

## Unjamming the Insurrectionary Imagination: Rescuing Détournement from the Liberal Complacencies of Culture Jamming

Richard Gilman-Opalsky<sup>1</sup>

This essay challenges genealogies that trace culture jamming to its coinage in the 1980s and 1990s, and argues for expanding beyond its narrow conceptualization as a tactic of media savvy activists. As media activism or pranking, culture jamming risks becoming a liberal fantasy that gives good news to capitalism: “Is this all the Left has left?” We must rescue the insurrectionary logic of culture jamming from its liberal complacencies. The insurrectionary logic of culture jamming was articulated in 1956 in Guy Debord’s theory of détournement. Détournement is political plagiarism, distortion, hijacking, or otherwise rerouting something against itself. For Debord, détournement was a revolutionary project “undertaken within the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy those conditions.” He insisted that “[a]n avant-garde cultural movement, even one with revolutionary sympathies, cannot accomplish this.” Sporadic “subvertising” cannot jam a culture of constant accumulation. Thus, I provide a détournement of culture jamming itself, retrieving the old insurrectionary idea for the current context of capitalist crises. I critique prominent notions of culture jamming and argue for unjamming the insurrectionary imagination through collective acts of revolt, i.e., the Zapatistas, Arab Spring, and occupations movement. This essay explores sustained modes of collective culture jamming as the radical and transformative counterpart to a highly individualized constellation of subvertising. . [Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2013 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS:** Culture Jamming, Insurrection, Revolution, Radical Theory, Postmodernism, Capitalism, Situationist, Guy Debord, Zapatistas.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Richard Gilman-Opalsky**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Philosophy in the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Springfield. His Ph.D. is in political philosophy from The New School for Social Research. Dr. Gilman-Opalsky’s teaching and research interests include Continental and contemporary political theory, socialist philosophy, Marxism, capitalism, autonomist and anarchist politics, postmodern theory, and post-structuralism. He is author of *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lexington Books, 2008), as well as numerous articles. His latest book is *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (Autonomedia, 2011). Address correspondence to: Richard Gilman-Opalsky, Department of Political Science, Public Affairs Center, Room # 362, University of Illinois, Springfield, One University Plaza, PAC 362, Springfield, Illinois 62703-5407; e-mail: [rgilm3@uis.edu](mailto:rgilm3@uis.edu).

## 1. FORMATIVE IMPASSES AND IMPULSES: POSTMODERN THEORY

“Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent.”<sup>1</sup>

I begin with three premises: First, the cultural and political impasses that make culture jamming make sense as a viable form of activism were first diagnosed by French and German philosophers in the decades after World War II. The cultural and political analyses of critical and postmodern theory set the stage for culture jamming. Second, the *necessity* of a politics of culture jamming was revealed by postmodern theorists as the only practicable modality of intervention given the impasses of the era. Thus, culture jamming is best defined, explained, and justified within the context of postmodern theory, indeed, as a postmodern politics. Third, the ideal articulation of the logic of culture jamming, theorized by Guy Debord in the 1950s, is the version we most urgently need to recover. This last premise contains a normative claim. So, I am not mainly interested in correcting the historical account of culture jamming by way of telling an origins story about where it really comes from. Rather, I set out to rescue the insurrectionary logic of culture jamming from the liberal complacencies that obscure it today. This requires bearing out the premises above.

Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers came to some dreadful epiphanies in the decades after World War II. The 20<sup>th</sup> century almost totally convinced generations of revolutionaries of the poverty and failure of their own grand narratives about the radical transformation of the world. The anti-Stalinist and anti-statist Left could not find any good reason to continue to place their faith in political parties and classical conceptions of revolution, nor could they find any guarantee on the horizon of an emergent revolutionary movement to resuscitate their optimism. The negativity of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s landmark study, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), would be recast in so many ways, but not easily overcome. The Nazis and Nuremberg revealed the dangers of manipulable masses, bolstering the political significance of the insights of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich. Diminishing numbers of radicals kept faith that a real challenge to capitalism was emerging anywhere in the atmosphere of the Cold War. A pervasive sense of the poverty and failure of revolution characterized a new

impasse facing disaffected radicals everywhere. It is within this context of defeatism and disillusionment that the formative logic of culture jamming was best articulated. The grand idea of a world-historical revolution appeared to be a corpse from the past. But wasn't there still a space for meaningful revolt, and could such a space ever be totally foreclosed? It is within this context that the possibility for negating the negativity of the Left resided. Kindling these embers for a new radical optimism was necessary to the task of rehabilitating a disillusioned Left. This essay critically considers culture jamming as a means for such a task.

Clearly then, I shall challenge popular genealogies that trace culture jamming to its coinage in the 1980s and 1990s. I argue for expanding beyond its narrow conceptualization as a tactic of media savvy activists. As media activism or pranking, culture jamming risks becoming a liberal fantasy that gives good news to capitalism: "Is this all the Left has left?" An insurrectionary logic of culture jamming was articulated in 1956 in Guy Debord's theory of *détournement*. *Détournement* means political plagiarism, distortion, hijacking, or otherwise rerouting something against itself. For Debord, *détournement* was part of a revolutionary project "undertaken within the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy those conditions," and he insisted that "[a]n avant-garde cultural movement, even one with revolutionary sympathies, cannot accomplish this. Neither can a revolutionary party on the traditional model, even if it accords a large place to criticism of culture (understanding by that term the entirety of artistic and conceptual means through which a society explains itself to itself and shows itself goals of life)." Debord was well aware, in the 1950s and 60s, that something like sporadic "subvertising" could never jam a culture of constant accumulation. Subvertising at its best is like a skip on a record that the needle passes over with a minor interruption. Instead, I argue for culture jamming through collective action and consider the "culture jams" of the Zapatistas, Arab Spring, and numerous occupations movements. This essay explores sustained modes of culture jamming as the radical counterpart to a highly individualized constellation of subvertising.

But to begin, and before we arrive at questions of goals and efficacy, we should explore culture jamming as a sensible response to the postmodern epiphany about the dilapidated state of revolutionary politics. Postmodern theory grew out of the disaffection of frustrated radicals whose utopian aspirations were squelched in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, giving us Jean-François Lyotard's "war on totality," Jean Baudrillard's apocalyptic crisis theories, and the micropolitics of Gilles Deleuze and

Félix Guattari. These theorists and others within the postmodern milieu reflect profound estrangement from the grand narratives of revolutionary promise. And what culture jamming does is to help disillusioned radicals imagine new opportunities for creative contestation, new modes of involvement and intervention. It is precisely on these grounds that I assess culture jamming as a postmodern politics.

To make my case, and more importantly, to grasp why this assessment is critical to questions of goals and efficacy, it is necessary to explain the postmodern condition of thought and action. In what follows, I provide brief portraits of some of the key postmodern thinkers to substantiate the claim that culture jamming is a postmodern politics. This portraiture provides more than historical context, for it shows that culture jamming comes out of a well developed philosophy of praxis, that its causes and aims have extensive theoretical grounding.

### **(a.) Foucault Rethinks Power**

Politics, which has centrally to do with power relations, takes on a new meaning if we change our understanding of what power is and how it functions in the world. Michel Foucault analyzed what he called a biopolitical form of power (or biopower), which led to imagining unconventional forms of revolt. Much of this theorization was accomplished in his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which explores the structures of biopower that developed in Western societies since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with a special focus on prisons, schools, and other disciplinary institutions. Foucault's elaboration of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon illustrated the phenomena of bodies controlled by brains, a technology of social control that functioned without armed guards, guns, dungeons, or public forms of violent punishment. "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost."<sup>3</sup> It is critical to observe that Foucault understood the transition from the physical (i.e., physical violence) to the visual (i.e., surveillance and the gaze), claiming that the visual was a more direct and cost-effective (both politically and economically) means to control the physical. The visual apparatus of surveillance and the gaze carries the threat of exposure, judgment, causes an anxiety about being seen, and thus accesses our brains, which regulate

our bodies. Foucault understood that the visual terrain would necessarily and increasingly become a site for politics and contestation. Culture jammers accept exactly the same thing and act on it. Culture jamming attempts to intervene in the visual landscape that shapes how we think because culture jammers understand that everything we see sends us messages, that the visual landscape is not a neutral terrain.

