention was sharply drawn to the

WTO and its relationship to globalization. As discussed above, this increased public scrutiny mainly stemmed from massive anti-globalization protests around the world. Thus, it is important to view the Yes Men's actions here as part of a larger movement against neo-liberal globalization and the various intuitions and corporations aligned with it.[6]

Tensions between the Yes Men's tactics and goals are clearly illustrated with an analysis of a number of Yes Men actions, illustrating these actions' complexity in terms of their approach to activism and their challenge to the ideology of neo-liberal globalization and other corporate practices. Since there is a clear learning curve to producing an "effective" action, a learning curve the Yes Men themselves all but explicitly state, the actions analyzed here will come from throughout their history so that the development of their tactics and how they respond to their perceived failures can be traced and evaluated. And while Yes Men have engaged in more lecture-based than televised actions, each has its own consequences in terms of challenging ideology and reaching audiences. As such, instead of going through these examples in a linear fashion, they will be explored as they relate to various aspects of the Yes Men's approach. The first group of actions for analysis will be four lecture-based actions: Salzburg, Tampere, Plattsburg and Sydney. These will be analyzed primarily in tracing the development of the Yes Men's tactics relating to interaction with their direct audience and their attempt to challenge dominant ideologies of globalization. Analyses of the Yes Men's media appearances on CNBC, BBC World, and consequently Channel 4, will explore the challenges facing the revelation of hoaxes to indirect audiences and the containment of their challenges to the ideologies they are critiquing.

FROM SALZBURG TO SYDNEY: STRATEGIES IN CHALLENGING GLOBALIZATION

While challenging ideology is not an articulated goal of the Yes Men, as activists it ends up being a part of what they do. And while the Yes Men indicate that their main goal is to influence people *outside* the events they infiltrate, their approach to each specific action indicates a desire to influence the audience right in front of them as well. The Yes Men have variously stated that they want to provoke some sort of "realization" in their audience of the idea that the practices of globalization are unjust. As will be clear, in their earliest actions the Yes Men put a lot of emphasis on getting this realization out of their direct audience, working hard to provoke reactions from them. They slowly abandoned this practice, however, switching to the presentation of a more direct criticism.

Salzburg, Austria

Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer's address to international trade lawyers in Salzburg was the first official Yes Men action. This action is important in how it set the standard against which their future actions would be measured (by themselves and others), and to how it would shape their expectations and tactics. Soon after Bichlbaum and Bonanno set up the gatt.org website, they received an email from an organizer of the Conference on International Services, hoping to enlist then WTO director Michael Moore as a speaker. As Moore was "unavailable," Dr. Bichlbauer (Bichlbaum) attended the conference and spoke on the WTO's behalf. Fellow Yes Men Mike Bonanno joined him, acting as his "security assistant."

In his lecture, titled "Trade Regulation Relaxation and Concepts of Incremental Improvement: Governing Perspectives from 1790 to the Present," Bichlbauer made a

number of statements intended to shock those in attendance. The lecture, written by Bichlbaum and Bonanno, and reproduced in its entirety in *The End of the WTO*,[7] comes across as a rather standard introduction to some of the most basic issues of globalization as it covers various barriers to trade (tariff trade barriers, non-tariff trade barriers, and systemic trade barriers), and gives examples of each and how they can be overcome through trade liberalization. Bichlbauer suggested:

- Punitive based tariffs (like the one by the EU against banana producing countries with bad human rights records) are illogical barriers to trade. Since perceptions of violence tend to be higher than actual violence, "we must enforce a rational, economics based approach to violence, an approach in which human emotions can have no place" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno and Spunkmeyer, p. 35)
- Cultural differences can be a kind of non-tariff barrier to trade. Cultural differences between Italians and the Dutch are what caused the failed merger between airlines KLM and Alitalia. Furthermore, cultural impediments to free trade between nations can actually lead to war. According to Bichlbauer, "Any artificial impediment to the free flow of capital is a dangerous liability" (p. 37)
- The voting process in the United States is a systemic barrier to trade. This could be fixed by allowing citizens to sell their votes on websites such as VoteAuction.com. "Consumerism," Bichlbauer argued, "is the ultimate form of democracy and citizenry in the modern world" (p. 38).

Concluding his remarks with a summary of his position on vote selling, Dr. Bichlbauer said that systematic trade barriers "are problems at the core of modern democracies, and yet which could be solved by allowing the free functioning of a very competent marketplace. A free marketplace. A liberated marketplace. And I like markets, I think this is what markets are for. Thank you" (p. 40).

Bonanno and Bichlbaum did not get the reaction they were hoping for or expecting from the audience seated in front of them. They were hoping those in attendance would in some way openly refute Dr. Bichlbauer's remarks. The Yes Men explain that the reaction they got at the lecture was less than inspiring:

> When Andy presented the [vote selling] concept to an audience of international trade lawyers in Salzburg, something very strange happened: nothing. While in the real world VoteAuction had triggered FBI raids, among trade lawyers the idea apparently seemed quite sensible. (p. 46)

The question and answer session produced only a few responses; one person asked what the WTO was doing to educate protesters of the benefits of trade liberalization. Another questioned the necessity of cultural homogenization across the globe in the advancement of free trade. Despite the latter comment, the Yes Men were not satisfied that they had effectively challenged this group to think reflexively on the practices and ideologies they (presumably) supported. So at the conference luncheon, the Yes Men continued to push the lawyers with more outrageous statements, like the one that leads this chapter. But the results of their efforts were still not enough for the Yes Men.

In a direct, if not overzealous, attempt to assess their impact, the Yes Men sent an email to conference delegates from a public relations man at the "WTO." Mr. Werner

Daitz explained that Dr. Bichlbauer had a pie thrown in his face after giving his lecture and, consequently, became ill. This fictitious incident was inspired by some real cases in which notable public figures had pies thrown in their faces by members of the Biotic Baking Brigade, prominent neo-liberal trade proponent Milton Friedman among them (Harold, 2004). In hoping to get some leads on who may have perpetrated this particular pie incident, and to effect some "quality control" regarding their representatives, Daitz asked the delegates to respond with their impression of Dr. Bichlbauer's lecture. "If you attended the lecture," Daitz wrote, "please convey your impressions of the audience's reaction to it; please be specific. (If there were any particularly strong reactions, especially from anyone you did not recognize as a delegate, please inform)" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, p. 49).

The Yes Men got a few responses from delegates, including one who indicated that Dr. Bichlbauer was the "worst speaker at the seminar. His presentation was just plain weird" (p. 49). Others wrote to say that they found the suggestions about Italians and vote selling offensive (The Yes Men, 2006b). But the Yes Men pushed the stunt still further, sending out an email to delegates from a Mr. Walther Funk, announcing that Dr. Bichlbauer had "passed on" because of his illness (p. 49). This contact became another appeal for any information that might provide leads on identifying the perpetrator and, secretly, also serve as an indication of any deeper impressions their prank may have had on their audience. According to the Yes Men, they got a lot of responses, though many were "embarrassing" and so were not published on their website. But of the comments that were published, many delegates seemed to find Dr. Bichlbauer's presentation "peculiar," "weird" or otherwise "strange" (The Yes Men, 2006c).

On November 29, a little over a month after the action, the Yes Men were exposed as a member of the organizing body of the conference (the Center for International Legal Studies) sent an email to conference attendees indicating he had found out about the action. At this news, the Yes Men decided to send one last announcement to conference delegates, this time announcing the action from the perspective of the WTO: “Dr. Bichlbauer was an imposter!” Alice Foley told delegates (The Yes Men, 2006c, ¶35). The email went on to explain that, while Dr. Bichlbauer was a fraud and they may not have liked some of the things he said, everything he did say was true and never strayed “beyond the confines of WTO orthodoxy” (¶37).

This email prompted a response from a delegate who took offense more to the Yes Men’s tactics than any particular things Bichlbauer had said. In fact, this very same delegate was the gentleman who at the conference asked Bichlbauer what the WTO was doing to correct protesters’ criticisms of trade liberalization. In his email he indicated that the members who had attended Bichlbauer’s lecture were not as closed minded, nor uniformly pro-globalization, as the Yes Men had assumed. He went further to say that “Dr. Bichlbauer came across as an uneducated boob who failed to make any real point” and that the Yes Men “wasted both [their] own time and ours” (The Yes Men, 2006c, ¶44).

The Yes Men defended themselves in an email reply to this delegate. Asked what they set out to accomplish, the Yes Men (still writing as WTO representative Foley) explain that they were attempting “to illustrate amusingly, through example and some exaggeration, the motives and aims of the WTO and its colleagues. The point wasn't to

illustrate this to you, in the audience there in Salzburg, but rather to others, in other audiences – of greater number, and more influential" (The Yes Men, 2006c, ¶52).

Up to the point of announcing Dr. Bichlbauer's death, on the surface everything the Yes Men had done indicated a desire to prod the conference delegates to be reflexive on globalization, or at least realize that what had happened was a prank. But apparently, the Yes Men's attempts to get reactions from this audience were not explicitly designed to force delegates to question the ideological basis of their positions on globalization. An indication of what the Yes Men thought they were walking into is provided by the Yes Men's documentary on this action, *The Horribly Stupid Stunt* (Yes Men, 2001), which begins with the following message: "Lawyers and economists like those you are about to meet are working hard, even now, to ensure that so-called democracy does not interfere with freedom of trade." It seems the Yes Men prepared for this action as if they were walking into the den a pro-globalization cabal and prepared to shower the audience with a slew of examples of how the logic of their ideological position vis a vis globalization was flawed.

What prompted the Yes Men to declare the Salzburg action a "success," however, is the response mentioned above, from the gentleman who chastised the Yes Men for their "ignorance." The Yes Men sum up the Salzburg action on their website by writing, "To calm the excited delegates, Dr. Bichlbauer is unmasked, and things are explained to one angry fellow. The experience is deemed a success!" ("Let them eat…," 2006, ¶ 11). The Yes Men do not go on to explain how one "angry fellow" translates to a "successful" action, particularly when this fellow did not indicate that he was angry at the content of

the lecture (which is geared to elicit responses from audiences – a Yes Men goal) but rather the overall tactic that was taken by the Yes Men.

Tampere, Finland

The second major Yes Men action took place at the "Textiles of the Future" conference in Tampere, Finland, to which they were invited to speak in the same manner as Salzburg. This presentation, developed and written by both Bichlbaum and Bonanno,[8] and far more dramatic than the one in Salzburg, again failed to elicit a response along the lines of what the Yes Men had indicated they were looking for in their previous action. What is apparent in this action, however, is that the Yes Men believed that increasing the absurdity level of their presentation would elicit the response they were after.

As Hank Hardy Unruh, Bichlbaum gave a lecture titled "Toward the Globalization of Textile Trade" to industry representatives from around the world. The lecture took the same approach to the critique of globalization as had the one in Salzburg, but this one focused on issues of labor and labor management. Starting with a discussion of US slavery in the 1860s, Unruh suggested that, while some credit the Civil War with having abolished slavery, as a labor system the "markets would have eventually replaced slavery with 'cleaner' sources of labor anyhow" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 85). He went on to explain how "involuntary imported slavery" is simply an inefficient use of resources; the slaves are better off being left to work in their home countries. The problem, Unruh explained, was developing an effective management system for remote labor forces. After all, Unruh insisted, the reason the British "failed" in India was because they had become "out of touch" with the textile workers there.

After explaining that technology can help provide solutions to these management difficulties, Unruh moved from behind the podium to where he could be fully seen by the audience. “Mike,” he indicated to Bonanno who was acting as Unruh’s assistant, “would you please?” Bonanno walked up to Unruh and, taking a firm grasp of Unruh’s suit with both hands, yanked as hard as he could. Unruh’s suit pulled off his body to reveal a skin tight, gold lamé body suit to the surprised and applauding audience. “This is the Management Leisure Suit.” Unruh continued. “This is the WTO’s answer to the two central management problems of today: how to maintain rapport with distant workers, and how to maintain one’s own mental health as a manager with the proper amount of leisure” (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 92).

To demonstrate how the suit works, Unruh pulled a tab which automatically inflated a two-foot golden phallus, called the “Employee Visualization Appendage,” the head of which rested at eye level (illustration 1). This brought another round of applause from the audience. Unruh explained more about the suit. For one, a video monitor is built into the head of the appendage so that managers can watch remote labor at work. The suit also allows for the emotional monitoring of remote labor forces by the use of implants in both workers (a chip implanted somewhere on the body) and management (illustration 2) This suit, Unruh explained, would provide for total monitoring of remote labor, while at the same time allowing managers to pursue leisure activities as it frees them from the confines of an office.

Illustration 1
Andy Bichlbaum as “WTO Representative” Hank Hardy Unruh.
Source: *The Yes Men* (Price, 2003)

Aside from applause and a few “oohs” and “ahhs,” the reaction from the audience elicited nothing more. With no questions for Unruh coming from the audience, the panel moderator decided to ask about China’s entry into the WTO. Unruh acknowledged China’s checkered human rights history, but insisted that such matters should not influence issues of global trade. With nothing more, the panel adjourned for lunch where Unruh and Bonanno joined the rest of the delegates to press for reactions to the presentation. From the account presented in the book, online, and the documentary, the Yes Men were once again very interested in finding out if the audience members “got the point” of their lecture. While they did not embark on the same post-lecture tactic as Salzburg, Bonanno and Bichlbaum followed delegates to lunch, and then to a dinner, in an attempt to get a deeper impression of what the delegates thought of the lecture. “Where were the cops?” The Yes Men muse in their book, “The men in white coats with straightjackets? The tomatoes and rotten eggs? We had pulled out all the stops this time. We had spent the last three weeks anticipating an extremely dramatic reaction, and nothing but smiles and applause had resulted. Hadn’t *anyone* been offended?” (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 109-110)

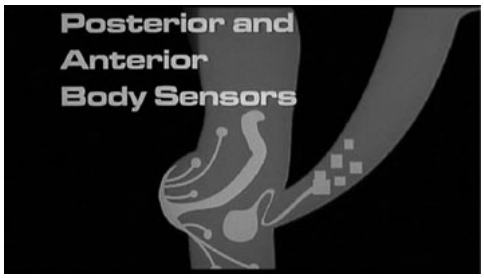

Illustration 2
Management monitoring sensors as a part of the “Management Leisure Suit.”
Source: *The Yes Men* (Price, 2003)

Plattsburg, Pennsylvania

If the Yes Men wanted things thrown at them, five months later they came up with a lecture that would deliver the goods. Indicating the degree to which the Yes Men would up the absurdity level of an action in search of the kind of response they were

looking for, a lecture delivered in April, 2002 before students in Plattsburg, Pennsylvania was by far the most outrageous. As Bichlbaum explains, “as soon as it became clear we weren’t succeeding [in reaching the direct audience], taking it further became crucial” (personal communication, January 27, 2007). The action itself was a lecture by WTO spokesman Dr. Kinnithrung Sprat (Bichlbaum), joined by a “McDonalds representative” played by Bonanno. Intended as a dress rehearsal for a May 2002 presentation to the Certified Public Accountants (CPA) of Australia, the topic of the Plattsburg lecture concerned ways to ease conditions of starvation in third world countries, conditions which occur because, as Sprat puts it, “people [simply] do not have enough money” (p. 122).

While such a statement is very much in line with how the Yes Men presented information in previous lectures, there was a slight shift in their rhetorical strategy for this lecture. Previously, the criticism of globalization contained in the lectures took the ideology of globalization and applied it to concepts and policies that were meant to suggest, through a process of innuendo and extrapolation, a criticism of globalization. But this time, the Yes Men actually used the language, and data, of the critics of globalization. For example, in the Plattsburg lecture, Spratt told the audience that

> it’s all too easy for non-specialists to be blinded by the fact that First-World corporations – by replacing local modes of subsistence with monocrops and exposing vulnerable populations to the vagaries of the global marketplace, not to mention the weather – are technically responsible for so much starvation and death in the Third World. (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 124)

Such explicit references to existing criticisms of practices promoted by economic ideologies in the pursuit of global trade, in this case the dominant thinking on how to maximize efficiency in agriculture, do not appear in the two previous lectures. This rhetorical method can be contrasted to the Salzburg lecture, wherein Dr. Bichlbauer's examples of impediments to free trade, and the solutions to them, became increasingly outlandish without acknowledging existing criticisms. According to Bichlbaum, "Perhaps Plattsburg aimed more than previous lectures to communicate a whole system, the way agribusiness works in the Third World" (personal communication, January 27, 2007).

To forward his argument about starvation around the world, Sprat radically simplified the Irish potato famine of the 1800s, suggesting that there was plenty of food; the problem was people could not afford it. Not surprisingly, Sprat lays the blame for any instance of famine throughout the world at the feet of protectionist economic policies that, in his view, keep people from becoming rich by keeping foreign corporations out of their markets. He pointed to three reasons this is bad: cultural insensitivity, reduced investment capital, and interference with capitalism.

As a response to such conditions, Sprat offered an "American solution" to the problem of world famine. He recounted various aspects of nutrition and diet from around the world, suggesting the United States as the model of food distribution since "it is common knowledge that in America, a large portion of the population is impoverished – and at levels often like those of the poorest Third World countries! But it's seldom malnourished!" Why is this? According to Spratt, it is mainly because markets do not get in the way of hunger. More specifically, malnutrition is not a problem in these countries because of fast food which, thanks to its low price, allows the poor to eat. Spratt used this

to ease into his proposal: The McDonalds Corporation would recycle human waste into hamburgers to sell in third world countries. According to Sprat:

> Already 20 years ago, NASA scientists tapped into this nutritional gold mine by developing filters to transform their astronauts' waste into healthy, hygienic, and even delicious food once again. With the use of this technology, a single hamburger, for example, can be eaten more than ten times, providing a cumulative total of three times the nutritional value of the original "fresh" hamburger. (p. 134)

To help illustrate the proposal, a visual demonstration was provided. Computer generated animation showed a person from the First World ordering a burger at McDonalds, then using the restroom. We follow the waste through a series of pipes to a McDonalds in the third world where the "recycled" waste pours out of a tap into the shape of a hamburger. A third world person, wearing a turban, then purchases the "reburger."

According to their account in *The End of the WTO*, students reacted negatively during much of the lecture, though some of what they describe (and is heard in *The Yes Men* documentary) could be a general restlessness found in many student audiences. During the question and answer session, however, some students openly registered their disgust with the lecturers and the content of what they heard. One student called the proposal "insulting," while another said that he couldn't believe "the corporate world is run by" people like Sprat and Bonanno (Price, 2004). Sprat then became bolder in his comments, ultimately eliciting a chorus of boos as objects were hurled at the presenters. The coda to the retelling of this story in *The End of the WTO* simply states, "We had finally done it" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 147). What the Yes Men

had “done” exactly, they do not elaborate. That they had pushed their audience into open revolt was clear. And the account of responses they provide certainly indicates that the audience was questioning WTO policies, without being told it was a prank (Bichlbaum, personal communication, January 27, 2007).

The proposal floated by the Yes Men at this action was certainly over the top and outrageously offensive: It is hard to believe that any audience would be able to sit through a lecture suggesting that recycled feces be sold to starving populations without some type of reaction. But for their final WTO performance, the Yes Men would altogether abandon the tactic of presenting a shocking spectacle in favor of an approach consisting entirely of the type of information critical of the WTO that they implemented in their Plattsburg lecture.

Sydney, Australia

For what was their final WTO action, the Yes Men took what they had learned from Plattsburg and crafted a new approach; they decided that proposing human feces be sold to third world countries was a lecture too far over the top to deliver to accountants. Also, the conference, originally themed “Business Without Borders,” had been cancelled. The Yes Men were, however, able to convince the Certified Public Accountants of Australia (CPAA) to hold a luncheon meeting with Mr. Sprat in May of 2002. In preparation for this lecture, and their new approach, the Yes Men consulted with Barry Coates, an anti-globalization activist whom they had contact with during an interview on CNBC (discussed below). Through their research, Bichlbaum and Bonanno crafted a speech that would announce the end of the WTO. In some ways this topic could be considered shocking, but certainly not in the same manner of their earlier actions.

For all intents and purposes, the Sydney lecture abandoned the escalating levels of shock value which the Yes Men had pursued as a way to get reactions from their audience (illustration 3). They took that tactic to its extreme in Plattsburg, but then questioned its usefulness. For Sydney, the objective would be on providing information in their lecture, information directly critical of the WTO: In his speech Mr. Sprat (played again by Bichlbaum, with Bonanno present as his "assistant") went through a litany of failures of WTO policy as advocated by critics of the institution. The key here, however, was that Sprat did not present this information as a critic of the WTO. As a WTO spokesman, he instead presented the information as if the WTO had done a review of its own policies and found that what they were doing was indeed more harmful than good.

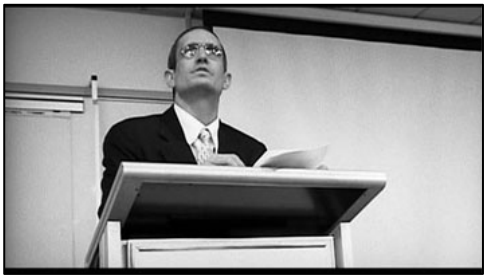

Illustration 3
Andy Bichlbaum as WTO representative Kinithrung Sprat.
Source: *The Yes Men* (Price, 2003)

The message of the Sydney lecture was to announce the dissolution of the WTO, to be replaced by the Trade Regulation Organization. As Spratt explained to the small gathering, "The new organization will have as its foundation and basis the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, which we feel will be a good basis for insuring that we will have human rather than business interests as our bottom line" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 161).

Among the examples of the damage and/or failures of the WTO, Spratt explained that:

- In the 20 years since the WTO has been overseeing global trade, the growth of the economies of many developing countries had slowed to rates lower than before the WTO.

- The gap between the rich and poor has doubled in the last 40 years as the wage gap between executives and the people who work for them continues to grow.
- Rates of malnutrition and poverty around the world have increased.
- The global trade system is rigged to take advantage of third world countries. According to Spratt, "The UN estimates that poor countries lose about US$2 billion per day because of unjust trade rules, many instituted by our organization" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 164).
- The WTO primarily works to weaken governments and strengthen corporations. As an example, Sprat explained that an estimated 80 percent of the environmental laws in the United States could be ruled as barriers to international trade by the WTO.

Clearly the Yes Men had abandoned the earlier tactic of shock. While keeping the impersonation aspect of their previous actions, the Yes Men "decided to try that old standby, sincerity" ("Let them eat…," 2006, ¶ 3). So instead of a WTO spokesman delivering a lecture in which a criticism of the WTO was implied in his outlandish proposals, a WTO spokesman was instead pointing out all that was wrong with the WTO and how it had failed as an organization that describes its mission as "improving the welfare of the peoples of the member countries."

The reaction from the audience was unquestionably upbeat, and the Yes Men didn't quite know what to make of it. "We no longer assumed we would be thrown off the stage," the Yes Men write in their book. "Nor would we have been caught off guard if

there had been no discussion at all – if everyone had simply filed off to lunch like sheep. What we were entirely unprepared for was everyone being so…happy" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 171). The book and documentary have numerous responses from attending accountants praising the WTO for their decision. At the lunch, various accountants offered suggestions for how the WTO could improve its work; one even sketched a new logo. In fact, the speech was so convincing that the CPAA drafted a press release about the WTO's announcement and posted it on their website. The Yes Men also made this announcement on their WTO site, gatt.org. And at least one public official got caught in the web of the hoax: Canadian Alliance MP John Duncan brought the matter up during his parliament's Question Period. "It was a brilliant master stroke," Duncan said after he learned of the hoax (Baxter, 2002, p A7).

While the Yes Men did not return to the type of shock tactic that characterized their earlier actions, they certainly stuck with parody and of being imposters in the realms of their critical targets. In fact, for the time period analyzed here, Sydney was their final appearance as members of the WTO making bold, critical claims about the organization.

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF THE YES MEN'S LECTURE-BASED ACTIONS

The anti-globalization messages the Yes Men have promoted with their lecture-based actions certainly reflect many of the themes identified by Allen above. Through various rhetorical methods (the use of exaggeration in Tampere, for example, and the direct criticism offered in Sydney), the Yes Men mostly touched on human rights, labor, and environmental concerns related to globalization. While some of their lectures covered multiple issues (the Salzburg lecture, for instance), perhaps the most consistent in terms of addressing one particular critique of globalization was the lecture in Tampere. It is

fitting that this lecture concerned the control of remote labor forces as the widespread reporting of the abuse of workers in sweatshops had besieged the apparel industry throughout the 1990s. According to Frederick Buttel (2003), the sweatshop scandals of the 1990s were a major force that helped to coalesce the anti-globalization movement. Naomi Klein (2000) also documents the rise in concern over sweatshop conditions by college students across the nation who, in turn, helped to bring the issue to national attention. So, at the heart of the Yes Men's critique is an economic ideology that advances the corporate desire for maximum efficiency at the expense of a concern for labor conditions and compensation. In fact, the ideology of economic efficiency underlies many of the practices and policies of globalization as a program to help corporations maximize profits on an international scale.

This focus on labor issues also connects the Yes Men's critique of globalization, and the economic ideologies that go into its practice, to critical theory, particularly the theories of capitalism and labor established by Marx. Central to his studies of the relationship between capitalism and society, Marx's investigation into the mechanisms of capitalism identifies at its core a deep conflict between the working and capitalist classes. This relationship, he argued, was based on exploitation as capitalists use an economic system that extracts profit from the labor of workers. As praxis, the Yes Men's lectures work to expose this method of domination and exploitation of labor that occurs through globalization. In Sydney the Yes Men used existing data and criticism of the WTO to raise awareness of these issues, while their strict use of parody in other cases also pointed to how the logic of capitalism, taken far enough, works to justify the domination and exploitation of workers the world over. From this perspective, neo-liberal economic

ideologies can be considered to mask contradictions that exist in society. The Yes Men then infiltrate spaces where many of these ideologies are generally taken for granted and the practicalities of their implementation are discussed.

In this respect, the Yes Men directly and purposefully engage audiences that are not always like-minded, while going in a roundabout way to reach their target audience (those who might find out about the action elsewhere). From the many different sources where Bonanno and Bichlbaum discuss the Yes Men's earliest actions, they were clearly attempting to affect the people at those events. About these actions, Bichlbaum acknowledges that "we did want to get the message to the trade lawyers and others" (personal communication, January 27, 2007). Statements such as these suggest the Yes Men are working to try to challenge the beliefs of those audience members, a goal that is as ambitious as its success is difficult to measure.

The Yes Men's two-pronged approach with regard to audiences (attempting to reach both direct and indirect audiences) presents some interesting dilemmas for the Yes Men actions, which are related to the audiences they target and the tactics they employ. With regard to audiences, of all of their actions, only a few could be considered to directly address audiences of like-minded individuals. Instead, the direct audiences of lecture-based actions tend to be comprised of those who the Yes Men appear to believe work for, or to some degree advocate, an agenda of which they are critical. The clearest examples of these would be audiences at the conferences in Salzburg, Tampere and Sydney. To suggest that these audiences are composed of completely ideologically homogeneous individuals would be a mistake. However, their attendance at these

conferences does help to delineate at least some degree of their relationship to globalization.

For example, the Salzburg action took place at a conference hosted by the Center for International Legal Studies. The center describes its mission as "to promote the dissemination of information among members of the international legal community, through research and publication projects, the post-graduate and professional training programs, and academic seminars, professional symposia and continuing legal education conferences" (Center, 2007). At this conference, Bichlbaum spoke on a panel titled "International Trade II" alongside such other presentations as, "Employing mediation methods to reach agreements and prevent misunderstandings or disputes in international transactions" and "Trade issues involved in Mexico's increasing role in regional and global manufacturing strategies" ("Salzburg," 2006). To suggest that an audience at such a conference and, more specifically, at such a panel, are experts on international trade is not too far of a stretch. However, to suggest that audience members have a uniform belief about the ethics of current international trade law and policies is tenuous. The same goes for the audiences at other Yes Men actions. Again, it is safe to make assumptions about these audiences *relationship* to international trade issues, but not their *ideological positions* regarding them, particularly in making assumptions that they are uniform in one direction or another.

Thus, what the Yes Men encountered in these actions was not groups of people staunch in their support of globalization but influenced by the power of ideological hegemony. This is where Gramsci's theory on a war of position versus a war of maneuver in matters of ideological struggle becomes relevant. As Gramsci has argued, a war of

position has more of a chance at changing dominant ideologies than a war of maneuver. The former, characterized by Thomas Butko (2006) as "a prolonged intellectual, cultural, and moral confrontation" (p. 80) with a dominant ideology, is more likely to produce change than is the latter. Regarding the war of maneuver, Butko offers as an example the Seattle 1999 WTO protests which "clearly demonstrated [that] any frontal assault will lead to coercive retaliation in which the ruling powers will assure their dominance through repressive action if necessary, usually with the broad and active support of the middle class" (p. 82). The Yes Men's actions then can be considered as part of a war of position, so long as they continue. They represent a challenge to the status quo, throwing the ideologies that sustain it into question and, ideally, with the right amount of pressure, to eventually change.

For this kind of change to happen, however, the challenge must be understood and accepted as an effective critique. This is the main risk of promoting a critical position in the form of parody or satire. Christine Harold (2007) suggests that parody is a form of rhetoric that "has been enthusiastically embraced" (p. 193) by those in traditional positions of power. Its use to an activist is limited, Harold suggests, because rather than actually destabilizing a power structure as does pranking (more attention will be devoted to this aspect of her argument below), parody merely comments on that power structure.

Harold's point may help explain why the Yes Men did not "succeed" in their earliest actions (specifically Salzburg and Tampere) which relied quite heavily on parody. Of the delegates who responded to the email about Dr. Bichlbauer's death in Salzburg, many of them indicated that his comments were so over the top that they didn't take them, or the man giving the lecture, seriously. The Yes Men's experience then suggests

that activists must find a way to circumvent hegemony's ability to give dominant ideology the power to deflect the criticizing force of parody if they wish to use those rhetorical devices as tools in motivating people to work for progressive social change.

The Yes Men did, however, get the reaction they desired in Sydney. It is of upmost importance to point out that the reactions of the CPAs (those reported by the Yes Men, at least) indicate that they understood the connections between the dominant practices of globalization and continuing, and in some cases increasing, conditions of exploitation and inequity around the world. "I'm as right-wing as the next guy," one of the accountants told the Yes Men during their luncheon in Sydney, "but it's about time we did something for these countries that we've done so well by. We just can't go on like this, it's impossible " (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 170). Comparing the content and outcomes of the Tampere and Salzburg lectures to Sydney's, which did not include exaggeration, wild theatrics or patently grotesque proposals, suggests that parody may not the best tactic to use when trying to influence people to adopt a critical position on an issue.

In order for the Yes Men to reach that other, indirect audience, and help them raise awareness of the consequences of globalization, the retelling of an action through multiple channels of communication is crucial. According to Bichlbaum, the Yes Men measure the success of an action based on "how much press it gets and how clearly the press publicizes the issue we're trying to publicize" (personal communication, January 27, 2007). Unfortunately, this relies on a fair amount of publicity, something that is never guaranteed. That the bulk of Yes Men activities do rely on third parties reporting them in order to reach a large and diverse audience indicates a dichotomous tactic that seems

risky. Such publicity is minimal for the WTO lectures mentioned above. This may be a result of those lectures having largely taken place in the relatively private confines of conference lectures. This is not the case, however, for the Yes Men's media hoaxes which, in two cases, were broadcast throughout the world. These two actions, broadcast on CNBC and BBC World, indicate some of the limits inherent in the mainstream media revealing an activist action or culture jam, while also suggesting some of the difficulties in articulating a critique through the Yes Men's particular approach.

