Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs

A Brief Introduction to the 2010 Reprint:

The term “cultural jamming” and the concept behind it first appeared on JamCon '84, a 1984 cassette-only release by the audio-collage band Negativland.

The group, who sociopolitical satire and media criticism often have a sharp, Situationist edge, applied the idea of “jamming” to billboard banditry. (Jamming was the joke-y, trollish practice, then prevalent in the C.B. radio community, of disrupting other users’ conversations with obscene or nonsensical interjections; billboard banditry is the neo-Situationist practice of illegally altering billboards to perversely funny, usually political effect in order to critique consumerism, capitalism, representations of race and gender in advertising, or American foreign policy.)

Inspired by Negativland’s work in general, and JamCon '84 in specific, I used my readings in postmodern theory, Baudrillard, McLuhan, and the politicized cultural histories of Stuart Ewen to historicize and theorize in depth Negativland’s notion of “cultural jamming,” which my Inner Grammian insisted on retooling as culture jamming.

In my December 1990 New York Times article on the subject—the first appearance of the phrase and the concept in the mainstream media—I used Negativland, the media hoaxes Joey Skaggs, the graffiti artist Robbie Conal, the parody billboard painter Jerry Johnson, and Reverend Ivan Stang of the tongue-in-cheek Church of the Subgenius cult as poster children for culture jamming—media age provocateurs who expose “the ways in which corporate and political interests use the media as a tool of behavior modification.”

In my 1993 Open Magazine pamphlet, Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs, a revised version of which appears below, I theorized the concept in depth, teasing out its historical precedents and excavating its philosophical foundations, among them Bakhtin’s reading of medieval carnival as symbolic subversion, the Situationist theory of the Spectacle and concomitant practice of détournement, and the Baudrillardian theory of postmodern society as a hyperreality. The conceptual thread running through the secret history and philosophical operating code of culture jamming was the idea of guerrilla semiotics, a term I coined* and which I unpack at length in my essay, below. “(Debt to Umberto Eco’s concept of “semiological guerrilla warfare” duly acknowledged here.)

After I published my New York Times article, I wrote a series of articles for the Canadian anti-consumerism magazine Adbusters, beginning with “Subvertising: The Billboard Bandit as Cultural Jammer” (Adbusters, Fall/Winter 1991, Volume 2, Number 1), in which I introduced editor/publisher Kalle Lasn to the term “culture jamming” and the theories it embodied.

Lasn took the concept and ran with it, branding his magazine as the house organ of the Culture Jamming Movement®, peddling anti-consumerist swag through the magazine’s website, and publishing a jammer’s manifesto of sorts, Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America, a strategy that has earned him the ire of jammers like Carrie McLaren, who in her essay “CULTURE JAMMING ™ brought to you by Adbusters” charges Lasn with reducing the phenomenon to a few pointless vagaries (“challenge your economics professors to justify their scientific credentials in class”) and things to buy—air-time on local TV to air Adbusters’ anti-commercials, Buy Nothing Day promo goods (irony, anyone?), and the Culture Jammer’s toolbox, where, for $35, you get a poster, stickers, The Culture Jammer’s Video, a Buy Nothing Day t-shirt and extra copies of Adbusters. Then inside the back page, in case you missed those two pages, there’s a full page of Culture Jamming materials. A set of six posters and postcards ($15), the Culture Jammer’s Calendar ($13), The Culture Jammer’s Video and Back Issues. Order before September 15 and get a second calendar free! ...Beat’ em at their own game, I guess is the thinking. But what comes out is no real alternative to our culture of consumption. Just a different brand.

What she said. I share McLaren’s pique at Adbuster’s complicity in the commodification of anti-consumerism (not to mention Lasn’s benign neglect, in too many interviews, of the role my work played in bringing the concept to his attention).

Adbusters’ exhortations to critical thinking and media literacy are crucial, especially when...
they fall on teenage ears. My ambivalence about the magazine springs from its shrink-wrapping of anti-consumerism: culture jamming calendars replete with subscription cards and merchandise order forms, and so forth. Also, my nose wrinkles at the Dworkinesque censoriousness that wafts from the magazine’s neo-puritan insinuation that alcohol use leads inevitably to alcohol abuse, that coffee consumption is a profound social evil. In such moments, it exudes the deep-rooted distrust of the masses’ ability to police their own desires that makes strange bedfellows of moral crusaders on the left and the right.

Seventeen years after my manifesto hit indie bookstores, the look and feel of culture jamming, at least, have been appropriated by the mainstream, tirelessly promoted by Adbusters (oh, the irony!) and hijacked by guerrilla advertisers to ambush unsuspecting consumers. Perhaps it’s high time we asked whether it, like the medieval Feast of Fools to which it is distantly related, was always just a socially sanctioned release valve—a tactical outlet for class resentments and pent-up dissent over social injustices and economic inequities that might have found more profoundly political expression if they hadn’t been harmlessly exorcized via rituals of resistance.

But that, wise crowd, is a question I leave to you.

— Mark Dery, October 8, 2010

A Note About the Creative Commons:

Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs was published in broadside form by the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series in 1993. That pamphlet, with its eye-grabbing cover by the collage artist Stephen Kroninger, is long out of print. Although you can still find the odd copy of the original pamphlet for sale on the Web, they’re rare as hen’s teeth and are priced accordingly.

Of course, following the cultural logic of the Digital Age, which is the same as that of Jurassic Park—namely, that anything that can be stored as information (sequenced, scanned, or otherwise encoded) can be raised from the dead—Culture Jamming lives on, in the purgatory of the virtual, all over the Web.