Further, Foucault discusses how the dominant concept of “power” has been disempowering. Power, in political philosophy, is typically associated with a negative, or a prohibitive idea, instead of understanding power in the positive terms of what it enables or produces. For Foucault, this confusion is tied to the fact that power is historically understood as the domain of the state, or as the domain of the “Sovereign” in the history of political philosophy. But Foucault argues that there are other locations of power, other “power relations” than those associated with the political state or the sovereign authority. These other power relations are important, Foucault insists. If we “decouple” our understanding of power from the state, we come up with a different understanding of politics and revolution. For example, if revolution means the transference of power, then Foucault’s sense of power means that there can be revolutions that do not involve the state. He says of his view: “This implies that there are many different kinds of revolution, roughly speaking as many kinds as there are possible subversive recodifications of power relations, and further that one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis for the functioning of the State.”<sup>4</sup> The good news, then, is that maybe revolution remains possible, although it must take on a different form, what could be called a postmodern form of revolution.

Foucault argues that truth is power and that politics has much to do with knowledge. “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” and only some among us have “the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.”<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this situation that culture jamming responds to. Culture jammers try to send counter messages into the public to intervene in the existing regime of truth, to challenge the general politics of truth, to challenge what counts as true with *other* truths or *real* truths that are otherwise obscured by mainstream discourses of power.

We could say that good culture jammers have a Foucauldian understanding of power. Culture jammers understand that while they do not have the power to establish a new regime of truth, that while they do not have the status of those who get to say what is true, they can

nonetheless speak, and that challenging the current regime of truth is a necessary mode of political action today. Indeed, Foucault did retain optimism about the possibilities for everyday people to renegotiate power relations throughout society in order to transform understandings and usher in new regimes of truth. In this way, Foucault's theory perfectly expresses the sentiments of the culture jammer.

### **(b.) Derrida's Playful Subversions**

Jacques Derrida developed his influential philosophy of "deconstruction" in the 1960s. For Derrida, deconstruction was a method used to perform a kind of culture jamming within the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida's work involved deconstructionist readings of philosophical texts. He read both classical and lesser known texts in such a way as to show that they could have meanings completely other than the meanings they are typically taken to have. Why do this, and who cares? Consider what is counted as knowledge in philosophy, for example, to have knowledge of Plato or Aristotle or Foucault or anyone else. Knowledge means that you are able to read those authors' books and to demonstrate an accurate understanding of them. Derrida's deconstructions revealed that no text has a single meaning that stands apart from the reader. The reader of a text always and invariably does something to the text and to its meaning. The same texts are read in different ways, so in the act of reading them, their meaning is produced one way or another. Derrida has said "reading is transformational."<sup>6</sup> The US Constitution has been and can be read for or against conservative or liberal positions, as can be seen in Justice White's opinion on sodomy, in the Citizens United case, or in the more recent decision on Barack Obama's health care reform act. Deconstruction seeks to take advantage of this openness, to expose the instability of, and ultimately to subvert, dominant ways of thinking about certain texts, including texts in philosophy, law, or even the sacred texts of religious traditions. In this regard, deconstruction and culture jamming also share an aspiration. Derrida insists: "Why engage in a work of deconstruction, rather than leave things the way they are, etc.? Nothing here, without a 'show of force' somewhere. Deconstruction... is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*."<sup>7</sup> Changing the codified meanings of things is an intervention; it is a form of praxis. Culture jammers change the meanings of their hijacked source materials; that is often their primary form of intervention.

For all of the criticisms that have accused Derrida's work of some kind of playful charlatanism, his work has always been two things: subversive

and anti-authoritarian. Derrida is subversive in the sense that his work attacks and destabilizes what is easily or too easily accepted as the settled facts of knowledge, of texts and their meanings, and of those who claim to have expertise over them. His work is anti-authoritarian because it aims to show, precisely through its acts of subversion, that inasmuch as everyone reads or interprets the texts and symbols and images around them, everyone has a certain kind of power, and authoritative meanings are always subject to deconstruction. He has himself said that “from the first texts I published, I have attempted to systematize a deconstructive critique precisely against the authority of meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Derrida’s project was never merely to be destructive (destruction is not the same as deconstruction), but rather, to change things in an active way. Derrida sees deconstruction as a political act, and if he is right, there is good reason to see culture jamming as political action too.

### **(c.) Lyotard’s Fragmentary Rule-Breaking**

Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophy exhibits many of the major themes common to postmodern thought. As well, Lyotard was one of the most iconic figures of the disaffected ultra-Left. He studied Marx intensely. His hopes were invested in the resolution of the Algerian political situation, which he believed was ripe for revolution. In 1954 Lyotard joined the revolutionary organization *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Socialism or Barbarism). The project of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was to provide theoretical resources for a new socialist revolution, and to critique other existing socialist aberrations (particularly Stalinism and the French communist party). Lyotard was a militant radical for roughly fifteen years of his early intellectual life. In the mid-to-late 1960s, however, Lyotard lost his faith in Marxism, although he remained a radical thinker and participated in the May 1968 uprisings in France (discussed more below).

He famously defined the postmodern as the end of the era of metanarratives. Metanarratives are totalizing stories about history and the goals of the human race that ground and legitimize knowledge and cultural practices (hence his loss of faith in Marxism). The two metanarratives that Lyotard saw as most important in defining modernity were (1) history as progressing toward social enlightenment and emancipation, and (2) knowledge as progressing toward totality. For Lyotard, modernity is defined as the age of metanarratives, and postmodernity as the age in which metanarratives have become bankrupt.

Lyotard developed a theory of postmodernity that clarified its meaning: Postmodernity is an era of fragmentation and pluralism.

In the famous appendix to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the author offers an essay that could possibly be a manifesto for the politics of culture jamming. This essay, perhaps more than any other, supports my contention that culture jamming is the politics of postmodernity. "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work."<sup>9</sup> Lyotard offered this characterization of postmodern works in order to defend books like Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, which was met with some hostility because it broke rules and defied categorization.<sup>10</sup> It cannot be the case, according to Lyotard, that those who have something to say will continue to speak in the old manners of speaking. Just as philosophers and artists must find new ways of speaking so too must activists. Lyotard understood this well, and we should recall his contention cited in the epigraph to this chapter, "that not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent."<sup>11</sup>

When Lyotard writes that no one is powerless, and that we can all be senders, addressees, or referents of messages, a contemporary reader might think first and foremost about the blogosphere and cyberspace as realizations of his insights. However, it is worth noting that Lyotard was not terribly optimistic about the computerized society, which he links in *The Postmodern Condition* to the privatization of knowledge and information. He understood well that the computerized storage of data, or information, would not necessarily lead to the liberation of knowledge, and I suspect Lyotard would remain skeptical of the internet as the location for postmodern work. Of course, culture jammers like The Yes Men have used the internet to some interesting effect, but culture jamming broadly conceived embodies and reflects Lyotard's idea of a postmodern politics very well.

#### **(d.) Baudrillard's Infectious Thinking**

There is no political hope in the works of Jean Baudrillard. His optimism is hard to find, but presents itself in fleeting moments where he imagines the poisoning of dominant systems by way of viruses, contamination, and collapse. Politics, if any is possible, would have to



function like an infection, a sickness that spreads throughout existing systems—economic, political, and ideological—revealing their contradictions and instabilities. If Baudrillard would have commented on culture jamming, it is predictable what he would express: He would have no optimism for culture jamming, which would undoubtedly strike him as too resolutely political. One does not try to change things any more, for only catastrophes can change things, and our own highly technological capitalist societies in the West are themselves testing the limits of their own continuation. “Other cultures, other metaphysics, are doubtless not badly undermined by this development because they did not have the ambition, expectation or phantasm of possessing the world, of analysing it in order to control it. But since we claimed to control the totality of postulates, it is clearly *our* system that is heading for catastrophe.”<sup>12</sup> For Baudrillard, then, culture jamming would be a symptom of a possible reversal, showing us that there are exceptions to the totality of postulates. Looking forward to the catastrophes of existing systems is the only politics one can find in Baudrillard, but his view is not entirely emptied of possibility for social and political change.