MEDIA HOAXING: PRANKS WITHOUT GUARANTEES[10]

The revelation of an action has numerous implications for the effectiveness of the criticism the Yes Men are leveling at their target. If an action is not revealed as a prank, understanding the criticism being made of the targeted organization requires much more from those who witness the action. Conversely, if an action is revealed as a prank, the criticism is much clearer and thus easier to identify. However, as will be discussed below with regard to the Yes Men's BBC World action, the process of the revelation of an action can include the containment and/or dismissal of any critique the action was attempting to make. This kind of media treatment becomes all the more critical if the action is revealed by the media, rather than the Yes Men themselves who can exert much more control over the intent and preferred meaning of the action.

Judging from their accounts, either the Yes Men announce that an action was a prank (which is often the case), or otherwise the target of the action announces it (see the BBC World action below). From the available information on the Yes Men's actions, it appears that audience members have figured out the prank by themselves only once: Remember those WTO protesters at the Plattsburg action? At the end of the lecture a

couple of them came up to Bichlbaum and Bonanno, one saying, “Nice act, y’all had me going for a good minute there” (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 147) – an incident oddly omitted from the documentary yet included in the book.[9] The Yes Men do not explain if these protesters recognized them or if the protesters figured out the hoax based on the absurdity of what Sprat was saying, but the fact that they were identified as “protesters” is not insignificant. Could it be that a certain level of knowledge related to a critique of globalization and protesting is required to identify a Yes Men’s prank on one’s own? About the Plattsburg action, the Yes Men suggest that a particular type of knowledge is required when they write: “the strong reaction clearly isn’t because the lecture is any crazier, since the students started reacting from the very beginning: it’s because the audience is smarter. All along, the problem has not been with the lectures, as supposed, but with the audiences themselves. Years of neoliberal ‘education’ and experience seem to make people stupid” (“Let them eat…,” 2006, ¶ 9 – 10). Clearly the Yes Men were impressed with their student audience in Plattsburg. But this reason for the disparities between different audience’s reactions to their actions (and a cheap shot at the intelligence of those who work for globalization) does not always bear out. One only has to look back at an earlier Yes Men action, which took place live on television, to see that the ideological position of an audience does not guarantee a critical reaction.

The CNBC action: Even activists don’t “get it”

The CNBC action is perhaps the best example of how the relationship between knowledge about globalization and the potential for the recognition of a Yes Men prank is complicated. Additionally, the importance of this action indicates the complexities in challenging dominant ideology by the fact that it was perpetrated not only in front of a

large television audience, but also under the direct scrutiny of a critic of the WTO: Barry Coates, then director of the World Development Movement, was one of three who participated in the "Marketwrap Europe" interview.

The CNBC action came nine months after Salzburg and was the Yes Men's second WTO-related action. The interview itself was scheduled to air immediately before hundreds of thousands of protesters would descend on Genoa, Italy to protest the G-8 meeting there. On July 19, 2001, WTO spokesman Granwyth Hulatberi (Bichlbaum) appeared on CNBC's Marketwrap Europe as a part of a discussion on the protests against globalization policies (illustration 4). Hulatberi made a number of claims intended to outrage, including suggesting that the focus of globalization proponents should be on the "proper" education of protesters' children, and that the powerful people in the world know what is right for the world:

Illustration 4
Andy Bichlbaum as WTO Representative Granwyth Hulatberi on CNBC.
Source: *The Yes Men* (Price, 2003)

> [W]ho actually has the power in the world, and therefore who is correct, in this kind of world view? I think the answer is easy. And if you look at the views held by myself, my organization and many, many of the decision-makers in the world – the powerful people – they happen to coincide with what I'm explaining. And I think this is enough, in this sort of view. (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, p. 61)

The segments of the interview which appear in the Yes Men's documentary show expressions on Coates' face which clearly betray astonishment at what he hears Hulatberi

saying. But Coates presents a rather good example of an inherent risk of the Yes Men's tactics: The degree to which one is a critic of the WTO is no more a guarantee that a Yes Men action will be identified than if one is a proponent. In fact, the Yes Men had to tell Coates in person that it was a prank.

In the following dialogue from the *The Yes Men*, Bonanno and Bichlbaum visit Coates to gather information for their presentation at the Sydney action. They are in the process of revealing the prank to Coates as they are watching a tape of the CNBC broadcast. And even though he appeared in the same broadcast as Bichlbaum, Coates does not recognize him. After watching the tape for a while, as Coates talks about his general reaction to the interview, Bichlbaum puts his face up to the screen, next to his image. With a look of disbelief on his face, Coate's jaw falls open.

> Coates: You did it as a spoof.
>
> Bichlbaum: Yeah.
>
> Bonanno: Yeah. Basically, um…
>
> [Coates extends his hand to Bichlbaum, they shake, all laugh]
>
> Bichlbaum: Good, we weren't sure how you'd react.
>
> Bonanno: We were really hoping you wouldn't be offended.
>
> Coates: Oh hell no, that's great. I was wondering because I hadn't seen that guy before, and I did know some of the WTO external relations people and I was thinking, "My god, they really put up a right one this time." (Price, 2004)

Coates can be considered to have a high level of critical knowledge in relation to neo-liberal economics, globalization and the WTO. Judging from his final comment, he also has contacts at the WTO. Granted, he is not the type of audience member in whom

the Yes Men are trying to provoke a "realization" as he already holds a critical view of the WTO. In the video of the CNBC interview, you can clearly see Coates' reactions to some of Hulatberi's comments, reactions that indicate surprise at the WTO spokesman's candor on issues of free trade. A transcript of the CNBC interview in the Yes Men's book demonstrates Coates challenging all of Hulatberi's claims, making use of his knowledge of the WTO to do to Hulatberi and the WTO just what the Yes Men were trying to do to the WTO at the exact same time. In essence it was a kind of double team critique on the policies of the WTO and the ideology of neo-liberal globalization. In fact, Coates may very well have thought that Hulatberi made his case for him.

The CNBC action also indicates why revelation may be more important for the Yes Men's goal of fostering a "realization" that the current ideology of globalization is problematic. After all, still months after the CNBC action, the Yes Men had to explain the hoax to Coates who, even with his contacts at the WTO, thought Hulatberi was a legitimate representative of the WTO. Additionally, unlike the somewhat tepid responses of Salzburg's and Tampere's direct audiences, in Coates the Yes Men finally found an audience member who challenged the outrageous claims their WTO spokesman was saying. At one point in the interview, he indicated that Hulatberi was way over the top: After Hulatberi suggested that globalization protester's children be educated "to follow thinkers like Milton Friedman and Darwin…rather than what the protesters have been reared on – Trotsky and Robespierre," Coates responded, "Can I just say that these kinds of simplistic arguments are just too insulting for most people to believe" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 59).

The point here is that the Yes Men's outrageous claims may not prove enough for everyone to figure out that they are actually hearing a critique (as those activists in Plattsburg did). For one, in this case it didn't matter that Coates did not know the action was a prank as his already existing high level of knowledge and critical attitude toward the WTO allowed him the opportunity to refute what Hulatberi was saying. It probably would not be too far of a stretch to suggest that, in the interview, Hulatberi's statements reinforced Coate's convictions. In a way, Coates behaved as the Yes Men's model audience member by openly expressing shock and anger at Hulatberi's claims. What is of import here is that Coates did not need a "realization;" he already had that and could offer a critical perspective in a direct confrontation with the "WTO's" claims. However, there are instances where such a voice is not present. In this kind of circumstance it becomes imperative that the action be understood as a hoax so as to lessen the possibility of misunderstanding the critique that is being offered.

The BBC World action: When the media reveals a hoax

As indicated, the Yes Men describe press attention as a vital component to their actions. As Bonanno claims, it is "the core of what we do." As such, the Yes Men are relying on the press to help them deliver their ideological critiques. As Boykoff (2006) contends, "media discourse is not only vital in terms of framing social issues and problems for the attentive public, but it is also a place of ideological and ideational struggle for various social movements, state actors, and institutions" (p. 227). However, when it comes to reporting on issues of protest and activism, research has demonstrated that the press tends to frame events in ways that marginalize the message of the activists and support dominant ideology. Todd Gitlin's (1980) seminal work on media framing of

the Students for a Democratic Society established this. Subsequent research on media framing of anti-globalization protest (e.g. Boykoff, 2006; Nomai, 1999) confirms Gitlin's initial findings. While plenty of news articles reveal various of the Yes Men's actions, the revelation of the BBC World hoax will be the focus here as it effectively demonstrates a few of the pitfalls of the media revealing a prank.

December 3, 2004 was the twentieth anniversary of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India where 2000 people were killed and 200,000 more injured as a result of the release of methyl isocyanate gas (Reinhold, 1985). In preparing a report on the anniversary of the disaster, a producer of the globally distributed news program BBC World contacted officials at Dowethics.com asking for a spokesman to be interviewed on the topic. Little did the producer realize that Dowethics.com was a parody website designed by the Yes Men. "Dow" agreed to send a spokesman to appear on the show, and on December 3, Jude Finisterra (Bichlbaum) arrived at a studio in Paris to be interviewed live (illustration 5).

Illustration 5
Andy Bichlbaum as Dow spokesman Jude Finisterra on BBC World.

During the interview, Finisterra expressed deep sympathy on behalf of Dow Chemical and announced that the company would be selling off its newly acquired subsidiary, Union Carbide. Additionally, the estimated $12 billion from that sale would be used to clean up the Bhopal disaster site in addition to providing medical care to an estimated 120,000 people still in need. In response to a question about when this relief

would get to the people of Bhopal, Finisterra responded “soon,” and added that it was better late than never:

> And I would also like to say that this is no small matter, Steve. This is the first time in history that a publicly owned company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it’s the right thing to do. And our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, Steve, but I think if they’re anything like me they will be ecstatic to be a part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those that we have wronged.

The interview was replayed within an hour on BBC World. It was also broadcast on BBC radio and carried to other news outlets by wire services.

Reaction was swift. Reports following the broadcast indicated that, in Bhopal that very day, protesters commemorating the disaster broke out in tears of joy upon hearing the news (Burleigh, 2004). The markets took notice of the announcement as well, and in a matter of hours Dow’s shares on the European market lost two billion dollars in value (Graff, 2004). But the hoax would not last long. A little more than an hour after the second broadcast, the BBC would retract the story after Dow denied everything Finisterra had said. Later that afternoon, Bichlbaum appeared (as himself) in an interview on Channel 4, attempting to explain why the Yes Men had hoaxed the BBC and, by extension, its viewers worldwide (illustration 6):

Illustration 6
Andy Bichlbaum as himself, interviewed on Channel 4.

> When we received the invitation, it took us a little while to decide what to do. But we decided that, essentially Dow has been promulgating a hoax by which they've convinced people that they can't do anything about Bhopal, that they cannot accept responsibility. And we wanted to prove that that was not accurate and to show that, in fact, they could easily accept responsibility and that there was something very concrete they could do about it. You could simply devote a relatively small amount of money to finally putting this behind them and, more importantly, behind the world.

A Channel 4 anchor[11] who interviewed Bichlbaum then proceeded to ask him, a number of times, if he didn't think that the hoax was a cruel thing to do to the people of Bhopal. "But at the end of the day," the anchor began his second of four questions on this subject (out of five total questions asked of Bichlbaum), "it is nevertheless a pretty cruel trick to play on the people of Bhopal, I mean, even if you managed to hit a few spikes at Dow." That would be the extent to which the anchor would reference Dow's culpability in the Bhopal disaster, the precise issue the Yes Men were trying highlight in their hoax.

While acknowledging the effect of the hoax on the people of Bhopal, in each answer Bichlbaum also tried to point the spotlight on Dow. But the anchor kept bringing that spotlight back on the people in Bhopal who had been "tricked" by the Yes Men's prank. The reaction of those people certainly needed to be addressed by Bichlbaum. But that the anchor's interview, plus the introductory story by reporter Alex Thompson, focused heavily on this element of the story, and not on Dow's responsibility, indicates a challenge the Yes Men face in the mass media's revelation of their pranks and their intended criticism.

The Yes Men were fortunate in this case because Bichlbaum was able to keep bringing the spotlight back to Dow. In contrast, the segment by Thompson that preceded the interview had an accusatory tone as he focused on the damage done to Dow's bottom line and the confused people in Bhopal by the Yes Men's hoax. But the Channel 4 story was not the only news outlet where the prank would be revealed and discussed. A Lexis/Nexis search, and an extensive list of news links on the Yes Men's website, provided twenty articles between December 3 and December 13 that reported on this action.[12] Unlike the Channel 4 report, however, the majority of these stories focus on the BBC's responsibility for airing the interview. The kind of focus on the hoax varies in tone, from a straight recounting of events as they played out (e.g. Gossett, 2004), to blaming the Yes Men for fooling the BBC (e.g. Smith, 2004), to pointing out that the BBC itself was at fault for what happened. In regards to the latter, Rashmee Z. Ahmed (2004), writing for the *Times of India*, argued that the BBC should have caught the prank much sooner because everything that Finisterra said went against decades of Dow's repeated denial of responsibility. "Jude Finisterra's very name was a giveaway," Ahmed added, "because Jude is the patron saint of lost causes and Finisterra is a Mexican landmark that translates as the end of the earth" (¶ 14).

What happened on the BBC, and how it happened, are major themes of the articles written about this prank, and most stories lead with an announcement that the BBC had been tricked. In these articles, the substance of the story is about how the BBC and Dow dealt with the action, labeled by the BBC as an "elaborate hoax," a description repeated by most journalists covering the story. Some of these stories do not go into the reasons why the Yes Men "deceived" the BBC, their viewers and, subsequently, the

people of Bhopal. Those that do, however, tend to bury this information at the end of the article.

Even in articles where the Yes Men are given a voice they are on the defensive. In a few instances, Bichlbaum notes that their action was not meant to bring attention to journalistic practices. In fact, when addressing this subject, Bichlbaum expresses regret that it was the BBC which carried this prank as it is the only news service that "had been covering Bhopal rather extensively and well" (Goodman, 2004). Instead, as Bichlbaum explains, the action was an effort to bring media attention to the Bhopal disaster. Some articles declare that mission a success (e.g. Mathew, 2004; Goodman, 2204; Nolan, 2004), despite the fact that overwhelming attention on the action focuses on the BBC's role in being an unwitting part of the prank (e.g. Graff, 2004).

This framing of the BBC World prank becomes even more urgent when considering the news outlets which covered this story from this angle. They tend to be those with the largest audience: the BBC (Holder, 2004a; Holder, 2004b), the *New York Times* (Cowell, 2004), CBS (Friedman, 2004), *The Guardian* UK (Wells & Ramesh, 2004; Graff, 2004), and the AP ("BBC issues," 2004), the latter of which is a feeder service to which many smaller newspapers around the world subscribe which increases the dissemination of this particular frame. This coverage can be contrasted to articles that explained the goal of the Yes Men's action and tended to present the Yes Men and the action itself, as opposed to the BBC and/or the "duped" people of Bhopal as the subjects of the story. Stories that framed the event in this way were few and far between. In fact, of the twenty articles reviewed here, only six (Roy, 2004; Goodman, 2004; Gossett, 2004; Kiss, 2004; Roddy, 2004; Graff, 2004) featured the Yes Men. Of those, only the

Guardian article (Graff, 2004) could be considered to reach a wide audience. The other five articles came from such diverse sources as journalism.co.uk (billed as "the essential site for journalists"), the *American Daily* (a news web site presenting the "conservative side of things" ["About," 2006]), the *Pittsburg Post Gazette* and Democracy Now (a progressive radio program that airs on Pacifica radio stations, comprised of five sister stations and fifty community stations around the United States).

Given this context, the Yes Men's own media, such as their website and book, are perhaps the best ways of controlling and distributing the messages that may have been missed by millions of potential viewers and/or misrepresented by media revelations of their pranks. In fact, their media becomes a vital part of the Yes Men strategy in reaching that "indirect" audience in the way that they want. In the concluding paragraphs of the introduction to their book, the Yes Men indicate another purpose for their media: to participate in and contribute to a community of like-minded activists. "If you are reading these words," they write, "chances are your political inclinations run roughly the same way as ours" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, p. 10).

THE YES MEN'S OWN MEDIA

Bichlbaum points out that getting media attention has always been a central goal of the Yes Men:

> I know Mike from the time of his Barbie/G.I. Joe switcheroo and before has always been interested in seeing how art can reach a wider public. And when I discovered for myself the potential of a goofy act (the SimCopter 'hack') to reach a worldwide public, a light bulb went off, and that's been my goal ever since – to

> leverage media attention for important and utopian causes through fun and devious means. (Personal communication, January 27, 2007)

This statement, combined with the fact that Bichlbaum feels that "taking it further" was necessary, made it clear to the Yes Men that more publicity was necessary, and so they embarked on the documentary (Bichlbaum, Personal communication, January 27, 2007). What Bichlbaum is pointing to here is that creating one's own media gives one the power to control the dissemination of the critiques one wishes to raise. After all, it is one thing to hope that the mainstream media pick up the story of a prank *and* that they will cover it in such a way that the issues raised by the prank are expressed. It is another thing entirely to make media that disseminates the message exactly as one wishes.

This is one long standing aspect of alternative media's importance to activists throughout history. The production of media far removed from the mainstream centers of power (e.g., multinational corporations and media conglomerates), and created and maintained by activist groups and individuals, has a vital role in maintaining and promoting alternative communities and ideologies that are critical of the status quo (Duncombe, 1997). As David Armstrong (1981) argues, alternative media not only offer activists and other "radicals and dissidents" an opportunity to communicate with each other, but also to "engage the dominant culture in dialogue" (p. 16). While the Yes Men's media may not meet all the criteria that identify differing conceptualizations of alternative media (their documentary, for one, is distributed by a major Hollywood studio), the purpose of their media does serve to promote ideas that counter the economic orthodoxy of globalization. The Yes Men have clearly and consistently maintained the

importance of reaching a larger audience within which they wish to raise a critical awareness of globalization.

From the beginning, the Yes Men have been creating their own media: Cameramen traveled with them to document their action in Salzburg. The result is a 22-minute independently produced and distributed video documentary entitled *The Horribly Stupid Stunt (Which has resulted in his untimely death)* which chronicles the Salzburg action and is only available on VHS through the Yes Men's website, itself a staple of the Yes Men's media production (www.theyesmen.org). On this site, visitors can also find extensive information on Yes Men actions (including links to news articles), links to other activist websites, and a wealth of information about the Yes Men and the type of work that they do. According to Bichlbaum, the site gets about 2,000 hits per day (personal communication, January 13, 2008).

Perhaps the most important part of the Yes Men's website, especially in terms of distributing favorable publicity, are the pages which detail the events which have occurred in their actions. It is on these pages where readers can get an understanding of the Yes Men's goals, expectations and outcomes for each action. But more critically, readers are offered an account of the issues the Yes Men are trying to get across with each of their actions. The ability for the Yes Men to do this allows them to bypass the risks inherent in relying on mainstream media sources, where the ultimate consequence is that there would be no coverage at all. Not being subject to the various filters that result from journalistic routines and the nature of for-profit news industry helps activists such as the Yes Men to deliver as precise a message as possible about the issues that are important to them. Furthermore, the ability to include hyperlinks in these articles helps to

create a textually rich experience for viewers who can follow the links to more information and to be connected with other communities of activists advocating similar positions. This kind of networking through activist communities serves as another opportunity for wider exposure to the Yes Men's, and by extension the anti-globalization movement's, critique.

In 2004, the Yes Men released both a book and a documentary (both titled *The Yes Men*). In some respects, the book and documentary are companion pieces as they each cover identical ground in terms of actions. One event in the book that is not in the documentary is Bichlbaum and Bonano's participation in the 2000 IMF protests in Genoa, Italy helping to highlight their anti-globalization activism. Otherwise the book and documentary afford the Yes Men an opportunity to explain their actions in a way that maximizes their potential for winning over audiences to the anti-globalization cause and inspiring others to carry out similar pranks. As they write in the introduction to their book:

> If you are reading these words, chances are your political inclinations run roughly the same way as ours. Odds are also good that you have some computer access and skills, and maybe a little free time – particularly you younger people, who have grown up with computers, are not yet chained to a career, and are not very impressed with authority. We hope this book will be a small inspiration to use your resources to good ends, whatever you end up deciding that means.
>
> (Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 10)

The documentary, while released internationally by MGM,[13] has a fairly good chance of reaching audiences beyond those who are already sympathetic to the Yes Men's cause.

But in the United States, the documentary was released theatrically on only thirty two screens. This rather limited release can be contrasted to other major documentaries, such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* which opened on 868 screens in the United States alone, a number that does not include international screens that were added in the weeks following the US opening.[14]

Taken together, these various media produced by the Yes Men go a long way towards disseminating their message. Not only was the Yes Men movie released by a major film distributor (MGM) on screens around the world, but having a constant presence on the web gives the Yes Men's message a virtually limitless reach. In fact, in a Google search for "Dow Chemical," only the first two links on the results page are official Dow Chemical sites: The Yes Men's Dow parody site, dowethics.com, is the fourth hit, after a Dow Wikipedia entry. Perhaps equally impressive, a Google search for "WTO" lists the Yes Men's WTO website, gatt.org, as the fourth link down, below two links to official WTO sites and a Wikipedia entry. Curiously enough, the Yes Men's WTO parody site is the only one described as "Official website of the World Trade Organization" in text underneath the link.

The effectiveness of the Yes Men's media depends to a large extent on availability and reach. For the most part, all of the Yes Men's media are currently available to anyone who wishes to access them. But this access is largely dependent on the resources available to the public that, in turn, depend upon various socio-economic factors. The book and DVD, for example, are available through a number of websites (Amazon.com and Deepdiscount.com, for example) for $14 or less each. But access to the web, and the ability to purchase products online, requires a number of resources, the

possession of a credit card being one. It should be noted, however, that both the *Yes Men* documentary and an early draft of the book are available for free online.[15] Also, a search of the local (Austin) public library has both the video and book available to residents for free. But having texts available and actually learning about and being able to see these texts are two different matters, with the latter relying again on as wide publicity as possible. That the Yes Men documentary is distributed internationally by a major Hollywood studio and was screened at ten film festivals in seven countries[16] certainly lends to the visibility of the Yes Men's critique.

CONCLUSION: THE CRITICAL POWER OF IDENTITY CORRECTION

It is not inconsequential that the Yes Men refer to their actions as "pranks." Christine Harold (2004) creates a distinction between parody and pranks. Opposed to her critique of parody mentioned above, pranking engages the processes by which the powerful maintain control. Pranking, according to Harold, is a comment on the *patterns* of power whereas parody is merely a comment on its *content.* As an example of this, Harold offers veteran prankster Joey Skaggs' "cathouse for dogs" prank, also appropriate to explore here because of its similarity to the Yes Men's tactics. For this prank, Skaggs issued a press release announcing his creation of a "cathouse for dogs," a place where canines could find sexual services for a price. The action received a lot of local, national and international media attention, including an Emmy-nominated ABC documentary and a subpoena from the New York Attorney General.

For Harold, Skaggs' prank exploits journalistic processes and creates a critique from within, effectively destabilizing the structure that gives it power. This is perhaps the strongest point of her argument. Unfortunately, she focuses solely on this fleeting

moment of destabilization. While she does a fair amount of juxtaposing parody and pranking, holding the latter up as the more venerable of the two, she fails to completely explore the somewhat resilient nature of dominant ideologies and the power structures that maintain them. About Skaggs' cathouse for dogs, Harold notes that, even as the prank had been revealed, journalists refused to retract the story, and so "Skaggs' cathouse for dogs remains on the record as historical 'fact'" (p. 196). Beyond those "insiders" who may know the facts of the prank, it is hard to see any lasting critical strength of such an outcome. Instead of destabilizing the cultural and ideological power of journalism, that the prank largely remains a historical fact *reinforces* that power. In this case, contrary to her assertion that revealing a prank actually weakens its critical potency, a more complete revelation of Skaggs' prank (including retractions by media outlets) could have had a deeper impact with its critique of journalistic practices.

To be fair to Harold's argument, she does not explore the wider role pranking plays in movements for social change. She firmly places pranking within the milieu of culture jamming tactics and the critique of consumer and capitalist society without indicating how pranks may operate as agents of change beyond short term critical, rhetorical moments. But as this chapter has attempted to illustrate, the pranking actions of the Yes Men clearly engage with a wider social movement. As Bichlbaum points out, identity correction is not a social movement in and of itself: "The real engine is street protest and other forms of mass movement. [What we do] is just a gimmick to get a certain amount [of] press attention for a certain number of issues" (personal communication, January 27, 2007). The Yes Men have made it clear that their actions are

part of an effort to advance the critique of globalization and capitalism and, as such, help to feed the wider movements of which they are in dialogue.

Ideally for the Yes Men, revealing the prank is important because that revelation has implications for the success of the action, defined as "how much press [the prank] gets, and how clearly the press publicizes the issue we're trying to publicize" (Bichlbaum, personal communication, January 27, 2007). But considering different reactions to the Yes Men actions it is clear that, in some cases, the prank's revelation is important while in other cases it does not matter. Take, for example, any of the Yes Men's various WTO actions, excluding Sydney (which will be discussed below). In each of these actions the Yes Men portrayed the WTO variously as exploitative of the developing world and concerned for the interests of business over the interests of citizens. If the Yes Men wish to attract people to the anti-globalization movement, the fact that many of these presentations insult or offend might be enough to turn audiences against globalization, or at least the WTO, without needing to know it was a prank.

However, consider also the BBC World action. Suppose the prank was never revealed and that millions of people around the world were left believing that Dow actually regretted what it had done and was going to provide reparations to victims and clean up the Bhopal site. It is likely that people would then have a positive attitude toward Dow and hold them up as an exemplar of corporate responsibility, especially in the absence of follow-up information that Dow did not take any action. In this case, audiences are left believing that Dow has done the right thing, and anti-corporate sentiment, at least toward Dow, may dissipate.

On the one hand, it is perhaps accurate to suggest that actions such as the BBC World and Sydney pranks require heavy publicity otherwise audiences will not be clued into the critique. In this event, people could be left believing that the problems are being addressed by the very proponents of neo-liberal globalization that the Yes Men are trying to destabilize. On the other hand, for actions similar to Salzburg, Tampere and Plattsburg, a revelation may not be as crucial because of the Yes Men's presentation of the WTO in a highly unflattering light. A revelation in these cases, however, may turn audiences away from anti-globalization if they believe that the pranksters went too far or if they feel as if they themselves were taken advantage of.

The ultimate risk is that if audience members do not know the Yes Men's action is a prank, it is likely that "realizations" (i.e., critical consciousness) will not be achieved. If, as the Yes Men indicate, the dissemination and revelation of the prank is a "core" of what they do, and is intimately connected to a realization that the ideology and practices behind neo-liberal economic policy are unjust, to some degree an identification of the prank becomes paramount to the success of an action. The problem is that the Yes Men's approach to reaching their target audience, those farthest removed from their actions, is a tactic that leaves a lot of room for the prank, and by extension the message, to be completely missed by large numbers of potential anti-globalization activists. Just as Skaggs' cathouse for dogs has become "historical fact" (to some, anyway), could not the Yes Men's BBC hoax also?

Furthermore, that activists who are very fluent in the policies and rhetoric of the WTO and globalization may not catch on to a prank could be another indication of the power of dominant ideologies, and dominant institutions, when presented by a man who

purports to be their representative. Perhaps this power is being conceded on the part of the audience members, like those of Plattsburg or Tampere equally, who may react strongly, or not at all, to various statements intended by the Yes Men to be outrageous. That the students in Plattsburg were offended by the WTO's proposals, and that the Australian accountants greeted the demise of the WTO with hope and optimism, both point to the power that neo-liberal globalization ideology and the name "WTO" have over the popular imagination in critical and compliant ways. Perhaps the Yes Men nail the issue on the head when they note, "We realized how much crap people will take if it comes from a person in a suit." Audience members in Salzburg may have regarded Dr. Bichlbauer as a bit of a nut, and it would be a mistake to assume that they all agreed with everything he said, but that they continued to speak to Bichlbauer as a WTO official after the lecture indicates the power of the name of the WTO as a major proponent of dominant globalization policies. It could simply be that critics *and* proponents assume that the positions taken by the WTO are always outrageous *or* sensible. So when a WTO official suggests that slavery as a labor model would have fallen out of favor naturally had market forces been left alone, no one bats an eye because such a statement represents ideology as usual.

While certainly a facet of the ideological struggle that the Yes Men engage in, such an analysis does not do justice to the complexity of their particular brand of incursion into the hegemonic process. If dominant ideology's strength comes from its ability to contain challenges and, as per Stuart Hall (1996), the conditions in the economic base effectively set the limits by which any challenges can be made, the Yes Men's tactic can go some ways to circumventing the power of hegemony. The Yes Men

work the limits set on ideological contention by operating within the very terrain of their object of criticism; they criticize the ideology behind various economic practices as fictitious proponents of those very ideological positions. As the very heart of identity correction, this tactic usurps the power delegated to dominant ideology (and those who propagate that ideology) and turns it on itself. As such, the Yes Men's pranks go beyond criticism to engage the particular ideologies and structures that give globalization or corporate practices their power in the realm of ideological hegemony.

Despite any limitations that may arise in the implementation of their tactics (such as the problems surrounding hoax revelation explored above), the Yes Men's approach can still be an incredibly effective critique and a damaging hit to the dominant ideologies associated with globalization. To borrow from Marx, the ideological premises with which the WTO and corporations have used to dominate and oppress citizens around the globe are now being turned against them. The challenge for the Yes Men, or other activists who wish to engage in this specific type of culture jamming, is in controlling the revelation of the hoax to maximize its ideological impact. Control of this kind is incredibly difficult because, once an action goes public, containing meaning becomes practically impossible. The closest one can get is through the dissemination of information though channels controlled by, or at least sympathetic to, the particular aims of the activists. The Yes Men do this through multiple channels: their web site, book and documentary.

Yet knowledge of and access to these media are limited and, to a large degree, rely on people knowing about the existence of the Yes Men in the first place in order to be found. While aimless browsing or web surfing may allow for someone to discover the

Yes Men, it is impossible to gauge how often they are found this way. In this regard, communities and networks of activists who spread the word become vitally important. The more people who talk about them, and post discussions and links on their own publications or websites, the more of a chance the Yes Men have of increasing their reach.

NOTES

[1] While Bichlbaum and Bonanno are the public faces of the Yes Men and the primary actors in Yes Men actions, many others have helped behind the scenes with various aspects (e.g. costumes, research, technical facets, etc.) of their actions and texts. Although the precise involvement of the members of this extended cast is not indicated, an extensive list of people who made the actions described in this analysis "possible" are listed in the acknowledgements to the Yes Men's book (pg. 5). It should also be noted that Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno are pseudonyms.

[2] According to Buttel (2003), "The [Seattle] coalition included anti globalization groups (e.g., International Form on Globalization, Global Exchange, Public Citizen Global Trade Watch); joint anti-globalization/environmental organizations (e.g. International Center for Trade and Sustainable Development, International Institute for Sustainable Development); farm, sustainable agriculture and anti-GMO groups (e.g. the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Genetic Resources Action International); organized labor; consumer groups (e.g. Consumers International); development activist/world hunger groups (Oxfam, Development Group for Alternative Policies); animal rights groups; and the governments (as well as NGOs and activists) of many countries of the South." (p. 104).

[3] Allen (2002) also writes that "the increased concentrations of wealth also raise new questions about the official separation of economic and political power which lies at the heart of Western democracies" (p. 82).