In solidarity with the ideas-as-intellectual-freeware movement, which champions an “open source” approach to ideas at a time when corporations are privatizing more and more intellectual property, I’m making Culture Jamming available to anyone who wants to archive it on his or her site, photocopy it for classroom use, or otherwise circulate it for noncommercial use. In return, I ask only that you credit me as the author and, ironically, copyright holder, as in: “©Mark Dery; all rights reserved.” I’m open-sourcing the ideas in this essay, not licensing users to profit from the republication and resale of my work. That’s stealware, not shareware.

Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs

I. The Empire of Signs

“My fellow Americans,” exhort John F. Kennedy, “haven’t you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen?”

Of course, it wasn’t actually Kennedy, but an actor in “Media Burn,” a spectacle staged in 1975 by the performance art collective Ant Farm. Speaking from a dais, “Kennedy” held forth on America’s addiction to the plug-in drug, declaring, “Mass media monopolies control people by their control of information.” On cue, an assistant doused a wall of TV sets with kerosene and flicked a match at the nearest console. An appreciative roar went up from the crowd as the televisions exploded into snapping flames and roiling smoke.

Minutes later, a customized 1959 Cadillac hurtled through the fiery wall with a shuddering crunch and ground to a halt, surrounded by the smashed, blackened carcasses of televisions. Here and there, some sets still burned; one by one, their picture tubes imploded, to the onlookers’ delight. A postcard reproduction of the event’s pyrotechnic climax, printed on the occasion of the its tenth anniversary, bears a droll poem:

Modern alert
plague is here
burn your TV
exterminate fear
Image breakers
smashing TV
American heroes
burn to be free

In “Media Burn,” Ant Farm indulged publicly in the guilty pleasure of kicking a hole in the cathode-ray tube. Now, almost two decades later, TV’s cyclopean eye peers into every corner of the cultural arena, and the desire to blind it is as strong as ever. “Media Burn” materializes the wish-fulfillment dream of a consumer democracy that yearns, in its hollow heart and empty head, for a belief system loftier than the “family values” promised by a Volvo ad campaign, discourse more elevated than that offered by the shark tank feeding-
It is a postmodern commonplace that our lives are intimately and inextricably bound up in the TV experience. Ninety-eight percent of all American households — more than half have indoor plumbing — have at least one television, which is on seven hours a day, on the average. Dwindling funds for public schools and libraries, counterpointed by the skyrocketing sales of VCRs and electronic games, have given rise to a culture of “aliteracy,” defined by Roger Cohen as “the rejection of books by children and young adults who know how to read but choose not to.” The drear truth that two thirds of Americans get “most of their information” from television is hardly a revelation.

Media prospector Bill McKibben wonders about the exchange value of such information:

> We believe we live in the ‘age of information,’ that there has been an information ‘explosion,’ an information ‘revolution.’ While in a certain narrow sense this is the case, in many important ways just the opposite is true. We also live at a moment of deep ignorance, when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach. An Unenlightenment. An age of missing information.

The effects of television are most deleterious in the realms of journalism and politics; in both spheres, TV has reduced discourse to photo ops and sound bites, asserting the hegemony of image over language, emotion over intellect. These developments are bodied forth in Ronald Reagan, a TV conjunction who for eight years held the news media, and thus the American public, spellbound. As Mark Hertsgaard points out, the President’s media-savvy handlers were able to reduce the fourth estate, which likes to think of itself as an unblinking watchdog, to a fawning lapdog: Deaver, Gergen and their colleagues effectively rewrote the rules of presidential image-making. On the basis of a sophisticated analysis of the American news media — how it worked, which buttons to push when, what techniques had and had not worked for previous administrations — they introduced a new model for packaging the nation’s top politician and using the press to sell him to the American public. Their objective was not simply to tame the press but to transform it into an unwitting mouthpiece of the government.

During the Reagan years, America was transformed into a TV democracy whose prime directive is social control through the fabrication and manipulation of images. “We [the Reagan campaign staff] tried to create the most entertaining, visually attractive scene to fill that box, so that the cameras from the networks would have to use it,” explained former Reagan advisor Michael Deaver. “It would be so good that they’d say, ‘Boy, this is going to make our show tonight.’” [W]e became Hollywood producers.”

The conversion of American society into a virtual reality was lamentably evident in the Persian Gulf War, a made-for-TV miniseries with piggybacked merchandising (T-shirts, baseball caps, Saddam toilet paper, Original Desert Shield Condoms) and gushy, Entertainment Tonight-style hype from a cheerleading media. When filmmaker Jon Alpert, under contract to NBC, brought back stomach-churning footage of Iraq under U.S. bombardment, the network — which is owned by one of the world’s largest arms manufacturers, General Electric — fired Alpert and refused to air the film. Not that Alpert’s film would have roused the body politic: Throughout the war, the American people demanded the right not to know. A poll cited in The New York Times was particularly distressing: “Given a choice between increasing military control over information or leaving it to news organizations to make most decisions about reporting on the war, 57 per cent of those responding said they would favor greater military control.”

During the war’s first weeks, as home front news organizations aided Pentagon spin control by maintaining a near-total blackout on coverage of protest marches, Deaver was giddy with enthusiasm. “If you were going to hire a public relations firm to do the media relations for an international event,” he bubbled, “it couldn’t be done any better than this is being done.” In fact, a P.R. firm, Hill & Knowlton, was hired; it orchestrated the congressional testimony of the distraught young Kuwaiti woman whose horror stories about babies ripped from incubators and left “on the cold floor to die” by Iraqi soldiers was highly effective in mobilizing public support for the war. Her testimony was never substantiated, and her identity — she was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. — was concealed, but why niggle over details? “Formulated like a World War II movie, the Gulf War even ended like a World War II movie,” wrote Neal Gabler, “with the troops marching triumphantly down Broadway or Main Street, bathed in the gratitude of their fellow Americans while the final credits rolled.”