For all his criticisms of Marx, Baudrillard is ultimately a crisis theorist who retains much of Marx’s sense that possibility is linked to systems crisis. The economic crisis of 2008-2012, which has revealed the inability of governments around the world to safeguard their own populations from the catastrophes of capitalism, has given rise to rebellion in Greece, Spain, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Baudrillard would surely see the forerunning crises in politics and economics as the cause or occasion for such uprisings.

But for Baudrillard, politics cannot be attempted outside the catastrophe that makes it possible. However, thinking is inevitable and can always be done. Our agency is therefore realized in thought, so thinking matters; it can impact, infect, and help realize its own incompatibility with the world. As Baudrillard puts it, “Thought must play a catastrophic role, must be itself an element of catastrophe, of provocation, in a world that wants absolutely to cleanse everything, to exterminate death and negativity.”<sup>13</sup> The world presents to us an image of its own immortality, the immortality, or permanence, of capitalism, its cleanliness, as opposed to the image of those other “dirty,” undeveloped parts of the world, and a pure positivity. But Baudrillard holds that thought can expose other dimensions of existing reality, poisoning, as it were, the sterilized and ideologically packaged image of the present world. In this way, Baudrillard connects two pathways essential to my project here. He is a cynic, even exploring his own nihilism in some

works.<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard is a man of *ressentiment*, to be sure, but at the same time sees the importance of a provocation, which has become necessary to any radicalism today. Radicals must become provocateurs whose thought infects and poisons the landscape of capitalism and its culture. Culture jamming is always about, in one way or another, just such a poisoning.

### **(e.) Camatte and Post-Class Struggle**

Jacques Camatte is a French philosopher who has been associated more with the Italian Left than with the intellectual or political movements from France I've been reviewing. Camatte was a Marxist and a member of the International Communist Party, a primarily Italian organization under the influence of Amadeo Bordiga. Camatte's work develops a total critique of all political organizations, all party politics, and the major "communist projects" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After collecting and publishing a great number of historical documents from leftist/communist currents, and analyzing recently discovered writings of Marx, in the early 1970's Camatte claimed to have abandoned the Marxist perspective altogether.

Camatte argues that "revolution" is impossible. After all, who could make the revolution? The working class is now nothing more than another aspect of capital, fully integrated into capitalist production and consumption, unable to supersede its own situation, and not even interested in doing so. Increasingly, Camatte's work offered nothing programmatic for politics.

In his essay, "The Wandering of Humanity," Camatte elaborates his critique of Marx and capitalism.<sup>15</sup> He maintains that Marx's communism was already possible in Marx's lifetime, since at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it never happened because the desperate "wandering of humanity" developed instead of the revolutionary proletariat that Marx predicted. People can hardly identify their real interests anymore. Hence, humanity is miserable and has no apparent capacity for properly diagnosing its miserable condition. Camatte's negativity resonated with many disaffected radicals of the 1970s, and it cleared a place for thinking of new tactics. In 1973 Camatte argued that there would need to be

a simultaneous refusal of all obsolete forms of struggle. Like the May '68 movement but more so, the lycée movement emphasized very clearly that staying within the old forms of struggle inevitably

leads to certain defeat. It is now becoming generally accepted that demonstrations, marches, spectacle and shows don't lead anywhere... The methods of struggle therefore must be put through analysis because they present an obstacle to the creation of new modes of action. And for this to be effective, there has to be a refusal of the old terrain of struggle – both in the workplace and in the streets.<sup>16</sup>

We can accept no delusion that Camatte would be excited about culture jamming. Working out of the traditions of Marxism, Camatte was hopelessly interested in the prospects for large-scale emergences of new revolutionary antagonisms, but now nothing could be planned or controlled by a political party, and class struggle had proven obsolete. He wrote of the uselessness of all “old forms of struggle” and that demonstrations and marches no longer can accomplish anything. He calls for “the creation of new modes of action” and “a refusal of the old terrain of struggle.” These themes run through all of Camatte’s work, as well as through all culture jamming. Culture jamming is one answer to Camatte’s call for the need to transcend the old terrain of struggle through the discovery of new forms of action.

#### **(f.) Deleuze and Guattari’s Rhizomatic Model**

Gilles Deleuze famously said, “Underneath all reason lies delirium, and drift.”<sup>17</sup> What lies beneath reason is all the complicated turmoil of human psychology. Rather than seeing philosophy as the pursuit of truth or universal principles, Deleuze defines philosophy as a painful attempt to create useful concepts out of an almost-incomprehensible mess. In Deleuze’s view, philosophy more closely resembles creative artistic production than any scientific description of a preexisting world.

Félix Guattari developed an analysis of human subjectivity—of what makes us who we are, what changes us, and how we relate to one another—called “schizoanalysis.” Schizoanalysis refers to a process that transforms Freud’s psychoanalysis into a more political, experimental, and collective approach. Schizoanalysis was introduced widely to readers in the 1972 book by Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. But schizoanalysis was developed over a much longer period, dating back to Guattari’s first experiments in psychotherapy. Most simply, schizoanalysis rests on three premises: (1) the psychological condition of a single person is better analyzed and understood within social contexts as a wider social condition (rather than as the condition of an

isolated individual within his or her childhood and family development). (2) Schizophrenia is conventionally defined as “a disintegration of the process of thinking, of contact with reality, and of emotional responsiveness.”<sup>18</sup> But that seemed a fitting characterization for the general condition of everyday life in contemporary capitalist societies. Thus, making a “schizoanalysis” of society should help us to better analyze society and its afflictions. (3) The generalized psychological condition of society cannot eliminate or completely bury human instincts for desire, love, sexual gratification, but can only repress these instincts. Therefore, in some instances, these desires and instincts will break through the surface. All analysis and politics should work toward cultivating such outbursts or breakthroughs.

Deleuze and Guattari’s work was always in some way about opening up new horizons for political and creative resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism. When Deleuze and Guattari thought about politics, they used the concept of the rhizome. A rhizome is a subterranean plant that grows like a root or a stem, which grows horizontally, and sends up shoots through the ground at various unpredictable points. The rhizome provides a model for a non-hierarchical (or horizontal) politics that Deleuze and Guattari recommended. Autonomously organized “micropolitical” acts of revolt comprise the discrete sections of an underground growth that aims to break out into the above-ground world of society, culture, and politics. “Let’s sum up the principal characteristics of a rhizome: unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point with any other point, and none of its features necessarily refers to features of the same kind.”<sup>19</sup> The rhizomatic theory of politics developed by Deleuze and Guattari lends itself to autonomous forms of organization and action. Culture jamming is an excellent example of micropolitical rhizomatic action. In fact, culture jamming necessarily occurs in rhizomatic form, and at its best, shares the aspirations of Deleuze and Guattari.

The above portraiture of the development of the formative philosophy of culture jamming in postmodern theory is not exhaustive. It is only a series of fragments, as it must be. It nonetheless provides a particular framing for how to answer the question of why culture jamming has become the avant-garde modality of activism today. But where does this framing leave us? We are left with a picture painted in many colors by the postmodern theorists, of a general loss of faith in all conventional forms of political action. We are left with an understanding of the frustrated but searching hopes of radical and revolutionary politics. We see the political imagination in pursuit of new forms of action. The

postmodern turn inscribes three words on the banners of a persistent radicalism: Creativity, Subversion, Autonomy!

## 2. DÉTOURNEMENT: THE INSURRECTIONARY LOGIC OF CULTURE JAMMING

“One must not introduce reformist illusions about the spectacle, as if it could be eventually improved from within, ameliorated by its own specialists under the supposed control of a better-informed public opinion. To do so would be tantamount to giving revolutionaries’ approval to a tendency, or an appearance of a tendency, in a game that we absolutely must not play; a game that we must reject in its entirety in the name of the fundamental requirements of the revolutionary project, which can in no case produce an aesthetics because it is already entirely beyond the domain of aesthetics.”<sup>20</sup>

There can be no question that, for Guy Debord, the author of the theory of *détournement*, the theory and practice of culture jamming was developed in the service of new revolutionary projects. Debord was a major figure in the development of the postmodern trajectory in France, although he too-often remains relegated to the footnotes of the story. In many ways, his work stood on the precipice of the postmodern turn and informed the work of most of the thinkers reviewed in Part 1 as well as in the whole postmodern milieu.<sup>21</sup> Debord’s work came early in the trajectory, expressed many of the insights that would come to define postmodern theory, and yet retained certain revolutionary commitments.