[4] Travelling around the world requires a fair amount of funding. Bichlbaum indicates that most of their funding comes from "art things and lecture things at universities" (personal communication, January 27, 2007). However, the acknowledgements to their book includes an extensive list of people and organizations that have contributed to their actions, either through the donation of financial or resources or other support (lodging, technical, etc). Some of the organizations listed as having provided financial support, for example, include Creative Capital, the Alpert, Guggenheim, and Langolis Foundations and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

[5] A closer connection between culture jamming and Situationists will be offered when discussing *Adbusters* and their practice of subvertising.

[6] For a more inclusive and detailed list of targets and actions of the Yes Men, see the Yes Men timeline, appendix A.

[7] All of the lectures included for analysis in this chapter are reprinted in their entirety in the Yes Men's book.

[8] Bichlbaum and Bonanno had assistance from others in making the costume and assembling the PowerPoint presentation for this action.

[9] I asked Bichlbaum why this was so, but he left that part of the question unanswered. It is entirely possible that this omission was a decision by the documentary makers that did not involve the Yes Men.

[10] The video for two of the actions discussed in this section, the BBC World and Channel 4, were found on the Yes Men's website (www.theyesmen.org). As I was working on subsequent revisions, however, the Yes Men have redesigned their website and the links to these two videos have not been restored. Both of these segments, however, can be found on YouTube. I have posted the very same video clips I used for this analysis. The BBC World broadcast I have titled "Yes Men Bhopal A" and it can be found at http://youtube.com/watch?v=MCQDIseybCs. The Channel 4 interview of Bichlbaum I have titled "Yes Men Bhopal B" and it can be found at http://youtube.com/watch?v=7X9532ABaPw.

[11] The copy of the broadcast I was able to obtain does not identify the Channel 4 anchor. I have subsequently been unable to verify his name.

[12] There are links to many non-english language articles on the Yes Men's links page. These articles were not included for analysis here.

[13] According to the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0379593/releaseinfo), *the Yes Men* screened in Canada, the United States, Germany, France, Poland, Iceland, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, the UK, Finland, Israel, Denmark, Australia, Hungary and Italy.

[14] For example, just two weeks after its US opening, *Fahrenheit 9/11* opened on an additional 132 screens in the United Kingdom (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361596/business).

[15] As of this writing, an early draft of the book can be found on the Yes Men's website (http://www.theyesmen.org/bookproposal/wholebook.pdf) and their documentary can be viewed on google.video.

[16] According to the Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0379593/releaseinfo), *The Yes Men* was screened at the Sundance, Wisconsin, Nantucket, La Rochelle, Marseille International Documentary, Warsaw, Jihlava, CPHDOX, and Dublin Film Festivals. It won the audience award at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival in 2004 and was nominated for a Political Film Society award in 2005.

CHAPTER 2

JAMMING CONSUMERISM:

THE ADBUSTERS MEDIA FOUNDATION

The message within the pages of Kalle Lasn's book *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (1999) are unmistakably clear: Consumerism is not "cool." Lasn goes on to explain that culture jammers are not cool, or at least not the type of cool that is promoted by corporations as a means to sell products. For Lasn, cool is a way of expressing individuality and being rebellious, far from what has become cool at the hands of marketers and advertisers. "What's cool now?" Lasn (1999) asks, "Same as always: It's cool to rebel. But a lot of people who think they're rebelling, aren't…We think we're buying anarchy when what we're actually buying is just corporate crafted conformity. We're buying a rebel template instead of creating our own" (p. 114).

Written in the late 1990's, Lasn's book seems to prophesize a criticism that would eventually be applied to the Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF), an organization he co-founded and whose slogan, "cultural revolution is our business," can be taken for all the literalness it affords. The slogan, which appears frequently in *Adbusters* magazine, a bi-monthly publication produced since the AMF's inception, is generally followed by a brief description of the Adbusters organization and goals, announcing a desire to "change the way we interact with the mass media and the way meaning is produced in our society" ("Cultural revolution…," Sept/Oct 2003, p. 14). For years the slogan and an accompanying descriptive paragraph has appeared alongside articles and photo spreads trumpeting the harms of what *Adbusters*, borrowing from Guy Debord and the

Situationists, identifies as the "society of the spectacle." Rampant consumerism, according to *Adbusters*, is the source of practically all of modern society's ills, including environmental degradation and rising rates of depression, the latter of which Lasn believes is caused by a myriad of harmful effects stemming from the false promises of those marketing consumerism as a way of life.

The key to changing the face of consumerism, Lasn and *Adbusters* argue, is through the activist tactic of culture jamming. "We believe culture jamming will become to our era what civil rights was to the '60s, what feminism was to the '70s, what environmentalism was to the 80s" (p. xi), Lasn (1999) writes in *Culture Jam*. He puts a lot of importance on culture jamming's ability to create change, describing its practitioners as members of "the most significant social movement of the next twenty years" (p. xi). Opposed to the culture jammers of the AMF and *Adbusters* are typical consumers, portrayed within the pages of the magazine and Lasn's book as mindless sheep (illustration 7), following the flock with no critical sense of the consequences of their actions as they obediently do what the corporate herders ask of them – to shop, shop, shop, and to buy, buy, buy.

Illustration 7
Tommy Hilfiger subvertisement
Source: *Adbusters*, Winter 1998, v. 5 no. 4, inside cover

The AMF created and co-sponsors events, such as Buy Nothing Day (BND) and TV Turn-Off Week, which the organization insists can help consumers to stop participating in consumerism's excess. Both of these events have been staples of the AMF's drive to encourage people to "downshift" – lower the level of their participation in consumerism – and are similar to the "voluntary poverty" practiced by 1950's Beat

culture (van Elteren, 1999) and 1960's countercultural Hippies (Braunstein & Doyle, 2002). The Beats and Hippies practiced voluntary poverty as part of their rejection of capitalism and materialism. While capitalism is not a target of the AMF's critique, it does insist that downshifting can counter the negative effects of materialism, being an act that will have positive psychological, environmental and social benefits. Lasn dedicates a section of his book to this way of living. "Uncooling consumption" offers examples of various downshifters, including how and why they've made those choices. "When you don't buy," Lasn (1999) writes, "you don't buy in to consumer culture. When you don't buy in, corporations lose their hold on you" (p. 169). The emphasis in downshifting is a kind of political consumption, but one that encourages abstinence from consumerism by refraining from the consumption of products that are not deemed to be necessary for a fulfilling life. For example, BND is celebrated annually the day after Thanksgiving, largely understood as the busiest shopping day of the year in the US. Instead of shopping, BND is promoted as a day to do something – anything – other than shopping, and campaigners advocate a host of activities that people can engage in such as spending quality time with the family (which doesn't include shopping) and participating in culture jamming events at shopping malls.

In 2001, however, the AMF introduced *Adbusters* readers to the Blackspot campaign.[1] In conjunction with the organization's promotion of BND and TV Turnoff, *Adbusters* had been offering their readers a steady diet of what can be considered a fanatical anti-consumerism, replete with apocalyptic narratives and testimony of a better life devoid of the trappings of shopping and consumer desire. The AMF's Blackspot campaign is an attempt at culture jamming aimed to "reclaim the cool" and, looked at

from the perspective of its earlier major campaigns aimed at curbing consumption, seems contradictory to its aims. The AMF eventually released of a line of shoes, similar in look to the Converse All Star line of sneakers, and optimistically projected to expand the Blackspot brand into the restaurant and music businesses.

For the *Adbusters* reader who had been closely following the magazine and parent organization for any amount of time, the shoes certainly came as no surprise. Various *Adbusters*-produced commodities have been advertised in the pages of the magazine for years, although never without some degree of controversy. But there was something about the shoes that seemed to go against much of what some had come to expect from an organization that had ensconced itself in a rhetoric proclaiming the ills of conspicuous consumption. In fact, as a long time reader of the magazine, my initial reaction was very similar to that of one letter writer who expressed, "We don't need another fucking sneaker, no matter what it represents" (Murdock, 2004, p. 28). It is easy to slip into a comfortable, resistant space within the AMF's rhetorical world, where a strong defiance to corporations and consumerism is actively encouraged within the pages of the magazine (e.g., through articles and artwork) and outside of them (e.g., through public performance and acts of rebellion). But one only needs to refer back to the *Adbusters*' slogan – "Cultural revolution is our *business*" – to understand that the shoes, and the myriad of contradictions they seem to represent, make complete and perfect sense within the evolution of the AMF's particular approach to culture jamming. The AMF, after all, is an organization dedicated to transforming consumerism, not of replacing capitalism with another form of economic organization. In fact, failing to attend to some of the structural

aspects of the capitalist organization of society may account for some of the limits to their challenge to consumerism.

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the evolution in how the AMF and its magazine challenge the dominant ideology of consumerism at the same time as they participate in some of its practices. This participation is not just through the selling of consumer goods but includes the active appropriation of mainstream consumerism's aesthetics, which both the Blackspot shoes and *Adbusters'* subvertising exemplify. Lasn might argue that everything his organization is doing, and has done, goes against the consumerism that major corporations are promoting. To a certain extent he is correct as the heavily layered and shifting critique of consumer society that appears within the pages of *Adbusters* also focuses on globalization, US military and cultural hegemony, advertising, marketing, mass media and even capitalism itself as actors in a system detrimental to everything with which it comes into contact. The AMF has a variety of tactics to engage this critique, from encouraging direct action, to the writing of articles, features and books, to engaging the symbolic terrain of artwork and design, the latter of which being where the organization's most high profile culture jamming activities have taken place.

For years *Adbusters* has been an anti-consumerist haven and a bastion of culture jamming. Through all of the twists and turns of their tactics, *Adbusters* has relied to varying degrees on mimicking the spectacle of consumer society in an apparent attempt to inject a critical self-awareness into the dominant spectacle. Yet, over time *Adbusters'* culture jamming tactics have developed a much more nuanced critique of consumerism which, at times, is functionally indistinguishable from mainstream consumerism. This

similarity can be seen in the evolution of their use of subvertising, which has gone from presenting an explicit critique to mere reprints of advertisements where critique relies on context, and in the creation of the Blackspot Corporation, replete with products that have advertising campaigns. With these developments in the AMF's culture jamming in mind, how does the AMF challenge consumerism at the same time that it copies its formal expression? Is it possible for the AMF to challenge consumerism through the continued promotion of Buy Nothing Day while also promoting and selling the Blackspot sneaker?

Adbusters and the AMF raise serious issues about the power of consumerist ideology in late capitalist society, especially in regard to its impact on activism, an impact that is certainly not limited to organizations seeking to challenge consumerism. As an organization working for progressive cultural change, how the AMF and *Adbusters* challenge the dominant ideology of consumerism is very important in theorizing the two-way flow of the hegemonic process and understanding how some ideologies remain hegemonic despite repeated contestation. How does the AMF serve as a poignant example of the power of consumer capitalism to incorporate and neutralize criticism? What role does the form of a critique, in this case the AMF's critique of consumerism, play in its ability to resist co-optation? To address these matters, this chapter will focus on the evolution of the AMF's culture jamming tactics, analyzing subvertisements and the Blackspot campaign in particular as two components in a larger arsenal of symbolic and action oriented tools intended to challenge the dominant ideologies and practices of consumerism.

WHAT IS THE AMF?

The Adbusters Media Foundation was formed in 1989 by former advertising executive Kalle Lasn and wildlife photographer Bill Schmalz. In the 1970s, when Lasn had a marketing firm in Japan, he decided to quit[2] and move to Vancouver, BC with his wife. It was in Vancouver where Lasn met Schmalz, and the pair began making wildlife documentaries that were broadcast on Canadian television through the 1980s.

In the late 1980s, however, the British Columbia logging industry launched an aggressive public relations campaign in an effort to "greenwash" their practice of clear cutting forests. Determined to counter this, Lasn and Schmalz created a thirty-second ad presenting the environmentalists' position. But they ran into some roadblocks in getting their message out; the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) refused to sell them airtime. Environmentalists and other outraged citizens began protesting both the logging industry and the CBC. Rather than air the environmentalists' position, however, the CBC decided to pull the logging industry's campaign from the airwaves. This particular experience motivated Lasn and Schmalz to immediately create the AMF, *Adbusters* magazine and the Powershift Advocacy Advertising Agency. More recently, the AMF has added to this repertoire with the Blackspot "Anti-corporation," a for-profit venture in which Lasn is the CEO. *Adbusters* magazine has grown to a circulation of 120,000 (as of this writing in 2008). With readers in over 100 countries, *Adbusters* also has international and regional editions printed in France, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Italy and Australia. Its funding comes mainly from magazine subscriptions and other donations usually related to specific activities or campaigns.[3]

The AMF critiques a wide variety of dominant cultural and economic ideologies and practices with a general anti-corporate disposition that tends to focus on issues of consumerism and globalization. Naturally, these issues are not mutually exclusive, but are instead presented here as a way to give perspective to the AMF's wide range of critique. Additionally, since September 11, 2001, the AMF has been actively critiquing US military activity around the globe, which it argues runs through and connects all of the above issues.

This analysis will begin by identifying the AMF's guiding philosophy, one that is clearly laid out by Lasn in his book *Culture Jam*. Not only does *Culture Jam* identify the main reasons why the AFM focuses on consumerism, but the book also explains the organization's particular approach to culture jamming. As Lasn is the key figure and motivational force behind the AMF and *Adbusters* (although he is still listed as a publisher, Schmalz ceased his involvement with *Adbusters* long ago), his book provides important insights to their raison d'etre.

LASN'S *CULTURE JAM*

I start with Lasn's *Culture Jam* because it so clearly lays out his vision not only of a utopian society, but a utopian *consumer* society. It is vitally important to reiterate that the AMF is not contesting capitalism as a guiding economic system. While there are many examples when content in *Adbusters* is critical of capitalism, neither the magazine nor the AMF go so far as to advocate the replacement of capitalism with any other kind of economic organization. Instead, the AMF's critique is mostly aimed at the cultural expression of *consumer* capitalism or, as it will be referred to here, consumerism.

It is equally critical to point out the importance of this book in indicating the content of the AMF and *Adbusters* critique and their approach to culture jamming. Some of what appears in *Culture Jam* has been reprinted within the pages of *Adbusters*, in some cases multiple times. In fact, the description of culture jamming that appears in the introduction to *Culture Jam* has been running as a "who we are" description in *Adbusters* and on the AMF's website at least since the publication of the book. While this may be an indication of the degree to which Lasn has used his editorial control to ensure that the thematic content of *Adbusters* reflect that of his book, it must be noted that *Adbusters* staff-generated copy consistently mirrors Lasn's conception of consumer culture, the power of corporations to control it and the powerlessness of most consumers to resist it which he develops in *Culture Jam*. And while some of the culture jamming tactics he formulates in *Culture Jam* may have changed, they continue to follow all of the theoretical underpinnings of how he believes culture jamming can be a force to change consumerism for the better.

The first part of this section evaluates Lasn's conception of the culture of consumerism, tying it to a larger tradition of critical theory while also suggesting some its limits. The second part of this section turns to what Lasn identifies as the kinds of activism most likely to change the culture of consumerism for the better. Not only does he suggest what cultural and economic forms should be targeted, but he offers a variety of strategies aimed at upending the balance of cultural power (which currently favors corporations).

Consumerism, corporate power, and culture

While the beginnings of consumer society can be traced to early industrialization, when production for subsistence was largely replaced by wage labor, a milestone in the development of consumerism would come as mass production ramped up in the years after World War II, creating a surplus of goods for purchase. Also of importance at this time was the introduction of the credit card in 1950, allowing the average consumer to spend beyond his or her means and increasing the purchasing power of laborers. Over the span of thirteen years, from 1945 to 1958, consumer credit rose from 8.4 billion to $45 billion (Miles, 1998). As of March, 2007, consumer credit reached $2.425 trillion ("Consumer borrowing…" 2007). The proliferation of goods and easy access to money changed how consumption functioned in society and culture, moving the act of consumption from something primarily aimed at sustaining life to becoming a way of life. According to Stephen Miles (1998),

> People were not only offered what they needed but also what they desired, while simultaneously "wants" actively became "needs"…Consumer capitalism was able to exploit a situation where the *symbolic* value of consumer goods was endowed with an increased social significance. It is in this sense that the ideological impact of consumerism became increasingly subtle in nature. (p. 7)

It is important then to distinguish between consumption and consumerism. Consumption can be understood as the basic process of consuming an object, either symbolically or physically. This refers to the fact that we consume texts just as we consume food; in each case we internalize that which was produced external to us. Consumerism, on the other hand, refers to a larger realm of social, cultural and economic processes that influence

and contextualize consumption in capitalist society. “While consumption is an act,” Miles writes, “consumerism is a way of life…the cultural expression and manifestation of the apparently ubiquitous act of consumption” (p. 4).

There are a number of ideological imperatives that drive consumerism in late-capitalist society. Some of these are founded in basic economic ideologies having to do with the role of production and consumption in producing profit and maintaining efficient capitalist enterprises. For example, the notion that it is important to consume in increasing quantities for the good of the economy is a generally accepted fact; this is the ideology of “growth” that has become central to the sustenance of a “healthy” economy. Another example involves the use of labor and materials in the production of consumer goods. Prevailing economic wisdom insists that costs associated with both of these factors be kept to a minimum, not only in order to offer a product cheaper than the competition but (and, Marx would argue, more importantly) to increase profits.

While the concepts above tend to circulate throughout contemporary American culture in the form of common sense, other ideologies related to consumerism are consistently reinforced through cultural forms, such as advertising. Advertising is a major focus for *Adbusters*, the AMF, and Lasn as it is the primary form through which corporations encourage consumers to participate in consumerism. In this respect, there are a number of purposes that advertising can serve, but the focus here, and for *Adbusters* is on its ideological dimension. In her book *Decoding Advertising*, Judith Williamson (1978) demonstrates the ideological function of advertising through the structuring of its symbolic content. By linking beneficial images and ideas that have no direct connection to the product being promoted, advertising can associate concepts such as safety, desire

and companionship with objects such as tires, cars and jewelry. It is in this same way that advertising can promote ideologies that insist one must look a certain way to be attractive, or consume certain products to find social acceptance. Consequently, any concern about the effectiveness of advertising should not focus on if a *certain* advertisement works in its ability to increase the sales of a *specific* product, but instead about the *gestalt* of advertising in society which promotes the *values* of consumerism.

It is particularly in relation to mass communication such as advertising that Lasn identifies an imbalance of cultural power as being at the center of the problems with contemporary consumerism (and North American – particularly United States – culture in general). This imbalance has the majority of power in the hands of corporations. The control he understands corporations as having in dictating the direction of various trends, and other aspects of consumer-oriented phenomena related to what, why and how much people should buy, borders on complete. According to Lasn, this cultural control mostly comes about from the corporate dominance of the mass media where steady pro-consumerism and pro-corporate propaganda is shot through everything from entertainment to the news. He warns of cultural homogenation stemming from the current political economy of the media in the United States and argues that Americans have been programmed to consume; “The bell rang and you salivated,” Lasn writes (p. 38).

The consumer culture that Lasn portrays is a grim one indeed, leaving in its wake a society rife with mental disorders, a world fraught with environmental disasters, and a corporate stranglehold on the production of culture with a careless disregard for people’s mental and physical environments. With respect to the impact of consumerism on mental health, a repeated refrain in *Culture Jam*, and throughout *Adbusters*, is that rates of

depression and other mental disorders have been steadily rising since the 1940s. Lasn leads his book with this revelation, pointing to studies that have been chronicling the rise of mental illnesses in the United States. This same point is mentioned in various issues of *Adbusters*, most notably the July/August 2001 issue titled "Toxic Culture." The only connection between the rise of mental illness and the rise of consumerism that Lasn makes is that they happened at the same time, and so he repeatedly *suggests* a connection. "Could it be," Lasn' writes, "that these things together – the curse of plentitude, the image explosion, the data overload, the hum of the media that, like Denny's, are always awake and bustling – are driving us crazy? I lay my money here. More than anything else, it is our mediated, consumption-driven culture that's making us sick" (p. 11).

Spurious reasoning aside, considering how Lasn frames consumerism, it is no surprise that he makes such a claim. Calling people the "Manchurian consumer[s]" (p. 37), Lasn details how it is that support for the culture of consumerism is maintained. Lasn explains how corporations have gained enormous economic and cultural power through various legal and social developments. Legally, the corporation gained this power when, in the1886 case Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad, the US Supreme Court ruled that a corporation has the same constitutional protections and rights as a citizen. Lasn also suggests that corporations have power because consumers are not as suspicious as they used to be and, as a result, have lost the ability to decide for themselves how to live their lives. "The [unofficial history of America^{TM}]," Lasn writes, "is a story of democracy derailed, of a revolutionary spirit suppressed, and of a once proud people reduced to servitude" (p. 71).

The culture of consumerism that results from this concentration of power in corporations is one in which consumers have little choice but to adopt the styles and manners dictated to them by corporations through the media. Lasn argues that a confluence of marketing, advertising, entertainment and public relations spin has created a consumerism that is sold as a cure for insecurity, where advertising alters behavior and some of it even reduces the ability for people to empathize with others. Lasn writes about the "ecology of the mind," an ecology that suffers from "mental pollution" and "infotoxins" as people operate in a mediated environment that suffers from a "loss of infodiversity." It is a message of incredibly strong media effects; "The commercial mass media are rearranging our neurons, manipulating our emotions, making powerful new connections between deep immaterial needs and material products. So virtual is the hypodermic needle that we don't feel it. So gradually is the dosage increased that we're not aware of the toxicity" (p. 13).

What Lasn is describing is a process whereby the production of ideology is almost completely controlled by a dominant, economic faction. Reading through his book, and much of *Adbusters*, is to read about a conceptualization of the dominant ideology thesis from the perspective of the base-superstructure model made popular by Karl Marx, who wrote about it in 1859, and subsequently expanded upon by scores of writers since. Beginning with a passage in his "preface to a critique of political economy," Marx suggests that the economic conditions of a society's structure (the economic "base") determines the makeup of many components of its culture (a part of the "superstructure"): "The mode of production of material life," Marx wrote, "conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men

that determines their being, but, on the contrary, the social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1977, p. 389). While not unproblematic (see, for example, Eagleton, 1991 and Larrain, 1979), many theorists took this passage as a sign that Marx was suggesting that ideology rises from the economic structures upon which a society is built. Marx's conceptualization of ideology as a type of false consciousness, that is as a set of ideas that mask class conflict and keep the proletariat operating against their own best interests, only strengthened the notion that it was tied to the material conditions of society. From this view, it is the economic (i.e., capitalist) imperatives of consumerism or late-capitalism that structures the ideas we have about what is right and good, useful and desirable.

An important distinction between Marx and Lasn must be made: While Marx identifies *capitalism* as an important factor is determining ideology and cultural practices, Lasn identifies *corporations* as fulfilling that role. This difference is crucial because Lasn's critique side steps a whole host of conditions tied to capitalism (e.g., theories of surplus value, crises of over production, the division of labor) that inform how corporations operate, the relationship between producers and consumers (e.g., antagonism) and the conditions of labor (e.g., alienation). In this regard, Lasn's take on the perpetuation of ideology mirrors Marx only in how it functions.

Lasn's observations about the corporate creation of tastes and the manufacturing of desires for products, images, are a part of critical media and social theories. There is a long tradition of research that critiques the rise of late-capitalism and the various marketing and advertising industries that work to sell products to consumers in an era of mass production. Perhaps one of the most contested components of this critical work is

the notion that corporations and the media have some sort of direct control over the thoughts and behaviors of consumers, a notion that is put forward by Lasn.

Most of this critical attention is directed at Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's (1944) influential chapter "The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception" from their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* An element of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that has been latched onto by critics of consumerism like Lasn is that the mass media, under the logic of capitalist mass production, are creating a homogenous product and, in its wake, a homogeneous culture. The next step that is often attributed to Horkheimer and Adorno is that their criticism of the media (including advertising) suggested a link between the media and consumerism. This unfortunate simplification of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument, as clearly explained in Conrad Lodziak's *The Myth of Consumerism*, misses the crucial point that, for Horkheimer, Adorno and the rest of the Frankfurt School of critical theorists, it is *capitalism* that is at the root of consumerist behavior. As Lodziak argues, "Major theorists of the production of consumption perspective … make it absolutely clear that consumption is not produced by advertising and the media. Rather, they insist that consumption is produced, in the first instance, by the alienation of labour and the subsequent organization and experience of employment" (p. 92). In other words, the phenomenon of consumerism is directly tied the material conditions of laboring within a capitalist system. As Marx explained, alienation results from a system where laborers are forced to work for reasons that are outside the production of goods (i.e., they work for a wage not to produce goods). This relationship to production causes laborers to lose control over the work they do and their identity as workers and as free human beings. Lodziak writes, "this translates into our dependency

on employment, which alone…exerts its own material manipulations on needs and consumption" (p. 93).

To suggest that the ideology of consumerism is a product of only one thing is clearly a faulty logic. But to argue that consumerism is produced and maintained by both economic (i.e., capitalist production) and cultural (e.g., entertainment) forces is clearly supported by a quick review by any number of critical inquiries into the subject. For example, David Harvey (1990) traces the rise of modern consumerism through an exploration of the capitalist imperatives that led us from pre-industrial and industrial forms of capital accumulation to the post-Fordist mode operating today. Through Harvey's exploration of the rise of economic and cultural aspects of postmodernity, he demonstrates how capital's continuous need to expand has driven much of what we consider to be consumerism: a fast-paced society and economy whose ultimate survival depends on the expansion and creation of markets and a rapid turnover of products and capital. Assisted by various technological innovations (e.g., computers, satellites, mass production), coupled with economic innovations (e.g., advances in marketing, the widespread use of credit for everyday purchases), consumerism is the public face that drives the need for the constant and rapid innovation and turnover of products in late-capitalist society.

Harvey identifies one (of many) cultural avenues that assist in the perpetuation of this late-capitalist economy: "Mastering or intervening actively in the production of volatility, on the one hand, entails manipulation of taste and opinion, either through being a fashion leader or by so saturating the market with images as to shape the volatility to particular ends. This means, in either case, the constructions of new sign systems and

imagery" (p. 287). To this end he argues that advertising is one resource that has helped to "manipulate desires and tastes" with no regard to the actual use of the product being advertised.

Stewart Ewen (2001) chronicles this cultural side in the rise of consumerism and lends much support to Harvey's argument. If in *Captains of Consciousness* Ewen comes across as depicting a society where the masses are dupes, blindingly led by corporate propaganda, it is because that is precisely how the architects of modern consumerism viewed the population. In their quest to increase profits it was necessary to take advantage of the new levels of mass production and ratchet up the level of consumption in society. As early as the 1920s industrialists freely and openly acknowledged that they were going to have to convince people, not just to buy, but to buy more. Ewen offers the example of Edward Feline who, in 1934, wrote, "The time has come…when all our educational institutions must concentrate on the great social task of teaching the masses not what to think but how to think, and thus to find out how to behave like human beings in the machine age" (quoted from Ewen, 2000, p. 54). This education that Feline wrote about was not just about adapting workers to an industrial age, but was about forging attitudes about consumption that would do away with what were then persisting notions of modesty, thrift, and practicality in the consumption of consumer goods.

Lasn's conceptualization of the crux of the problem with consumerism, which extends to the AMF's plan to change it, is situated firmly in the space where the economic meets the cultural, specifically the cultural industries, even more specifically design, advertising and marketing. This focus, while certainly valid, is limited in scope and so can present some problems for basing solutions on it. Identifying the cultural level

as the creation of, *and solution to*, the problems of consumerism is, as many critics point out, at best too simplistic and, at worst, doomed to failure from the start. As suggested above, Lodziak takes exception to a symbolic approach to understanding consumerism. He criticizes a cultural studies approach which has created a "myth of consumerism" out of the notion that consumerism is practiced at the symbolic level wherein much power and agency is given to the consumer. Lodziak argues, acerbically at times, that consumerism is rooted in the material conditions upon which society functions.

A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), however, argue that there is a connection between the symbolic and material aspects that influence consumerism. While Firat and Venkatesh celebrate a "liberatory" postmodern consumerism, they suggest that we are not yet entirely at a liberatory moment. While treating the consumption of goods as a symbolic transaction where consumers have the power to create meaning and, as a result, be a part of (at least) symbolic production, Firat and Venkatesh argue that "the consumer needs to be studied as a participant in an ongoing, never ending process of construction that includes a multiplicity of moments where things (most importantly as symbols) are consumed, produced, signified, represented, allocated, distributed, and circulated" (p. 259). But they argue that while we have moved culturally into postmodernism, capitalism remains in a modernist mode and, as a result, "the individual consumer is not driven by needs dictated by her/his own nature, but by the organization of the system of objects" (p. 260). What Firat and Venkatesh effectively present is a system in which cultural and economic forces are operating to create a consumer society. In this way, capitalism may use the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism (i.e., heavily promoting the multiplicity of the symbolic content of consumer goods through design,

marketing and advertising) in order to mask the myriad of contradictions that are a consequence of late-capitalist, consumer society.

But increasingly, how one critiques consumerism and, by extension, how one critiques those who critique consumerism, comes down to where one places the crux of power when it comes to promoting and maintaining consumerism. In her essay "Post Mod-cons: Consumerism and cultural studies," Eve Bertelson explores two approaches to understanding the practice of consumerism, "critical optimists and pessimists." Of them, she writes:

> The former, adherents of consumption as social practice, tend to subscribe to an active audience/active consumer position stressing autonomy and competence, while the latter, focusing on the exchange/commodity nexus see the production and reproduction of consumer subjects as systemic and intractable, presented in the worse-case scenarios as inert dupes of the system. (p. 90).

Lasn's conceptualization of our present form of consumerism seems, on the surface, to fall into the latter category but actually avoids either of them. His description of a one-way flow of corporate cultural power and its behavioral effects seems to represent the "exchange/commodity nexus" position, but does not take into consideration the influences and consequences of the capitalist economic system upon which it is predicated. Nor does Lasn address the various ways in which consumerism is practiced, which excludes his position from Bertelson's "consumption as social practice" category. Thus there are two fundamental aspects of consumerism that he does not address: Some of the deeper capitalist influences on the reproduction of ideologies that sustain consumerism and people's actual experience of it. The consequences of missing an

important link in the economic-consumerism chain and failing to resonate with the lives of actual consumers can be disastrous for a program dedicated to creating progressive cultural change.

While it is appropriate to critique Lasn for failing to account for the larger role that capitalism plays in the condition of consumerism, since he has not fully articulated this issue it is unfair to judge the practices of *Adbusters* and the AMF as if he had. But this omission by Lasn might also help to explain why *Adbusters* and the AMF have shifted their tactics in their attempts to challenge the dominant ways in which consumerism is conceptualized, promoted and practiced. As will be traced in the next section, while the theoretical underpinnings which Lasn lays out in his book continue to inform the AMF's culture jamming practices to this day, some of the more prominent of these have changed since Lasn first wrote about them. For now, however, I will turn to an examination of Lasn's prescription for taking control of culture away from the corporations who dominate it.