After the yellow ribbons were taken down, however, a creeping disaffection remained. A slowly-spreading rancor at the televisual Weltanschauung, it is with us still, exacerbated by the prattle of talk show hosts, anchorclones, and the Teen Talk Barbie advertised on Saturday mornings whose “four fun phrases” include “I love shopping” and “Meet me at the mall.” Mark Crispin Miller neatly sums TV’s place in our society:

> Everybody watches it, but no one really likes it. This is the open secret of TV today. Its only champions are its own executives, the advertisers who exploit it, and a compromised network of academic boosters. Otherwise, TV has no spontaneous defenders, because there is almost nothing in it to defend.
The rage and frustration of the disempowered viewer exorcised in “Media Burn” bubbles up, unexpectedly, in “57 Channels (And Nothin’ On)”, Bruce Springsteen’s Scorsese-esque tale of a man unhinged by the welter of meaningless information that assails him from every channel. Springsteen sings: “So I bought a .44 magnum it was solid steel cast/ And in the blessed name of Elvis well I just let it blast/ ‘Til my TV lay in pieces there at my feet/ And they busted me for disturbin’ the almighty peace.”

Significantly, the video for “57 Channels” incorporates footage of a white Cadillac on a collision course with a wall of flaming TV sets, in obvious homage to “Media Burn.” The ritual destruction of the TV set, endlessly iterated in American mass culture, can be seen as a retaliatory gesture by an audience that has begun to bridle, if only intuitively, at the suggestion that “power” resides in the remote control unit, that “freedom of choice” refers to the ever-dwindling options offered around the dial. This techno-voodoo rite constitutes the symbolic obliteration of a one-way information pipeline that only transmits, never receives. It is an act of sympathetic magic performed in the name of all who are obliged to peer at the world through peepholes owned by multinational conglomerates for whom the profit margin is the bottom line. “To the eye of the consumer,” notes Ben Bagdikian,

the global media oligopoly is not visible…Newsstands still display rows of newspapers and magazines, in a dazzling array of colors and subjects…Throughout the world, broadcast and cable channels continue to multiply, as do video cassettes and music recordings. But…if this bright kaleidoscope suddenly disappeared and was replaced by the corporate colophons of those who own this output, the collage would go gray with the names of the few multinationals that now command the field.

In his watershed work, The Media Monopoly, Bagdikian reports that the number of transnational media giants has dropped to 23 and is rapidly shrinking. Following another vector, Herbert Schiller considers the interlocked issues of privatized information and limited access:

The commercialization of information, its private acquisition and sale, has become a major industry. While more material than ever before, in formats created for special use, is available at a price, free public information supported by general taxation is attacked by the private sector as an unacceptable form of subsidy…An individual’s ability to know the actual circumstances of national and international existence has progressively diminished.

Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon level another, equally disturbing charge:

In an era of network news cutbacks and staff layoffs, many reporters are reluctant to pursue stories they know will upset management. “People are more careful now,” remarked a former NBC news producer, “because this whole notion of freedom of the press becomes a contradiction when the people who own the media are the same people who need to be reported on.”

Corporate ownership of the newsmedia, the subsumption of an ever-larger number of publishing companies and television networks into an ever-slower number of multinationals, and the increased privatization of truth by an information-rich, technocratic elite are not newly-risen issues. More recent is the notion that the public mind is being colonized by corporate phantasms — wraithlike images of power and desire that haunt our dreams. Consider the observations of Neal Gabler:

Everywhere the fabricated, the inauthentic and the theatrical have gradually driven out the natural, the genuine and the spontaneous until there is no distinction between real life and stagecraft. In fact, one could argue that the theatricalization of American life is the major cultural transformation of this century.

And Marshall Blonsky:

We can no longer do anything without wanting to see it immediately on video…There is never any longer an event or a person who acts for himself, in himself. The direction of events and of people is to be reproduced into image, to be doubled in the image of television. [T]oday the referent disappears. In circulation are images. Only images.

The territory demarcated by Gabler and Blonsky, lush with fictions yet strangely barren, has been mapped in detail by the philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his landmark 1975 essay, “The Production of Simulacra,” Baudrillard put forth the notion that we inhabit a “hyperreality,” a hall of media mirrors in which reality has been lost in an infinity of reflections. We “experience” events, first and foremost, as electronic reproductions of rumored phenomena many times removed, he maintains; originals, invariably compared to their digitally-enhanced representations, inevitably fall short. In the “desert of the real,” asserts Baudrillard, mirages outnumber oases and are more alluring to the thirsty eye. Moreover, he argues, signs that once pointed toward distant realities now refer only to themselves. Disneyland’s Main Street, U.S.A, which depicts the sort of idyllic, turn-of-the-century burg that exists only in Norman Rockwell paintings and MGM backlots, is a textbook example of self-referential simulation, a painstaking replica of something that
Reality isn’t what it used to be. In America, factory capitalism has been superseded by an information economy characterized by the reduction of labor to the manipulation, on computers, of symbols that stand in for the manufacturing process. The engines of industrial production have slowed, yielding to a phantasmagoric capitalism that produces intangible commodities — Hollywood blockbusters, television sit-coms, catchphrases, jingles, buzzwords, images, one-minute megatrends, financial transactions flickering through fiberoptic bundles. Our wars are Nintendo wars, fought with camera-equipped smart bombs that marry cinema and weaponry in a television that kills. Futurologists predict that the flagship technology of the coming century will be “virtual reality,” a computer-based system that immerses users wearing headgear wired for sight and sound in computer-animated worlds. In virtual reality, the television swallows the viewer, headfirst.

II. Culture Jamming

Meanwhile, the question remains: How to box with shadows? In other words, what shape does an engaged politics assume in an empire of signs?

