

The Frankenstein of Culture Jamming

Is Qanon a right-wing cooption of left-wing "culture jamming"? Daniel Tutt examines the aesthetics and theatrics of the far-right, suggesting that Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulation and seduction help us understand conspiracy thinking.

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A plausible theory of the emergence of the conspiratorial movement known as QAnon, one of the major political groups to organize the “1/6” storming of the Capitol, is that it emerged out of radical left “culture jamming.” On this theory, left-wing pranksters, inspired by the revolutionary Wu Ming Collective, posted the first mention of the myth that an anonymous government agent known as “Q” had details on a cabal of child sex abusers at the highest levels of power. Beginning in 2016, QAnon got users in alt-right forums worked up over implausible revelations, like the infamous claim that Hillary Clinton was secretly heading a global child sex-trafficking ring. This forum evolved into a global conspiracy network that has now become a mainstream fixture of the Republican Party, as evidenced by multiple public officials, including Donald Trump, offering legitimacy to their movement.

While it is possible that the Wu Ming Collective bred a reactionary Frankenstein out of the tactic of culture jamming, Wu Ming had already peaked in the 1990’s after penning a series of alternative history novels that were widely read, especially in Europe and Italy. The most widely hailed is entitled *Q* and is set in the turbulent period of the Protestant Reformation. *Q* is told from the perspective of an underground revolutionary hunted by a mysterious imposter known as Q who is an agent of the Catholic aristocracy. The heroine of the novel remains anonymous and ends up joining Thomas Müntzer’s rebellion, a radical proto-communist threat to the liberal Martin Luther’s reformist platform during the Protestant Reformation. Wu Ming’s focus on Müntzer is understandable: Müntzer’s revolutionary motto, *omina sunt communia* “all things are in common” presents what the philosopher Alain Badiou calls an invariant idea of emancipatory politics. Müntzer’s rebellion against the church and the aristocracy contained an idea of equality that is expressed in radically immanent, non-property egalitarianism. This fundamental demand of Müntzer is a universal and transhistorical one, found in other moments of emancipatory uprising, from the Spartacus slave revolt, to the slave revolt of 1804, to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

What Was Culture Jamming?

Wu Ming orchestrated a series of culture jams during the 1990s and 2000s that deployed what are by now everyday features of our world: fake news, live action role-playing (LARPing) and conspiracy. As one of the Wu Ming authors details in this lecture, their strategy entailed tactics similar to other culture jammers like the Yes Men. Culture jamming is reminiscent of Bertold Brecht’s alienation effect in that it aims to disrupt commonly held ideologies by exposing the absurdity that underlies social relations of power. Culture jammers would impersonate powerful businessmen, journalists, and politicians and flip the script in highly public events, making radically egalitarian and seemingly ludicrous promises that were intended to ridicule and shame the cynicism and ideological laws of mass society.

For instance, in 2006, the Yes Men impersonated a government official in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and promised public subsidies far beyond what the austere federal budgets allowed for. This intervention embarrassed and shamed the federal government but elicited little in terms of policy change. Yes Men's and Wu Ming's interventions were ultimately "symbolic interventions" that sought to expose the ideological contours of our world, unveiling how the symbolic authority models we unconsciously rely on to manage our beliefs make us complicit in systems of domination. To jammers, their interventions revealed a profound apathy and cynicism embedded in our mainstream notions of what is politically possible.

But what did culture jamming produce? Outrage? Radicalization? This is less clear when looking at the record of this tactic. In the case of the Yes Men, it is clear some of the interventions had a surprising effect. By impersonating a corporate CEO or a senior government official, jammers occupied the seat of symbolic authority, while the "symbolic efficiency" of these actual leaders' roles were shown to be hollow – during the prank everyone continued to believe them. The pranks effected a shameful lesson in groupthink and ideological conformity, which is that many people adjust themselves to a threshold of permissible injustice to merely get by day-to-day. When reminded of this threshold people often prefer to remain in a sort of slumber. Culture jams often elicited only mild alarm, reinforcing a general cynicism and a sense of powerlessness to change the situation. Through these provocations, culture jammers sought to lift the veil on the cynical and interpassive allegiance to the symbolic efficiency of everyday ideology. If a stunt was well-orchestrated (as in the 2004 documentary *The Yes Men Fix the World*), the audience would remain in a general slumber, as if no one except The Yes Men and Wu Ming were actually "in" on the joke.

In psychoanalytic terms, culture jamming sought to expose the core of the law as such, by exposing it as a dead law. It revealed symbolic authority as being deeply riddled by fantasy and illusion. For Jacques Lacan, fantasy arises because of "symbolic castration," or the moment in which the imaginary object that sustains one's reality is shown to be lacking. Fantasy is thus both a defense mechanism against the fear of symbolic castration and the way that we cope with the inevitability of symbolic castration. The political act of culture jamming intervened between these mechanisms, suspending symbolic castration to demonstrate the fundamentally fictional basis of our investment in the symbolic codes of everyday life. Ideally, culture jamming revealed the fundamentally fantastical, imaginary object by suspending it through a moment of parody, where critical questioning and a dose of humor could take place. Culture jammers manipulated and interrogated the zone of fantasy, exposing the empty seat of symbolic authority. By temporarily exposing the fantasy, cultural jamming revealed *both* the cynicism that sustains our public allegiance to the symbolic law, and the utter emptiness of the commands that we follow this law.