In the passage cited above, Debord issued a clear warning against reformist activity disguised by the veneer of insurgency. He understood well that revolution has its spectacle (a mythological form), that there will be political action that wants to look like revolution—that may actually look like revolution—but that, when explored, is seeking nothing more than a bit of liberal legislation permissible within the limits of capitalism and its culture. For example, if the San Andreas Accords on Indigenous Rights was the sole aim of the Zapatista uprising, the upheaval in Chiapas would have only been a spectacle of a revolution. Likewise, if the tumult of the civil rights movement in the US is embodied and reflected in the capstone achievements of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, then that tumult had no real revolutionary character, even though it was often mixed with revolutionary rhetoric. What is the character of real revolution today? The question, for Debord and many others, is an old one in revolutionary

traditions: to be able to discern the difference between revolution and reform. In a broad stroke, and without betraying the good insights of postmodern theory, we could say that revolution is concerned with some kind of structural transformation from what exists into what ought to be. We shall return to this later.

Debord's contention that "[a]rt criticism is a second-degree spectacle" should be taken as a warning to culture jammers today.<sup>22</sup> Is the successfully detoured billboard a second-degree spectacle? Is it the one that outsmarts the advertising savvy of the original with a wittier advertising savvy? Is the successfully detoured billboard the one that survives long enough to generate a buzz among local passersby? Or, perhaps the successfully detoured billboard is the one that very few people see because it is quickly deemed impermissible by the advertisers or their guardians and is erased from the landscape at once. What are the aims of culture jamming? These questions are unavoidable when looking at culture jamming through the lens of Debord.

One of the most important essays Debord wrote about the politics of culture jamming, or *détournement*, was his 1963 "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art." In that essay he wrote about linking people and experiences together "to help unify such groups and the coherent basis of their project," and so that their shared commitment would inhere in "the critique of the existing world."<sup>23</sup> We must keep in mind that Debord worked to build a Situationist International, which attempted, however unsuccessfully, to achieve just such a coherent linking up of avant-garde activists within the radical milieu of his era. Debord argued that although the new forms of action in politics and art would have to be autonomously organized in a fragmentary way, often sporadically, and by disparate individuals taking no orders from any central command, that such new forms of action should aspire to concretely coordinate with one another to avoid marginalization, cooptation, or total irrelevance.

There are indications that culture jamming today has lost this critical sensibility. Culture jamming is often accessed and associated with its breakthrough stars, a privileged coterie of notable personalities, The Yes Men, Reverend Billy, Banksy, Andrew Boyd, the artist-activists Packard Jennings and Steve Lambert, maybe a dozen other people. Such a smattering of celebrity activists cannot comprise a movement that is antagonistic to its opponents. If the "new activism" is led by a small cast of celebrity activists, including maybe 100 to 1,000 assistant-workers behind the scenes, culture jamming becomes a voyeuristic politics, where very few do while most continue to watch. This preserves too much of

the current notion of “being political” in the age of 24-hour cable news, where to “be political” is essentially the same as to know what is happening in the world of politics. To be political means to know what Barack Obama or Mitt Romney have said in their speeches, to be up on official scandals and controversies. Debord sent warnings into the future that the new radical movements must not be any small coterie of hip marketing geniuses, some of whom (like Andrew Boyd) are hired for the job. Any politics that replaces collective action with a sparse campaign of media pranks coordinated by a band of enlightened professionals is a second-degree spectacle at best.

As a point of contrast, consider Debord’s favorite examples. He wrote about students in Caracas who made an armed attack on an exhibition of French art, stealing paintings, and offering to return them only in exchange for the release of political prisoners; he discusses pirate radio broadcasts that made “official” warnings about the real dangers of nuclear war that the real officials would never broadcast; he commends an English group of activists, the “Spies for Peace,” who discovered and divulged the secret location of a bomb shelter exclusively built for government officials. All of this is *détournement*, is culture jamming. These acts are aimed to captivate attention and to force a critique of a culture in which bourgeois paintings are considered equivalent bargaining chips for prisoners, the radio is always a *de facto* authority, and real preparations are made to protect presidents from bombs while the whole population is locked out. Can we call this “critical art?” According to Debord, we must. He insists that “a critical art can be carried out within the existing means of cultural expression, from cinema to painting—even though we ultimately wish to destroy this entire artistic framework. This critical art is what the situationists have summed up in their theory of *détournement*. Such an art must not only be critical in its content, it must also be self-critical in its form.”<sup>24</sup>

If we follow Debord here, culture jamming can have no fixed form. Culture jamming cannot be defined as the *détournement* of billboards, as subvertising, media pranks, or any other “type of act,” although all of these things may very well be examples of culture jamming. One is reminded of Plato’s insistence that we do not mistake “the good” for any particular “good act.” The good cannot be defined by any one example of a good thing, and good culture jamming cannot be defined by any one example of a good culture jam.

In the 1956 “User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman state that there are “two main categories of detourned elements... These are *minor détournements* and *deceptive détournements*.”

Minor détournement is the détournement of an element which has no importance in itself and which thus draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed. For example, a press clipping, a neutral phrase, a commonplace photograph. Deceptive détournement, also termed premonitory-proposition détournement, is in contrast the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context.<sup>25</sup> In the first case, then, détournement is about utilizing other peoples' resources for one's own purposes, taking what is available, regardless of its intended context, and making it say something else as you wish. In the second case, détournement addresses through some kind of critical derailment the intended context, making it turn on its self, or contradict its claims. Detoured billboards fall into the latter category, as does the work of Reverend Billy, who manipulates the context of the religious sermon, exploiting the preacher's world, but using it beyond and against the scope of that world in order to comment on consumerism and capitalist culture. The first category, minor détournement, is in some ways the broader of the two, for it even includes graffiti, which is a way of speaking on city walls without having to pay advertising fees. Corporations are involved in what should be considered legally contracted graffiti. Indeed, illegal graffiti shows the openness and accessibility of détournement, for it involves all of the meaningful vandalisms of uprisings and gives voice to words that speak to the whole city, to all who see them, often written by those who have no conventional artistic prowess, little money, no contracts, and nothing to sell, but something to say nonetheless.

To explore more concretely the purposes of détournement in connection with Debord and his generation, we should consult René Viénet's small treasure of a book, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*. This book was originally published in 1968 in French, long before being translated into English publication in 1992. Viénet's book includes photographs of detoured walls, comics, and paintings, many of which were done by students who were reading the works of Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. These examples, beautifully arranged and explained by Viénet, show us why there can be no narrow sense of culture jamming. In May 1968, the walls detoured into communiqués rarely involved image-play, but were nonetheless full of creative minor détournement. On the side of a church: "How can one think freely in the shadow of a chapel?"<sup>26</sup> On many walls: "Beneath the paving stones, the beach!"<sup>27</sup> The comics of the period were very creative, but the makers of the detoured comics did not, and



presumably could not, draw them, so they took to changing the content of the text bubbles instead. A part of the culture jamming of May 1968 could be seen in the city on the day after the fiercest street protests. In Viénet's book, photographs of street scenes show burnt cars stacked by the sidewalk, shopping streets converted into rubble, police cars and vans on fire. The participants in these uprisings did not take control of the city's institutions, but rather, attacked its features, transforming its appearance. Why? What reason lies behind this rebellion, or what delirium, what desires, what disaffections, what grievances?

We can be sure of one thing from the start: The messages of May 1968 were not written by those who wanted reform, but by those who wanted something more radical, some kind (or many kinds) of structural transformation. This is why the uprising appears irrational from the point of view of power, for it is speaking a different language. Debord and Wolman insisted that "*Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.*"<sup>28</sup> It is worth considering that riots are typically characterized as irrational or senseless, as in the case of the recent "riots" around London in the fall of 2011. But what would be the rational demands of such disaffected people in the UK? The demand to "be rational" is much like the demand to "be practical," which essentially means playing by the rules of the game. Everyone knows that rational people write letters to editors and abide by all the laws. But it is this rational-practicality that the most radical elements always reject, and often for good reason, which is to say that there must be *another reason or rationality*, one that is excluded by the ideological narrowness of those who defend the existing conditions. Culture jamming is, at its best, about wrenching open that narrowness so that we can see other "rationalities" than those integrated into the dominant narrative. It is therefore not a coincidence that Debord had an enduring interest in Hegel and dialectics, for the fact that rationality turns into its opposite and vice versa is critical to his theory of the spectacle.