The answer lies, perhaps, in the “semiological guerrilla warfare” imagined by Umberto Eco. “[T]he receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a different way...I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation,” he writes. “[O]ne medium can be employed to communicate a series of opinions on another medium...The universe of Technological Communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception.”

Eco assumes, a priori, the radical politics of visual literacy, an idea eloquently argued by Stuart Ewen, a critic of consumer culture. “We live at a time when the image has become the predominant mode of public address, eclipsing all other forms in the structuring of meaning,” as Ewen observes. “Yet little in our education prepares us to make sense of the rhetoric, historical development or social implications of the images within our lives.” In a society of heat, light and electronic commotion...an eerie otherworld of “illimitable vastness, brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things” — the desperate project of reconstructing meaning, or at least reclaiming that notion from marketing departments and P.R. firms, requires visually-literate ghostbusters.

Culture jammers answer to that name. “Jamming” is CB slang for the illegal practice of interrupting radio broadcasts or conversations between fellow hams with lip farts, obscenities, and other equally jejune hijinx. Culture jamming, by contrast, is directed against an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols.

The term “cultural jamming” was first used by the collage band Negativland to describe billboard alteration and other forms of media sabotage. On Jamcon ’84, a mock-serious bandmember observes, “As awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life grows, some resist...The skillfully reworked billboard...directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy. The studio for the cultural jammer is the world at large.”

Part artistic terrorists, part vernacular critics, culture jammers, like Eco’s “communications guerrillas,” 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. Jammers offer irrefutable evidence that the right has no copyright on war waged with incantations and simulations. And, like Ewen’s cultural cryptographers, they refuse the role of passive shoppers, renewing the notion of a public discourse.

Finally, and just as importantly, culture jammers are Groucho Marxists, ever mindful of the fun to be had in the joyful demolition of oppressive ideologies. As the inveterate prankster and former Dead Kennedy singer Jello Biafra once observed, “There’s a big difference between ‘simple crime’ like holding up a 7-11, and ‘creative crime’ as a form of expression...Creative crime is...uplifting to the soul...What better way to survive our anthill society than by abusing the very mass media that sedates the public?...A prank a day keeps the dogleleash away!”

Jamming is part of a historical continuum that includes Russian samizdat (underground publishing in defiance of official censorship); the anti-fascist photomontages of John Heartfield; Situationist détournement (defined by Greil Marcus, in Lipstick Traces, as “the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one’s own devise”); the underground journalism of ’60s radicals such as Paul Krassner, Jerry Rubin, and Abbie Hoffman; Yippie street theater such as the celebrated attempt to levitate the Pentagon; parody religions such as the Dallas-based Church of the Subgenius; workplace
Media hoaxing, the fine art of hoodwinking journalists into covering exhaustively the absurd, the distasteful, and the suspiciously coincidental. This is accomplished through various tactics, including:

- **Sniping and Subvertising**: The practice of releasing false information or disinformation to create a media frenzy. This can include everything from hoaxes to false stories designed to disrupt the normal flow of information. For example, the notorious "Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream" campaign, which featured a photo of Jodie Foster, with the caption: "Oscar Winner. Yale Graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke." Queer Nation launched this campaign in 1989. Its popular tagline, "All You Need is a Dollar and a Dream" became "All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream." The graphics collective Gran Fury, formerly part of ACT UP, has taken its sharp-tongued message even further: a superslick Benetton parody ran on buses in San Francisco and New York in 1989. Its headline blared: "Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do" over a row of kissing couples, all of them racially-mixed and two of them gay. "We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention," says group member Loring Mcalpin. "[If] anyone is angry enough and has a Xerox machine and has five or six friends who feel the same way, you'd be surprised how far you can go."

- **Adbusters**: A Vancouver, B.C.-based quarterly that critiques consumer culture, enlivens its pages with acid satires. "Absolut Nonsense," a cunningly-executed spoof featuring a suspiciously familiar-looking bottle, proclaimed: "Any suggestion that our advertising campaign has contributed to alcoholism, drunk driving or wife and child beating is absolute nonsense. No one pays any attention to advertising." Ewen, himself a covert jammer, excoriates conspicuous consumption in his "Billboards of the Future" — anonymously-mailed Xerox broadsides like his ad for "Chutzpah: cologne for women & men, one splash and you'll be demanding the equal distribution of wealth." Guerrilla Girls, a cabal of feminist artists that bills itself as "the conscience of the art world," is known for savagely funny, on-target posters, one of which depicted a nude odalisque in a gorilla mask, asking, "Do we have to get naked to get into the Met. Museum?" Los Angeles’s Robbie Conal covers urban walls with the information age equivalent of Dorian Gray’s portrait: grotesque renderings of Oliver North, Ed Meese, and other scandal-ridden politicos. "I’m interested in counter-advertising," he says, "using the streamlined sign language of advertising in a kind of reverse penetration." For gay activists, subvertising and sniping have proven formidable weapons. A March, 1991 Village Voice report from the frontlines of the "outing" wars made mention of "Absolutely Queer" posters, credited to a phantom organization called OUTPOST, appearing on Manhattan buildings. One, sparked by the controversy over the perceived homophobia in Silence of the Lambs, featured a photo of Jodie Foster, with the caption: "Oscar Winner. Yale Graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke." Queer Nation launched a "Truth in Advertising" poster campaign that sent up New York Lotto ads calculated to part the poor and their money; in them, the official tagline, "All You Need is a Dollar and a Dream" became "All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream." The graphics collective Gran Fury, formerly part of ACT UP, has taken its sharp-tongued message even further: a superslick Benetton parody ran on buses in San Francisco and New York in 1989. Its headline blared: "Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do" over a row of kissing couples, all of them racially-mixed and two of them gay. "We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention," says group member Loring Mcalpin. "[If] anyone is angry enough and has a Xerox machine and has five or six friends who feel the same way, you’d be surprised how far you can go."