Challenging consumerism

It bears repeating that Lasn, and by extension the AMF and *Adbusters*, are not out to eliminate consumerism or corporations. Much to the contrary, the *Adbusters* movement is about cultural *reform*. Lasn may be making repeated calls to revolution, and he may characterize culture jamming as revolutionary. Based on his writings and the texts in *Adbusters*, however, revolutionary change is far from the goal and can best be chalked up to rhetorical flair. In fact, perhaps the earliest foreshadowing of his position and, ultimately of the Blackspot campaign, comes in the middle of his book where he writes, "We believe we can launch a new brand and beat America™ in a meme war" (p. 127).[4]

Lasn's reference here to a meme war, a war of is the crux of his plan to "revolutionize" consumerism, to abolish the harmful and predatory practices of corporate, consumer behavior in culture. Lasn has a number of ideas for how to pull this off which all rely on virtually the same tactics he identifies the corporate sector as employing, except in his case the message being portrayed is one that attempts to highlight the power that corporations have over consumers and culture. To reverse this, to put culture back in the hands of the people, Lasn proposes several ideas aimed at reducing the power of corporations while also creating a more emotionally and ecologically friendly consumerism. These include:

- True Cost: The cost of products should not only reflect the cost of the materials used to produce it, but also the cost of those products to the environment, whether that is by deforestation, contribution to global warming, etc.
- Media Carta: Enforcing everyone's "right to communicate" through whatever channels they desire.
- The corporate "I": Doing away with the notion that corporations have the same constitutional rights and legal protections as people.

Lasn devotes a chapter to the "meme warrior," the semantic activist who is going to pave the way for cultural change by promoting the above ideas. Within this chapter, he outlines a number of tactics in creating and distributing memes to counter those which are dominant in our culture, all of which he characterizes as culture jamming. He writes about exploiting "leverage points," practicing "détournement," "cyberjamming" (i.e. hacking) and "TV jamming" (e.g. getting "counter memes" on television), all of which

are intended to interrupt corporate communication while injecting a criticism of it and/or promoting an alternative to corporate-controlled culture. In his explanation of "leverage points," Lasn gives critical insight into how he envisions broader social change will happen:

> Almost every social problem, no matter how seemingly intractable, can be solved with enough time, scrutiny and effort. There's always some little fissure you can squeeze a crowbar into and heave. That's the leverage point. When pressure is applied there, memes start replicating, minds start changing and, in time, the whole culture moves. (p. 130)

So he urges wannabe warriors to "learn to detourn," "reframe debates," "drop your façade of politeness," and "learn to confront."

Much of the social change he envisions is predicated upon what Max Haiven (2007) calls a "freeing of the mind" (p. 96). Lasn suggests that culture jamming can liberate the mind and free people from the false trappings of consumer desire instilled by the corporate rule over culture. This change in consciousness is to be facilitated through exposure to various culture jamming activities which are largely symbolic in nature in the sense that, for the most part, they do not change the material conditions that create our social reality. Instead, these culture jamming activities challenge the ideologies that are taken for granted and sustain consumerism. The goal then is that these challenges will have a positive impact on how we perceive ourselves and our culture, ultimately affecting how we interact with them.

It is the connection between challenging ideology and prompting action that is most important for Lasn's vision of effecting cultural change. A change in our perception

of how the world around us works (in Lasn's case, seeing that our lives are under the control of forces outside ourselves) will lead to behavioral change en masse, in turn facilitating the structural change that is necessary to create a more mentally and environmentally friendly culture. Unfortunately, Lasn does not make the connections that explain how a change in consciousness can and will translate into a change in culture. At times he even seems to collapse the two.

This is why some critics argue that the mostly rhetorically – and symbolically – based criticisms that culture jamming provides are less productive (even non-productive) than other modes of activism. Heath and Potter (2005) suggest that, as opposed to the more traditional forms of politics, including the types of direct action found in street protest, the organizing of various activist groups and coalitions, and lobbying for changes in legislation, culture jamming lacks the ability to effect change. "Cultural politics…is significantly more fun," they conclude as they continue to argue that "guerrilla theater, playing in a band [and] making avant-garde art" is not nearly as politically effectual as union organizing (p. 62). While critiquing this aspect of Heath and Potter's argument for being vague and hyperbolic, Christine Harold (2007) makes virtually the same case as she questions the limitations of a rhetorical approach to critiquing culture. After challenging the ability of various cultural interventions by culture jamming activists (subvertising mostly), she comes to the conclusion that creating actual alternatives (such as Lawrence Lessig's "creative commons" project)[5] and working within the political system are more practical and fruitful ways to effect change. In some respects the AMF seems to acknowledge this with the creation of the Blackspot sneaker. Harold

acknowledges this development of the AMF's but, curiously, devotes only one sentence to it in a chapter otherwise devoted to critiquing *Adbusters'* use of subvertising.

What is also unclear in Lasn's conception of change is exactly what kind of culture will result from the culture jamming program he promotes. In his writing he forcefully explains that he wishes to see a culture that is not controlled by corporations but rather by the people (the very same people, by the way, that he gives very little credit to in their ability to resist domination). But in much of his argument in *Culture Jam*, which continues to be circulated in *Adbusters*, it can only be inferred what kind of culture he desires. Through Lasn's and *Adbusters'* focus on the environmental and mental damage being wrought by the current situation it can be assumed that the reformed culture will be less environmentally destructive and healthier (physically and mentally) for humans.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Lasn's book is that he attributes very little power or autonomy to people who live within the culture he describes. "Our media saturated postmodern world," Lasn (1999) writes, "where all communication flows in one direction, from the powerful to the powerless, produces a population of lumpen spectators" (p. 194). This disdain for the agency of everyday people is not only made amazingly clear in his description of the problem (e.g., "the bell rang and you salivated" p. 38), but also in terms of his solution to the problem, creating a counter spectacle with counter memes. It seems his vision of creating change is very much predicated on a pliant population who believes anything it sees or reads in the media. In this kind of a situation, culture jamming becomes a war of ideas, of *ideologies*, played out through the perpetuation of memes and the side that can get the most airtime, or reach the most

people, will win.[6] This approach is evident in early *Adbusters* issues and is perhaps best crystallized in the subvertising published therein.

What follows is an analysis of how Lasn and the AMF put their work for cultural change into practice with a focus on their culture jamming techniques of subvertising and the Blackspot campaign. As these two approaches rely heavily on *Adbusters* magazine, it, too, will form a part of this analysis, functioning as a context within which subvertising and Blackspot evolved, but also as an important marker in the evolution of the two tactics, as it, too, changed over time. As examples of *Adbusters'* culture jamming, subvertising and the Blackspot campaign are approaches to contesting a number of ideologies that legitimate consumerism and make it the dominant cultural form in the United States. An analysis of the evolution of these tactics over time provides key insights into how activists attempt to achieve social change by challenging dominant ideology through cultural forms.

Likewise, a study of the evolution of these tactics illustrates how hegemony can work to reinforce dominant ideologies as it insinuates itself within the very heart of activist critique. As will be demonstrated, as *Adbusters* attempts to maneuver in such a way as to avoid its culture jamming techniques from being co-opted by mainstream corporations, and as the AMF try to develop a campaign and aesthetic that can get its message out while subverting the power of corporations, it mimics more and more the ideologies, aesthetics and economic structures (particularly through Blackspot) that underlie the hegemonic power of the very culture it is contesting. As a result, *Adbusters*' formerly very strong critique of consumerism (in terms of its articulation, not so much its

complexity) becomes lost amid the AMF's own culture jamming activities and a barrage of criticism from both mainstream and academic circles.

ADBUSTERS MAGAZINE

According to the AMF, the content of *Adbusters* magazine is primarily geared toward "examining the relationship between human beings and their physical and mental environments" (Adbusters Media Foundation, 2005, ¶ 6). There are a number of different formal and aesthetic tactics the magazine takes to do this, but the first thing that people often notice about the magazine is how "slick" it is. *Adbusters* is certainly a "glossy" magazine, often with well over 80 full-color pages per issue. While this aspect of the magazine has remained steady over the years, it is the content and the manner in which the content is presented to its readers that has changed dramatically.

Of all the content in the magazine, the most salient here is subvertising. Subvertising has long been a part of *Adbusters'* content and a staple in the meme war Lasn and the AMF have been waging. But over the years, as the AMF began to notice the degree to which some culture jamming techniques were being appropriated by Madison Avenue (particularly subvertising), *Adbusters* changed the mode of address it had been using to reach its audience. Much of this change is predicated on the notion that pulling people out of their daily, lived expectations can foster a change in consciousness to one that is open towards, and will consequently work for, creating progressive social change. So as the layout and aesthetic approach of *Adbusters* morphed to reflect this, so, too, did the subvertisements it they printed.

In a very real way, *Adbusters* can be seen to be operating with the same cultural intent as the feminist consciousness-raising literature explored by Lisa Marie Hogeland

(1998). Hogeland argues that 1970's feminist literature worked with the understanding that there is a connection between consciousness and social change. As such, the consciousness-raising novel served many purposes, including disseminating feminist ideas to a wider public, helping to maintain feminist communities, and also helping to raise women's awareness of themselves as subjects within a patriarchal society. *Adbusters* magazine seems to work with a very similar theory guiding its actions, and in *Culture Jam*, Lasn makes it clear that he believes a change in consciousness is key to creating social change. The analogy to feminist consciousness-raising can be furthered here: *Adbusters* serves as a space within which individual's stories of being dominated by consumerism are told with the hope that others will also see their own domination and work to escape it.

Adbusters' approach to its particular kind of consciousness-raising takes many forms, but it began mostly through articles and subvertisements that appeared within the magazine. A review of six years of *Adbusters* (2000 – 2005) indicates that these approaches have shifted, with a major shift happening after the Sept/Oct 2001 issue. The two most salient aspects of the shift that will be the focus of this analysis are: 1) a formal shift from a linear, straightforward presentation of information and subvertising to one that requires more work from readers; and 2) a tactical shift moving from a focus on a text-based challenge of the dominant ideologies circulating in and around the practice of consumerism to a product-oriented challenge. Both of these approaches came through the development of what Lasn calls "design anarchy," followed by a pronounced *Adbusters'* branding effort beginning with the Blackspot campaign, then the Blackspot sneaker and its corresponding Blackspot "anti-corporation."

As indicated earlier, much of the text within *Adbusters* continues the same themes that Lasn explains in *Culture Jam*, mainly advocating anti-corporate and anti-consumerism sentiments. But the magazine also actively engages in reporting on activist actions and exploring various tactics that activists can and do use. For now, I want to focus attention on the evolution of the text, graphics and layout in *Adbusters*, exploring the ways in which their use is intended to engage the reader in an attempt to raise consciousness. This shift is important as it has implications for how the AMF practices culture jamming.

Classic Adbusters *and traditional subvertising*

In 2000 – 2001 issues, *Adbusters* has a layout very similar to any mainstream magazine on bookstore shelves: The cover of each issue generally refers to a feature that can be found within the issue, and each issue contains departments (e.g., "Letters," "Battle of the Mind," "News from the Front," and "Creative Resistance") that are clearly demarcated with headings and generally appear in the same place in each issue (letters first, "Battle of the Mind" second, then features, etc). These components, and any other special features (e.g., subvertisements or photo essays), are presented in an easily accessible, linear fashion where connections between consumerist ideology and the critique of it are often easy to follow, sometimes clearly labeled. These issues even have page numbers.

The August/September 2000 issue (titled "Corporate Crackdown") is prototypical of this era of *Adbusters*. The magazine opens with a nine-page photo essay consisting of images of people working at an office, none of whom look particularly happy to be there. Accompanying the photos (five in total, four of which are page-and-a-half spreads) are

various quotes from corporate presidents. As if to announce the theme of the issue, text alongside the second to last photo reads, “The aim of this issue is to crack the corporate ‘I’.” The letters section begins on page 9 and runs uninterrupted for five pages. The “Battle of the Mind” (BOM) section begins on page sixteen and features articles about developments in advertising (e.g., Ritter, 2000; Smith, 2000), marketing (e.g., Hermosillo, 2000) and the media (e.g., Grierson, 2000), many explaining how corporations are continuing their colonization of more and more of our personal and mental space and the effect this is having on people and culture. Again, the themes and messages of these articles reflect the connections between culture and the corporation that are expressed by Lasn in *Culture Jam*.

What follows BOM are a number of feature articles. The first is a thirteen-page story about Cuba. Titled “Cubamerica,” Bruce Grierson’s text and Mark Gilber’s photographs portray a rather romantic view of the island nation described, not as communist, but as “the last country in the western world trying to hold the fort against consumer capitalism” (p. 25). Next, the cover story, “Corporate Crackdown” (Lasn & Liacas, 2000), tells of the rise, and eminent fall, of the corporation. Mirroring almost word for word Lasn’s description of the economic and cultural power of corporations in *Culture Jam*, “Corporate Crackdown” parts ways from that text in “Part III: The Crackdown.” Listing a number of different “fronts” (e.g., community, legal, global), Lasn and Tom Liacas offer suggestions for how to challenge corporate power (e.g., charter revocation) and then supply some examples of when such tactics have been successful.

Fittingly, the “News from the Front” (NF) section follows the long list of activism against corporations highlighted in the cover story. This section contains articles on the

status of activism itself (e.g., Chalrton, 2000; Hedberg, 2000), activist happenings from around the world (e.g., Keever, 2000), and specific examples of what some people are doing to protest any number of issues related to globalization ("GlobalAmerica," 2000) and corporate conglomeration (e.g., MacKinnon, 2000). There are also a number of sidebars with various types of information that offer ideas for activists to direct their activity (e.g., "Dial-a-CEO") or about specific events (e.g., TV turnoff week).

The issue closes with the "Creative Resistance" (CR) section which features artistic forays into the criticism of culture, politics and economics. This is also a section where subvertising is typically showcased (although in other issues subvertising may appear elsewhere within the magazine). One example of subvertising from this issue's CR section includes a spoof of the Coca-Cola ads which feature polar bears (illustration 8): This particular ad reads "Enjoy Climate Change" in the same typeface as the famous Coca-Cola ads and pictures three polar bears floating on a chunk of ice. Examples of logo play have the Russian hammer and sickle morphing into the McDonald's logo, the Nike "swoosh" with a broken tail, and a can of Calvin Klein beans.

Illustration 8
Coca-Cola subvertisement
Source: *Adbusters*, August/September 2000, v. 8 n. 3, p. 59

The most noteworthy part of this issue's CR section, however, is the introduction where the end of subvertising as readers have come to know it in the pages of *Adbusters* is all but explicitly stated. This introduction (no author is identified) acknowledges the readers who have been asking where the subvertising had gone as the magazine's publishing of them had diminished quite a bit over the past few years. The answer is

"underground." "To Adbusters, subvertising is fun," the copy reads, "but only if it's making some CEO squirm. In more and more cases, it just isn't working" ("Creative resistance," 2000, p. 58). What follows is a call for artists and activists to change tactics: "subvertising must evolve." Offered as an example are Red Cross ads which suggest "a more subtle approach." The ads feature photographs of relief workers in third-world countries with various corporate slogans superimposed over them. One photograph is taken from the perspective of the back of a truck, looking down on a group of people reaching up while a package bearing the Red Cross logo is being handed down to them (illustration 9). The corporate slogan used for this photo: "We keep your promises."

Illustration 9
Red Cross subvertisement.
Source: *Adbusters*, August/September 2000, V. 8 n. 3, p. 61.

This juxtaposition of image and text can be read any number of different ways, which can further depend on if a viewer knows where the slogan comes from. For example, when I first saw the photograph described above, I didn't realize that the text was a corporate slogan and was wondering why *Adbusters* was reprinting Red Cross advertisements. As a result, I was trying to figure out a critique *Adbusters* might be trying to make based on context (that it appears in *Adbusters*). After learning that the quote was the slogan for DHL Worldwide Express (which *Adbusters* noted in a caption), I attributed criticism to the image itself and thought the comment was that the Red Cross keeps our promises to aid the needy in our absence (i.e., we aren't keeping our own promises so someone else does it for us). Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this (or any other) reading, but in an apparent effort to make sure the point is understood,

Adbusters includes a quote from the creators of the series, Wilbert Leering and Lennart Wienecke, who explain that they "placed corporate statements in a completely different context to show the simplicity of our western world vs. the hardship of people living in developing countries" ("Creative Resistance," 2000, p. 61).

What *Adbusters* initiates in the August/September 2000 issue of CR, is a move to a different way of subvertising. In fact, there are essentially two different types of subvertisements that appear in *Adbusters*: the more straightforward critique, one that includes critique in the visual rhetoric of the ad (what I call "traditional" subvertising), and the more esoteric, a simple reprint of an ad that relies more heavily on context for critique to be understood (what I call "neo-subvertising"). Up to this point, what had appeared within the pages of *Adbusters* could be considered traditional subvertising. This type parodies familiar ad campaigns, mimicking the campaign's aesthetic, injecting it with a message critical of the product or industry. The subvertising that *Adbusters* later developed is more of the "neo-subvertising" variety. These subvertisements will be explored in more detail below in the section on Design Anarchy; suffice it to say here that these subvertisements tend to be literal reproductions of advertisements taken from a variety of sources, sometimes literally "ripped" from a magazine and reprinted within the pages of *Adbusters*.

As explored in the introduction, subvertising works to interrupt the signification process of an advertisement, altering it in an attempt to invest it with an alternative message aimed at raising a critical awareness of anything from a particular product to industry wide practices. Williamson's (1978) exploration into the signification process in advertising and its relationship to ideology argues that the placement of various objects

and texts within the structure of the ad invites the viewer to make connections between them. Since the connections do not exist naturally and are only suggested by the ad, viewers must make those connections themselves and thus rely on various pre-existing "referent systems" (p. 19). "They are clearly ideological systems," she writes, "and draw their significance from areas outside advertising" (p. 19). She argues that this process works to mask the goal of the advertisement, to create connections where there are none. This is what subvertising works against: It illustrates the constructedness of advertising while creating connections between products and the consequences of their consumption. Instead of the hip sexiness of Absolut vodka there is impotence. Instead of the ineffable beauty that comes from Calvin Klein there is neurosis. Thus, subvertising relies on the same signification process as advertising, but aims to link referents to meanings that counter the standard ideological work of ads and raise consciousness.

At this point it is important to reconsider the goal of subvertising which does not suggest, like so much *Adbusters* rhetoric, that consumers are dupes who are tricked by slick advertising campaigns into being compliant drones, or even, as Harold (2007) suggests, that it is intended to reveal some truth that is hidden from viewers. Instead, subvertising works *with* readers who continually play with texts. But just as it would be a mistake to say that everyone falls prey to the marketing ploys that seek to perpetuate the ideologies of consumerism, so, too, would it be hasty to say that everyone plays with texts in ways that are *resistant* to the dominant ideology of consumerism.

Adbusters' critique of advertising is rarely about a particular brand, but instead is about the cultural environment, where consumerism is relentlessly perpetuated and alternatives to it, or alternative ways of practicing it, are practically non-existent. When

Adbusters does focus on one particular brand, subvertising is being used as a "leverage point" to reveal broader cultural and ethical issues related to that brand. So while brands may be identifiable in some subvertisements (e.g., Camel or Absolut), the messages can be understood as more broadly aimed at the consequences of the purchase of that type of product (e.g., cigarettes and alcohol). An example of subvertisements that suggest a more general critique of consumerism is in the "Obsession" series of ads (see illustration 10 for an example). Each one of these subvertisements (of which there are a number, including video versions) carefully mimic the rhetorical and aesthetic tropes of the famous Calvin Klein ads, but twists them in such a way as to draw attention to the negative impact fashion industry advertising can have on consumers' perceptions of their bodies, not just Calvin Klein. The message of a subvertisement, then, may not be limited to suggesting that a particular brand is being deceptive in its advertising practices (although it certainly can and has). Instead, subvertising should be understood for its ability to offer a wide range of criticisms related not only to a particular product, but also to an industry or to even wider social or political beliefs and practices.

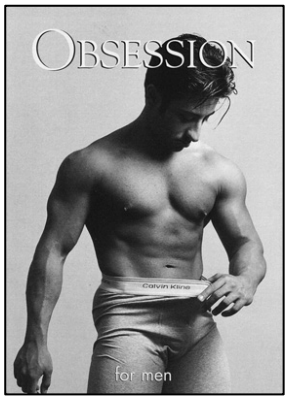

Illustration 10
Obsession subvertisement. Source: *Adbusters* postcard from author's collection.

As an activity that appropriates texts associated with dominant social and cultural practices as a means to raise awareness of and critique them, subvertisements that have been distributed by *Adbusters* (both within and without their magazine) display some of the intentions of what the Situationists called "*détournement*," a practice where existing cultural texts would be altered to produce revolutionary meaning. From their writings, it

is clear that the Situationists saw *détournement* as a linguistic intrusion that would be a part of the challenge to the social conditions linked to capitalism in France at the time of their movement.

This is how the *détournement* of the Situationists parts with that of Lasn and the AMF: *Détournement* for the Situationists was primarily a method by which they hoped to overturn the spectacle, "the sphere where," Raoul Vaneigem wrote, "forced labor is transformed into a voluntary sacrifice" (Vaneigem, 1981, p. 125). On this point, Harold (2007) and Max Haiven (2007) are correct in their observation that, while Lasn likens the work of subvertising to Situationist *détournement*, he limits its use to fostering a cultural revolution (i.e., "how meaning is produced") as opposed to its use for a revolution which aims to transform the social relationships created by capitalism (i.e., between workers, capitalists and the concept of alienation). In this regard, Lasn's insistence that the culture jamming he advocates is a continuation of the Situationist legacy is a profound misrepresentation of the goal of the Situationists. As Haiven notes, "situationism was predicated on a strong Marxist understanding of power, resistance, culture, and society" (p. 94,) and it is precisely this aspect of critique that is missing from Lasn and the AMF's goal of culture jamming (in this case subvertising).

Some critiques of subvertising also suggest that any critical content in this vein can become lost on contemporary consumers who live within an environment cluttered with corporate logos and commercial messages. As Naomi Klein (2000) writes, "In these information-numb times, we are beyond being abruptly awakened by a startling image, a sharp juxtaposition or even a fabulously clever *détournement*" (p. 296). Also, Harold suggests that subvertising does not take advertising "seriously enough" (p. 52).

Essentially, Harold argues that subvertising wishes to "simultaneously deploy and escape the tropes of advertising" (p. 53). What she is arguing is that subvertising's form and mode of address reproduce those of advertising and thus effectively works against its own cause.

Research by Ayse Binay (2005) suggests that there may be some credence to this line of criticism, as she found that exposure to Absolut vodka subvertisements (for an example, see illustration 11) did not have a negative effect on attitudes toward the brand and, in some cases, actually increased brand loyalty. While these results are telling and should give subvertisers everywhere a moment of pause, a number of issues related to this study must be explored. For one, this was a study of subvertisements involving just one brand: Absolut. Binay first measured attitudes toward the brand and then showed a succession of Absolut ads and Absolut subvertisements, measuring attitudes toward the brand along the way. What is not clear is if participants knew they were seeing subvertisements. Binay's research does not address the possibility that the context within which subvertising is encountered is an important factor in a viewer's response. This is particularly important to keep in mind considering the context within which the viewers saw the subvertisements: in a research experiment where they were first asked their attitudes about the Absolut brand.

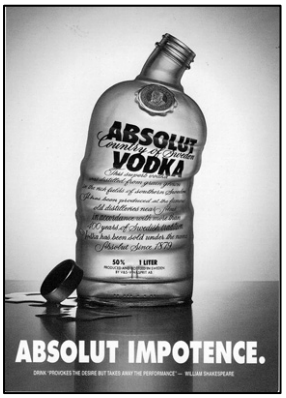

Illustration 11
Small text reads, "Drink provokes the desire but takes away the performance – William Shakespeare." Source: *Adbusters* postcard from author's collection.

To complicate matters is the co-optation of subvertising aesthetics by mainstream advertisers, effectively appropriating back from the appropriators. Examples abound, but perhaps the most notable was one reported in the final Creative Resistance section that

appeared in *Adbusters* magazine. In the July/August 2001 issue of *Adbusters*, Lasn (2001) continues the call started almost a year earlier for culture jammers to shift tactics, with a recent advertising campaign by Nike in Australia as a case in point. Nike had erected billboards that looked as if they had been jammed with the phrase "the most offensive boots we've ever made" (illustration 12). They furthered this charade by making it look as if those "jammed" billboards had been jammed once again, and then set up a fake grassroots protest group named Fans Fighting for Fairer Football (Rebensdorf, 2001). In *Adbusters* Lasn denounces Nike for this tactic and renews the concern that this type of culture jamming (the subvertising variety) may be losing its power of cultural critique, writing that, while it "can do serious damage to a corporation's brand…It can also, as Nike is proving, become a marketing hall of mirrors" (p. 58).

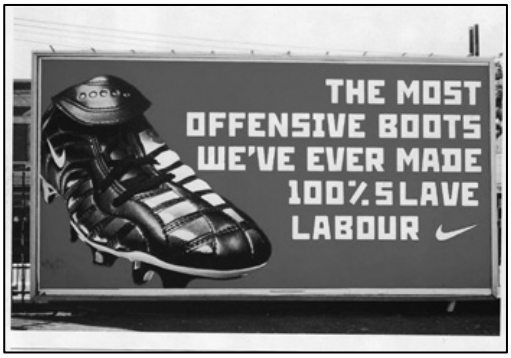

Illustration 12
Nike billboard.
Source: *Adbusters*, July/August 2001, v. 9 n. 4, p. 58.

Here Lasn revives the call for culture jammers to alter their subvertising technique arguing that, if this form of critiquing consumerism can be easily co-opted, it must be changed. Lasn is determined to urge culture jammers to develop a new mode of critique that uses the advertiser's own words and images against them. The work of Wilbert Leering and Lennart Wienecke presented in *Adbusters* a year earlier (as in illustration 9 above) is one example of the kind of approach the magazine suggested could continue this project. The further away from a specifically identifiable critique that a particular subvertisement moves, however, the more risk there is that critique can be lost as more

information from outside of the subvertisement is required to understand it. A reader's cultural capital, then, is important because, as subvertisements become more and more esoteric, more cultural knowledge will be required to recognize critiques. Yet this is precisely the direction in which *Adbusters* went with their move to "neo-subvertising."

Design Anarchy and Neo-Subvertising

The different mode of critique offered by neo-subvertising is related to a larger change in the mode of critique offered through *Adbusters* magazine as a whole. The issue that follows Lasn's call for a change in how culture jammers ply their trademarked cultural critiques ushered in a new approach based on the controversial design manifesto First Things First 2000 (FTF2K), which *Adbusters* published in Winter, 1999 issue titled "Design Agitation" (issue number 27). The manifesto, an update of Ken Garland's 1964 version, it was a call to graphic designers to lend their talents toward addressing "unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises" (First Things First 2000, ¶ 4).[7]

Originally published in London in 1964 by Ken Garland, the First Things First manifesto called on graphic designers to devote their skills to help work against many of the world's problems rather than having them "wasted on…purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity" (First Things First 1964, 2007, ¶ 2). FTF2K revised Garland's original manifesto, and while some of the text was left as originally written, new content was added to more closely reflect the perspective of *Adbusters* and Lasn. For example, text was added explaining that "designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen consumers speak, think, feel, respond, and interact" (First

Things First 2000, 2007, ¶ 3). “Consumerism is running uncontested,” FTF2K suggests, “it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design” (First Things First 2000, ¶ 5). First Things First 2000 was signed by thirty-three prominent graphic designers and was simultaneously published in the *AIGA* journal, *Émigré*, *Eye*, *Forum*, *Items*, and the autumn 1999 issue of *Adbusters* guaranteeing that it would reach a large audience of graphic designers.

Reaction to FTF2K from the design community was swift and heated. While some welcomed the manifesto and expressed a desire to sign on, others attacked the ideologies of the manifesto, arguing that the need to work for a steady income prohibited them from participating in a life devoted to altruistic causes. Hardly an issue of *Adbusters* went by, between when it was printed in 1999 and the publication of “Design Anarchy” in 2001, without some letters from readers responding to FTF2K appearing within its pages. Rick Poynor, a designer who was involved with the new draft of First Things First, wrote follow up stories in *Adbusters* (Poynor, 2000; Poynor, 2001) accompanied by more letters from readers covering the scope of reaction to the manifesto’s call.

In essence, FTF2K is an attempt to make culture jammers of all graphic designers, and the “Design Anarchy” issue of *Adbusters* published in the fall of 2001 (issue number 37) aimed to show how this could be done and what it might look like. Some of the aesthetic principles *Adbusters* applies to “Design Anarchy” under the influence of FTF2K have had a lasting impact on the way *Adbusters* practices and promotes its particular type of culture jamming. For one, in an apparent attempt to avoid co-optation, it pushed their culture jamming further away from more overt forms of criticism (á la neo-subvertising). As such, the “Design Anarchy” issue marks a number of turning points in how *Adbusters*

presents its critique and where it focuses its critical attention in challenging the ideology of consumerism. The first noticeable difference is in the layout of the magazine's contents: This issue of *Adbusters* shuns the mainstream magazine format described above and instead adopts an anarchic and unpredictable structure and visual approach. *Adbusters* also moves away from a heavy focus on attacking advertising and focuses instead on graphic design, a move from targeting the promotion of the product to the earlier stage of product design, reaching out and speaking directly to those who are involved in this process.

In dialogue with FTF2K, "Design Anarchy" began a radical transformation of the magazine's design which would have a lasting impact. Lasn (2006) explains this design approach and the reasons behind it:

> First you kill all the page numbers because they just disrupt the flow…then you kill the table of contents because it's the signature of commercial compartmentalization…then you kill the decks and heads because, in a seamless flow, there are no beginnings…then you take some of the letters to the editors and sprinkle them throughout (a very democratic move)…you collect inspiring quotes and bits of text from all over and place them in your mockup like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle…you use page-sized punctuation to smooth out conceptual discontinuities (as if your magazine were one long sentence)…then you tear out ads from other magazines and use them as counterpoint…you rip them up and use them as backdrop (a neat reversal of capitalist appropriation) (p. 126 - 128)

These descriptions and functions are similar to those of zines, the DIY publications of individuals that Stephen Duncombe (1997) analyzes in *Notes from the Underground*.

While *Adbusters* differs radically from zines in some respects (production quality and circulation numbers chiefly among them), there are some ways in which *Adbusters* functions indistinctly from zines. Among these is the zine's function in providing a forum where alternatives to the status quo can be promoted. It certainly appears that Lasn developed the concept of "Design Anarchy" to challenge the status quo of graphic design culture as a part of his effort to change how consumerism is practiced. Furthermore, virtually all of the aesthetic approaches Lasn mentions above have been a part of zine culture since at least the 1970s.

The layout of the "Design Anarchy" issue does away with just about every convention readers had become accustomed to in previous issues of *Adbusters*, and mainstream magazines in general. Alongside articles that are printed in a more traditional fashion (illustration 13) are those that are not (illustration 14), often incorporating a hectic assemblage of images and text. These styles of layout were experimented with in future issues, as in the March/April 2003 issue where none of the articles have headlines. *Adbusters* seems to take to playing with layout even further, in some cases making it difficult to discern where an article begins or where it ends. One example of this comes in the July/August 2002 issue where three stories are spread over four pages (p.


Anna, the Queen of I-Am

For two generations of designers, it's a showdown at the Shokan!

Energetically massaging a wad of gum, Anna plugs in her headphones and settles in at her G4's 30-inch monitor for a very focused and solitary Saturday afternoon at the office of her new employer, Ubiquitous Design.

by DK Holland

Illustration 13
Traditional layout in *Design Anarchy*.
Source: *Adbusters*, September/October 2001, v.9 n.5, pp. 22-23.

Illustration 14
Radical article layout in *Design Anarchy*.
Source: *Adbusters*, September/October 2001, v.9 n.5, pp. 24-25.

Illustration 15
An example of disjointed layout style.
Source: *Adbusters*, July/August 2002, v. 10 n. 4, pp. 26-27.

