

Culture Jamming

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The Information War of the 90s

Recently, magazines like *Jack Ruby Slippers* and *Adbusters* have begun to promote the concept of "culture jamming". What does it mean ? And what are its roots ? According to important culture jammers such as Mark Dery, it is an attempt to "jam" the transmissions of our corporate-controlled, media-consumer-industrial complex. Dery suggests that we consider our mental environment - the realms of signification we encounter every day, especially in omnipresent advertising - and that we take direct political action so as to protect that environment just as fiercely as the "natural" or physical one.

The origins of culture jamming probably lie with the Situationist International in France, and its practice of *detournement* or inversion. The roots of *detournement* itself probably lie in the Feast of Fools and other medieval ceremonies where the social order was inverted and the authorities paraded around in fools' costume, revealing their "natural" or "divine" authority to be socially created and maintained. Situationist Guy de Bord suggested in the 60s that we were living in a "society of the spectacle" - where real leisure and real living had been replaced by pre-packaged experiences and media-created events. Other Situationists practiced *detournement* as a response : most would take images from advertising, the mass media, or popular culture, and change the dialogue subtly so as to reveal the ideologies masked in everyday media experience.

Writing in the Situationist vein, the French philosopher Baudrillard calls our postmodern existence "hyperreality". Real experiences and things have been replaced with simulacra - copies without an original. Due to the power of mass media advertising, our relationship to the signifier has changed. Now it hides the absence of a signified : conceals the inability to deliver real satisfaction by cleverly simulating it. Part of our hyperreal lives is the fact that our simulations are more real than real. Given a better imitation, people choose it over the real thing; hence Disney's Matterhorn enjoys more visitors than the real one in Switzerland. More insidiously, through various obfuscations, people come to think the simulacrum is the real McCoy, and forget about the historical and physical reality it represents.

Modern advertising critics like Mark Crispin Miller often note the hidden messages concealed within the cool graphics and media saturation of Madison Avenue and MTV. Originally, they suggest, advertising often connected the product being sold with some sort of self-image or way of life (pastoral, pleasant, family-oriented). Often, it was conveyed that the product would somehow confer various advantages - popularity, sexiness, fame, success, power, even individuality. Today, ads are filled with a strange sort of rugged selfishness, misanthropy, and mean-spiritedness ("touch my doritos and die"). A person is told sternly to buy as much as they can of the product but never to share with friends. "Get your own", they're told. While various moral crusaders seek to combat the various sexual innuendos of TV programming, they rarely challenge the more subtle but socially disruptive images found in commercials and other advertising.

The product, no longer able to offer satisfaction on its own ground ("a potato chip is a chip is a chip"), instead offers the consumer a chance to be part of a certain "crowd" or "scene". They belong to a cool "product tribe", revelling in the image and sensibility that the product somehow mystically confers - the fetishism of commodities, hyperaccelerated for Generation X. Analysts of postindustrial America suggest this is the secret

hidden within these advertising campaigns - that more and more people are being sold style, image, and celebrity, since there is no substance or material satisfaction to the product-in-itself. Concealed within the jump-cut flash of postmodern advertising is a simple code : consumption is a mode of transcendence, a way to take part in something larger than yourself, "the Pepsi Generation".

Corporations utilize various techniques to carve Americans into various market profiles - not based on what products they use, but on what media messages they respond to. In other words, they are to be sold on the images they want to project to themselves and others, and not on the intrinsic usefulness of consumer items. Whatever values they supposedly respond to, are translated into clever pitches, suggesting that the product somehow represents or embodies those values. Subliminal seduction has never been that important in advertising, despite the hype, but the use of semiotic strategies certainly has. Products are often "pitched" to specific ethnic groups, minorities, or subcultures, often using the Marcusian co-optation strategy of appealing to their own sense of difference or deviance ("wear our clothes, and then you'll be a real rebel").

Is there a way out of hyperreality and the society of the spectacle ? Yes. You can take charge of your mental environment, and become a culture jammer. Culture jamming means semiotic jujitsu - using media power against itself. The Adbusters' Media Foundation does this all the time with famous spoofs of the Absolut Vodka ads ("Absolut death", etc.). Other culture jammers often take commercials or TV programs and replace the dialogue and soundtrack with something subversive. Yet others take to billboards or road signs and cleverly rearrange the letters to say something different. As one activist suggests, "where critique is no longer a possibility, parody is always an alternative response".

In our global media village of multinational media conglomerates and satellite TV, culture jamming is necessarily a global enterprise. As the Western consumerist message increasingly spreads to the masses of the Third World/Periphery, it is the task of culture jammers to go there too and jam the signal. Surely, some have remarked, we must be living in hyperreality when Taco Bell opens in Mexico City and Pizza Hut opens in Rome. Or when more schoolchildren know Joe Camel better than they can recognize the current president. Slowly, the lines between information and entertainment are being blurred, producing a fuzzy sort of "infotainment" in which real facts are irrelevant but audience ratings are key.

Culture jamming is more than just a clever game. In an era in which conspicuous consumption is slowly eating up the entire planet, it may just be the key to survival itself. We may not be able to stop the signal at its source, but at least we can jam its reception. The point is to awaken people to their media-controlled life, to stop and notice the signal and noise that is their mental environment. Like "Rowdy" Roddy Piper in *They Live* we may suddenly notice a host of things we previously ignored. Messages from all around us telling us to sleep, procreate, consume, but not to question. Culture jamming shows these hidden Barthian "mythologies" - through satire, it forces people to confront that which seems most "natural" to them. Today, more than ever, culture jamming is the key weapon in the 90s information "war", the outcome of which could well determine our collective fate.