- **Media Hoaxing**: The act of misleading journalists into covering stories that are designed to divert attention from more pressing issues. This can include anything from fake news stories to disinformation campaigns. For example, the notorious "Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream" campaign, which featured a photo of Jodie Foster, with the caption: "Oscar Winner. Yale Graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke." Queer Nation launched this campaign in 1989. Its popular tagline, "All You Need is a Dollar and a Dream" became "All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream." The graphics collective Gran Fury, formerly part of ACT UP, has taken its sharp-tongued message even further: a superslick Benetton parody ran on buses in San Francisco and New York in 1989. Its headline blared: "Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do" over a row of kissing couples, all of them racially-mixed and two of them gay. "We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention," says group member Loring Mcalpin. "[If] anyone is angry enough and has a Xerox machine and has five or six friends who feel the same way, you’d be surprised how far you can go."
Conceptual con artists like Joey Skaggs dramatize the dangers inherent in a press that seems to have forgotten the difference between the public good and the bottom line, between the responsibility to enlighten and the desire to entertain.

Skaggs has been flimflamming journalists since 1966, pointing up the self-replicating, almost viral nature of news stories in a wired world. The trick, he confides, "is to get someone from an out-of-state newspaper to run a story on something unseen, and then you Xerox that story and include it in a second mailing. Journalists see that it has appeared in print and think, therefore, that there's no need to do any further research. That's how a snowflake becomes a snowball and finally an avalanche, which is the scary part. There's a point at which it becomes very difficult to believe anything the media tells you."

In 1976, Skaggs created the Cathouse For Dogs, a canine bordello that offered a "savory selection" of doggie Delleshais, ranging from pedigree (Fifi, the French poodle) to mutt (Lady the Tramp). The ASPCA was outraged, the Soho News was incensed, and ABC devoted a segment to it which later received an Emmy nomination for best news broadcast of the year. In time, Skaggs reappeared as the leader of Walk Right!, a combat-booted Guardian Angels-meet-Emily Post outfit determined to improve sidewalk etiquette, and later as Joe Bones, head of a Fat Squad whose tough guy enforcers promised, for a fee, to prevent overweight clients from cheating on diets. As Dr. Joseph Gregor, Skaggs convinced UPI and New York's WNBC-TV that hormones extracted from mutant cockroaches could cure arthritis, acne, and nuclear radiation sickness.

After reeling in the media outlets who have taken his bait, Skaggs holds a conference at which he reveals his deception. "The hoax," he insists, "is just the hook. The second phase, in which I reveal the hoax, is the important part. As Joey Skaggs, 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."

Audio Agitprop

Audio agitprop, much of which utilizes digital samplers to deconstruct media culture and challenge copyright law, is a somewhat more innocuous manifestation. Likely suspects include Sucking Chest Wound, whose God Family Country ponders mobthink and media bias; The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, who take aim in "Television, the Drug of the Nation" at "happy talk" newscasts that embrace the values of MTV and Entertainment Tonight; Producers For Bob, whose part, chittering dance tracks provide an unlikely backdrop for monologues about "media ecology," a McLuhan-inspired strategy for survival in a toxic media environment; and Chris Burke, whose Oil War, with its cut-up press conferences, presidential speeches, and nightly newssites, is pirate C-Span for Noam Chomsky readers. Sucking Chest Wound's Wayne Morris speaks for all when he says, "I get really angry with the biased coverage that's passed off as objective journalism. By taking scraps of the news and blatantly manipulating them, we're having our revenge on manipulative media."

Billboard Banditry

Lastly, there is billboard banditry, the phenomenon that inspired Negativland's coinage, Australia's BUGA UP stages hit-and-run "demotions," or anti-promotions, scrawling graffiti on cigarette or liquor ads. The group's name is at once an acronym for "Billboard-Utilizing Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions" and a pun on "bugger up," Aussie slang for "screw up."

In like fashion, African-American activists have decided to resist cigarette and liquor ads targeting communities of color by any means necessary. Describing Reverend Calvin Butts and fellow Harlem residents attacking a Hennessey billboard with paint and rollers, Z magazine's Michael Kamber reports, "In less than a minute there's only a large white blotch where moments before the woman had smiled coyly down at the street." Chicago's Reverend Michael Pfleger is a comrade-in-arms; he and his Operation Clean defaced — some prefer the term "refaced" — approximately 1,000 cigarette and alcohol billboards in 1990 alone. "It started with the illegal drug problem," says Pfleger. "But you soon realize that the number-one killer isn't crack or heroin, but tobacco. And we realized that to stop tobacco and alcohol we [had] to go after the advertising problem."

San Francisco's Billboard Liberation Front, together with Truth in Advertising, a band of "midnight billboard editors" based in Santa Cruz, snap motorists out of their rush hour trances with deconstructed, reconstructed billboards. In the wake of the Valdez disaster, the BLF reinvented a radio promo — "Hits Happen. New X-100" — as "Shit Happens — New Exxon"; TIA turned "Tropical Blend. The Savage Tan" into "Typical Blend. Sex in Ads." Inspired by a newsflash that plans were underway to begin producing neutron bombs, a Seattle-based trio known as SSS reworked a Kent billboard proclaiming "Hollywood Bowled Over By Kent III Taste!" to read "Hollywood Bowled Over By Neutron Bomb!" replacing the cigarette pack with a portrait of then-President Ronald Reagan.