26 – 29) and laid out in such a way that goes against the standard practice of reading a magazine article (illustration 15). A large image that takes up the vast majority of the two-page spread looks as if it is placed directly over the text, which is further split up with the addition of text strips on the left and right sides of the spread.

The running theme in the "Design Anarchy" issue of *Adbusters* is one aimed at convincing designers through example that they can practice what FTF2K is asking of them. Spread throughout the magazine are articles by designers which discuss some of the ethical and practical issues related to a graphic designer's participation in, and complicity with, creating a destructive culture of consumerism. For example, DK Holland (2001) writes the story of a young new graphic designer who, through experience, wakes up to the call for designers to put their talents to use fostering progressive social change. "Design is a very powerful tool," a seasoned designer tells the young ingénue. "We can use our imagination and skills to try to change all this. Make people more aware, help them organize, and together, we can all make the right things happen" (p. 23). In "Hysteria™," Mr. Keedy (no first name is given) warns designers that "people" are on to them. "You can't expect people to see a line between advertising and design when designers don't bother to draw one. But they had better draw one soon, because people are getting hysterical, and they're not after witches in Salem or commies in Hollywood. This time, they're after corporate tools like you" (p. 46).

"Design Anarchy" can be considered very much in line with the larger goals of AMF's culture jamming in terms of challenging people to think outside their every day experiences of life or, in this case at least, the common experience of reading a magazine. As such the new design approach of *Adbusters* magazine does not encourage the kind of reading strategies one might employ with the traditional layout of a magazine. For example, by eliminating the various departments (Battle of the Mind, etc.) readers are unable to flip to a certain section of the magazine with the intent of quickly finding what is of interest to them. One of the staples of consumerism is finding what one wants and then buying it quickly. This forces readers to read through much of the magazine without knowing what they are going to find beyond the clue given by the title of the issue.

In addition to transformations in *Adbusters* design and layout choices, the magazine's traditional mode of subvertising was all but abandoned in favor of neo-subvertising.[8] Neo-subvertising does not fit the descriptions of subvertising offered by others (e.g., Dery, 1993; Harold, 2007; Klein, 2000), but as *Adbusters* is identified as *the* pre-eminent space within which subvertising is manufactured and distributed, it is important to identify how *Adbusters* changes the mode of address of their subvertising. This more subtle form of subvertising appears through the reprinting of ads, some with direct commentary added, some without. Thus, there are two forms by which neo-subvertising can take. One form of this subvertisement defaces the ad in some way, making a critique more explicit, as in the "traditional" subvertising (e.g., illustration 16). The second type

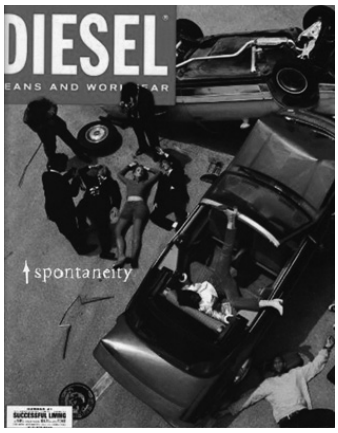

Illustration 16
Neo-subvertising with alteration.
Source: *Adbusters*,
January/February 2002, v. 10 n. 1,
p. 70

in this category, the unaltered reproduction, relies more on context in order to offer criticism. It is safe to say that this latter type of neo-subvertising does not hold any kind of critical content outside the pages of *Adbusters*.

Take, for example, the Nissan Xterra automobile advertisement reprinted in *Adbusters* issue number 46 (illustration 17). Since the advertisement itself is not altered in any way, it does not explicitly offer a critique (as the more "traditional" subvertising does). Instead, readers need to draw on what they know about *Adbusters*, and/or the text surrounding the placement of the ad, in order to develop a critique on their own. On the page to the left of the reprint are two prominent graphs (one labeled "surface temperatures" and the other labeled "polar ice") and two short paragraphs, one a letter from a reader (who explains his commitment to not owning a car) and the other attributed to someone named Konski who writes about hoping for a major crash in the Dow Jones stock market. With these two pages taken together, connections can be made between the auto industry and global warming, particularly because of the prominence of the snowy mountains in the ad juxtaposed with the declining graph labeled "polar ice." In this case, the connections the original ad attempts to make between the automobile and nature (e.g., adventure, fun, sport) are jammed with *Adbusters'* connection of the automobile to global warming.

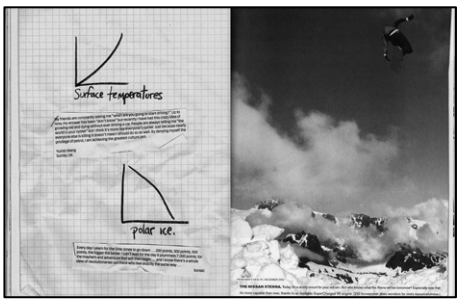

Illustration 17
Context of Nissan Xterra ad reprint
Source: *Adbusters*, March/April 2003, v. 11 n. 2, pp 46-47.

Further critique along these lines is provided with content in the pages before this ad reprint that links global warming and SUVs, the latter of which is labeled a "weapon of mass destruction" (illustration 18) twenty two pages before the Xterra ad. Critique is furthered still with an understanding of *Adbusters'* historical disdain for automobiles, as the connections between consumerism, automobiles, global warming and war have been addressed to some degree in practically every issue of *Adbusters* between 2000 and 2005. The complexity of this type of critique indicates the differing levels of cultural capital required to suss out a critique in the placement of the Xterra ad within *Adbusters*. Fortunately for the example here, much of that capital can be gained by reading the very issue within which the neo-subvertisement appears.

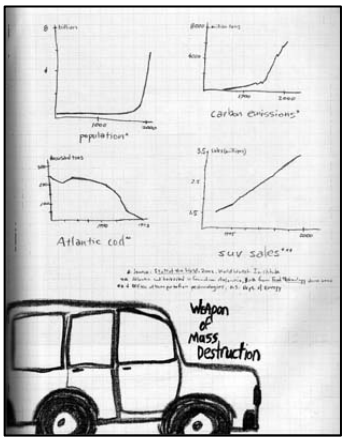

Illustration 18
Context for the Xterra ad reprint elsewhere in the magazine.
Source: *Adbusters*, March/April 2003, V. 11 n. 2, p. 25.

In addition to neo-subvertising, a new layout format, and aesthetic direction, *Adbusters* now asks for a stronger commitment from readers to be able to decode critical messages with fewer and fewer overt markers supplied by the content. So, while the articles remain unchanged in terms of what information is conveyed (the articles themselves have not become less overt in their presentation of criticisms of various aspects of consumerism), the culture jamming artwork has moved in a few different directions. With less overt information, increasing amounts of prior knowledge on the issues common to *Adbusters* critiques becomes necessary for these tactics to become effectively accessible.

As a result, such an approach to social change becomes less about recruiting new members and more about maintaining an already existing community of readers who hold critical viewpoints. This is not to suggest that those who lack a critical sensibility cannot access these texts. The concern is that the further away a rhetorical tactic moves from a direct attack on dominant ideology, the more room there is for such an attack to lose its critical edge and change consciousness. This is the very risk exposed by the Blackspot sneaker, which was introduced in the "Design Anarchy" issue of *Adbusters*.

BLACKSPOT

Stephen Duncombe (1997) argues that many zines function as a place where producers express frustration with the alienation (in a Marxist sense) between themselves and the world of consumer goods. "What they are trying to do," Duncombe writes, "consciously and not, is to reforge the links between themselves and the world they buy" (p. 107). The same can be said of the function of the AMF, especially as it relates to the development and implementation of the Blackspot campaign.[6] The Blackspot is a brand and shoesthat was announced, developed, and eventually advertised primarily in *Adbusters*. Thus, the role of the magazine in promoting Blackspot marks its important social, political and cultural function. In this way, *Adbusters* and the AMF are points where a subcultural, "alternative economy" is created as a way to bypass mainstream cultural industries "that deem only certain kinds of voices, narratives, and consumer goods fashionable and profitable enough to be marketed and sold" (Piano, 2002, ¶26).

The "big idea" (as Lasn likes to call such things) put forward in "Design Anarchy" is not only that designers can create powerful and socially responsible advertising campaigns, but that they can design powerful and socially responsible

products. Such products should not only be a reflection of ethical production practices, but also take cultural power away from corporations and put it into the hands of the people. In what could be called the cover story (if only because, like the issue's cover, it is titled "Design Anarchy"), this call is made explicit:

> The urgent task today is to create a warrior tradition within design – to balance all the meek and gentle souls with a few rough ones, and for these mavericks to come forward with a new, slick/subversive "savior" style that says: fuck opulence, fuck decadence, fuck your corporate cool ("Design Anarchy," 2001, p. 112).

What follows this introduction are different ideas for achieving such a style: the "mindbomb" the "anti-logo," and the "stink bomb." And it is here where readers are introduced to the Blackspot sneaker (illustration 19). This is the first incarnation of the sneaker, represented by a generic looking outline drawing accompanied by a reproduction of the Blackspot logo in the bottom right-hand corner of the page. The logo itself, it should be mentioned here, would eventually have its very own marketing campaign. Various parts of this sneaker's drawing are labeled "no sweatshop labor," "hemp laces," and "true cost pricing (50 percent to factory)." A short paragraph explains the philosophy behind the style and the goals that the sneaker represents. This statement bears quotation in its entirety for the irony of what it represents in relation to *Adbusters'* longstanding critiques of consumerism and the pervasiveness of advertising and marketing:

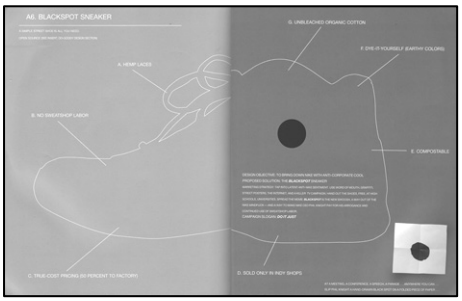

Illustration 19
Original mock up of the Blackspot sneaker. Source: *Adbusters*, September/October 2001, v. 9 n. 5, pp. 118-119.

> Design objective: To bring down Nike with anti-corporate cool. Proposed solution: The Blackspot sneaker. Marketing strategy: Tap into latent anti-Nike sentiment. Use word of mouth, graffiti, street posters, the internet, and a killer TV campaign. Hand out the shoes, free, at high schools, universities, spread the meme: Blackspot is the new swoosh, a way out of the Nike mindfuck – and a way to make Nike CEO Phil Knight pay for his arrogance and continued use of sweatshop labor. Campaign slogan: Do it just. (p. 119)

This issue closes on the back cover with an image of a black spot on a white page. A quote attributed to Milton Glaser, a designer perhaps most well known for creating the "I love New York" logo, is at the bottom of the page: "The war is over. It is time to begin again."

The path the Blackspot marketing campaign took over the course of the next few years carried out much of what was detailed in the original descriptive paragraph.[9] The first step of the Blackspot campaign was a very concerted viral marketing campaign that featured only the Blackspot logo. Culture jammers were encouraged to print multiple copies of the Blackspot logo on sticker paper and then paste them over corporate logos wherever they might be encountered. "If you give someone the black spot, it is the kiss of death," Lasn explained in an interview with Iain Aitch (2003) as he told of its origins in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Future issues of *Adbusters* would have Blackspot logo inserts. During this time, there was no discussion about the sneaker. This early Blackspot campaign came across as one that was simply intended to jam corporate logos everywhere.

In this sense, the *Adbusters* issues that immediately followed "Design Anarchy" did not do much promotion of the Blackspot logo or sneaker. There would be an occasional black spot that would appear in the pages, but there was no real promotion of the idea, much less a discussion of it. Between issues 38 (November/December 2001 – the issue to follow "Design Anarchy") and 47 (May/June 2003), the most that the AMF did with the Blackspot campaign was to release a music CD titled "live without dead time" (a phrase used by the Situationists during their 1968 action) and included in the May/June 2003 issue of *Adbusters* (illustration 20). The CD, featuring music from a variety of artists, was mixed by DJ Spooky and featured the Blackspot logo prominently on the back of the CD case. The somewhat low-key promotion of the Blackspot campaign ramped up in *Adbusters'* July/August 2003 issue. Titled "Us vs. Them," this issue features the Blackspot throughout, in action, "jamming" various logos (for an example, see illustration 21). It is also in this issue where the Blackspot logo is called "the icon" of "The Big Fix" ("The big fix," 2003, p. 33 – 34) and where *Adbusters* announces a desire to place a Blackspot ad on television and in the *New York Times*, the text of which reads:

Illustration 20
Back cover of the "Live Wihtout Deadtime" CD.
Source: From author's collection

Illustration 21
Use of the Blackspot to jam corporate logos
Source: *Adbusters*, July/August 2003, v. 11 n. 4, p. 31.

> July 4: Because my country has sold its soul to corporate power/because consumerism has become our national religion/because we've forgotten the true

> meaning of freedom/and because patriotism now means agreeing with the president/I pledge to do my duty…and take my country back. ("July 4," 2003, p. 44)

As indicated by the text of this advertisement, up to this point the Blackspot campaign had mainly been an effort in "unbranding." But this changed dramatically, with a big moment in the evolution of the Blackspot campaign coming in the following issue of *Adbusters*. Called "Cool Fascismo" (September/October 2003), the final six pages of the magazine lead to the announcement of the Blackspot sneaker. The presentation begins with a plain black spot (p. 102), followed by different phrases, each on its own page, "the new game…you demand the impossible" (p. 103), "the new style…you play what's not there" (p. 104), "the new cool…you wander off into the night and soak up the moonlight…" (inside back cover). Flipping to the back cover the reader is greeted with a mock up of the first version of the Blackspot sneaker and urged to "rethink the cool" (illustration 22). The text below an image of the Blackspot sneaker reads, Nike CEO "Phil Knight had a dream. He'd sell shoes. He'd sell dreams. He'd get rich. He'd use sweatshops if he had to. Then along came a new shoe. Plain. Simple. Cheap. Fair. Designed for only one thing: Kicking Phil's ass. The unswoosher." In the following issue, *Adbusters* printed a two-page mock up of an ad for the Blackspot sneaker and asked for help in raising $47,000 to get it published in the *New York Times*.

Illustration 22
Blackspot sneaker advertisement in *Adbusters* magazine.
Source: *Adbusters*, September/October 2003, v. 11 n. 5, back cover.

The design of the sneaker, and the text in the advertisement for it, is a direct reaction to the purchase of Converse by Nike and is based on the Converse Chuck Taylor low top sneaker. To put a further counterpoint on the production practices of the Nike Corporation (i.e., its use of sweatshop labor), the Blackspot follows the principles of production first outlined in the concept shoe's premiere in Design Anarchy to years prior. According to their website ("About the shoes," 2008), the Blackspot sneakers "comply with vegan standards" (¶ 8) and are made of 100 percent organic hemp. They are produced in a Portugese shoe factory which is family owned, unionized, and pays up to 100 percent higher than Portugal's minimum wage (based on the job and seniority). Nike's reaction to the Blackspot shoes, for the most part, tend to be responses to the challenge to Nike's production practices, as it repeatedly denies the allegations of the appalling conditions of its factories and that its marketing practices manipulate consumers (see, for example, Ives, 2004).

On the face of it, for a magazine and organization dedicated to critiquing consumerism and the corporations that support and promote it, many of the elements of the Blackspot campaign come across as the highest form of hypocrisy. Looking back, it appears that the two years between the introduction of the Blackspot sneaker idea in "Design Anarchy" and the formal announcement of production of the shoes, the Blackspot campaign functioned, not only as a jam of corporate logos, but also as a marketing campaign to raise awareness of the Blackspot brand. The ultimate irony is that Lasn and *Adbusters* continually refer to Blackspot as an "anti-logo." This may have been true during the early phase of the Blackspot campaign when people were encouraged to use it to cover up other corporate logos. But once it became associated with a product

(the sneaker), and later a corporation (see below), it ceased to become the negation of other logos, such as the Nike swoosh or the golden arches of McDonalds. The Blackspot is no longer an "anti-logo" primarily because it functions in the very same manner as any other, mainstream corporate logo: It promotes a particular type of identity that is associated with lifestyle choices and political preferences.

As Naomi Klein (2000) argues in *No Logo*, there has been a profound shift from corporations focusing on the manufacture of products to a focusing on the manufacture of brands. With the development of mass production, which facilitates the manufacture of items that are identical to each other, it became important for corporations to differentiate their products from the competition. This differentiation would be done through branding, a practice that began in earnest in the mid nineteenth century. As the economic stakes increased, and the market became more crowded over time, the focus on branding became more intense and essential to the survival of a company. "What these companies produced primarily were not things," Klein writes, "but *images* of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing" (p. 4).

What comes with a logo is not only a corporate identity in terms of differentiation in the market, but also a consumer identity as the brands we consume say much about who we are. This aspect of consumerism has been one of the focuses of the AMF's critique and a target of their culture jamming for many years: Our identities as consumers have been in the hands of corporations that, through marketing, work to carefully craft certain identities that consumers buy into (both literally and figuratively). The organization's culture jamming has been aimed squarely at throwing a negative spotlight on this process.

The AMF's choice to imitate the design of the Converse shoe thus becomes important in terms of "reclaiming" the corporate-crafted cool. Long the favorite of the independent music scene, Converse shoes have a history of association with rebellious types, from the hunky "what are you rebelling against?" image of James Dean, to the "rock and roll high school" punk sensibilities of the Ramones. According to Lasn, the Blackspot sneaker has been one way in which he would like to wrest control of "cool" away from the Nike-like corporations of the world (and in this particular case, the actual Nike) and put it in the hands of the people.

By developing the Blackspot sneakers, Lasn and the AMF are attempting pull cultural power away from large, multinational corporations by creating alternative corporate ventures that promote the direct involvement of their customers and local entrepreneurship. Through the creation of the Blackspot "anti-corporation," established to produce and market the shoes, anyone who buys a pair of shoes also gets a share in the corporation. That share entitles the bearer to help decide the direction of future Blackspot ventures. The next phase of the Blackspot anti-corporation came with a proposed expansion of the Blackspot brand. On the back cover of the January/February 2005 "Big Ideas" issue of *Adbusters*, the expansion is offered as an opportunity to change capitalism (illustration 23), moving the brand into "an independent music label" and "a chain of restaurants serving only locally-sourced foods."

Illustration 23
The Blackspot campaign. Source: *Adbusters*, January/February 2005, v. 13 n. 1, back cover.

The absence of a logo of any kind, however, may have been more appropriate to the kind of culture the AMF has indicated it wants to create, especially considering the earlier part of the Blackspot campaign that declared its intention to "unbrand America." To replace the Converse logo with a black spot is to replace one logo, one brand, with another. This is just one example where *Adbusters'* culture jamming practice conflicts with its rhetoric. This is particularly so as it relates to continued denunciations of "ad creep," and is what Max Haiven (2007) refers to when he speaks of *Adbusters'* many "double standards" (p. 93).

The mainstream media have picked up on and repeated this criticism as well. Virtually all articles about the Blackspot sneaker published between 2003 (when coverage began) and 2005 point out that *Adbusters* is a magazine known for being at the forefront of the anti-consumerism movement and that it is now selling shoes, a fact critics tend to passively suggest is hypocritical. But others can be more on the nose, such as Nat Ives (2004) who, in the *New York Times* headlines his article by writing, "If you disdain the Nike mystique, an anti-ad group is, um, advertising an alternative" (Ives, 2004). Granted, most of the articles that either point out or suggest hypocrisy do not explore the intricacies of *Adbusters'* critiques or goals. These articles can be contrasted to Iain Aitch's (2003) 1700-word exploration of Lasn, *Adbusters* and the Blackspot sneakers. Even though Aitch presents a conflict between Lasn's philosophy and the sneakers, enough context is given to understand how Blackspot sneakers fit into Lasn's overall vision of social change.

To label Blackspot as hypocrisy, however, is a particularly simple critique, especially for those who fail to take into account that Lasn, *Adbusters* and the AMF are

not, and never were, interested in ending consumerism or capitalism or challenging the society of the spectacle in the sense that Guy Debord and the Situationists were. As Lucy Michaels of Corporate Watch told Aitch (2003), "While the anti-swoosh marketing idea is genius, it's still a marketing idea to make us choose one product over another. We can choose the red shoe or the blue shoe or the fairly-traded shoe. If we really want to make the world a fairer place and end exploitation, we have to question the underlying structure by which we produce and consume" (p. 5). That so many critics make charges of hypocrisy against *Adbusters*, however, indicates how the magazine's critique of consumerism has been misunderstood. This may very well be the fault of *Adbusters'* own previous culture jamming techniques, in combination with the content of the magazine's text and very title of the magazine.

Criticisms such as these also side step the instances in which the practices of production and consumption can be political in nature. As Doreen Piano (2002) argues, production and consumption by those who challenge dominant cultural and political ideologies and practices (in her case feminist zine publishers) can be acts of resistance. As it concerns production, a whole host of practices involved with the production of consumer goods have been identified by activists, mostly those concerning labor (e.g., the use of sweatshops) and manufacturing (e.g., the use of non-renewable, non-recyclable, and even poisonous materials). In the late 1970s, the Fair Trade Foundation was established in an effort to connect politically like-minded producers and consumers, and their fair trade criteria has a number of requirements that products must meet that are intended to benefit laborers and the environment around the world.[10]

Regarding politically motivated consumption, Michele Micheletti (2003) argues that there is a very real political consumerism, a type of consumerism where decisions about what to buy and where to shop are made by consumers based on political issues. The success of progressive chains such as the Body Shop (2006 revenue of 772 million) and Whole Foods (2006 revenue $5.6 billion), not to mention the multitude of independent and small businesses dedicated to providing green or otherwise ethically produced products, are a testament to the economic power of politically motivated consumption. Some even practice their consumption outside of such locations all together, choosing instead to shop at thrift stores or even make their own products.

The connection between politically motivated consumption and ethical production practices is what Micheletti argues drives political consumerism: The belief that our personal consumer choices are political actions and that buying a certain product is condoning and supporting a range of production practices. This type of consumerism moves the traditional arena of politics out of the sphere of governments and civil servants (e.g., through regulation) and into a private one, as it tacitly conveys the notion that shoppers can have more influence on the production practices of corporations than the state.

It is clear that the Blackspot sneaker is meant to participate in this type of fair trade production and political consumerism, offering another ethically produced consumer good. Lasn's numerous proclamations, however, about the Blackspot campaign offering an "innovative" approach to revolutionizing consumerism is a bit of a stretch. In this respect, the Blackspot sneaker is decades late. Plenty of entrepreneurs and

independent businesses have made it their mission to provide labor and environmentally friendly alternatives in the marketplace long before Blackspot sneakers hit the market.

CONCLUSION

As indicated earlier, Lasn's critique of consumerism, and the AMF's consequent activity to destabilize it, are open to criticism. From the perspective of critics such as Lodziak and Haiven (2007), because neither Lasn nor the AMF address fundamental capitalist foundations that reproduce consumerism (e.g., class conflict, division of labor, surplus value, and alienation) they will not be able to either change the ideologies that inform consumerism or how it is practiced. Haiven argues further that *Adbusters'* approach to change does more to reproduce the neoliberal ideology that they, seemingly, wish to change: "Culpability and guilt for consumer culture is placed on the shoulders of the individual in a way continuous with a neoliberal public pedagogy that disappears public issues into personal responsibilities, which erases systemic inequality in favour of a moralistic indignation" (p. 104).

Rather than being seen as inherent flaws, however, these perspectives on the AMF's challenges to consumerism can be understood for how they identify the power that late-capitalism and neoliberalism have in structuring challenges to them. It is a given, then, that the AMF will not be able to overcome the fundamental aspects of capitalism that reproduce class antagonisms while it is taking an individualist approach to fostering social change. Not only does such an approach suggest that individual action can create social change, it works against the notion that large activist collectives are necessary for broader social change to happen. This is the heart of Haiven's critique of *Adbusters*. But he leaves unexplored is the possibility that change at the individual level can lead to, or at

least facilitate, the building of larger coalitions of people demanding change. This is how feminist consciousness raising ideally works: as women realize how their own experiences as women connect with others, they see themselves as part of an oppressed collective who then demand change. Can this same process not also be applied to consumerism or any other number of political, social and economic issues?

Through the Blackspot campaign it is clear that the AMF offers an alternative to the dominant modes of, and ideologies about, the production of consumer products. Through the promotion of downshifting, the AMF offers other avenues for consumer behavior it argues can have a positive impact on society, the environment, and consumer psychology. Through subvertising, the AMF offers a critical perspective on consumerism intended to empower and encourage consumers to resist it. So the focus of critique should turn to the ways and degrees to which the AMF's culture jamming activity can work to bring about progressive change in these areas.

As a challenge to dominant notions and practices of consumerism in the United States, *Adbusters'* shifting tactics in culture jamming show how some contemporary activist organizations adapt and even incorporate dominant practices while trying to destabilize the ideologies that underlie them. Clearly frustrated with the ability of mainstream advertisers to incorporate oppositional aesthetics and tactics, through *Adbusters*, Lasn and the AMF decided to incorporate mainstream fashion (e.g., a Converse-style shoe) and tactics (e.g., sales and advertising) in order to advance their critique of the status quo. The Blackspot campaign marks the pinnacle of the AMF's appropriation of mainstream consumerist practices, which had its beginning in traditional subvertising, then moved to neo-subvertising, finally taking the form of a consumer good

in the Blackspot sneakers. Each of these stages reflect a tactic that increasingly mimics the target of critique, while asking more from consumers to be able to recognize that critique. It is a surprising evolution for an approach meant to critique consumerism because, without ample and readily available cultural capital on the part of the viewer, the power of this type of culture jamming can be diluted, making it more difficult to distinguish between dominant ideologies and practices and a critique of them.

As contests to dominant ideologies associated with consumerism, the AMF's culture jamming practices are seriously complex because of the different modes of address they use to communicate with consumers/activists who may be reading and following the rhetoric and actions of the group. On the one hand, through various incarnations of subvertising and other print-based material in *Adbusters*, the AMF offers a strong critique of corporate marketing techniques to convince people to disengage from the dominant practices and ideologies of consumerism. On the other hand, the AMF markets its own brand, in this case asking people to consume as a form of political action. If the evolution of subvertising from an overt to a subtle critique didn't complicate *Adbusters*' challenge to consumerism enough, the promotion of the Blackspot brand moves the organization even closer to the practices for which they chastise the mainstream culture industries.

The move to the promotion of consumer goods is a curious one for the AMF, as *Adbusters* continues to encourage the lifestyle of "downshifting," continues to attack the advertising and marketing industries, suggesting that less is more and insisting that the only way out of the impending doom being brought on by conspicuous consumption is to change dominant consumerist behavior. The *modus operandi* of Lasn, the AMF and

Adbusters to date suggests that changes in consumer behavior, such as downshifting, will have a ripple effect throughout the entire culture, eventually freeing it from corporate control. Thus, the majority of the group's activity has been geared toward engaging readers, primarily through texts, in a way so as to prompt them to change their consumption behavior. For many critics, the main problem with the AMF's tactics is that they have moved further and further away from explicit critique, and now replicate dominant aesthetics to such a degree that their critique becomes harder to locate. And so while the Blackspot sneakers may, for example, challenge some of the production practices under which most products of its type are manufactured, the shoes do not challenge fundamental principles that underlie the promotional processes that perpetuate consumerism.

Some critics focus on what, at first glance, comes across as hypocrisy in the promotion of consumer goods by organizations that rail against consumerism, and the activists who support them. In their book *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2005) argue that the counterculture is really just another demographic for marketers. One of their central theses is that, "thanks to the myth of the subculture, many of the people who are most opposed to consumerism nevertheless actively participate in the sort of behavior that drives it" (p. 133). Opening their book with the example of the Blackspot sneaker, and putting aside the fact that they do not define counterculture or culture jamming and they conflate the two, the authors argue that being a part of a counterculture amounts to nothing more than an attempt by people to avoid coming off as square.

Riffing off Thomas Frank's (1997) *The Conquest of Cool*, and couched in Hobbsian and competitive consumption social theories, Heath and Potter (2005) suggest that one thing people want is to differentiate themselves from one another. Consumption, they argue, is a quest for distinction and thus, "counterculture has become one of the driving forces of competitive consumption" (p.131) as individuals within the counterculture (and outside it, too) compete against each other for distinction from one another. This is mainly because, they argue, the counterculture is an image culture; it is about distinction, aesthetics, and taste as much as anything else. But one of the fatal flaws of their argument is that they move from a primarily politically activist counterculture to counterculture as mere style, thereby conflating activist and hipster. I'm not suggesting that hipsters can't be activists (or visa-versa), but Heath and Potter operate on the assumption that the two are mutually exclusive: Activists against corporate consumerism can't be consumers (or hipsters). But they are consumers mainly, it seems, because they do such a good job differentiating themselves. And they are also consumers because the market has found them, advertises to them and sells their "brand" of style. Because of this, Heath and Potter argue, these countercultural activists will never change the system they advocate they want changed. It seems for Heath and Potter, the fact that a countercultural image (or style) can become popular, or can become branded, is proof positive that it cannot be politically effective and, to some degree, is even nonexistent.

Heath and Potter offer the Blackspot sneaker as a prime example to bolster their critique. Leaving aside the fact that they do not investigate the AMF, nor explain any of the reasons behind the production and sale of the Blackspot shoes, Heath and Potter's argument here presupposes that any act of consumption reinforces, and cannot change,

consumerism. While it is safe to suggest that the Blackspot shoes do not offer an alternative to consumerism per se, and in some regard they do reinforce some aspects of dominant consumer society, they do offer a challenge to mainstream capitalist production practices. Thus, the problem is not the shoes themselves, but in making sure that the discourse that surrounds them, the context of the shoes, can be useful in the larger task of transforming the production practices of consumer goods for the better.

Beyond being yet another consumer product, the shoes themselves do represent a challenge to dominant institutions that continue to rely on and reproduce ideologies related to consumerism and their quest for profit and market domination. The broader ideological and cultural critiques that the Blackspot shoes represent require a clearer articulation of, and explanation for, all the various factors that have gone into the production and promotion of the shoes. With a media system that generally shies away from a deep treatment of any issue, however, challenges to dominant ideologies that Lasn and the AMF put forward can become lost very quickly. The problem of articulating a critique through an act of consumption is then latched onto by the media and repeated and magnified until "hypocrisy" becomes the dominant frame within which the organization's actions are understood. Rather than being marginalized, any critique is effectively neutralized. As Lasn has said, "We're really selling an idea, rather than a product" (Nolan, 2004, p. 3). Yet, if the reasons behind the shoes production and marketing are ignored or become lost, the Blackspot sneaker becomes mere "business as usual." Rather than operate as a challenge then, the shoes, regardless of whether they are available at independently owned stores or the Footlocker chain, become yet another consumer choice in a crowded and competitive market, reduced to the most common

consumer-activist issue (e.g., sweatshop labor) wherein many of *Adbusters* most pointed (though problematic) critiques of consumerism are abandoned. The hegemony of consumerism then moves on, ready to devour the next critique that might pop up.

NOTES

[1] There are three elements to the Blackspot campaign: The Blackspot logo, the Blackspot sneaker and the Blackspot anti-corporation. When I refer to the "Blackspot campaign," I am referring to all three elements. Otherwise I will specifically identify the logo, sneaker or anti-corporation when talking about the specific elements of the campaign.

[2] This is a story very similar to a friend of his, Jerry Mander, who quit working as an advertising executive to write "Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television."