Debord and Wolman insist that "détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle... It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a *literary communism*."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, détournement can never be the private property of graphic designers, professional philosophers, expert musicians, or other specialists. If détournement is "a real means of proletarian artistic education" and a real step toward "literary communism," this means that its purpose is to give every member of any

exploited, alienated community new ways of speaking, of discovering what they can do, of finding new forms of struggling against their own lamentable life conditions. Yet, in the same essay, Debord and Wolman say: “It is obviously in the realm of the cinema that *détournement* can attain its greatest effectiveness and, for those concerned with this aspect, its greatest beauty.”<sup>30</sup> This seemingly contradictory (i.e., does the proletariat have the cinema?) sentiment clearly reflects Debord’s own biases, as he made many filmic *détournements*, including a detoured adaptation of his most influential book *The Society of the Spectacle*. Viénet also made feature-film-length *détournements*, and his best movie, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* is an excellent example of detoured cinema. But perhaps this assertion is not as contradictory as it seems. If ever there was proletarian filmmaking, it would be through *détournement*. Viénet’s movie is a detoured martial arts film, overdubbed with new dialogue in French. This approach takes much work and creativity, but not necessarily much money, and even less so today when *détournement* is a common methodology on YouTube and elsewhere on the Internet, where everyday people are increasingly involved in making movies.

Perhaps the most important line in Debord and Wolman’s text is the one that concludes it. “In itself, the theory of *détournement* scarcely interests us.”<sup>31</sup> And this is where I want to take the reader of the present essay. *Détournement* is a particular, possible resource, which recommends what Debord and Wolman call the tactic of “extremist innovation” that intervenes in the spheres of civil disobedience and direct action.<sup>32</sup> Debord understood the opportunistic nature of *détournement*. Its sole function was what Debord and Wolman saw as a transformational potentiality, a way to let revolutionary desires speak. Culture jamming, which incorporates the logic of *détournement*, must therefore (a) be broadly enough conceived to include the burnt, stacked cars and graffiti in the streets of riots and rebellions and (b) must understand itself as a minor composition within the broader conduction of a revolutionary politics. When media theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi gives his lectures in bank lobbies instead of in his classrooms at University of Brera, this is culture jamming. When activists in the occupy movement in Northern Italy cemented shut the entrance to the UniCredit Banca building, that was culture jamming too.

In the foundational text of the Situationist International, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency” (1957), Debord wrote:

Our concern is precisely the use of certain means of action, along with the discovery of new ones that may more easily be recognized in the sphere of culture and manners but that will be implemented with a view to interaction with global revolutionary change.<sup>33</sup>

So, all of this was clear from the start. *Détournement* was to be counted among the tools of a new activism, which functioned primarily in the “sphere of culture.” *Détournement* could be carried out autonomously by individuals, but what matters most is that it is done “with a view to interaction” as part of a broader international politics committed to “global revolutionary change.” I am not convinced that any of this old-fashioned language about revolution and collective action has been carried through to the present interest in culture jamming. Possibly, the old ideas of revolution and collective action have been purposely left behind because they have proven to be outmoded relics of the past and they have been variously deemed inappropriate for postmodern politics. But that would be a traceable development. My contention is that revolution and collective action have been eclipsed by a “not-fully-conscious” liberal appropriation of the radical intentions of *détournement*. I say “not-fully-conscious” because I do not mean that liberals had any deliberate designs to render culture jamming a cultural curiosity for academics interested in the aesthetic appeal of media pranks. By “not-fully-conscious” I mean that culture jamming has become less radical and more liberal as a result of the rigor mortis in the corpse of the radicalism of previous generations. To be blunt, how can culture jamming be opposed to capitalism and its culture in an era when the permanence of capitalism and its culture is too often taken for granted?

Debord insisted that the Situationist International

must support, alongside the workers’ parties or extremist tendencies existing within these parties, the necessity of considering a consistent ideological action for fighting, on the level of the passions, the influence of the propaganda methods of late capitalism: to concretely contrast, at every opportunity, other desirable ways of life with the reflections of the capitalist way of life; to destroy, by all hyperpolitical means, the bourgeois idea of happiness... We must introduce everywhere a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture; coordinate all the enquiries that are happening at this moment without a general perspective; orchestrate, through criticism and propaganda, the most progressive

artists and intellectuals of all countries to make contact with us with a view to joint action.<sup>34</sup>

What I want to emphasize here is that Debord was resolutely interested in a passionate praxis linked to the initiative of “fighting the propaganda of late capitalism.” Capitalism was still identified as the problem. Nonetheless, in a rather postmodern way—with much uncertainty about the future, a refutation of classical Marxism, and much in common with Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Camatte, and Deleuze and Guattari—Debord demanded “joint action” with the most extreme elements of left-wing organs, internationalism, global orchestration, and collective action. This should compel us to ask what a postmodern politics could be, what culture jamming could look like, and what, if any, are the foregone conclusions of capitalism. In a sense, the economic crisis of 2008-2012 has already forced us to ask these very questions.

Another situationist thinker, Raoul Vaneigem—once a close comrade of Guy Debord—made some distinct contributions to thinking about what a postmodern politics could be. Like Debord, Vaneigem warned against the centralization of leadership in a cadre of leaders, while advocating a kind of insurrectionary poetry. “I have already said that in my view no insurrection is ever fragmented in its initial impulses, that it only becomes so when the poetry of agitators and ringleaders gives way to authoritarian leadership.”<sup>35</sup> Vaneigem consistently encouraged poetic forms of expressing the insurrectionary desires of everyday people. He insisted that every person has “an irreducible core of creativity.”<sup>36</sup> And Vaneigem helped Debord articulate the approach of *détournement*. Mainly, Vaneigem adds the importance of poetry to the discussion of creative revolutionary activism. For Vaneigem, *détournement* is all about “reversal of perspective.” “The reversal of perspective entails a kind of anti-conditioning. Not a new form of conditioning, but a new game and its tactics; the game of subversion (*détournement*).”<sup>37</sup> And for Vaneigem, this subversion must be fun, daring, and should make us feel good doing it.

Vaneigem’s definition of poetry should be intimately linked to the work of culture jammers. Poetry, for Vaneigem, is a form of expression that breaks rules, so upheavals are poetic because they speak to us in unconventional ways, using forms of communication that centralize human creativity and even spontaneity. Vaneigem insists that “poetry rarely involves poems these days. Most works of art are betrayals of poetry. How could it be otherwise, when poetry and power are irreconcilable?”<sup>38</sup> Poetry is, for Vaneigem, an irrepressible force.

“Everywhere repressed, this poetry springs up everywhere... It plays muse to rioters, informs revolt and animates all great revolutionary carnivals for a while, until the bureaucrats consign it to the prison of hagiography.”<sup>39</sup> Maybe we should think of culture jamming as a kind of poetry.

The importance of the style of expression was of course not lost on Debord either. In his most influential book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes of détournement as an “insurrectional style.”<sup>40</sup> What Vaneigem called the poetic form, or Debord called the insurrectional style, was central to the situationist praxis of détournement. And, as the title of the present essay reveals, it is precisely the insurrectionary context and content of détournement that I seek to recover. Therefore, I must finally say what I mean by it, and what I mean by the term “insurrectionary imagination?”