Artfux and the breakaway group Cicada Corps of Artists are New Jersey-based agitprop collectives who snipe and stage neo-Situationist happenings. On one occasion, Artfux...
members joined painter Ron English for a tutorial of sorts, in which English instructed the group in the fine art of billboard banditry. Painting and mounting posters conceptualized by English, Artlux accompanied the New York artist on a one-day, all-out attack on Manhattan. One common operation involved using telephone numbers to spell out the corporate equation for animal murder and ecological disaster: A hapless-looking cow plus a death’s-head等于 a McDonald’s polystyrene clamshell. “Food, foam and Fun!” the tagline taunted. In a similar vein, the group mocked “Smooth Joe,” the Camel cigarettes camel, turning his phallic nose into a flaccid penis and his sagging lips into bobbing testicles. One altered billboard adjoined, “Drink Coca-Cola — It Makes You Fart,” while another showed a seamed, careworn Uncle Sam opposite the legend, “Censorship is good because — — — -!"

“Corporations and the government have the money and the means to sell anything they want, good or bad,” noted Artlux member Orlando Cuevas in a Jersey Journal feature on the group. “We…[are] ringing the alarm for everyone else.”

III. Guerrilla Semiotics

Culture jammers often make use of what might be called “guerilla” semiotics — analytical techniques not unlike those employed by scholars to decipher the signs and symbols that constitute a culture’s secret language, what literary theorist Roland Barthes called “systems of signification.” These systems, notes Barthes in the introduction to Elements of Semiology, comprise nonverbal as well as verbal modes of communication, encompassing “images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these.”

It is no small irony — or tragedy — that semiotics, which seeks to make explicit the implicit meanings in the sign language of society, has become pop culture shorthand for an academic parlor trick useful in divining the hidden significance in Casablanca, Disneyland, or our never-ending obsession with Marilyn Monroe. In paranoid pop psych such as Wilson Bryan Key’s Subliminal Seduction, semiotics offers titillating decryptions of naughty advertising. “This preoccupation with subliminal advertising,” writes Ewen, “is part of the legendary life of post-World War II American capitalism: the word ‘SEX’ written on the surface of Ritz crackers, copulating bodies or death images concealed in ice cubes, and so forth.” Increasingly, advertising assumes this popular mythology: a recent print ad depicted a cocktail glass filled with icceubes, the words “Absolut vodka” faintly discernible on their craggly, shadowed surfaces. The tagline: “Absolut Subliminal.”

All of which makes semiotics seem trivial, effete, although it is an inherently political project; Barthes “set out…to examine the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and ‘given’ for the whole of society.” Marshall Blonsky has called semiotics “a defense against information sickness, the ‘too-muchness’ of the world,” fulfilling Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy that “just as we now try to control atom-bomb fallout, so will we one day try to control media fallout.” As used by culture jammers, it is an essential tool in the all-important undertaking of making sense of the world, its networks of power, the encoded messages that flicker ceaselessly along its communication channels.

This is not to say that all of the jammers mentioned in this essay knowingly derive their ideas from semiotics or are even familiar with it, only that their ad hoc approach to cultural analysis has much in common with the semiotician’s attempt to “read between the lines” of culture considered as a text. Most jammers have little interest in the deliria that result from long immersion in the academic vacuum, breathing pure theory. They intuitively refuse the rejection of engaged politics typical of postmodernists like Baudrillard, a disempowering stance that too often results in an overeagerness for ringside seats at the gotterdammerung. The L.A. Weekly’s disquieting observation that Baudrillard “loves to observe the liquidation of culture, to experience the delivery from depth” calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s pronouncement that mankind’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” Jammers, in contrast, are attempting to reclaim the public space ceded to the chimeras of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, to restore a sense of equilibrium to a society sickened by the vertiginous whirl of TV culture.

IV. Postscript From the Edge

The territory mapped by this essay ends at the edge of the electronic frontier, the “world space of multinational capital” (Fredric Jameson) where vast sums are bllipered from one computer to another through phone lines twined around the globe. Many of us already spend our workdays in an incunabular form of cyberpunk writer William Gibson’s “cyberspace,” defined in his novel Neuromancer as “a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators…A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.” The experience of computer scientist W. Daniel Hillis, once novel, is becoming increasingly familiar:

When I first met my wife, she was immersed in trading options. Her office was in the top of a skyscraper in Boston, and yet, in a very real sense, when she was at work she was in a world that could not be identified with any single physical location. Sitting at a computer screen, she lived in a world that consisted of offers and trades, a world in which she knew friends and enemies, safe and stormy weather. For a large portion of each day, that world was more
In the next century, growing numbers of Americans will work and play in artificial environments that only exist, in the truest sense, as bytes stored in computer memory. The explosion of computer-based interactive media seems destined to sweep away (at least in its familiar form) the decidedly non-interactive medium that has dominated the latter half of this century: television. Much of this media may one day be connected to a high-capacity, high-speed fiber optic network of “information superhighways” linking as many homes as are currently serviced by the telephone network. This network, predicts computer journalist John Markoff, “could do for the flow of information — words, music, movies, medical images, manufacturing blueprints and much more — what the transcontinental railroad did for the flow of goods a century ago and the interstate highway system did in this century.”