[3] In addition to fundraisers to raise money to pay for the publication of various ad campaigns, the AMF will occasionally solicit funds for different events and actions. Sometimes these solicitations appear in the pages of the *Adbusters* magazine (as with the fundraising associated with Blackspot promotions in the *New York Times*), while other times they will be sent out through the "Culture Jammers Network" listserve that people can join through the AMF's website (www.adbusters.org).

[4] The term "meme" was originally coined by evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Memes are ideas which are repeated and spread, much like a virus, throughout culture. They can be anything from a particular type of practice, to catchphrases and tunes, to substantial ideologies. "Potent memes," Lasn (1999) writes, "can change minds, alter behavior, catalyze collective mindshifts, and transform

cultures" (p. 123). Of the groups and activists here, Lasn is the only one who references this term as a part of culture jamming strategy.

[5] Lawrence Lessig pioneered the "creative commons" project as an alternative to the more mainstream and restrictive use of copyright. According to the Creative Commons website (www.creativecommons.org), applying one of the creative commons licensing marks allows "authors, scientists, artists, and educators easily mark their creative work with the freedoms they want it to carry…from 'all rights reserved' to 'some rights reserved'" (¶ 1). This project will be discussed in Chapter 3.

[6] Adbusters has a number of "culture jamming videos," some of which they have tried to get on the air. Much like Lasn's experience in the 1980s with his anti-logging advertisement, the AMF has had a hard time getting their material broadcast on national television stations. Perhaps one of the most well known of the AMF's attempts to get an ad for Buy Nothing Day aired in 1997 resulted in the organization being turned down by every major broadcaster they approached, except for CNN Headline news.

[7] See appendix B for full text of both the 1964 and 2000 manifestos.

[8] While the more traditional subvertising may have disappeared from the pages of *Adbusters*, the AMF continues to distribute the more popular of their subvertisements through postcards one gets with a "friend of the foundation" subscription to the magazine.

[9] Although, in all my research, I have not come across any information that indicates free pairs of the shoes were given out at schools or anywhere else.

[10] For example, at their online "fair trade store," Global Exchange lists criteria products must meet in order to be considered fair trade and receive the a Fair Trade Federation

certificate of approval. Among these criteria are requirements that producers must: pay a fair wage in the local context, engage in environmentally sustainable practices and provide healthy and safe working conditions.

CHAPTER 3

JAMMING CORPORATE MEDIA:

THE BLF AND ILLEGAL ART EXHIBIT

In December of 1995, two members of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), Jack Napier and Winslow Leach, climbed a billboard owned by the Gannett company (Camel's new..., 1996). As the two men ascended the billboard on Bayshore Boulevard in San Francisco, it displayed a neon ad for Camel Cigarettes: Camel's brand name was boldly displayed on the top, with the trademarked phrase "genuine taste," at the bottom. On the right side of the billboard was a painting of the brand's trademark character, Joe Camel, looking off to the left while coolly holding a saxophone and smoking a cigarette (illustration 24). However, a few hours after Napier and Leach had scaled the billboard, the message changed as the neon lettering had been altered. "Camel" now read "Am I" and "genuine taste" had been masked with the neon words "dead yet?" Joe Camel still stood coolly on the side, except that a red neon skull had been superimposed over his head.

Illustration 24
Before and after Camel Cigarettes billboard liberation .
Source: http://www.billboardliberation.com/deadyet.html

The billboard "liberations" performed by the BLF are stylistically similar to *Adbusters*' subvertising explored in the previous chapter. In fact, *Adbusters* frequently

features photographs of such "billboard banditry," as Mark Dery calls it, within the pages of the magazine. That the billboard liberations are another example of subvertising will not be explored here in favor of a different aspect of the BLF's work: Through the physical appropriation of the spaces purchased by communication corporations and utilized by advertisers, the BLF critiques not only the messages of marketers and advertisers but also the imbalance of communicative power that favors media corporations. For the BLF, the subvertising they do with commercial messages on billboards is part of a larger critique of the concentration of the U.S. mass media in corporate hands. "Until that glorious day for global communications when every man, woman and child can scream at or sing to the world in 100pt type from their very own rooftop," the BLF manifesto states, "we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design" (Napier & Thomas, 2007, ¶ 9).

The BLF's culture jamming as a challenge to the US corporate media system complements that of the Illegal Art exhibit. Originally curated in 1991 by *Stay Free!* magazine editor and publisher Carrie McLaren and Internet Archive founder Brewster Kahle, the Illegal Art exhibit features works by artists who appropriate images, video and/or audio from many popular culture sources. While the exhibit does have an occasional installation at galleries around the nation, there is a permanent exhibit at the Illegal Art website: www.illegal-art.org. Some of the artists in the exhibit have been sued by copyright owners who object to the use of what they view is their property to control. As just one example, director Todd Haynes' short 1987 film *The Karen Carpenter Story* is available to download from illegal-art.org. The film tells the life of 1970's pop star

Karen Carpenter exclusively through the use of Barbie dolls, chronicling her battle with anorexia and exploring the relationship between female stars and their bodies. Haynes was successfully sued for copyright infringement by the Carpenter family and A&M records over the unauthorized use of their music while also arguing that Haynes has no right to tell the story of Karen Carpenter (Desjardins, 2005).

The fate of Haynes' *Superstar* is but one situation that some critics would suggest is an example of the constricting power of current copyright and intellectual property law. In his book *Free Culture*, Lawrence Lessig (2005) argues that, in their efforts to protect intellectual property, laws, U.S. courts and corporations have become so restrictive in recent years that they negatively impact creativity and thus pose a danger to cultural growth and individual expression. Lessig's argument will be explored in more detail below. Suffice it to say that he points out that the very kinds of cultural appropriation corporations such as Disney have engaged in the past are now prohibited either by the threat of legal action or the cost and bureaucracy involved in securing rights from those same corporations. Furthermore, the original purpose of intellectual property law as conceived by the authors of the US constitution was to encourage cultural production and innovation. But critics argue that the current legal climate and use of intellectual property laws actually works to stifle cultural productivity. In her introduction to the Illegal Art exhibit web site, Carrie McLaren notes, "If current copyright laws had been in effect way back in the day, whole genres such as collage, hiphop and Pop Art might never have existed" (McLaren, 2006, ¶ 10).

In the same vein of *détournement* as the culture jamming activists explored in previous chapters, the artists in the Illegal Art exhibit and the BLF appropriate existing

and currently circulating popular cultural icons and media and, with various linguistic, visual, and/or technological techniques, invest the original product with meanings that reflect critically on those icons and/or the corporate practices behind them. What makes these actions particularly interesting is the degree to which the original text is an integral part of the final jammed product. In other words, the practices and policies of dominant media corporations is critiqued with the use of their very own products, much like *Adbusters*' neo-subvertising.

Through an analysis of their practices and products, this chapter seeks to outline how the BLF and the Illegal Art exhibit operate as a direct refutation of contemporary U.S. corporate media. How does the mainstream media structure and inform the actions of these culture jammers? Through what symbolic and structural methods do the BLF and Illegal Art exhibit stake their claims against the corporate control of communication, information, technology and, ultimately, culture?

CORPORATE MEDIA, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY, AND CULTURE

In his seminal book on the structures and consequences of corporate controlled mass media, Ben Bagdikian begins the fourth edition of *The Media Monopoly* (1992) with a concise summation of what has happened in the industry since the first edition of his book was published nine years earlier:

> Ownership of most of the major media has been consolidated in fewer and fewer corporate hands, from fifty national and multinational corporations at the time of the first edition, published in 1983, to twenty with this fourth edition…In 1983, the number of companies controlling most of the national daily circulation has shrunk from twenty to eleven. In magazine publishing, a majority of the total

> annual industry revenues, which had gone to twenty firms, now goes to two; in book publishing, what had gone to eleven firms now goes to five. (Bagdikian, 1992, p. ix – x)

In 2004 Bagdikian offered a complete revision of *The Media Monopoly* with *The New Media Monopoly* where he notes that, at the time of his first edition, the heads of the fifty corporations that commanded the majority of audiences "would have fit comfortably in a modest hotel ballroom" (p. 27). At the time of his revision in 2004, however, five men controlled that same amount of media.

One aspect of the study of the media is the critical assessment of the consequences of the concentration of media power. At the center of this media criticism is the assumption that communication is power, and those who control the means of communication have the power to shape the social, cultural, political and economic landscape. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1996) describe such critical assessments of media systems as going "beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good" (p. 14). Applied to the study of the media, such analyses explore the relationship between the cultural products of the media within the context of capitalist production and governmental/state practices.

A very large and prominent strand of this particular kind criticism, while not necessarily being critical of the capitalist foundations of the media industry, critically assesses the impact that ownership has on the range of cultural expression. Critics such as Bagdikian (2004) and Robert McChesney (2004) have long argued that a confluence of media practices (they tend to focus on journalism), compounded by an increasing concentration of media ownership creates a media environment that is detrimental to the

type of communication necessary for a healthy democracy. It should be noted here that issues such as these are largely what inform, motivate and become the target of many of media activists, such as those discussed in the introduction.

Judging by the past twenty-five years of policy that affects the media in the U.S., it is clear that those in power hold the view that increasing media concentration is not something to be concerned about. Instead, the U.S. government's increasing deregulation of the media has been defended on the grounds that it is a fundamental expression of our nation's belief in the "free market" and that the media are capable of serving the public interest without government regulation (Harvey, 2007). Such neoliberal economic ideology has been the backbone of media regulation decisions since the Reagan administration in the 1980s, and continued through the Clinton administration with the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, and the administration of George W. Bush in the 2000s. Each of these periods has seen repeated efforts by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to further deregulate the media industries, increasing the number and variety of media outlets that can be owned by a single corporation. In the latest attempt as of this writing, FCC chairman Kevin J. Martin has proposed changes that would not only relax the rules concerning how many media outlets one company can own in a single market, but also relax the rules concerning the number of different *types* of media (e.g., broadcast and print) one company can own in a single market (Labaton, 2007).

It should be pointed out that an attempt by Martin's predecessor, Michael Powell, to dramatically ease ownership rules five years earlier did not garner much support. Ultimately Powell's plans to, for all intents and purposes, eliminate the very same

ownership rules being targeted by Martin, were stymied by fierce public opposition. It is notable, therefore, that a strong ideology of media deregulation continues to dominate in Washington despite overwhelming public opposition. For example, when in 2003 the FCC proposed to loosen cross ownership rules, 63 percent of those who had heard of the proposal thought it would have a negative impact on the country (Strong opposition…, 2003). As one letter writer told the *New York Times* when the FCC proposed this same deregulation again in 2007, "While contemporary broadcasting certainly faces new and serious challenges, as the industry claims, it is also true, as critics claim, that the actions and inactions of an unrestrained electronic media can undermine an open, democratic society" (Ramey, 2007).

The dominance in Washington DC of pro-media industry deregulation policies is clearly an instance where political power, not necessarily the widespread belief in a course of action being desirable, influences what happens. If a majority of citizens surveyed oppose the greater concentration of media ownership, yet the FCC continues to support greater concentration, it suggests that those in powerful positions to make and influence policy decisions (not the least of which being those who own media outlets) are acting on the belief that media markets should be free of (or at least have significantly looser) ownership rules. The thinking being applied here is certainly consistent with neoliberal economic ideology which, through careful engineering, has garnered wide public support since the 1970s (Harvey, 2007).

One area related to the concentration of media ownership, and where the practice of this same perspective on media power has played out, is the realm of intellectual property law, more specifically copyright law. In his book *Owning Culture*, Kembrew

McLeod (2001) argues that, because it is concerned with the protection of culturally circulated texts, intellectual property law, in conjunction with the kind of media concentration discussed above, can be used to control the communication of ideas. So, in addition to the kind of self-censorship identified as one of the consequences of heavy media consolidation, as McLeod writes,

> Now intellectual property holding companies can exercise their influence on companies to which they are not connected by refusing to grant permission for the use of a sound sample, photograph, movie clip, newspaper article and whatnot. Even the mere threat of a lawsuit may prevent a work that appropriates from an intellectual property holder from being distributed. (p. 2)

This dynamic is not limited to corporations, however, as McLeod and Lawrence Lessig (2004) document many examples where corporations have invoked copyright law to prevent individuals from using their copyrighted work. These are not just instances of pirates illegally distributing copyrighted works, but also cases where artists or others borrow from publicly circulated cultural texts and/or artifacts, examples of which can be found in the Illegal Art exhibit and will be discussed below.

A survey of some of the more prominent authors on the impact of contemporary intellectual property law on culture suggests that the former is detrimental to the latter, and yet the owners of intellectual property continue to restrict uses of their cultural products that would benefit society (Lessig, 2004; McLeod, 2001; Vaidhyanathan, 2001). While intellectual property protections stem from a desire to provide an incentive for creativity and cultural production (copyright is, in effect, the granting of only a temporary monopoly), critics argue that recent changes to the law that have extended the length of a

copyright (for fourteen years in the early days of U.S. copyright law, and currently seventy years past the life of the author), as well as increasingly draconian copyright enforcement, threaten to stifle the very cultural vitality the law was intended to promote. Siva Vaidhyanathan (2001) writes:

> If there were no copyright laws, unscrupulous publishers would simply copy popular works and sell them at a low price, paying no royalties to the author. But just as importantly, the framers [of the US constitution] and later jurists concluded that creativity depends on the use, criticism, supplementation, and consideration of previous works. Therefore, they argued, authors should enjoy this monopoly just long enough to provide an incentive to create more, but the work should live afterward in the "public domain" as common property of the reading public. (p. 21)

Unlike what is indicated in the well documented public opposition to the increasing concentration of media ownership, the consequences of the increasingly restrictive intellectual property laws seem to be less understood. Part of this stems from the notion that the public tends to understand cultural products in terms of the ideology of property that is popular in the United States. As Vaidhyanathan argues, "It is essential to understand that copyright in the American tradition was not meant to be a 'property right' as the public generally understands property…Lately, however, American courts, periodicals, and public rhetoric seem to have engaged almost exclusively in 'property talk' when discussing copyright" (p. 11). What this means is that cultural texts (e.g., songs, films, books, newscasts) that are released to the public for consumption are still considered to be private property, solely controlled by the corporation or individual who

created and/or distributed them until the copyrights expire and the texts enter the public domain.

Critiquing what he calls “the privatization of culture” (p. 1), McLeod (2001) makes a forceful argument for the validity of appropriation as part of rich and lively communication within a society. Like most critics of copyright law, he works from the fundamental position that a great deal of our cultural heritage is built on the creativity of previous generations. Disney is but one poignant example of a corporation that built much of its library of what are widely considered “classic” films by appropriating the stories of the Brothers Grimm, stories that are in the public domain. As the copyrights for some Disney characters, including Mickey Mouse, were set to expire in 2001, in 1998 Disney led the effort to lobby congress to pass the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act, and extend the length of copyright. Many critics pointed to the consequence that such an act would have by limiting the type of circulation and expansion of cultural creativity that Disney enjoyed in building its own empire. As Derek Slater (2003) puts it, the Copyright Extension Act essentially makes sure that nobody can do with Disney what Disney did with the Brothers Grimm. Not only does Disney enjoy the current copyright protection of seventy years past the life of the author, but as a major corporation that holds the copyright, Disney can effectively reapply for copyright when it expires. Thus, Disney has an effective, monopolistic control of all of their texts for so long as they care to hold it.

As it is, none of the critics of contemporary intellectual property law included in this summary advocate abolishing copyright. Instead, in addition to the length of time, they also question the degree to which those who hold copyrights should be allowed to control the images and texts they circulate. At the center of this critique is the concept of

"fair use." As a legal concept applied to the use of copyrighted material by others, fair use has maintained that it is legal for a person to reproduce portions of copyrighted material in the course of criticism, parody or for educational purposes. There is a long list of criteria that courts weigh when considering fair use cases, including the "purpose or character of the use," the "amount of the copyrighted work that was taken or used" and the "effect on the market value of the original" (Vaidhayanathan, 2001, p. 27).

The problem for those who appropriate copyrighted works, however, is that there is a great deal of uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes fair use. The guidelines mentioned above are just that and do not indicate at what point an appropriation is not fair use. Many of those sued by copyright holders tend to settle out of court because they cannot afford the costs to defend themselves. As a result, many opportunities to set precedents do not make it to court (McLeod, 2001). Copyright holders, then, wield an incredible amount of power, and others who may use copyrighted works in their projects, run the risk of inviting unwanted and costly legal attention. About the copyright violation suit against them by Island Records (explored in more detail below), the collage band Negativland writes: "Companies like Island depend on this kind of economic inevitability to bully their way over all lesser forms of opposition…We think there are issues to stand up for here, but Island can spend their way out of ever having to face them in a court of law" (quoted in McLeod, 2001, p. 117). Like many artists, Negativland's case never made it to court because, in the face of a legal battle they could not afford, their label decided to comply with Island Record's demands and pull all copies of the offending single (which sampled a song by the band U2) out of circulation. I explore this case in more detail below.

The issue here is the notion that current intellectual property law allows for the effective control of information and, by extension, culture. In their books, McLeod, Lessig, and Vaidhyanathan document many different instances where cultural production has been thwarted by corporations eager to tightly control the circulation of their products. This kind of control has enormous consequences for the potential range of creativity and public debate. As exemplified by the exhibits in Illegal Art explored below, the current climate with regard to copyright can have a negative impact on the ability of artists, or any other cultural producer, to criticize or otherwise encourage society to critically reflect on the corporate produced culture that surrounds us. As Farhad Manjoo (2003) notes in his review of the Illegal Art exhibit, "In a way, what's most fascinating is not what you see but what you don't – all the art that wasn't made, all the pieces that weren't attempted, because a musician or a filmmaker or a painter or a poet knew that to do so would mean endless legal battles and possible financial ruin" (¶ 19-20).

THE ILLEGAL ART EXHIBIT: JAMMING COPYRIGHT

It is important to point out that Illegal Art is not a specific group, but rather an art exhibit organized and sponsored by *Stay Free!* magazine. In 2002, *Stay Free!* editor Carrie McLaren was approached by Brewster Kahle who asked if she would be interested in organizing an art exhibit that would explore issues related to copyright law and its impact on creativity. McLaren agreed, and in 2003 took the exhibit on a national tour where it was displayed in galleries in New York, Chicago and San Francisco. The exhibit is currently online (www.illegal-art.org) and is sponsored by *Stay Free!* magazine, the Online Policy Group and the Prelinger Archives.

According to McLaren, the main goal of Illegal Art is to draw attention to increasingly restrictive copyright laws (An interview…2003). McLaren (2006) suggests that the kind of artwork that currently runs afoul of intellectual property law was perfectly legal decades ago. The exhibit has become a way not only to raise awareness of the current climate and resulting impact of intellectual property laws on artistic production, but to question the impact such a climate has on the ability to creatively critique the social consequences of cultural products and practices.

Throughout the exhibit, the issue of the fair use of copyrighted images is a central concern. As a legal concept, fair use allows for the limited reproduction of copyrighted works, but these "fair" uses are slowly being whittled away by corporations eager to tightly control their products. In an introduction to the "Copyright Issue" of *Stay Free!* magazine which introduces the exhibit, McLaren (2002) writes:

> Recently intellectual property laws have expanded into vast new territories. If the entertainment industry gets its way, regulations will not only deter copying but will limit how we read, watch and use media. In fact, recent legislation has already restricted freedoms we often take for granted:
>
> * The ability to quote from articles or other texts in a review
> * The ability to copy music you've purchased for personal use
> * The ability to borrow materials from a library
> * The ability to record TV broadcasts for personal use (p. 4)

While the organizers of the Illegal Art exhibit do not advocate abolishing copyright laws, they do strenuously argue for a re-evaluation of the laws currently on the books which they believe are too restrictive. "When people see this exhibit," McLaren told Wired.com,

"they won't want to support the laws that make this type of work illegal" (Mayfield, 2002, ¶ 15).

The exhibit contains a variety of artworks in different media (e.g., electronic, paintings) that appropriate the copyrighted works of various corporations. Broadly defined, "appropriation art" incorporates previously circulated imagery into new works of art. Different appropriation artists practice this technique for different reasons, from the purely stylistic to the overtly political (McLeod, 2001). Very much continuation of the practice of *détournement*, many of the pieces in the Illegal Art exhibit intentionally appropriate copyrighted material, thus critiquing a wide variety of social and cultural practices associated with such material. Sometimes critique is extended to the dominant notions of intellectual property that find themselves expressed in the actions of copyright holders. As Christine Harold (2007) explains, "By unabashedly using copyrighted and trademarked material in their work, appropriation artists, or intellectual property pirates, attempt to call attention to the asymmetrical control over our cultural materials" (p. 114).

One example of this kind of work in the Illegal Art exhibit is the Negativland video "Gimmie the Mermaid." Negativland is well known for their audio collages, of which they have produced eleven full-length albums, in addition to numerous singles and other video and audio projects. Negativland composes songs that are comprised of any number of samples from a wide variety of sources, including other songs, movies, commercials, and news broadcasts; pretty much anything that makes a sound is fair game for Negativland's style of audio collage. In 1991, the band released a single called "U2" which featured a sample from U2's song "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" mixed with outtakes from Casey Kasem's *American Top 40* program. In Negativland's

song, Kasem is heard saying about U2, “The four man band features Adam Clayton on bass, Larry Mullen on drums, Dave Evans, nicknamed “the Edge,” on guitar, this is bullshit, nobody cares. These guys are from England and who gives a shit? It’s a lot of waste…names that don’t mean diddly shit” (Negativland, 1991). Citing a violation of copyright, Negativland was sued by U2’s label, Island Records, just four days after the single’s release. To avoid a costly court battle, Negativland’s label SST complied with Island’s terms of settlement and pulled all copies of the single from sale (McLeod, 2001).

This experience did not deter Negativland continuing to borrow corporate controlled content. Their contribution to the Illegal Art exhibit appropriates a Disney character and the voice recording of a lawyer to directly critique the intellectual property environment within which contemporary artists are working. “Gimmie the Mermaid” was released in 1995 as part of a book, titled *Fair Use,* and album co-release chronicling the band’s experience with their “U2” single mixes the voice of a music industry lawyer with the voice of the Little Mermaid singing “Part of your world” from the film *The Little Mermaid*. The song ends with a rendition of the chorus to Black Flag’s “Gimmie, Gimmie, Gimmie.” Most of the song, however, involves intercuting the lawyer’s voice with that of the Little Mermaid right before she is to begin her song, and then as she begins singing:

> Lawyer: I’m telling you the facts of law and the facts of reality here. The reality is I gave you money, I own it or I control it. Do you wanna try and do something with it? I’m gonna sue you. You never use it for any purpose again or I will sue you.
>
> Little Mermaid: Maybe he’s right.

Woman: I own the copyright!

Lawyer: I'm a lawyer! Go get a lawyer right now, let's have it out. I'm not going to piss around with you about this. You can't use it without my permission for anything forever. Get a lawyer because you're gonna need one.

Little Mermaid: Maybe he's right. Maybe there is something the matter with me.

Lawyer: I'm gonna sue your ass.

Little Mermaid: I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad.

Lawyer: You wanna test me in the courts?

Little Mermaid: (begins singing) Look at this stuff…

Lawyer: I own it…

Little Mermaid: …isn't it neat?

Lawyer: …or I control it.

Little Mermaid: Wouldn't you think my collection's complete?

Lawyer: You wanna find out?

Illustration 25
Tom Maloney, "Gimmie the Mermaid," 2002, screen grab from video
Source: http://ia300126.us.archive.org/3/items/ill-art/negativland_maloney_gimme_the_mermaid.mpeg

"Gimmie the Mermaid" continues like this until these voices fade out and the verse to Black Flag's "Gimmie Gimmie Gimmie" takes over: "Gimmie, Gimmie, Gimmie! I need some more! Gimmie, Gimmie, Gimmie! Don't ask what for!" The video, made by Disney animator Tim Maloney on Disney equipment, incorporates the image of a very angry looking Little Mermaid, who speaks with the voice of the lawyer, juxtaposed against various images that are in the public domain (illustration 25). The

original voice of the Little Mermaid, meanwhile, is relocated to and used by various East Indian-influenced characters. As the exchange heats up (as during the segment excerpted above), the Little Mermaid interjects herself by way of a bubble to scold the characters musing in the voice of the Little Mermaid (illustration 26).

The critique of copyright in this Negativland piece is self-evident. The juxtaposition of the virulent verbal attack on the part of the lawyer juxtaposed with the voice of an innocent girl eager to explore and play with the bountiful material the world offers her highlights the battles artists risk entering when practicing appropriation art. "Gimmie the Mermaid" also hints to the cultural role Disney plays in the creation of their products, as well as the role they play in the cultural production of others. As mentioned above, Disney's vast empire grew on the appropriation of texts that had been a part of folk culture for decades. Disney now "aggressively" protects these very cultural products through lawsuits and the threat of lawsuits (McLeod, 2001, p. 138), effectively keeping them from the same level of cultural circulation as those texts that influenced them. The coda "gimmie gimmie gimmie" becomes a transparent jab at the selfishness and greed of corporations who tightly guard their products and work to lobby for laws and court decisions that continue to narrow what defines fair use. While Negativland has not been sued by Disney over the use of *The Little Mermaid* in this piece, such attention from the corporation could relegate this criticism to the same fate as their 1991 single.

Illustration 26
Tom Maloney, "Gimmie the Mermaid," 2002, screen grab from video
Source: http://ia300126.us.archive.org/3/items/ill-art/negativland_maloney_gimme_the_mermaid.mpeg

Another piece in the Illegal Art exhibit that critiques intellectual property law is the framed copy of a certificate from the US government that grants Kembrew McLeod the trademark to the term "freedom of expression." In addition to the certificate itself, which could illicit surprise that such a term is trademarked, the story surrounding this document offers a deeper critique of contemporary intellectual property law. In 1998 McLeod trademarked this phrase as the title to a zine he was producing and then asked a friend of his to start up his own punk rock magazine called *Freedom of Expression*. McLeod then hired a lawyer to send a cease and desist letter to the publisher of the other *Freedom of Expression* magazine. According to McLeod (2001), the cease and desist letter read, in part:

> We represent Kembrew McLeod of Sunderland, Massachusetts, the owner of the federally registered trademark, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION … Your company has been using the mark Freedom of Expression … Such use creates a likelihood of confusion in the market and also creates a substantial risk of harm to the reputation and goodwill of our client. This letter, therefore, constitutes formal notice of your infringement of our client's trademark rights and a demand that you refrain from all further use of Freedom of Expression. (p. xi)

McLeod then notified local media about this legal affair, gaining the attention of the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, which ran a story on the suit. Rather than offering a straightforward critique of intellectual property law, he decided to continue to play the part of the disgruntled trademark holder, telling the reporter, "I didn't go to the trouble, the expense and the time of trademarking Freedom of Expression just to have someone else come along and think they can use it whenever they want" (McLeod, 2001, p. xi).

McLeod's prank was pulled off without a hitch; the article appeared in the paper's Fourth of July edition and included the quote from him above.

All of this information about the events surrounding McLeod's trademark is included in notes that accompany the piece and help to explain the certificate's inclusion in the Illegal Art exhibit. In his book, McLeod explains that he wanted to use newspaper coverage to help raise awareness of the issues surrounding intellectual property law. But "rather than someone reading a quote from me stating 'I'm concerned with the way intellectual property law facilitates the appropriation of significant aspects of our culture by corporations … blah blah blah,'" he explains, "I wanted to orchestrate the story in a way that newspaper readers would come to that conclusion on their own" (p. xi). By itself, the certificate could provoke a response critical of intellectual property law that Kembrew, and the Illegal Art organizers, hope for; yet the inclusion of a somewhat detailed explanation of the overall prank expresses a desire to direct an understanding of the place that Kembrew's trademark/prank holds in the critique of intellectual property law.

Many of the works in the Illegal Art exhibit do not confront the issue of copyright as directly as Negativland's video or even the story of McLeod's certificate. In fact, McLeod's explanation for how he approached his media prank also works as an adequate description of how the Illegal Art exhibit wants visitors to learn about copyright in general: That viewers raise critical awareness on their own. As McLaren has said, many of the artists were "not ever thinking about these issues when they were producing art. They were working with what's symbolic culturally" (Byrne, 2003, ¶8). The stakes for such art are raised much higher in today's cultural climate because of the degree to which

symbolic material culled from the larger cultural environment is owned or controlled by corporations. Under a strict application of current copyright law, these works of art would be illegal and thus unavailable for the public to see. While the majority of the artworks appropriate symbols from other, copyrighted material, they do not in and of themselves raise the concerns about copyright that have been expressed by critics. Instead, the impact of intellectual property law is implied by the inclusion of the work in the Illegal Art exhibit.

In order to make connections between the work of art and copyright clear, all of the artworks have accompanying texts, most of which indicate the issues that the works raise. While it is clear that each and every work of art in the exhibit is freely appropriating from other, well known and heavily circulated cultural texts and artifacts, the interpretations of messages or critiques of culture that some offer are wildly subjective. For example, Eric Doeringer's "CD – 2002" is a collection of copies he burned of all 302 music CDs in his personal collection. Each disk has only a number printed on it, along with the title of the collection and Doeringer's signature, leaving no indication of which artist is recorded on which CD. That this kind of activity (copying music CDs) flaunts copyright is clear to those who know the law. That he is currently selling the copies through his website pushes him closer to violating copyright law, more specifically those that relate to piracy; but there is no indication in the exhibit that he has had legal trouble. None of this is explained in Doeringer's work or the accompanying exhibit text. In this case, Doeringer comes across as what Harold (2007) calls an "intellectual property pirate" (p. 114) in the strictest sense. Thus, in the absence of a text that clearly situates his work in a particular critique of intellectual property, his collection

comes across as one, big middle finger to a recording industry that has been very active in prosecuting this kind of piracy. This is just one example of how understanding the nuances of intellectual property law is important in understanding the relationship between the creative work and the law. If critique is not necessarily inherent in the work itself, or any accompanying text, one can be lent to it by the context within which it appears, in this case the Illegal Art exhibit.

Some of the accompanying notes in the Illegal Art exhibit, while illuminating where a work runs or has run afoul of copyright law, might also aim to illuminate the cultural criticism a particular artist is attempting to make with the use of the copyrighted images. For example, A series of graphite drawings by Diana Thorneycroft depict six well known cartoon characters in grim states of violence (illustration 27): Mickey has had his throat cut, Fred Flintstone has been shot in the head and Ernie of Bert and Ernie fame, is hanging by a noose. The accompanying text explains that the lawyers for a gallery which was hosting an exhibit titled "Foul Play" (in which this series was to be included) warned that it could be sued for copyright infringement if the gallery exhibited the work. As co-curators of the exhibit, Thorneycroft and Michael Boss decided to pull her series of images which, Thorneycroft explains in the exhibit notes, are meant to

Illustration 27
Diana Thorneycroft, "Mouse," "Boy," "Dog," "Man," "White Mouse," "Man with Large Nose," Graphite on paper, 2001 – 2.
Source: http://www.illegal-art.org/print/popups/thorney.html

"reflect the hypocritical way that society ignores the violence that is often at the heart of child's play" ("Diana Thorneycroft," 2007, ¶ 3).