When I speak of insurrection, much like Debord, I do not mean to invoke the idea of an armed insurrection of some militant faction of society in a grand stand-off with its own state. Instead, I want to recover the word’s 15<sup>th</sup> century meaning, which embodies the idea of “a rising up.” The rising up of insurrection starts from *within* a system or place; it involves going against from within, and not from outside. Theorists like Derrida engaged in what Debord would call an “insurrectionary style,” going against from within a text. Insurrection may contain elements of riot and rebellion, but it is not synonymous with either of these. Insurrection delivers a message, even if that message is deemed irrational by opponents. Thus, riots may be more or less insurrectionary, depending on what they have to say about the existing state of affairs. Rebellion can be an insurrectionary form too, but not if it is essentially reformist in terms of its content. Rebellion typically lies in between reform and revolution in the following way: Rebellion is a mode of action that emerges from the realization of the failure of conventional measures. Thus, one becomes a rebel only after realizing the impasses of reform. But, it is critical to grasp that insurrection is closely related to revolution because it is a revolutionary effort, attempt, expression, a moment of revolt. Whereas, riots or rebellions may not have any revolutionary content, for they can occur in response to contested election results, court decisions, or electrical blackouts. This is not to diminish the insurrectionary potentialities of riot and rebellion, but rather, to emphasize the revolutionary character of insurrection.

Today, the revolutionary side of insurrection does not mean seizing the apparatuses of power, for revolution cannot hold that meaning in the postmodern era. Postmodern revolution refers to structural

transformations from what is into some sense of what ought to be, and insurrection consists in the substantive efforts that try to realize such transformations. Insurrection happens even when it fails to make revolution. So, why should we speak of insurrection instead of revolution, which is just like speaking of the processes of a project, and not of the goals of the overarching project itself? If we find a potter sitting at the wheel with her hands molding spinning wet clay, is it not reasonable to ask what she is aiming to make, and would it not confuse our expectations if she told us that she didn't know yet what the clay ought to become? But such a potter (and such potters do exist) is a good analogy here, because the era of grandiose projects is over. This is exactly what we learned from postmodern theory, from the experience of the ultra-Left after WWII, from philosophers like Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. Yet, the difficulty and even undesirability of some single unitary vision for an overarching project to remake the world does not preclude the possibility of insurrection, which in its own development may suggest new horizons for politics and culture. Thus, insurrection is the more hopeful term today, but it needs the help of our imagination. This is the way I want to explain the title of the present essay, by making the case that culture jamming, in its greatest aspirations, needs to be revitalized by the insurrectionary imagination of culture jammers, and that culture jamming, in its greatest aspirations, can contribute to revitalizing the insurrectionary imagination of our postmodern societies.

This is not impossible. Viénet showed how the French insurrection of May 1968 enlivened the imaginations of radical students in London, the latter of whom sent an address to French workers and students saying, "Comrades, you have reanimated the traditions of 1871 and 1917".<sup>41</sup> In June of 1968, the student strikers at Columbia University in New York City wrote: "For more than two weeks twelve million French workers and students have led a mass general strike against the same conditions which confront us in America... Their fight is our fight."<sup>42</sup> Viénet himself pointed out that by the end of May 1968 "occupations of university buildings had taken place in Germany, Stockholm, Brussels, and at the Hornsey Art College in London. Barricades had gone up in Rome on May 31<sup>st</sup>. In June the students of Tokyo...occupied their faculties and defended them against the police."<sup>43</sup> Viénet goes on to highlight occupations, demonstrations, and civil disobedience, all enlivened by the French situation, in Switzerland, including riots in Zurich, Buenos Aires, Dakar, Madrid, Peru, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Turkey, and the Congo.<sup>44</sup> It cannot simply be said that 1968 was a different era and that none of this can happen today. Fifty years after

Viénet's catalog of insurrection, students at The New School for Social Research (and elsewhere around the world) occupied university buildings in solidarity with the Greek revolt of 2008. Even more recently, we saw the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement, which have had a similarly 'contagious spreading' as did the examples from 1968. There are other notable examples in between 1968 and 2008, including the 1994 Zapatista uprising (discussed more in Part 3), which had very particular international resonances in the movements against capitalist globalization in Seattle in 1999, DC in 2000, and Genoa in 2001. Uprisings such as these intervene critically and publicly on the terrain of the cultural-valuational norms of society, showing to their own societies, as well as to others elsewhere, that many things that are taken for granted can be thrown into question. This is culture jamming.

### 3. A DÉTOURNEMENT OF THE WIKIPEDIA ENTRY ON "CULTURE JAMMING"

Debord wrote, "Ideas improve. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas."<sup>45</sup> Following this, I shall now synthesize a number of my foregoing arguments in a détournement of the Wikipedia entry on "Culture Jamming."

It doesn't matter when the term "culture jamming" was officially coined, unless the history that is written about it obscures its meaning and aspirations. We have seen that the logic of culture jamming, détournement, was worked out as a new means of insurrection in the mid-1950s. As it turns out, tracing culture jamming to the renaming of détournement in 1984 *does* obscure the historical context I have unpacked, and most importantly, the revolutionary aspirations of that history. Culture jamming is often said to refer to a tactic used by many anti-consumerist social movements to disrupt or subvert mainstream cultural institutions, including corporate advertising. But what is almost always missing from the discourse on consumerism and corporate advertising is one key word and idea: capitalism. Any definition of culture jamming that obscures the antagonistic relationship between détournement and capitalism is a mistake. It is not as guardians of a sacred origins story that we should go back well before Mark Dery's definition of culture jamming, or Negativland's "original" approach, all the way to the situationists. Such work is worth doing only to dig out lost moorings, meanings, purposes, and impetuses, which once lost and

buried, can convert a radical praxis into an intellectual or artistic curiosity.

And culture jamming, especially in the form of subvertising, is a liberal fantasy. All its failures notwithstanding, the first month of Occupy Wall Street had far greater “cultural impact” than any detoured billboard. (We must not accept the narrative that *AdBusters* magazine started Occupy Wall Street any more than we should accept *Time* magazine’s assignment of the sole authorship of the slogan “We are the 99%” to anthropologist David Graeber.)<sup>46</sup> UC students in Berkeley and Santa Cruz and students at The New School in New York City kicked off the recent wave of occupations in 2008 and 2009, and protest slogans are truly authored by those who publish them in the streets. One of the concerns of culture jamming as liberal fantasy has to do with its integration into the liberal trend of treating conscientious consumption as political action. How is the moral sensibility of the Left expressed today, but to buy local and organic, from health food stores and CSAs, farmer’s markets, to use compact fluorescent light bulbs, to recycle, and to drink “fair trade” coffee from Starbucks? Where is the critique of capitalism? The perpetual-growth logic of capital is the organizational logic of most—if not all—societies today. Capitalism and its culture deal very well with their own ironies, even happily pointing out their own tolerance for every criticism that leaves their logic alone. Is culture jamming perfectly compatible with capitalism? “Crowd sourcing” now invites people to make détournements of corporate logos, as GAP, for example, recently invited from its customers. GAP even encouraged people to express their disgust at the old logo, to re-figure the logo in any blasphemous way they would like, so that the company could generate news stories about itself and avoid hiring designers to fashion the new branding.<sup>47</sup> To define subvertising as the activity of “re-figuring logos, fashion statements, and product images as a means to challenge the idea of what’s cool” could also just be defined as “advertising!” Indeed, professional advertisers today are expert subvertisers.

Culture jammers do not transform the capitalist mass media, for they engage in parodist and parasitic détournement. In this way, culture jamming is not as independent an act as it might seem, for it depends upon the dominant form that is detoured. Again, I refer to Viénet’s detoured movie, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* His détournement required substantial work, a good script retrofitted to the filmic sequences, and actors to perform and record the overdubbed dialogue. Yet, Viénet’s film would not have existed without the 1972 martial arts original, *The Crush*, by Tu Guangqi. Although this may not be true in the



particular case of Viénet's film, detourned works are generally far less widespread than the original source material. Culture jamming is certainly a way to infiltrate the public sphere. It is a special joy to see a detourned billboard of the Billboard Liberation Front, and it does empower even the least privileged among us to post uninvited messages, to interject, to interfere, and to intervene. The problem is that every liberated billboard is surrounded and vastly outnumbered by the unjammed billboards that are only slightly less noteworthy on the visual landscape. It is a mismatch of scale, and from a political point of view, we must not romanticize the heroism of David vs. Goliath. Indeed, such a situation is as catastrophic as it is noble. This is largely why I have insisted on treating culture jamming broadly enough to include a wide range of interventions on the cultural terrain, including all of those moments of collective action reviewed in passing above, and thus to recommend culture jamming everywhere in new and surprising ways, but always and only as one possible means of acting out a postmodern politics.