The culture jammer’s question, as always, is: Who will have access to this cornucopia of information, and on what terms? Will fiber-optic superhighways make stored knowledge universally available, in the tradition of the public library, or will they merely facilitate psychological carpet bombing designed to soften up consumer defenses? And what of the network news? Will it be superseded by local broadcasts, with their heartbreaking (always “heartwarming”) tales of rescued puppies and shocking (always “shocking”) stories of senseless mayhem, mortared together with airhead banter? Or will the Big Three give way to innumerable news channels, each a conduit for information about global, national and local events germane to a specific demographic? Will cyberpunk telejournalists equipped with Hi-8 video cameras, digital scanners, and PC-based editing facilities hack their way into legitimate broadcasts? Or will they, in a medium of almost infinite bandwidth and channels beyond count, simply be given their own airtime? In short, will the electronic frontier be wormholed with “temporary autonomous zones” — Hakim Bey’s term for pirate utopias, centrifuges in which social gravity is artificially suspended — or will it be subdivided and overdeveloped by what cultural critic Andrew Ross calls “the military-industrial-media complex?” Gibson, who believes that we are “moving toward a world where all of the consumers under a certain age will...identify more...with the products they consume than...with any sort of antiquated notion of nationality,” is not sanguine. In the video documentary Cyberpunk, he conjures a minatory vision of what will happen when virtual reality is married to a device that stimulates the brain directly. “It’s going to be very commercial,” he says. “We could wind up with something that felt like having a very, very expensive American television commercial injected directly into your cortex.”

“For Sale” signs already litter the unreal estate of cyberspace. A New York Times article titled “A Rush to Stake Claims on the Multimedia Frontier” prophesies “software and hardware that will connect consumers seamlessly to services...[allowing them] to shop from home,” while a Newsweek cover story on interactive media promises “new technology that will change the way you shop, play and learn” (the order, here, speaks volumes about American priorities). Video retailers are betting that the intersection of interactive media and home shopping will result in zillions of dollars’ worth of impulse buys: zirconium rings, nonstick frying pans, costumed dolls, spray-on toupees. What a New York Times author cutely calls Communicopia (“the convergence of virtually all communications technologies”) may end up looking like the Home Shopping Network on steroids.

But hope springs eternal, even in cyberspace. Jammers are heartened by the electronic frontier’s promise of a new media paradigm — interactive rather than passive, nomadic and atomized rather than resident and centralized, egalitarian rather than elitist. To date, this paradigm has assumed two forms: the virtual community and the desktop-published or on-line ‘zine. (“Zine,” the preferred term among underground publishers, has subtly political connotations: grassroots organization, a shoestring budget, an anti-aesthetic of exuberant sloppiness, a lively give-and-take between transmitters and receivers, and, more often than not, a mocking, oppositional stance vis a vis mainstream media.) Virtual communities are comprised of computer users connected by modem to the bulletin board systems (BBS’s) springing up all over the Internet, the worldwide meta-network that connects international computer networks. Funded not by advertisers but by paid subscribers, the BBS is a first, faltering step toward the jammer’s dream of a truly democratic medium. Although virtual communities fall short of utopia — women and people of color are grossly underrepresented, and those who cannot afford the price of admission or who are alienated from technology because of their cultural status are denied access — they nonetheless represent a profound improvement on the homogenous, hegemonic medium of television.

On a BBS, any subscriber may initiate a discussion topic, no matter how arcane, in which other subscribers may participate. If the bulletin board in question is plugged into the Internet, their comments will be read and responded to by computer users scattered across the Internet. On-line forums retire, at long last, the Sunday morning punditocracy, the expert elite, the celebrity anchorclones of network news, even the electronic town hall, with its carefully-screened audience and over-rehearsed politicians. As one resident of a San Francisco-based bulletin board called the WELL noted,

This medium gives us the possibility (illusory as it may be) that we can build a world unmediated by authorities and experts. The roles of reader, writer, and critic are so quickly interchangeable that they become increasingly irrelevant in a community of co-creation.
The current saturation of relatively inexpensive multimedia communication tools holds tremendous potential for destroying the monopoly of ideas we have lived with for so long... A personal computer can be configured to act as a publishing house, a broadcast-quality TV studio, a professional recording studio, or the node in an international computer bulletin board system.

Increasingly, ‘zines are being published on-line, to be bounced around the world via the Internet. “I can see a future in which any person can have a node on the net,” says Mitch Kapor, president of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group concerned with free speech, privacy, and other constitutional issues in cyberspace. “Any person can be a publisher. It’s better than the media we now have.”

Devil’s advocates might well argue that Festering Brain Sore, a fanzine for mass murderer aficionados, or the WELL topic devoted to “arm pit sex” are hardly going to crash the corporate media system. Hakim Bey writes, “The story of computer networks, BBS’s and various other experiments in electro-democracy has so far been one of hobbyism for the most part. Many anarchists and libertarians have deep faith in the PC as a weapon of liberation and self-liberation — but no real gains to show, no palpable liberty.”

Then again, involvement in virtual communities and the ‘zine scene is rapidly expanding beyond mere hobbyism: as this is written, approximately 10 million people frequent BBS’s, and an estimated 10,000 ‘zines are being published (70 alone are given over to left politics of a more or less radical nature). These burgeoning subcultures are driven not by the desire for commodities but by the dream of community — precisely the sort of community now sought in the nationally-shared experience of watching game shows, sitcoms, sportscasts, talk shows, and, less and less, the evening news. It is this yearning for meaning and cohesion that lies at the heart of the jammer’s attempts to reassemble the fragments of our world into something more profound than the luxury cars, sexy technology, and overdesigned bodies that flit across our screens. Hackers who expose governmental wrongdoing, textual slashers, wheatpaste snipers, billboard bandits, media hoaxers, subverters, and unannounced political protestors who disrupt live newscasts remind us that numberless stories go untold in the daily papers and the evening news, that what is not reported speaks louder than what is. The jammer insists on choice: not the dizzying proliferation of consumer options, in which a polyphony of brand names conceals the essential monophony of the advertiser’s song, but a true plurality, in which the univocal world view promulgated by corporate media yields to a multivocal, polyvalent one.