Such notes, however, do not always aim to explain the message behind the works they accompany. Take, for example, Tom Forsythe's series of photographs titled "Food Chain Barbie." These stills (see illustration 28 for some examples) present Barbie dolls posed with, and inside, various household appliances. Perhaps the organizers of the Illegal Art exhibit decided that the critique of the relationship between gender stereotypes and Barbie offered by Forsythe's work was straightforward enough that they did not need to comment on it. Nevertheless, the note explains that, after posting these photos on his website, Forsythe received a cease and desist letter claiming copyright infringement from Mattel, the company that holds the copyright for the Barbie doll. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, Forsythe took the case to court and prevailed, with the 9th circuit court of appeals finding that Forsythe's work is protected as parody under the provisions of fair use. The circuit court noted that "it is not difficult to see the commentary that Forsyth intended or the harm that he perceived in Barbie's influence on gender roles and the position of women in society. However one may feel about his message whether he is wrong or right, whether his methods are powerful or banal – his photographs parody Barbie and everything Mattel's doll has come to signify" (*Mattel Inc v. Walking Mountain Productions*, 2003, 802).

Illustration 28
Tom Forsythe, "Missionary Barbie," "Blended Mermaids," Fuji Supergloss Prints, 1999
Source: http://creativefreedomdefense.org/

The works of Thorneycroft, Forsythe, and Haynes (mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) point to the potential of intellectual property law to silence social and cultural criticism. In each of these examples, the artists involved made social commentary by drawing upon cultural symbols that are very closely tied to the subject of their critiques, and have faced legal repercussions for doing so. The message sent by copyright holders in these cases is clear: Use our material without permission, for any purpose, and you may be sued. More often than not, getting permission to use copyrighted material is financially prohibitive. McLeod (2001) notes that many artists cannot afford the licensing rights corporations require. In addition, corporations are unlikely to allow artists or critics to use their cultural materials in a negative light (Lessig, 2004). Thus, it is impossible to say how many artists or other social critics have been silenced out of the fear of a lawsuit or outright intimidation by copyright or trademark holders.

The Illegal Art exhibit has a number of techniques through which it attempts to raise awareness of these issues. What is clear is that the more traditional gallery practice of merely having the title and artist's name accompany the piece will not be sufficient to ensure that all viewers will understand the critique being offered. However, a work's position with regard to a critique of intellectual property law may not necessarily be apparent, especially to those viewers who are not familiar with the laws. Thus additional textual information becomes vitally important to the educational service the exhibit wishes to provide. Luckily, in the Illegal Art exhibit extra information about each piece is immediately available, either posted right next to the piece or in other reading materials: Brochures and/or the "copyright issue" of *Stay Free!* magazine are available at the

gallery shows while hyperlinks at the online exhibit provide the opportunity to find a wealth of additional information.

When it comes to immediately available extra information, Illegal Art patrons are privileged viewers: For viewers of actions by the Billboard Liberation Front there is a larger gap (in time and space) between the expression of the goals of the organization and its billboard "liberations." While it is safe to say that the work of the BLF is viewed by many, many more people than those who view the Illegal Art exhibit (particularly in its physical form at galleries), it is hard to say how many of those people who drive past and see a "liberated" billboard then see (or seek out) media that explains the critique offered by that liberation and/or what the BLF is and why it does what it does. Questions surrounding the possible reception of the BLF's work become even more acute when considering the context within which people experience it. People will choose to go to the Illegal Art exhibit, for example, and thus increase the chances that they are somewhat interested in the topic of intellectual property law and thus have at least some exposure to the issues involved. People stuck in traffic on Highway 101 on their way to or from work, however, may never have even heard of the BLF, much less know it was them who did the liberation. Indeed, they may not even be familiar with the practice of culture jamming.

THE BLF: JAMMING CORPORATE CONTROLLED COMMUNICATION

Founded in December of 1977, the BLF's inaugural mission involved the "liberation" of nine billboards advertising Fact cigarettes in San Francisco. Its action on the billboards changed the original phrase, "I'm realistic, I smoke Fact," to "I'm real sick, I smoke Facts," with an arrow pointing to the Surgeon General's warning in the corner of

the ad. Since that time, the BLF has been liberating billboards mainly around the San Francisco Bay Area.

The BLF engages in the act of what it calls “improving” billboard advertisements through various methods, mostly masking existing text and graphics and/or adding its own. The BLF action mentioned at the beginning of this chapter serves as perhaps one of its more elaborate improvements as it includes the use of neon. But there are many billboard actions that are accomplished with nothing more than a few extra letters and some glue. The BLF’s “clients,” as it likes to call the advertisers whom it targets, run the gamut from the fashion industry to political groups to government agencies. The extensive index of BLF clients, including McDonalds, Banana Republic and Forbes Magazine, and the various improvements of their advertisements, can be found at www.billboardliberation.com/clients.html.

The BLF’s position on billboards and advertising is not one of abolition, but instead of liberation, as the name of their organization suggests. The BLF’s manifesto, written by members Jack Napier and John Thomas (members of the BLF use pseudonyms), explains that, rather than being opposed to billboards and advertising per se, they are opposed to the almost total dominance of billboard use by corporate advertisers. After a discussion on the role, prominence, and impact of advertising in society, the manifesto highlights the communicative power imbalance that billboards, and their content, represent. The BLF singles out the billboard as advertising that “is entirely inescapable to all but the bedridden shut in or the Thoreauian misanthrope” (Napier and Thomas, 2007, ¶9). Instead of elimination, the organization argues for *more* billboards:

> [The] Billboard Liberation Front states emphatically and for all time herein that to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular billboard for each citizen. Until that glorious day for global communication when every man, woman and child can scream at or sing to the world in 100pt type from their very own rooftop; until that day we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design (¶ 9).

There seems to be sarcasm in BLF discourse, but its level is hard to gauge. In an interview which appears on the BLF website (www.billboardliberation.com), Napier answers some questions about his position on the use of billboards (for full text, see Appendix C):

> (4) Do you think that billboards should be banished from our environment?
>
> [Jack Napier] - God no. Substandard copyrighters and satirically challenged Ad execs should be banned.
>
> (4.5) If your answer is no, then if billboards were put to a use other than advertising, what would you choose?
>
> JN – I think that tap dance troupes and stand up comics should use the actual billboard platforms to perform on. (Questions for…, 2006, ¶ 6)

Reading statements such as these, it seems clear that the BLF, or at least Napier, is intent on making light of his practices which, in certain contexts, can be taken as serious critical comment. A consistent theme, reiterated by Napier and other BLF members time and again, is that the point of their billboard banditry is to have fun (see, for example, Segal, 2007; Hua, 2000). One such reiteration was during an interview with *Advertising Age's*

Creativity reporter Warren Berger. Berger had managed to secure an interview with a group of BLF members and witnessed this exchange:

> When someone in the group began discussing comparisons between culture jamming and the French detournement intellectual movement, Napier barked: "Fuck that noise!" As he explained, the objective of billboard jamming is simple: Have fun, screw with the media a bit, and get off a few good one liners. (p. 51)

As hard as it may be to take seriously many of the somewhat over the top statements that Napier makes, and despite the repeated claims about fun being the "objective" of billboard liberation, there is much that Napier and other BLF members have said that make it clear their actions are not only fun and games.

A number of interviews, lectures, and stories about the BLF and the act of billboard liberation, many written by BLF members, contradict the "it's all just tomfoolery" image that BLF members such as Napier present. In addition, the content of some of the liberations that BLF members perform express something much deeper than what Napier attempts to characterize as simple pranking in an effort to have a laugh. Much of what is written about and by the BLF suggests a strongly critical understanding of the cultural power of the media and communication (advertising in particular), the concentration of this power in corporate hands, and the ability of people to resist. In one very lucidly critical moment, Napier tells Berger (2000) (in a quote that directly follows the exchange quoted above):

> "I have to admit I'm pretty irate at a handful of billboard corporations controlling all the public spaces. I find that completely undemocratic and I didn't vote for it – and yet these billboards are in a public space and I have to look at them." He

> believes “those spaces belong to all of us,” and that if messages are to be posted there, then everyone should be able to have a say in what goes on the boards. (p. 51)

“Public space,” D. S. Black (1999) wrote in a lecture prepared for a billboard liberation show at CBGB’s in New York, “should include areas in which the public can truly express itself, rather than just running around the hamster wheel of commerce at the mall” (¶ 16).

Both Napier and Black express a desire to engage what Nancy Fraser (1992) calls “subaltern counterpublics.” Fraser argues that subaltern counterpublics, unlike the bourgeois public sphere as theorized by Jurgen Habermas, go a lot further in advancing the intended benefits of a public sphere. Fraser faults Habermas’ public sphere for not taking into account how the concerns, opinions and needs of various minority or alternative (basically non-white male) voices are structured out of participation. Instead, a counter public sphere accounts for issues related to equality of expression and diversity of people and positions. “Insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics,” Fraser writes, “they help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies” (p. 124).

The BLF’s position in the public sphere is augmented with a critique of the power of advertising as a cultural force. The BLF manifesto proclaims that “the Ad defines our world, creating both the focus on ‘image’ and the culture of consumption that ultimately

attract and inspire all individuals desirous of communicating to their fellow man in a profound fashion. It is clear that He who controls the Ad speaks with the voice of our age" (Napier & Thomas, 2007, ¶ 8). Napier calls advertising the "language of the culture" (Goldberg, 1999, ¶ 18; Hua, 2000, p. B1), a language which is out of balance in favor of the corporations which can afford the means to communicate directly with millions of people. Billboard liberator Black (1999) argues that the range of debate and the opportunities for marginal voices to be heard has been limited by the dominance of commercial factors that operate as a de facto regulation of who can speak. "As long as advertising and paid publications monopolize our media landscape," he writes, "murals and midnight editing such as graffiti and altered billboards are going to be necessary marginal emendations" (¶ 44). Together with his statement above concerning the use of public space, Black is calling for others besides corporations and advertisers to have the ability to contribute to the cultural landscape.

The BLF's critique of advertising has some important similarities to that of *Adbusters,* mainly as it relates to the power of advertising as a ubiquitous form of communication and as a cultural force. In this regard it reflects the critiques of advertising offered by Ewen (2000), Klein (2000), Kellner (1995), and, naturally, Lasn (1999) discussed in the previous chapter. The dominance of advertising's singular message (to buy) seems to be as much of a concern for the BLF as the corporate control of mass media outlets, such as the billboard. However, it must be stressed, that the BLF does not wish to see the end of billboards, or of advertising. The BLF alternatively labels its "liberations" as "improvements." The BLF's position on advertising is perhaps better expressed with the reason given for a billboard action that changed the word "Marlboro"

to “Marlbore”: “We felt that the whole Marlboro campaign using that macho cowboy is hackneyed and painfully dull…It’s about time they got rid of it. We thought we’d help them along” (Jarvis, 1980, ¶ 4).

Thus, while the BLF actively maintains a position that advocates for the improvement of advertising, combined with the kind of action it takes toward effecting that improvement, the group certainly joins a much larger tradition of activists interested in the democratization of the media. The BLF uses to their advantage (and in this case, without permission) the media channel of the billboard to illuminate the constructedness of those advertising messages and an inequitable communication system. In the original billboard’s place is one that acknowledges and disseminates a wider variety of viewpoints and ideologies, a goal very much in line with the media activists described by Stein (2001) and Laurie Ouellette (1995). Both of these scholars highlight activist use of the very same technologies used by powerful cultural producers in order to promote critical perspectives that would be otherwise ignored. As far back as 1974, Raymond Williams commented on the potential for media technology in the fight for a more democratic media system. “These are the contemporary tools of the long revolution,” Raymond Williams (1974) wrote, “towards an educated and participatory democracy, and of the recovery of effective communication in complex urban and industrial societies.”

So how does the BLF present its critiques, which range from a strong indictment of the unequal power to communicate that is represented by the billboard to the happy-go-lucky pranksters just out to have a good time? Various BLF members have made it very clear that one route to equaling the playing field lies in what Black (1999) calls “FSU-ism,” to Fuck Shit Up. The alteration of billboards, the jamming of the messages of

advertisers, is one way to practice FSU-ism, and it is something that the BLF maintains is a technique that is available to anyone. To engage a billboard liberation, the BLF insists, "A can of spray paint, a blithe spirit and a balmy night are all you really need." If that is not enough information for would be culture jammers, *The art and science of billboard improvement* ("Art and science..,"1999) is available on the BLF website and offers an extensive manual with suggestions to fit a variety of technical and physical aptitudes. This document embodies the spirit of what Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) calls "citizen's media," as the BLF actively seek to enable the average citizen to appropriate communication channels, traditionally reserved for those with powerful resources, using whatever technical skills and technologies that might be at their disposal.

The finished product of the jam on the billboards, however, does not ultimately present the complex relationship that the BLF has towards advertising in general and the billboard in particular. According to the *Art and science of billboard improvement*, one of the integral aspects of billboard liberation, and an action that can ensure that the jam has "the greatest possible reach," is the announcement of the jam through press releases sent to local media. Functioning much like the notes that accompany artwork in the Illegal Art exhibit, the BLF's press releases are, for all intents and purposes, used to explain the jam's message to the public.

The BLF issues press releases for each of its actions, and these are available on their website along with photographs of its "improvements." The press releases convey a certain amount of criticism, although some are heavily charged with a sarcastic tone, with respect to the specific target (or "client") of the jam. Sometimes these press releases garner the attention of the press or other information outlets (such as independent

bloggers). For example, the press release for the BLF's 2003 action on a Citizens Against Lawsuit Abuse billboard prompted a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (2003 circulation over 400,000) which ran a 3200-word story on the group, including extensive information on the background of the organization. However, such media attention is scant: Of the eleven billboard liberations between 2000 and 2005 that are featured on its "clients" web pages, only three have links to press coverage of those events. And as with any press coverage (as the experiences of both the Yes Men and the AMF can contend), a story about an action does not guarantee that it will present information that clearly conveys the complexity of the group's actions. Additionally, the BLF's larger criticisms regarding advertising and billboards, which are abundant in its own publications and some press accounts of its group, are generally absent from the press releases themselves.

Illustration 29
Before and after Johnny Walker billboard BLF action.
Source:
http://billboardliberation.com/johnny.html

A good example is the press release for the liberation of a Johnny Walker billboard at the corner of Mission and 15th Streets in San Francisco (see illustration 29). On the night of July 5, 2005, five BLF members converged to change the text at the bottom of the billboard which originally read "drink responsibly" to "drink yourself blind." The press release ("Client: Johnny Walker," 2005), quoted in its entirety below, explains the reason for the change:

> 10:30pm July 5th, 2005
>
> Location: Billboard corner of 15th and Mission St S.F.

The Billboard Liberation Front and Diageo Inc. Speak Out For Alcoholics and the Visually Impaired

"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

- William Blake

While the politically correct increasingly push an extremist "resposible [sic] drinking" agenda upon the public, the Billboard Liberation Front joined forces with Diageo Inc. (importers of Johnnie Walker whiskies) to defend our God-given right to consume enough alcohol to cause permanent neurological damage.

Alcohol abuse is a cornerstone of American culture, is crucial for the health of the alcoholic beverage industry, and gives ordinary citizens important insight into the lives of those with crippling disabilities, like blindness and poor balance.

"Boozing oneself into oblivion is a beloved tradition that goes to the very heart of who we are as Americans," said BLF founder Jack Napier. "After all, we're not talking about pot, here."

Visit the BLF's improvements at 15th St @ Mission.

Like the Fact cigarette billboard jams back in the late seventies, this press release points out the tensions between America's penchant for hyper consumerism, the health effects of alcohol consumption, and the hollow ring to the words "drink responsibly" in an ad for alcohol. While the press release is an attempt to get more attention paid to the jam, it also serves as an indication of some of the thinking (beyond logistics) that goes into the text of the jam. If, as Sam McManis (2003) suggests, part of billboard improving is consciousness raising, and if, as BLF member Amanda Hav tells McManis, that he

engages in this action “to make people think” (p. E1), any insights about the jams that can be gleaned from press releases becomes crucial.

Unfortunately, as the Johnny Walker press release suggests, without reference to the reasons behind the BLF’s practices these billboard liberations function as simple subvertisements of particular brands or products, without attending to the underlying reasons BLF members engage in their activity. Sometimes larger social and political issues become subjects of a BLF jam, as was a jam of a billboard that encouraged motorists to report excessively polluting vehicles (illustration 30). The press release likened such a program as part of a class war: “As part of the heroic U.S. Government and private citizen ‘posse comitatus’ efforts to keep annoying poor people off of the streets and out of our hair,” the press release reads, “the BLF and Ron English have ‘improved’ a Bay Area Air Quality Management District Billboard” (“Client: Bay area…”, 2002, ¶ 10). What can limit exposure to criticisms such as these, and of the group’s larger critique of the connections between advertising and the power of corporations to dominate public space, is that they are only available to those who are exposed to texts far beyond the billboard. For the most part, these criticisms will reside in news article databases and on various blogs and websites, which means that, outside of the pure luck of stumbling upon a story about the action, this information is available mainly to those who seek it out.

Illustration 30
“Improved” billboard for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District
Source: http://billboardliberation.com/snitch.html

As with any cultural text, it is also important to consider that these jammed billboards, which are generally going to be encountered without any extra-textual

information that indicates intent, can be interpreted in a number of ways. This kind of encounter adds another potential layer of dissonance between the critical intent of the jammers and the unsuspecting viewers of the jam. Jack Napier suggests that straight forward criticism does not make for an effective liberation. He actually prefers to create as much dissonance as possible:

> If someone goes up and spray paints “fuck Exxon” on a billboard, that does nothing for me. I like to see people who do creative technical work – making it look as though the billboard were done by the advertiser. But if the messages are blatantly and stodgily political I also have very little interest in it, even if it’s technically well done. Because if it’s a very straightforward and boring message, it’s just not going to get through to anyone except those who already agree. My favorite billboards are ones that are enigmatic – the ones that people have a hard time figuring out right away. It sticks in their minds. (Berger, 2000, p. 51)

By shunning a “straightforward” approach to offering critique, Napier gives a lot of power to the ability of a cleverly détourned billboard to effect a change in consciousness, or at very least foster a critical understanding of the message at hand.

Not only are the BLF’s various criticisms of advertising and billboard production and consumption complex and nuanced, but they seem to have an ambivalent conception of the people who come into contact with advertising. The masses are variously referred to in the BLF circulated texts as being “programmed” or otherwise influenced by advertising (see for example Black, 1999; McManis, 2003). Reflecting Adorno and Horkheimer’s sentiment about the fate of human agency as a result of the capitalist imperative, Black (1999) puts it succinctly: “It’s either write or be written. I can raise a

pen or a brush in defense of my own mental environment, or allow myself to be the passive, infinitely impressed palimpsest which is the consumer caught in the maw of a marketing campaign" (¶ 5). But, as Napier suggests above, members of the BLF also point out that people can, and do, subvert advertisers' intended messages all the time. "I think a lot of people look at advertising and think of some way to change it" BLF member L.L. Fauntleroy says. "They editorialize in their heads. It's a popular movement" (Segal, 2007, ¶44). And according to Napier, "People always find some way to subvert the powers that collectively oversee them. That's my big hope for humanity" (Goldberg, 1999, ¶ 19). Such a position argues what many cultural studies scholars have written about audiences who, rather than passively absorb mass mediated messages, actively engage with texts. David Morley's (1992) *Nationwide* study is just one case in point, as he concludes that "it's always a question of how social position plus particular discourse positions produce specific readings" (p. 118).

In their rhetorically flamboyant way, the BLF argue for the exact opposite of what the FCC has been trying to enact: While "a billboard for everyone" may not be technically feasible, the expression of such a desire suggests that media concentration is not in the best interests of a culturally expressive society. Through their actions that hijack the intended message of billboard advertisers, the BLF refuse to allow these instances of corporate monopolized public speech to go unchecked.

It is unfortunate that, beyond what appears on the billboards, the issues that concern the BLF are available only to those who seek them out. The stakes, in terms of making sure the message is clear, are increased as advertisers have begun to mimic the look of the hijacked billboard. Describing his reaction to seeing a billboard for the

Plymouth Neon designed to look as if it had been altered by an activist, Napier says, "First I was taken aback, and then I was pissed off. And then I thought, 'Shit, I'm not going to let them get away with that"; he climbed up the billboard and changed the word "hip" to "hype" and added the number 666 (Berger, 2006, p. 51) (illustration 31).

Illustration 31
Napier's improvement to the Plymouth Neon billboard. The mohawk and spray painted letter "p" were a part of the original billboard.
Source: http://billboardliberation.com/hype.html

The concern over appropriation, however, should be second to the ability for the message of the BLF to reach a wider public. As it stands, the actual billboard liberations it creates do nothing to advance its critique of the cultural imbalance of power that is skewed in favor of corporate advertisers. Unless it finds some way to direct people to media outlets it controls (i.e. their web site), the BLF, like the Yes Men, must rely on a media system outside of its control to deliver its criticisms of media systems. It should be noted, however, that mainstream advertising's appropriation of the billboard liberation aesthetic is a concession that the tactic works at reaching audiences. As the mainstream corporate media steps up its appropriations, culture jammers should see this as a sign that continuing to offer such critical jams to the public may contribute a lot toward advancing critical consciousness in the "war of position" of hegemonic struggle.

CONCLUSION

Both the Illegal Art exhibit and the Billboard Liberation Front are critical challenges to the policies and practices of the U.S., corporate media. As the ownership of media corporations continues to concentrate into fewer and fewer hands (as of this

writing, Microsoft has put in an unsolicited bid to purchase Yahoo!), the stakes rise with regard to the control of culture and access to public means of communication. The artists and activists associated with these groups work to raise a critical awareness of the consequences that dominant media practices have for the vitality and diversity of culture.

Although with a different focus, there is a great deal of similarity at the core of the Illegal Art and BLF critiques. Illegal Art makes explicit a concern about the negative effects a strict control of cultural products can have on the circulation of cultural criticism. Amidst the flamboyant rhetoric of the BLF lies a critique of the state of contemporary public communication as serious as that of the Illegal Art exhibit. Although the BLF focuses on access to communication media instead of the control of cultural products, it also expresses a concern about the ability of people to effectively contribute to the public circulation of ideas. In fact, the BLF climbing on a billboard and changing a message is a symbolic intervention in an existing text that is functionally (in terms of critique) indistinct from taking a picture of a Barbie in a blender. Both acts are contested by corporations to be violations of their property rights (physical for the former and intellectual for the latter) as they interrupt and challenge the assumptions behind, not only the détourned text itself, but the economic structures that underlie them.

Neither of these groups advocate an ideology that promotes the increasing concentration and control of communication. The beliefs of the BLF and Illegal Art, as evinced through their texts and behaviors, act as a challenge to the notion that market forces, left to themselves, will provide the kind of robust discourse that is vital for a thriving democracy and culture.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the culture jamming activists and tactics explored here offer numerous examples of how dominant ideologies tied to various aspects of contemporary U.S. economic and cultural life are contested through a variety of cultural forms. Each group encourages its viewers to explore and critically assess how people are exploited and/or oppressed in different ways related to dominant cultural and economic practices. They have worked to interrupt various means of communication, and invest the messages contained therein with a critical reflection on its purpose. Thus, the culture jammer's approach is one that sabotages the ways in which dominant institutions communicate, practice, and thus reproduce, dominant ideologies. This battle mostly takes the form of rhetorical challenges and reversals of symbolic meaning and is aimed squarely at influencing how people perceive the world in which they live.

IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE AS A POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

As praxis, the examples of culture jamming in these case studies serve as powerful tools that challenge the hegemony of ideologies that, to a large extent, shape our economic and cultural landscape. While these activists do not explicitly state critical theory as a foundation for their actions, the cases explored here express a number of different critical approaches to understanding the relationships between economic power and cultural and social practices. For if critical theory is aimed at exploring the relations of certain, preferred economic and cultural practices with domination and exploitation, the texts of culture jammers expose such conditions with the very modes by which they

are sustained. The practice of culture jamming is at its core turning the language and aesthetics of domination upon themselves.

The practice of taking popularly circulated images and texts and attempting to associate them with alternative meaning is what Stuart Hall (1985) identifies as a part of ideological struggle. As mentioned earlier, Hall does not subscribe to the notion that ideology is determined and instead argues that it is constantly challenged by people trying to reconfigure the associations that are made along a signifying chain. "Often," Hall writes, "ideological struggle actually consist of attempting to win some new set of meanings for an existing term or category, of dis-articulating it from its place in a signifying structure" (p. 112). The relationship of this process to the work of culture jamming is found in the degree to which culture jammers appropriate whole signifying systems (an advertisement, for example) and attempt to interrupt their traditional messages (e.g., to consume) with one that is critical of that message. As *détournement*, when this process is applied to specific targets (such as Nike, Barbie, or the WTO), there is an attempt to disrupt the signification favored by various entities (e.g., corporations, non-governmental organizations) that are tied to their products or policies. For instance, culture jammers make us aware that the WTO does not represent an entity dedicated to "improve the welfare of the peoples of the member countries," but instead is an entity that does just the opposite; the Nike symbol represents not athleticism but corporate control of culture; and Barbie becomes, not an innocent toy for girls, but yet another cultural symbol inscribed with patriarchy.

Because it builds a critique of dominant cultural and economic practices through the appropriation of familiar texts and aesthetics associated with them, culture jamming

can be considered a politics of everyday life. Since culture jammers perform their challenges to dominant ideologies with languages and texts that are widely circulated and accessible to everyone, these activists work with the materials of everyday life. This is how Bradley MacDonald (2006) describes the work of the Situationists as he argues that their approaches to activism were aimed at creating new desires that would help pave the way to a better society. The use of popular culture as a staging ground for this kind of politics is useful because its "ubiquitous character…is more closely connected to the experiences of individuals, and thus potentially provides a wider terrain of political action" (p. 84). A politics of everyday life, then, has the benefit of speaking in a way that is familiar, in a way that people encounter and interact with on a daily basis. This can be contrasted to the more specialized languages and aesthetic approaches found in texts aimed at specific and elite groups.

Being imbedded in popular language, being a part of everyday life, however, can make an ideology rather powerful in the degree to which it is taken for granted, has become "common sense," and can structure critique against it. Culture jamming activists have to work hard to achieve and maintain an understanding of their activity as against some deeply ingrained notions of what people believe to be right, good and desirable. And while some of the ideologies these culture jammers critique may enjoy broad support (i.e., they are dominant because they are widely believed to be in the best interest of everyone), others may be dominant only because of their association with power. In either case, there are economic and political structures that support and reproduce these ideologies, structures that culture jamming itself does not redress and thus indicates what may be the ultimate limit of this activist tactic. For while dressing critique in the clothes

of the popular might make it more accessible, it also indicates the degree to which dominant structures and ideologies can shape critiques against it. This is one way to understand the Adbusters Media Foundation's development of the Blackspot campaign: The organization has internalized the dominant ideology of consumerism to such an extent that it sees participating in it as the best way to critique and change it for the better.

Marx insisted that the economic system must change in order to bring about a change in the class structure and the lived experience of workers in capitalist society. For Marx, the economic imperatives of capitalism were the foundation (the economic base) upon which a host of institutions and ideologies were built upon (the superstructure). The superstructure then reflected and reinforced the economic base in a one-way path of influence. As critics of this model have pointed out (e.g., Hall, 1996; Williams, 1977), such a notion of economic determinacy does not account for the resistant and oppositional cultural practices that take place at the superstructural level. As such, these same critics contend, the economic base of a society does not determine what may appear in the superstructure. Instead, it sets the limits to what can appear. This is certainly true for what we have seen with respect to the culture jammers in this project. For while these culture jammers certainly reject a number of capitalist economic policies and practices (e.g., consumerism, globalization, intellectual property laws), they do not call for a different economic *system* as a means to solve the problems they identify.

The notion of hegemony as a struggle between dominant and oppositional ideologies and practices suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between the base and superstructure. In this conceptualization, cultural (and institutional) formations within the superstructure can have an influence on the economic base rather than

exclusively the other way around. Thus, culture jammers can have an effect on capitalism by challenging some of the prevailing ideologies that inform the way capitalism is practiced (e.g., arguing for better working conditions and higher wages for workers) rather than challenging capitalism itself (e.g., arguing for workers to own the means of production). Such a process has been most visible in the production and sale of consumer goods relating to issues of sweatshop labor and environmentally responsible products. It may not be a revolution in the Marxian sense, but it does suggest that cultural practices, such as those related to consumerism, can change (or at least influence) economic practices.

RAISING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Aside from a change in the material conditions as a requisite for broader social change, Marx also argued that class consciousness must be fostered for a revolution to happen. It is extremely important to point out that the culture jamming activists in this dissertation are not working to alleviate the kind of class conflict that concerned Marx and is at the heart of his call for revolution. There is a rich history of cultural activity that has had as its primary aim to foster this kind of class consciousness. For example, Rebecca Zurier's (1988) *Art for the Masses* chronicles cultural activities which, although not necessarily culture *jamming*, did work to foster a critical class consciousness. The early twentieth century magazine *The Masses* showcased articles and artwork that addressed a litany of social issues (e.g., those related to sexuality, religion, and gender and racial equality) in ways that connected to them to people's lives, most importantly as workers. While there would be shifts in the magazine's focus though time (the magazine was in existence from 1912 to 1917), it had a strong foundation in its socialist origins. In

fact, on the cover of *The Masses*' first issue are Marx's famous words, "Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains and the world to gain." At the time, the magazine was also sub-titled "a monthly magazine devoted to the interests of the working people."

While the culture jammers explored in this dissertation may not have raising class consciousness as their primary objective, Zurier's description of some of *The Masses* goals are remarkable for how they compare to culture jammers.

> Hoping to establish a working-class cooperative movement by "awakening the disenfranchised," [*The Masses* founders Piet] Vlag and [Rufus] Weeks saw the magazine as a practical educational tool, like the Belgian *Le Peuple*; at the same time they wanted to take up where the high-toned literary and artistic *Comrade* had left off. Like the editors of the *Comrade*, they hoped that "the masses" would appreciate great art. (p. 31)

Through a cultural approach (in this case artwork), *The Masses* was hoping to foster a critical consciousness that was in the best interest of workers. Instead of class consciousness, culture jammers are working to raise a critical consciousness as it relates to various other economic, cultural and social issues. But just as Marx insisted that revolution would not happen until class consciousness was fostered, so, too, is it fair to say that progressive change will not occur without the development of a critical consciousness on the part of a large number of people. This is a fine line for me to argue here, but one that is crucial in order to realize the important part that culture jamming performs as a political practice in fostering social change.

If the AMF, for example, explicitly stated that they wished to revolutionize the means of production, it would be entirely appropriate to analyze their work for the degree to which it does that. But the AMF states that it wishes to revolutionize various cultural systems of production and representation. As much as that might bristle critical theorists who would argue that such a focus on culture is misdirected revolutionary energy, this critique does not illuminate how the AMF works to promote a critical understanding of culture that would, as a next step, encourage activism that could change the material conditions of society. While material change is certainly desired by these activists, it cannot be the immediate outcome of their culture jamming tactics which are mostly rhetorical and/or symbolic expressions of the reasons why change is needed. Communicating the reasons for social change is an essential component of any movement for social change in two ways; it helps to sustain a community of activists while it can also recruit more people to a certain cause.

It is clear that culture jamming activists wish for people outside their particular movement to develop a critical understanding of cultural and economic practices. This is a crucial aim, for if a movement is to grow in visibility and power, more people must join the cause to be vocal and active advocates for the desired change. The *détournement* practices of culture jamming create a rhetorical space where those who are unfamiliar with various cultural critiques can be made aware through a form with which they are familiar. As *détournement*, culture jamming seeks to foster critical moments that distance people from, and create a critical consciousness of, a regular or expected experience of their daily lives or routines. While this is mainly accomplished through the use of familiar images and texts thrown into a critical relief, this tactic still relies a great deal

upon critical context for an individual encountering the jam to realize that it is one. Upon the recognition of the critique, then, a whole host of critical evaluations of power, culture and society are expected to follow. Culture jamming is a tactic that, despite the rhetoric of some of its practitioners, gives a lot of credit to the critical sensibilities of the receivers of cultural texts. But there is the possibility, of course, that critique will be missed.