Mark Dery, often associated with the introduction of the idea of culture jamming to the world, makes some unfortunate betrayals of the good idea he is credited for. Dery agrees with Carrie McLaren's criticism of *AdBusters* magazine, which rightly challenges the magazine's founder Kalle Lasn for "branding his magazine as the house organ of the Culture Jamming Movement®, peddling anti-consumerist swag through the magazine's website..."<sup>48</sup> Yet, Dery's unhappiness with *AdBusters* is unlike McLaren's inasmuch as Dery takes special offense at Lasn for not crediting him for the idea that the magazine is founded on. Dery complains: "I introduced editor/publisher Kalle Lasn to the term 'culture jamming'" and "Lasn took the concept and ran with it," while neglecting, "in too many interviews, the role my work played in bringing the concept to his attention."<sup>49</sup> Why should Dery care in the slightest about anyone running with the concept of culture jamming, or about not being credited for the idea? Many of the situationists used pseudonyms or published their writings without attribution to their authors, and they were not, for all their faults, terribly worried about keeping *détournement* as the private property of their movement. The concept of culture jamming did not come into the world in 1990 through Dery's pen and *The New York Times*. But what is all this about? By no means am I suggesting that Kalle Lasn and *AdBusters* win the dispute, and I have criticized that magazine elsewhere for different reasons.<sup>50</sup> The point is that we must depart from the proprietary interests of post-Cold War culture jammers, understanding that the social, political, economic, and cultural impetuses

for culture jamming preceded all of the celebrities of the post-Cold War wave, and if culture jamming is worth defending it must flow in countless directions beyond anyone's grasp.

Any culture jammer who thinks they can effectively disrupt the unconscious thought processes of consumers who might experience an epiphany after seeing detoured advertising, needs a better understanding of human psychology and ideology. Culture jammers cannot reasonably expect that the memes of their actions will evoke behavioral change and political action. Ideology is resistant to critique, resilient and malleable enough to survive strong refutations. Ideology does not shatter like a mask when confronted with logical contradictions, statistical data, and other information, because ideology is central to peoples' political self-understandings. Fox News fans will not have their worldview shattered by Rachel Maddow any more than Maddow's fans would abandon their worldview in the face of the exposés of Sean Hannity. And unfortunately, the affective appeal of speaking to people on the sonic/visual terrain that culture jammers prefer does not promise anything either. Viénet's movie appeals to situationists and their students, and probably to activists interested in radical theory, but it is not hard to see that it would confuse a general audience that does not get all the Trotsky and Foucault references (and there are many). Ideology, which thinkers like Wilhelm Reich, Karl Mannheim, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Guy Debord, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek diagnose well, is not one subvertisement (or one hundred subvertisements) away from being shattered.

Perhaps the worst possible fate for the good idea of *détournement* is culture jamming as a tool of "social consumer movements." What is a "social consumer movement?" This essentially refers to socially conscious shopping, a "movement" of consumers not only armed with dollars, but also with a liberal conscience. This so-called movement in fact generates a new specialized market based on treating righteous consumption as political action, and has proven to be a boon for capitalism, providing it with more than new market demand, but even with the endorsement of former critics. The business world has become expert at creating two models of every commodity, a bad version (or "classic" or "traditional") and a green version for socially conscious consumers. Social consumerism means you can live a totally privatized life of individuated consumption that nonetheless reassures you of your good virtue and good conscience. You may even feel, after a particularly green shopping spree, that you have just been participating in political action.

*AdBusters'* own "true cost" campaign falls happily into this trap. The campaign aims to get people to see the "true cost" of the products they buy, adding to the sales costs of various commodities the human and environmental costs required to make them. The best part of this campaign is that aspires to shake up a narrowly conceived academic economics, which leaves out human and environmental costs because it only sees cost in terms of money. The "true cost" campaign should be commended for publishing a powerful, savvy critique of the sanitized mythology of capitalism. But any assumption that neoliberal and neoclassical economists will adopt and repeat a critique of their own ideological narrowness in light of the "true cost" campaign is a tall order of delusion. And the claim that *AdBusters* can be accused of such delusion is well argued in Max Haiven's excellent article, "Privatized Resistance: AdBusters and the Culture of Neoliberalism."<sup>51</sup> Haiven criticizes *AdBusters'* "plans to create and sell the Black Spot, a Portuguese-made canvas sneaker with a two-fold agenda: to 'kick [Nike CEO] Phil Knight's ass,' and to 'do no less than reinvent capitalism.'"<sup>52</sup> So the iconic organ of the culture jammer press is going to compete with and beat Nike at making and selling sneakers and also reinvent capitalism? That the Black Spot could kick Nike's ass is clearly, at the very gentlest, a ludicrous feat of wishful thinking, but the fact that *AdBusters* wants to reinvent capitalism substantiates the claim that the magazine and its editors are integrated into the pseudo-politics of socially conscious shopping. Haiven also rightly questions the efficacy of the "social consumer" demands raised by "Buy Nothing Day" and "TV Turnoff Week" which he attributes to the magazine's "iconic "brand" of cultural resistance."<sup>53</sup> When culture jamming becomes a tool for bringing about a more conscientious consumer culture that runs for only 364 instead of 365 days a year, it becomes a caricatured cooptation of the situationist idea of *détournement*, and worse, inadvertently acquiesces to the most defeatist realizations of our postmodern era.

Nonetheless, with all these criticisms piled high, I am advocating culture jamming everywhere. This advocacy is not a contradiction. Culture jamming appeals to that irreducible creative core Vaneigem wrote about, and provides everyday people with a way to act without having to wait patiently for mass movements to emerge. Culture jamming shows us what can be done in between major transformations, what can be done almost anywhere, by anyone. Culture jamming has an allure which speaks to its credit. It attracts activists who are drawn to the risks of civil disobedience, who are not necessarily transfixed on outcomes, but interested in the joyful, witty, and even funny side of

political engagement. This is important. After all, what are the prospects for creating a world we desire if all the old ways of trying to make such a world are completely undesirable? Culture jamming utilizes an “insurrectionary style” and can escape vilification by way of wit and aesthetic appeal. In our postmodern era, we need processes that are open, autonomous, fun, funny, and that can be carried out anywhere any time; culture jamming is one modality for exploring and enacting these processes.

But I am calling for a recalibration. Effective forms of jamming should not be measured by the successful transmission of their messages. The most effective forms of jamming are those that show people (the jammers as well as those who view the culture jam) that they can speak a discourse of defiance, of rebellion, of rejection, of radical criticism. Forget about forcing viewers out of their comfort zone. That is a pipe dream. Consumers do not need culture jammers to make them aware of the negative body image perpetuated by big name apparel brands. Everyone in a body already knows this. Rather, culture jamming can be about the sporadic revitalization of new forms of civil disobedience, which can be woven into the fabric of other insurrectionary movements.

#### **4. REINVENTING REVOLUTION, NOT CAPITALISM**

Creative collective action, radical critique, ongoing social and political movements that discover new means of communication and new ways of connecting with people through humor and wit and by getting out the truth *can* effectively jam up the cultural-valuational norms of capitalism. *We must culture jam.* But this cannot be limited to fugitive consumptive patterns or other liberal fantasies. A good culture jam should show up in unusual ways and places such that we do not immediately recognize it as culture jamming at all. A liberated billboard, a day off from shopping, a week without television, not only leave the existing culture exactly as it was, but even affirm the normality of the culture they claim to oppose by accommodating the slogan from May 1968, “retour a la normale,” return to normal. Such culture jams accept that they are fleeting aberrations and presuppose a return to the very culture they oppose, and thus, they reify the permanence of capitalism.