The electronic frontier is an ever-expanding corner of Eco’s “universe of Technological Communication...patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas” bent on restoring “a critical dimension to passive reception.” These guerrilla semioticians are in pursuit of new myths stitched together from the fabric of their own lives, a patchwork of experiences and aspirations that has little to do with the depressive stories of an apolitical intelligentsia or the repressive fictions of corporate media’s Magic Kingdom. “The images that bombard and oppose us must be reorganized,” insist Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen. “If our critique of commodity culture points to better alternatives, let us explore — in our own billboards of the future — what they might be.” Even now, hackers, slashers, and snipers — culture jammers all — are rising to that challenge.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Bill Mullen, a professor at Youngstown University and friend of many years whose close reading and tough-minded critique of this essay improved it immeasurably, and to Margot Mifflin, whose slashing red pen saved me, at the last minute, from my worst excesses.

* * *

Points of Departure

Craig Baldwin, Sonic Outlaws (c/o Artists Television Access, 415-824-3890, or by mail from 992 Valencia Street, San Francisco, CA 94110, VHS, 87 minutes, $30, make check payable to Craig Baldwin). Baldwin, an independent filmmaker, is an appropriationist auteur par excellence, equal parts Eisenstein and dumpster-diver. His documentary Sonic Outlaws uses the legal and media brouhaha stirred up by Negativland’s illegal sampling (and howlingly funny parody) of a U-2 song as a springboard for deeper thoughts on copyright in the age of digital reproduction and private ownership of the public airwaves. Audio Dadaists and unrepentant plagiarists Emergency Broadcast Network, the Tape Beatles, and John Oswald are also featured.

“Billboard Liberation Front Manual,” Processed World #25, Summer/Fall 1990, pps. 22-6. This and other back issues may be ordered from 41 Sutter Street, #1829, San Francisco, CA 94110.
This essay originally appeared in 1993, as Pamphlet #25 in the Open Magazine.


Gareth Brwyn, “Jamming the Media,” in Black Hole, ed. by Carolyn Hughes, (Baltimore: Institute for Publications Design, Yale Gordon College of Liberal Arts, University of Baltimore, 1992). This essay, as well as the companion pieces in this underground omnibus, explore the interstice between cyberpunk and culture jamming. Brwyn’s later book, Jamming the Media: A Citizen’s Guide to Reclaiming the Tools of Communication (Chronicle Books), is an exhaustively researched, high-spirited romp through the DIY underground, stuffed to bursting with detailed how-to information on desktop publishing, media pranking, pirate radio, and “multimedia for the masses.” The refrain to the Ramones song, “We want the airwaves,” reverberates through these pages. E-mail Gareth at gareth at well dot com.


Critical Art Ensemble, The Electronic Disturbance and Electronic Civil Disobedience (both available from Autonomedia, POB 568 Williamsburgh Station, Brooklyn, NY 11211-0568, phone/fax 718-963-2603). Critical Art Ensemble is a collective of media hackers and postmodern theorists. In my back cover blurb to Electronic Civil Disobedience, I write, “An Anarchist’s Cookbook for an age of decentralized, dematerialized power, ECD shares cultural DNA with William Burroughs’s ‘Electronic Revolution,’ Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone, and other classics of ‘nomadic resistance.’”

Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching, Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood, eds. (Tucson: Ned Ludd Books, 1987). Chapter 8, “Propaganda,” includes sections on “Billboard Revision” and “Correcting Forest Service Signs.” The jury is still out on Earth First!, which often crosses the line from righteous ecopolitical rage to neo-Luddite knee-jerking (hence the name of the publishing company). That said, the authors’ folksy pragmatism, anarcho-libertarian humor, and iron-spined resolve in the face of bulldozers and chainsaws is truly inspiring.


Loompanics Unlimited, a distributor of fringe publications, is an invaluable source for titles on hacking; psychological warfare; Zeke Teflon’s Complete Manual of Pirate Radio; Muzzled Media: How to Get the News You’ve Been Missing! by Gerry L. Dexter; and more. Loompanics’ 1988 catalogue includes Erwin R. Strauss’s “Pirate Broadcasting,” a historical and philosophical inquiry into the titular phenomenon. Write P.O. Box 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368 for a catalogue.


Test Card F: Television, Mythinformation, and Social Control (AK Press, POB 40682, San Francisco, CA 94104-0682). A spleen-filled rant on “the media machine” as engine of social control, lashed together with punk and neo-Situationist collages. The back cover declares, “Using savage image/text cut-and-paste, Test Card F explodes all previous media theories and riots through the Global Village, looting the ideological supermarket of all its products.” A Molotov cocktail for the mind.

Endnotes

1. This essay originally appeared in 1993, as Pamphlet #25 in the Open Magazine


4. Ibid., p. 9.


2. God Family Country is available from DOVentertainment, 2 Bloor Street West, Suite 100-159, Toronto, Canada M4W 3E2, as is Bob’s Media Ecology, by Producers For Bob: Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury, by the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, was released by 4th & Bdwy/Island, and should be stocked by most major record retailers; the cassette-only Oil War, by Chris Burke, can be purchased directly from the artist ($5.95 check or money order to Chris Burke, 111 3rd Avenue, #12-E, New York, NY 10003).


“Culture jamming” is a strategy often utilized by the anti-globalization movement in the creation and reappropriation of memes, or memorable and persistent ideas. Traditional culture jamming strategies have included a variety of actions, ranging from billboard liberation, wherein artists reclaim billboards as public space, to media activism, wherein activists attempt to garner news coverage through some form of direct action in order to have their message heard. Dery, M., (2004, Oct 10), Culture jamming: hacking, slashing and sniping in the empire of signs. Available at: http://www.markdery.com/archives/2004/10/cultureJamming_l.html. Downes, S., (1999, Oct. 4), Hacking memes. First Monday, 4.10.