Baudrillard and the Politics of the Simulation

We can already sense a strong difference between the peak of culture jamming to our own time. Conspiracy theories are now so pervasive that even mainstream media in the age of Trump engages in conspiracy-lite reporting, on display with punditry's "Russiagate" fixation. On the right, LARPing has exploded into a new riot and protest aesthetic; from Charlottesville to 1/6, the far-right have adorned themselves with costumes, flags and political signage that corresponds to the world of internet memes and surrealist political theater. A strange inversion has occurred, whereby a style of the radical left have been co-opted, to far greater effect, by the contemporary far right. Although this is not the place to trace the intricate genealogy from culture jamming to QAnon, the theatrics of QAnon and other far-right factions that stormed the Capitol clearly owe much to similar political tactics. But just how do they differ from culture jammers?

The theatrics of the far right can be understood by drawing on French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulation." For Baudrillard, simulation describes a new order of value in contemporary capitalism, one where signs and symbols dominate social life, rather than material production, and where the rapid circulation of artificial images and copies ushers in a "hyperreal" society, completely mediated by simulations, marked by a crisis of the symbolic law. Simulation does not envelop all social reality in a total fantasy but is a response to a profound weakening of the basis of the symbolic law, turning politics in to a game of introducing distinct "reality principles."

For Baudrillard the ubiquity of simulation emerges primarily from a crisis within political economy. Baudrillard says that our social relations were mediated by the counterfeit (natural law) in the Renaissance and production (commodity law) in the industrial age. But today, it is the dizzying proliferation of symbols that "simulate" social reality. Further, a society regulated and dominated by simulation is not bound by a social contract; rather, capital itself regulates and accelerates the simulation. He writes, "capital is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral or economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law."¹

Baudrillard's notion of the simulation helps us understand why the conspiracy form has become so ubiquitous. Since simulation introduces a crisis in shared reality, the conspiracy form is a reactionary response that tries to place limits on the simulation. Baudrillard calls this attempt to place a limit on simulation a "seduction," or the attempt to *exit from* and *form an alternative to* the simulation. Was the Capitol Hill gang of twenty-first century fascists and Qanon fanatics consciously trying to seduce us into the reality principle of the Q conspiracy? Or was it a far more chaotic ensemble of desperation in which rioters were seeking to fulfill the dictates of Trump's call to

¹ Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacra and Simulation* University of Michigan Press, 1994 (15).

“show strength”? Somewhere in the middle of these two possible scenarios is most likely the case.

What we cannot do is resort to an understanding of far-right conspiracy thinking as a failure to recognize the “truth.” If we take Baudrillard’s idea of simulation and seduction seriously, it no longer makes sense to criticize ideology as a “false” representation of reality, or to sound the liberal alarm over the rise of “post-truth” politics basis because the larger problem is that the real is no longer real as such. Capital’s proliferation of signs tends to erode the semiotic system necessary for people to derive stable meaning from political and world events. All successful political movements must, therefore, aim to save the reality principle and restore a certain order to amidst “hyperreal” conditions.

Baudrillard also speaks to the relationship between simulation and fascism. He maintained that fascism displays a mourning over the loss of power and thus aims to bring back the stable ground of a social order that is not riddled by the simulation. This aesthetic dimension of fascist politics has been a staple of early and mid-twentieth century fascist movements, from Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda films to the more spontaneously driven culture jammers on 1/6. As Walter Benjamin noted, fascists turn to aesthetics to express their grievances and organize the masses, without touching the material relations of injustice that plague a given society. It is thus quite natural that culture jamming tactics would find a home within today’s fascist far right. Like the culture jammer, the fascist seeks to isolate the real and to suspend it; the difference is that the LARPing spectacle shoots real bullets and has real victims. Whereas the left culture jammer aims for a rational and deliberate reevaluation of our fantastical investment in the simulation, the fascist saboteur seeks a violent, expulsive confrontation with it.

Given this analysis, the left must think more seductively – it must develop ways of thinking how to respond to crises of the symbolic in that don’t slip into paranoia or fantasy. The later Baudrillard was mostly pessimistic about the left and claimed that, unlike fascists, it did not know how to mourn the real. The left tended to be trapped more in melancholia than mourning, uncertain and ambivalent about its relation to resurrecting the old stable social order. Baudrillard argued that this ambivalence caused the left to settle for a tepid welfare state. But today, we face a situation in which left melancholia and ambivalence is out staged by the political theater of the (increasingly organized) right, as it continues to develop wild new myths, experiments and narratives with the simulation.

It is yet not clear how seductive their interventions will prove. The conditions of the Covid pandemic and lockdowns may draw people away from radical political conspiracies and paranoid theater. Clearly, Biden’s electoral victory indicates a form of nostalgia for a return to the ground, but the passive welfare state that Baudrillard worried about is no longer the ground. Baudrillard was not able to see that the power of neoliberalism had brushed aside any notion of a post-liberal social order where “restoring order to the real” can occur. Instead, far from the “End of History” passivity that he feared, today’s social order is a neo-social Darwinist system of brutality, competition

and inequality that is becoming reminiscent of pre-French Revolution conditions. It is under these conditions of unchecked capital domination that the simulation accelerates, and every political bloc has to respond to the perpetual crises generated by capital's hyperreal "sorcery of social relations." The left cannot sit out the aesthetic game of politics. A re-evaluation and re-appropriation of culture jamming, one that "turns the language and aesthetics on domination on themselves," is urgently needed. Only in the cauldron of creative and experimental agitation and struggle can new reality principles and means of transforming the world be discovered.

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