But uprisings, all kinds of social and political upheaval, rebellions and sometimes even riots, typically do better to raise enduring questions about the dominant culture, deep questions that don’t go away so easily. For example, the Mexican Zapatistas forced much of Mexico (and much of the world) to consider the “indigenous problem” in many countries

throughout the 1990s. The Zapatista rebellion jammed the culture, and even contained many experimental and aesthetic dimensions that culture jammers revere. In closing, I shall briefly discuss this example, and make mention of more recent examples of culture jamming by other means. It is not my intention to provide a broad overview of the Zapatista uprising, for there are better sources for that, and I have myself dedicated numerous chapters to an in-depth analysis of the Zapatistas in my book, *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory*.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1980s, the international media paid no attention to the problems of Mexico's Mayan population,<sup>55</sup> and the details of the struggles of indigenous Mexico were not widely known in Mexican or international public spheres. Because of the dearth of publicity, the aspirations of indigenous politics went largely unrealized for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until January 1, 1994, the day of the Zapatista uprising, as well as the inauguration day of NAFTA, which the Zapatistas famously vilified as "the death certificate for the ethnic people of Mexico."<sup>56</sup> After the Zapatista uprising, all kinds of media publics were made aware of the Zapatistas, although often with the heavy bias of the Mexican government that sought to characterize them as terrorists. Nonetheless, one strength of such an uprising is the fact that it is unignorable, just as it was unignorable more recently in the streets of Seattle in 1999, in Greece in 2008, in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria from 2010 through 2012, and in the 2011 riots in the UK, just for example. Effective culture jams do not *need* the media, they do not ask it for favors, but if the jams are good they will probably command its attention on some level. The media cannot define a culture jam, although the media may be part of a culture jam. In the case of the Zapatista uprising, its meaning *exceeded* the media, escaped it while commanding its attention at the same time. The Zapatista uprising was not understood through the media, but rather, had to be understood more fully, more slowly, and more widely elsewhere, with the help of multifarious theoretical and practical resources. The meaning of the Zapatistas is still being explored today. The same could be said—and will be said for many years—about the Arab Spring.

From Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos extended an invitation to the people of the United States, to those who had learned of their movement and wondered how they, living in the country whose government heralded NAFTA, could respond constructively to the uprising: "We need people in the United States to create counter-propaganda to that of the Mexican federal government, and get out the truth, against the lie of Salinas."<sup>57</sup> "Getting out the truth" was a major part of the Zapatista

strategy. This is one of the reasons why the Mexican government could not effectively define the Zapatistas through the media as terrorists or as a conventional revolutionary movement, because instead of behaving like terrorists or conventional revolutionaries, they spent significant time reading poetry aloud and sharing imaginative stories that delivered their arguments with humor and a popular appeal. The fact is, most of what the world received from the Zapatistas, most of the movement's output, were explanations in text and images—explanations of who they are, what they want, and why they are doing what they are doing. The Zapatistas used words and images as weapons to make a guerilla seizure of the public sphere.

Harry Cleaver wrote of the Zapatistas, “This has been a war of words, images, imagination, and organization... Vital to this continuing struggle has been the pro-Zapatista use of computer communications.”<sup>58</sup> Discussion in topical common spaces was rarely had with the Zapatistas directly (aside from brief and infrequent *encuentro* meetings), but rather, with and about their texts and images: “El Sup had a rifle, yes, but he hardly used it. His bullets took the form of faxes and e-mails, cluster bombs in the shape of *comunicués*, and nonstop e-mail *midrashim* through the Internet. He wrote in a torrent, producing hundreds of texts, disproving Hannah Arendt's claim that ‘under conditions of tyranny it is far easier to act than to think.’ In less than twelve months, during sleepless sessions on the word processor in the midst of fighting a war, El Sup generated enough text for a 300-page volume.”<sup>59</sup>

In August of 1996, in La Realidad, Mexico, at the first *encuentro*, Subcomandante Marcos said: “Who can say in what precise locale, and at what exact hour and date this Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism began? We don't know. But we do know who initiated it. All the rebels around the world started it. Here, we are only a small part of those rebels, it's true. But to all the many walls that all the rebels of the world break every day, you have added one more rupture—that of the wall around the Zapatista Reality.”<sup>60</sup> The Zapatistas understood that their rebellion was just one form, one particular moment, in the development of an insurrectionary response to the development of capitalism, in this case, an opposition to the accelerated phase of neoliberalism that took off at the end of the Cold War. The Zapatistas understood well that they were just one manifestation of a radical critique that predates—and that would certainly postdate—their own uprising. Their project was about the refusal to accept a world organized by the logic of capital, a sentiment that has recently reemerged in Greece, the Arab Spring, and most sharply, in the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In the mid-to-late 90s, the term “Zapatismo” was used to capture the idea of a contagion of resistance acted out in solidarity with the Zapatistas in other ways and places. Zapatismo could mobilize people in other ways and places than took place in the mountains of Chiapas in Mexico, just like Viénet’s catalog of acts that were inspired around the world by the French occupations of 1968. Today, we know that the rebellion in Tunisia could take place in other ways in Egypt and Syria, just as Occupy Wall Street could take place in countless cities without Wall Streets.

Perhaps culture jamming could describe whatever intervenes in, with an aim to radically transform, the pervasive cultural-valuational norms of existing society. Culture jammers could participate in what Brian Holmes has called “reverse imagineering.”<sup>61</sup> When Holmes discusses rebellions and uprisings like those of the Zapatistas and against the WTO in 1999, he reflects: “These kinds of actions are about as far as one could imagine from a museum; yet when you approach them, you can feel something distinctly artistic. They bring together the multiplicity of individual expression and the unity of a collective will.”<sup>62</sup> Culture jamming is postmodern in its rhizomatic and playful subversions, in that it occurs in unpredictable moments of intervention, poisoning the visual landscape of capitalism. Culture jamming is postmodern in that it rethinks power, breaks rules, and is informed by the failures of old revolutionary narratives while wanting to be insurrectionary anyway. Like postmodern theory, culture jamming does not want to give up on its radical aspirations, so it enacts guerrilla creativity in autonomously organized schemes. Culture jamming could and should aspire to reinvent revolution, not capitalism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, Jean- François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Debord, Guy, “Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life” in *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 98-99.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Positions* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *Passwords* (Verso, 2003), p. 52. This is also discussed in Baudrillard's *Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit* (Verso, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Badurillard, *Passwords*, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> See especially the chapter "On Nihilism" in Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Published in Camatte, Jacques, *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (Autonomedia, 1995), pp. 39-90.

<sup>16</sup> Camatte, *The Selected Works of Jacques Camatte* (Prism Key Press, 2011), p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974* (Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 262.

<sup>18</sup> See *Concise Medical Dictionary: Eighth Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 657.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix, *On the Line* (Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Debord, "For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art" in *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 394.

<sup>21</sup> Of the postmodern thinkers reviewed in Part 1, there is little evidence that Debord had any influence on the work of Foucault and Derrida, which puts them in the category of rare exceptions.

<sup>22</sup> Debord, op. cit., p. 395.

<sup>23</sup> Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art" in *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 403.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>25</sup> Debord, "A User's Guide to Détournement" in *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Viénet, René, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (Autonomedia, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>28</sup> Debord, "A User's Guide to Détournement," op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.



<sup>33</sup> Debord, “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (The MIT Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>35</sup> Vaneigem, Raoul, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Rebel Press, 2006), p. 174.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1995), p. 144.

<sup>41</sup> Viénet, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>46</sup> See “The Protester” by Kurt Andersen, *Time Magazine*, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> See “New Gap Logo Hated by Many, Company Turns to Crowdsourcing Tactics” by Mike Isaac, *Forbes Magazine*, Oct. 07, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Dery, Mark, “Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs” Retrieved June 25, 2012, from [http://markdery.com/?page\\_id=154](http://markdery.com/?page_id=154).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> See Gilman-Opalsky, Richard, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (Autonomedia, 2001), pp. 81-85.

<sup>51</sup> *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 29:85–110, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> See Gilman-Opalsky, *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lexington Books, 2008), especially Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

<sup>55</sup> Weinberg, Bill, *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (Verso, 2002), p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Ross, John, *The War Against Oblivion: The Zapatista Chronicles 1994-2000* (Common Courage Press, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> Weinberg, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> Cleaver, Harry, “The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle” in *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (Pluto Press, 1998), p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> Stavans, Ilan, “Unmasking Marcos” in *The Zapatista Reader* (Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), pp. 388-389.

<sup>60</sup> Weinberg, *Homage to Chiapas*, op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>61</sup> Holmes, Brian, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (Autonomedia, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.