The possibility of missing a jam's critique is, to some extent, tied to a viewer's cultural capital as it relates not only to the degree of familiarity with or access to such texts, but also the cultural position of the activists perpetrating the jam. In this regard, there are a number of issues related to race, class, and gender that might have an impact on how someone experiences culture jamming's critique. Such factors go beyond education to also include people's every day, lived experiences of consumerism or the political economy of the media, as just two examples. Thus, that the experiences of people may not reflect the critical scrutiny of culture jammers has enormous implications for not only their efficacy but also their relevance. This makes context all the more important, as culture jammers need to be sure that their critiques are universal enough to meet the critical perspectives of those outside of their cultural position.

However, If as members of the BLF assert, along with a host of cultural studies scholars (e.g., Fiske, 1986; Jenkins, 1992; Hall, 1985), that everyone possesses an innate ability and affinity for playing with texts in culturally oppositional ways, perhaps missing a critique should not be the central concern of culture jammers. Instead, the concern should be about visibility, about more and more people experiencing the culture jams and encountering the media of culture jammers. With each case study explored here it is evident these activists realize that a factor in successfully challenging the dominant

ideologies receivers might hold depends on the ability of culture jammers to freely and effectively communicate alternatives to them.

However, as many academic studies, and the first-hand experiences of Lasn and the AMF, have amply demonstrated, the mainstream media are very reluctant to give time or space to perspectives critical of the status quo. In 1997, when the AMF tried to purchase airtime before Thanksgiving for an advertisement promoting Buy Nothing Day (something they attempt each year), all the major networks refused to air the spot. To explain his position, Richard Gitter, vice president of advertising standards at NBC, told the AFM, "We don't want to take any advertising that's inimical to our legitimate business interests" (Berner, 1997, p. A1). Gitter's comment demonstrates the degree to which dominant economic practices work to keep alternatives from reaching large audiences, those audiences who may lack the ability, technical or otherwise, to find other sources of information. But it also serves as an important reminder of the difficulties activists can face in not only having access to space in mainstream media outlets, but having such a space that will present their positions in a non-denigrating light.

The life of culture jamming texts, however, cannot be overlooked as they continue to circulate throughout culture where they are encountered primarily with an understanding that they are jams. For example, culture jamming texts circulate throughout the internet, not only on the activists' own web sites but also on other web sites that garner high traffic. As just one example, video of many of the Yes Men actions can be found on YouTube, which, according to Nielsen NetRatings, had 19.6 million unique visitors in June 2006 (Nielsen NetRatings, 2006). In fact, one YouTube user posted a video of Andy Bichlbaum as Jude Finisterra on BBC World on June 7, 2006

(http://youtube.com/watch?v=SlUQ2sUti8o). According to the counter on this page, the video has been viewed over 42,000 times. Culture jamming texts can also circulate through popular social news sites (e.g., Reddit, Digg), on personal webpages, and on social networking sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook).

On last example here happened very recently and involves a February 28, 2008 BLF action in San Francisco. One of my daily internet routines is to log onto the social news site Reddit.com to see what stories people from around the world have submitted to the site. The site uses a rating system whereby a user can vote a submission up or down, depending on if they liked what was posted. I always go to the "hot" page and saw the following link in the number one spot: "AT&T, Your world delivered. To the NSA" (Reddit.com, 2008). When I clicked on the link I was taken to a page on Boingboing.net (Jardin, 2008) that had a story about a BLF action and a photograph of the group's billboard improvement (see illustrations 32). At that time the story had been voted on 1004 times (with 860 up votes and 144 down votes), and four days later (and no longer at number one) it had 1523 points (1846 up votes and 323 down votes). While the link itself did not take readers to the Billboard Liberation Front, three different users in the comments section posted a link to the BLF's site (myself included). While the popularity of the BLF's action on Reddit.com might be a function of the politics of those who frequent the site

Illustration 32
Before and after AT&T billboard BLF action
Source: http://billboardliberation.com/HQ.html

(which, judging by the content there, tends to be slightly libertarian and obsessed with government malfeasance), it is hard to ignore the potential this has for more people to be exposed to the BLF's larger message.

There are certainly limitations to the reach of the internet. Some people do not have access and, even if they do, they might not even come across culture jamming material while navigating through the vast amounts of information available. The potential for massive exposure of the kinds indicated above, however, can translate to increased visibility of the culture jam without the reliance on traditional media. Additionally, viewers who may have stumbled upon such jams have immediate access to resources (via links) that allow them to further explore issues the texts raise. Encountering a culture jam with the instant knowledge that it is a critical text can go a long way to eliminating many of the barriers to effecting a change in consciousness.

CULTURE JAMMER'S MEDIA MADE BY, AND FOR, THEMSELVES

There is another, distinct audience that encounters culture jamming texts often with the prior knowledge that it is a jam. This audience consists mainly of activists. To be sure, the visibility of their media is an important variable in the degree to which the activists' ideas can bring new members to join a cause. But such media also serves a vital purpose for the community of activists who already share critical perspectives. Culture jamming, then, can be considered an important part of activists' media. In other words, it is not necessarily media only to expose the general public to their ideas, but media for other activists.

The different media that are produced by culture jammers, as well as media produced about and in response to them (e.g., news reports), constitute a valuable means

by which different social movements can organize, promote and/or maintain a collective identity. This media is intimately related to issues of activist identity and community which Chris Atton (2002) and Stephen Duncombe (1997) argue are central to much alternative media production. Atton and Duncombe discuss identity and community mostly in terms of the individual creation and distribution of zines, but the role of various media texts of culture jammers in this regard is functionally similar; it expresses the critical identity position of activists and connects them to larger communities which share in their beliefs. Consequently, culture jamming media can be considered a part of what Sidney Tarrow (1998) calls "connective structures" (p. 124). Such structures help organize social movements with diverse and diffuse memberships, linking "leaders and followers, center and periphery, and different parts of a movement sector, permitting coordination and aggregation between movement organizations and allowing movements to persist even when formal organization is lacking" (p. 124). In other words, as a tactic for promoting social change, culture jamming can serve as strong force in rallying diverse groups around central movements for social change.

Furthermore, just as it would be incorrect to assume that audiences of culture jamming activity have a uniform position regarding any ideological position, so, too, would it be faulty to suggest that movement activists have a uniformly critical position regarding dominant ideologies and practices, much less ideas on how to go about changing them. Beyond offering space for the active reinforcement of community and identity (as mentioned above), "preaching to the converted" can also serve as an opportunity to challenge the status quo of the activist community itself. Challenging the dismissive critique of cultural politics that accuses it of "preaching to the converted," Tim

Miller and David Roman (1995) argue that, by addressing like-minded audiences, such political action serves other vital functions that are important for the maintenance of alternative (in their case, gay and lesbian theater) communities. Thus, it is important for activists to be reminded of their own ideological assumptions and their relationship to the dominant culture. Miller and Roman write:

> The dialectical tension between the assumption that political artists are preaching a type of ideological redundancy to a group of sympathetic supporters and the possibility that community based performers and audiences are participating in an active expression of what may constitute the community itself, obscures the fact that these very marginalized communities are themselves subject to the continuous rhetorical and material practices of a naturalized hegemonic norm. Hegemony's performance forces its subjects to a conversion into its alleged neutrality, its claims to the true and the real. Political performers who practice what Cornel West so aptly identifies as "prophetic criticism" expose these coercive attempts out to maintain the hegemonic norms that govern and discipline daily life. (p. 187).

Issues of community, identity and ideological reinforcement aside, the circulation of culture jamming texts within communities of activists can serve as a morale boost for those who identify and participate in movements for change. In this respect, culture jamming can offer a pleasurable experience for viewers who get a cathartic feeling of accomplishment in knowing that the master's tools have been turned against him. As someone who is critical of the low level of responsibility to which corporations are held accountable for their actions, the Yes Men's Bhopal action gives me an immense feeling

of satisfaction. When I first saw the video of the BBC World interview (I found it on the Yes Men's website), I knew that it was a prank, and I snickered throughout the entire performance as I listened to what Bichlbaum was saying. Even though I have watched it dozens of times since then, a wry grin still crosses my lips as I marvel at the sheer bravado of Bichlbaum's performance. Even with the complications and challenges that some culture jamming practices face with regard to offering critique, moments like these can go a long way toward maintaining a level of determination and a sense of accomplishment for activists who take on the daunting task of challenging deeply entrenched ideologies.

The *Adbusters*' letters pages will occasionally contain letters from readers who are similarly inspired and motivated by what they encounter in the pages of the magazine.[1] Such positive letters offer a reminder about the effect the magazine can have. Jonathan Thies (2000), a self described "17-year-old wide-eyed youngster" from Rhode Island writes, "I'm still in high school but am very interested in *Adbusters*. I wanted to be a graphic artist and design logos and T-shirts and the like. But now I see the underbelly of the industry. Please keep me informed" (p. 9). Even those who have less than positive things to say about the magazine can find good in it. Lisa Bancroft (2004) wrote, "Despite the repeated gloom, sour, ugly and pathetic words – and images (and proof) inside – your underlying (and often silent) message is positive: *We're alive!*" (emphasis in original, p. 12). Russ Goetting (2001) wrote to *Adbusters*,

> I'm a rich kid living in Seattle who has been knocked on his ass by your magazine! Now, instead of buying stuff at Old Navy, I take my allowance each week and buy stacks of Adbusters and put them on the shelves of stores that don't

> carry it. It's fun to watch people pick up your mag and see the thinking smoke rise off their heads. (p. 9)

For all of these reasons, the temptation to question the efficacy of culture jamming (especially in its first iteration) solely in terms of how it can change material conditions, or even those outside of movements for social change, must be avoided. While these are perfectly valid and important questions to address, a focus on them limits the degree to which culture jamming functions as a part of the drive for social change. Like the potential to understand them, the circulation of these texts is not fixed as they serve different purposes that correspond to the context within which they are engaged. From this perspective, culture jammers should be concerned less over appropriation and exclusion by the dominant systems of representation, and more with the content and distribution of their challenges to it. In this regard, a high level, and consistency in the content, of critique might go a long way toward producing the results these activists seek.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

With an understanding of how culture jamming operates at the level of ideological struggle, this project opens up a few avenues for exploring how culture jamming's oppositional texts circulate through culture. One potential, and important, direction for further exploration is the reception of culture jamming texts. Such research could focus not only on how viewers understand and respond to the ideological positions of culture jamming texts, but on how different contexts influence those understandings. In this regard, how audiences' differing ideological positions and types of cultural capital relate to an understanding the critiques offered by culture jammers could be useful in determining where and when the activity is most effective in presenting a critique. Not

only could such research reveal the power of context to shape the reception of critical texts, but it could also suggest ways in which culture jamming can successfully negotiate those contexts that are detrimental to its aims.

Additionally, the failure of most culture jamming organizations in this dissertation to address factors related to class, race and gender in their critiques of different social, cultural and economic practices must be critically assessed. While the Yes Men do more than any other group to raise these issues as they are influenced by the globalization policies of the WTO, no other culture jamming organization explored here includes these issues in their critique of dominant ideologies and practices. The AMF is just one of the organizations here that could nuance their critique with a serious consideration of this triad. Addressing, for example, the class-based reasons why people shop at Wal-Mart or eat at McDonalds, rather than just flat out attacking the corporations and, by extension, those who frequent them, would go a long way to encouraging people to empathize with their point of view. Treating consumerism as a phenomenon that ignores the class, race and gender based differences behind its practice threatens the group's potential for appealing to diverse audiences and connecting with other movements, thus diluting the anti-consumerism movement's potential strength. In all of the texts I have read, there is no indication that culture jammers are reflexive on this point, or on their privileged cultural position. As it is, culture jamming activism in general comes across through its texts and criticisms as a predominantly white, male, middle-class, western activity with a white, male, middle-class, western understanding of social and cultural problems. Such a perspective does not bring these activists as close as they could be to representing the actual conditions within which people experience their everyday lives. Further research

on the impact of race, class and gender on the production and reception of culture jamming texts can indicate how their critique falls short and point to new possible approaches for this tactic to effect social change.

Notes

[1] Unfortunately, I could only find such feedback for readers of *Adbusters* magazine. An extensive search of the Yes Men, BLF and Illegal Art web sites suggest that these groups do not publish reader's and viewer's responses to their work.

Appendix A

Yes Men Timeline of Actions

Pre-Yes Men:

1993 – Barbie Liberation Organization

- Founded in 1989
- Igor Vamos (Co-founder of RTmark, future "Mike Bonanno" in Yes Men) and group switch voice boxes between GI Joe and Barbie dolls in time for Christmas.
- (http://www.rtmark.com/legacy/blo.html)

1996 - Sim-Copter stunt

- Jacques Servin (future Andy Bichlbaum in Yes Men) rewrites code in Maxis' Sim-Copter to place men kissing men in the game's environment
- (http://www.rtmark.com/legacy/simcopter.html)

1999, April – GWBush.com

- While working at RTMark, Bonanno and Andy (?) develop the gwbush.com parody website.
- April 14 letter to Zack Exley of RTMark from George Bush's lawyer threatens legal action if the site is not taken down. Instead, the site was enhanced with more material
- May 3, the Bush Campaign complains to the FCC, claiming that the gwbush.com site violates the Federal Election Campaign act of 1971.

- Suit is dropped and Bush comments about the site, calling Bonanno and Mike "garbage men" and suggesting that "there ought to be limits to freedom."

1999, November – www.gatt.org

- A WTO parody website created by Andy and Mike, in conjunction with RTMark.

The Yes Men:

2000, October 27 – Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer in Salzburg

- As Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer, Andy attends a conference on international trade law in Salzburg, Austria.
- Addressed to then WTO head Michael Moore, this speaker request came through gatt.org (in May, 2000) from a conference organizer who thought the web site was the official WTO website.
- Among Bicklbauer's claims: the siesta is an unfair barrier to trade,

2001, July 19 – Granwyth Hulatberi on CNBC's "Marketwrap Europe"

- Another request (on July 6) for a representative that comes through gatt.org, Andy is Granwyth Hulatberi, appearing with activist Barry Coates from the World Development Movement and Vernon Ellis, International Chairman of Andersen Consulting.
- Claims protesters are "focusing too much on facts" and that the issues protesters are against can be solved by properly educating their children with a private sector based education.

2001, August 16 – Hank Hardy Unruh in Tampere, Finland

- "Textiles of the Future" conference organizers contact gatt.org, asking for a WTO representative to give keynote address (January, 2001).
- August 16, as hank Hardy Unruh, Andy gives a presentation at the conference where he unveils the "manager's leisure suit."
- Unruh suggests that the American Civil War was unnecessary, that market forces would have eliminated the "inefficient" slave trade with remote labor and proposes the "magangement leisure suit," a gold lame suit with a three foot phallus for monitoring remote labor.

2002, April – Dr. Kinnithrung Sprat, Lecture to students, Plattsburg, PA

- Andy poses asWTO representative Sprat, and Mike as a McDonalds representative.
- Present a lecture on the problems of starvation and propose recycling human waste into McDonalds hamburgers to sell to Third World countries
- Students question and harshly critique them.

2002, May 21 – Kinnithrung Sprat, Sydney, Australia

- Small lecture set up in lieu of canceled conference.
- Kinnithrung Sprat (Andy) delivers a lecture to the Certified Public Accountants of Australia announcing the disbanding of the WTO and its reorganization as the Trade Regulation Organization, dedicated to the plight of third-world countries.
- The lecture includes statistics on the damaging effects of current WTO policies and practices.

2002, Dec. 3 – Dow-Chemical press release

- Press release that outlines issues about Dow's responsibility in very honest terms. http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/bhopalmemorialpress.html

2002, Dec. 4 – Dow-chemical.com shut down

- Jame parker, son of Dow CEO, listed by the Yes Men as owner of the site, successfully takes over the site.

2002 – Co-release Dreamweaver software

- Dreamweaver is software that makes it easy to create copy/parody websites.
- Co-release with plagiarist.org and detritus.net.

2003 – Try 'em! Playing cards

- In response to the Pentagon's releasing of a deck of cards "featuring the nastiest, most unreconstructable Baathists in the whole of Iraq," the Yes Men release their own deck of cards featuring known US political and cultural leaders who they deem to be "criminals."

2003, Sept 7 – "The Yes Men" movie

- Released in Canada

2004, January – "The Yes Men" movie

- US premiere at Sundance Film Festival

2004, April 28 – Dow representative Erastus Hamm, London, England

- International Payments 2005 conference
- Announce "Acceptable Risk," a method of determining how many deaths are acceptable in search of corporate profitability.

2004, April 29-30 – Heritage Foundation's annual Resource Bank meeting

- April 29, Andy and Mike set up a table adorned with a foot long roman warship and position papers.
- April 30, Andy gets on stage and nominates Ed Meese to run for president. Mike dons a gorilla suit and tries to get attendees to sign a "draft Meese" petition until he gets kicked out.

2004, May 20 – Ice age petition

- Andy and Mike collect signatures for a petition supporting Bush's global warming policies which, among other things, states: "The United States is uniquely positioned to *benefit* from a "new ice age," while our competitors will be *weakened* by it."

2004, August 20 – Nov. 3, Yes, Bush Can! Tour

- Andy, Mike and "team" tour the country as faux Bush supporters (and to promote their film).

2004, September 1 – "The Yes Men" book

2004, September 24 – "The Yes Men" movie

- Limited US release

2004, December 3 – Jude Finisterra on BBC World

- 20th anniversary of Bhopal diaster
- Dow spokesman Finisterra (Andy) announced that Dow was going to sell Union Carbide and use the funds to compensate victims and clean up Bhopal.

2005, May 12 – Jude Finisterra (Andy) and Mike Bonanno at Dow's Annual General Meeting

- During question and answer session, Jude asks if Dow is going to use some of their profits to help people of Bhopal
- During question and answer session, Mike asks if Dow is going to do anything about the “creeps” who are speaking poorly about Dow.”

Appendix B

Interviews with Andy Bichlbaum

The following is the text of the questions and answers solicited from Andy Bichlbaum on January 26, 2006. I first emailed him a list of questions. What is below is the content of the document he sent back to me, which includes the questions I originally sent him. Bichlbaum's responses are as (AB).

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Please keep in mind that the focus of my chapter on the Yes Men is on your pranks between the years of 2000 and 2005. Specifically I am writing about the following pranks:

Salzburg

Tampere

Plattsburg

Sydney

CNBC

BBC World

So I guess in my questions I'm asking you to think back to those days and remember what your mindset was. So here we go!

1) How do you measure the success of a prank?

(AB) According to how much press it gets, and how clearly the press publicizes the issue we're trying to publicize.

2) What are some of the unintended consequences of performing actions such as yours?

(AB) The long-term medical and psychological effects are as yet unknown. (It really is like a drug.) Besides that, I guess we never expected so many people to be inspired to do similar things.... I guess.

3) My first couple of questions are based one argument I am making in this chapter; That the Yes Men really have two audiences. There is the "direct" audience who is right there in front of you as you are doing the prank. Then there is an "indirect" audience, people who see or hear about the prank and who usually know it is a prank right off the bat (like the audience of your documentary).

a) Which of these audiences is most important to your goals? Why?

(AB) The indirect audience, of course. Or rather, the direct audience is crucial because without them there would be no scene, but it's the indirect audience that we're trying to reach.

b) In the documentary and the book, you talk about your goal of creating a "realization" in people that what the WTO, and globalization in general, is doing is wrong and is hurting people. Do you wish to get the same realization out of the international trade lawyers in Salzburg or the accountants in Sydney and people reading of these pranks in the news?

(AB) Originally we did want to get the message to the trade lawyers and others. And in Sydney I think we actually may have succeeded with the direct audience. But generally it was a failure; as soon as it became clear we weren't succeeding, taking it further became crucial—hence film.

With the BBC action, more than any other, we wanted the direct audience to react—to realize in a word that another world is possible. But even there it was the repercussions of the action—the articles about it, as hoax—that were the most important in getting the word out there, by far. (It linked "Dow" and "Bhopal"—that was the whole point of the thing.)

4) The following few questions are based on a kind of evolution of your pranking that I have observed while studying your WTO pranks (Salzburg thru Sydney). In that "evolution" I noticed that you really escalated the "shock" level of your presentations, culminating in Plattsburg, but then changed direction in Sydney. While announcing the dissolution of the WTO is shocking to a certain degree, it abandons the more theatrical shock value of your previous method. Related to this, in looking at the content of the lectures, the information in them was often filled with outrageous assertions (e.g. markets would have ended slavery naturally, Italians are lazy, etc). But in Plattsburg and Sydney, obviously influenced by your meeting with Barry Coates, you seemed to move away from that type of language, favoring the use of current statistics and criticisms of the WTO.

a) What are your thoughts on this?

(AB) I think as we've moved forward (and since then) we've kept our interest in ridiculous punch lines (there are also quite a few in Plattsburgh, especially towards the end, where we advocate cannibalism), but also aim to communicate solid information. Perhaps Plattsburgh aimed more than previous lectures to communicate a whole

system—the way agribusiness works in the Third World. Quite complicated and at the same time quite simple. Maybe that's what you're seeing there?

In any case, with the Sydney talk, as with the BBC action and more recently the New Orleans one, it was crucial to pack the talk (which wasn't satirical) with actual facts, to hew very strictly to truth. No exaggeration possible there.

b) Likewise, has reaching and effecting a wider audience through the press been a part of your larger tactics from the get go?

(AB) Oh yes—from the time we met, that's been the whole goal. I know Mike from the time of his Barbie/GI Joe switcheroo and before has always been interested in seeing how art can reach a wider public. And when I discovered for myself the potential of a goofy act (the SimCopter "hack") to reach a worldwide public, a light bulb went off, and that's been my goal ever since—to leverage media attention for important and utopian causes through fun and devious means.

5) Can you say anything about assumptions you make about your audience before you prepare a prank? I guess I'm asking how the venue for your prank plays into your decision of what to do (e.g. Tampere vs. Sydney)

(AB) Well, the context is all of course—in Tampere we sort of had to orient the talk around textiles because it was a textile conference. In Sydney we didn't really have to pay attention to the context much because the premise was a UFO of information: the supposed dissolution of the WTO having just been announced that morning. Sometimes we've chosen the context because of what we wanted to say—the Halliburton and New Orleans lectures were like that, we set out to get them because they were up our alley.

But there are no subtleties really, I don't think—the business world is fairly uniform and boring, and an incompetent but well-dressed WTO rep goes over equally well in Sydney and Tampere, or anywhere else.

6) In terms of challenging people's beliefs (particularly those people who are at the event where you do the prank), what are some of the obstacles you think need to be overcome in order for your pranks to be successful?

(AB) Who knows? We've never succeeded in overcoming those obstacles, I don't think, since nobody's ever really gotten what we do.

The main challenge is of course to communicate clearly but satirically what we're trying to say, so that it comes off clearly to the indirect audience.

7) About Plattsburg and Sydney, was there any point where you told the audience it was a prank? If so, when?

(AB) No.

8) Particularly with Plattsburg, I am curious why the protesters are not in the documentary while they are mentioned in the book. Is there a reason for their omission from the documentary? In the book you mention that they figured you guys out, did they out you at the lecture?

(AB) The protesters were so dumbfounded that they never raised up their signs and protested. They probably figured it out right away. Our sense was that much of the audience figured it out during the lecture.

9) Related to your stated goals, if you had to point out to any limitations of "identity correction" in realizing your goals, what would they be?

(AB) Tons of limitations! It only just goes so far. The real engine is street protest and other forms of mass movement. This is just a gimmick to get a certain amount press attention for a certain number of issues. It's nothing more - in no way a movement, which is what's called for and being developed.

10) I realize that you both work, but traveling around the globe as you do must be rather expensive. Can you give me any information on where your funding came from in the early years?

(AB) Art things, and lecture things at universities. Just like today.

11) Andy, I have to know, before your participation in the CNBC interview, what was going through your head? You looked REALLY nervous. This was only your second Yes Men/WTO prank, correct?

(AB) Right. Super-nervous. Terrified.

12) I'm curious about your co-author on the book, Bob Spunkmeyer. Can you give me any information on his involvement with the Yes Men? Since his name comes up when I talk about the book, it would be nice if I could give him some context.

(AB) His real name is Bob Ostertag. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_Ostertag

12) What is next for the Yes Men? I heard from some friends at the Media Reform conference that you are working on a new film. Is this true? Can you give me any info on it?

(AB) Yes we are. I wish I'd gone to that conference.... I'll send you a document about it - remind me in a couple of days if I forget.

On January 13, 2007, I contacted Bichlbaum again via email with some additional questions pertaining to Yes Men media. Below are his replies.

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Movie: All I can find out from IMDB is that the film was released on 3 screens for opening weekend. IMDB also has info on revenue. MGM doesn't have anything. Do you have any info on how wide a release your film was (i.e. how many screens it was on). Were there only 3 prints struck? If you also have any info you can share on DVD sales, that would be awesome. Do you have any press releases you could share?

(AB) Mike, do you know how many screens or any of that? My impression is: screens = 50 or so eventually; number of prints = 5?; DVD sales = no idea at all. Didn't really do any press releases after the initial ones – do you want those? They just say "go see the movie."

The book: I'm awaiting to hear back from Disinformation, but thought I'd ask if you have any numbers related to the book's circulation and sales.

(AB) Not very good! A bunch were left over, and we bought them for cheap. That's the dirty truth.

The website: I assume the website got more attention when the film was released. Can you share any traffic numbers with me?

(AB) Can't remember, but our traffic generally hovers around 2000 visitors per day, I think...

Appendix C

First Things First Manifestos

First Things First (1964 version)

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as: cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, beforeshave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.

In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.

We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. With this in mind we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.

First Things First 2000

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, *what graphic designers do*. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated

with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.

Appendix D

Interview with Jack Napier

The following interview can be found on the Billboard Liberation Front's website at http://www.billboardliberation.com/response.html. It is reprinted here pursuant to Napier's request that, if information from the interview is used, the interview be published in its entirety.

+++

Questions for Redressing the Imposition on Public Space

The fight against the use of billboards as commercial adverts rather than as a medium for public self expression, protest and communication for social issues.

Doctoral thesis research by Jessica Hall

+++

Dear Jessica, here are my answers to your questions. You are welcome to publish and/or distribute this document as you please as long as you do so without editing, and use in its entirety.

Cheers,

Jack Napier, CEO, BLF

+++

(1) ***What is your involvement in billboard alteration? (Is it direct action or involvement in a website or publication etc?)***

JN - We consider our work to be "improvements" as opposed to mere alterations. We only choose ad campaigns that we can improve upon. We also have a website:

(2) ***Billboard alteration is illegal, why do you take the risk and how do you justify what you do?***

JN - We believe that our work is invoicable, not illegal. Consequently, we have begun to back charge most of our major clients (Exxon, R.J. Reynolds, Levis, etc.) for advertising services provided. As to the rumored illegality of our activities, we believe that this will never be pressed in court. In the unfortunate event of legal action against our group, our attorney would certainly emphasize the several instances of billboard company executives noting in print (S.F. Examiner, Wired Mag, Village Voice, etc.) the fact that the BLF does not actually damage the boards when we add an improvement. A company spokesman for Outdoor Systems, the largest outdoor ad company in the U.S. is actually quoted describing our penchant for leaving a twelve pack of beer (not the cheap stuff either!) up on the boards for their hard working sign crews. As to your query about risk; the well lived life is a series of calculated risks. If you risk nothing, you gain nothing.

(3) ***Why do you think billboards are detrimental to society?***

JN - We at the BLF have NEVER once stated anywhere, anytime that billboards are a detriment to society. We truly believe that anyone who wants a billboard should have one, preferably covered in neon, on the roof of their house.

(4) ***Do you think that billboards should be banished from our environment?***

JN - God no. Substandard copywriters and satirically challenged Ad execs should be banned.

(4.5) ***If your answer is no, then if billboards were put to a use other than advertising, what would you choose?***

JN - I think that tap dance troupes and stand up comics should use the actual billboard platforms to perform on.

(5) ***Do you agree that we all absorb the content of adverts even if we don't notice them consciously?***

JN - Of course not. I say that if you Just Do It, and Don't Leave Home Without It, so to speak, you should Be In Good Hands and can then Think Different(ly) about your Obsession.

(6) ***Do you believe that subliminal advertising exists?***

JN - What?

(6.5) ***If your answer is yes, define what you believe subliminal advertising to be.***

JN - The dusky, perfumed scent of a beautiful, fecund woman wafting along on the lazy warm breeze of a late summers afternoon.

(7) ***What do you see as the long term effects of advertising on society*****?**

JN - Eventually, everyone will be their very own copywriting, market penetrating, demographic interpreting sales phenomenon.

(8) ***Do you believe there are any positive effects of advertising?***

JN - Are there positive effects of breathing? In an outhouse?

(9) ***As a result of billboard alteration, do you know of any encouraging reactions from the companies that own them or the company that is doing the advertising?***

JN - No! The bastards just keep stealing our original ideas without paying us!

(10) ***What opinion do you have on the argument that corporate logo/billboard modification only draws attention to and therefore promotes the product?***

JN - Of course ANY product or logo exposure moves more product units. Any

sophomore marketing student could tell you that. It is merely the possibility of encouraging someone to think, if only for a second, that makes our work enticing.

(11) ***An artists credibility and career often stems from their work making a social comment. Therefore you could say that an artist altering a billboard is effectively promoting himself, and isn't that the same as a company promoting a product? Can you differentiate between an artist creating a public service message and an ad agency creating an advert?***

JN - Budget.

(12) ***I have read an article that implies that Adbusters are becoming too money oriented. What is your reaction to this?***

JN - We're still waiting for our cut.

(13) ***If a brand or company is mocked by a billboard alteration rather than the amendment making a serious point, won't the viewer dismiss it as a childish prank?***

JN - God bless the child. Each "viewer" who sees enough billboard "improvements" might eventually get the idea that each and every brand and/or ad slogan is his/hers to modify (if only in their imagination). Once you change the message, it becomes yours. As to the idea of making "serious points" in ad improvement, or for that matter in any type of public discourse, didn't that become difficult if not impossible after Reagans presidency? Not to mention after we decided to allow a bunch of unintelligible and silly French "philosophers" dictate the nature of reality to us?

(14) ***Have you seen how the public react to billboard alteration? Do you think people understand the points you make and then read between the lines of advertising? It is possible that many people just laugh and forget the message.***

JN - I'm just happy when they don't accidentally hit me with their car! If anything lightens someone's day through humor or a momentary identification with something outside of themselves that gives them ideas, how can it be bad? However, if you're trying to make the world a better place, give hungry people food (if they agree to quit breeding like roaches.)

(15) ***Do you believe that your actions could eventually lead to billboards being abolished?***

JN - I really hope not.

(15.5) ***Realistically the Government makes money from alcohol, tobacco and cars as well as many other products through taxes, so would they ever get rid of that which promotes those goods?***

JN - If you think that the (any) government works in YOUR best interest, I've got a great bridge in Manhattan you might be interested in buying.

(16) ***What realistic future do you see for billboards?***

JN - Most people are now walking billboards, what with all the clothing logos on their togs. I suppose the next frontiers will be inner and outer space. Designer DNA encoded directly onto our protein molecules is a possibility. Of course, any one who doubts that we'll eventually be seeing a Nike swoop etched onto the surface of the moon simply doesn't understand human potential.

Please state if you do not wish your responses to be published on the Internet.

(JN) - Have at it.

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Vita

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