

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

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1993

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I. The Empire of Signs

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

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

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

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

In “Media Burn,” Ant Farm indulged publicly in the guilty pleasure of kicking a hole in the cathode-ray tube. Now, almost two decades later, TV’s cyclopean eye peers into every corner of the cultural arena, and the desire to blind it is as strong as ever. “Media Burn” materializes the wish-fulfillment dream of a consumer democracy that yearns, in its hollow heart and empty head, for a belief system loftier than the “family values” promised by a Volvo ad campaign, discourse more elevated than that offered by the shark tank feeding-frenzy of *The McLaughlin Hour*.

It is a postmodern commonplace that our lives are intimately and inextricably bound up in the TV experience. Ninety-eight percent of all American households — more than have indoor plumbing — have at least one television, which is on seven hours

a day, on the average. Dwindling funds for public schools and libraries, counterpointed by the skyrocketing sales of VCRs and electronic games, have given rise to a culture of “aliteracy,” defined by Roger Cohen as “the rejection of books by children and young adults who know how to read but choose not to.” The drear truth that two thirds of Americans get “most of their information” from television is hardly a revelation.

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

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

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

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

The conversion of American society into a virtual reality was lamentably evident in the Persian Gulf War, a made-for-TV miniseries with piggybacked merchandising (T-shirts, baseball caps, Saddam toilet paper, Original Desert Shield Condoms) and gushy, *Entertainment Tonight*-style hype from a cheerleading media. When filmmaker Jon Alpert, under contract to NBC, brought back stomach-churning footage of Iraq under U.S. bombardment, the network — which is owned by one of the world’s largest arms manufacturers, General Electric — fired Alpert and refused to air the film. Not that Alpert’s film would have roused the body politic: Throughout the war, the American people demanded the right not to know. A poll cited in *The New York Times*

was particularly distressing: “Given a choice between increasing military control over information or leaving it to news organizations to make most decisions about reporting on the war, 57 per cent of those responding said they would favor greater military control.”

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

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

Everybody watches it, but no one really likes it. This is the open secret of TV today. Its only champions are its own executives, the advertisers who exploit it, and a compromised network of academic boosters. Otherwise, TV has no spontaneous defenders, because there is almost nothing in it to defend.

The rage and frustration of the disempowered viewer exorcised in “Media Burn” bubbles up, unexpectedly, in “57 Channels (And Nothin’ On)”, Bruce Springsteen’s Scorsese-esque tale of a man unhinged by the welter of meaningless information that assails him from every channel. Springsteen sings: “So I bought a .44 magnum it was solid steel cast/ And in the blessed name of Elvis well I just let it blast/ ‘Til my TV lay in pieces there at my feet/ And they busted me for disturbin’ the almighty peace.”

Significantly, the video for “57 Channels” incorporates footage of a white Cadillac on a collision course with a wall of flaming TV sets, in obvious homage to “Media Burn.” The ritual destruction of the TV set, endlessly iterated in American mass culture, can be seen as a retaliatory gesture by an audience that has begun to bridle, if only intuitively, at the suggestion that “power” resides in the remote control unit, that “freedom of choice” refers to the ever-greater options offered around the dial.

This techno-oodoo rite constitutes the symbolic obliteration of a one-way information pipeline that only transmits, never receives. It is an act of sympathetic magic performed in the name of all who are obliged to peer at the world through peepholes owned by multinational conglomerates for whom the profit margin is the bottom line. “To the eye of the consumer,” notes Ben Bagdikian,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Marshall Blonsky:

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

The territory demarcated by Gabler and Blonsky, lush with fictions yet strangely barren, has been mapped in detail by the philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In his landmark 1975 essay, "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard put forth the notion that we inhabit a "hyperreality," a hall of media mirrors in which reality has been lost in an infinity of reflections. We "experience" events, first and foremost, as electronic reproductions of rumored phenomena many times removed, he maintains; originals, invariably compared to their digitally-enhanced representations, inevitably fall short. In the "desert of the real," asserts Baudrillard, mirages outnumber oases and are more alluring to the thirsty eye. Moreover, he argues, signs that once pointed toward distant realities now refer only to themselves. Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A, which depicts the sort of idyllic, turn-of-the-century burg that exists only in Norman Rockwell paintings and MGM backlots, is a textbook example of self-referential simulation, a painstaking replica of something that never was. "These would be the successive phases of the image," writes Baudrillard, betraying an almost necrophiliac relish as he contemplates the decomposition of culturally-defined reality. "[The image] is the reflection of a basic reality; it masks and perverts a basic reality; it masks the absence of a basic reality; it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum."

Reality isn't what it used to be. In America, factory capitalism has been superseded by an information economy characterized by the reduction of labor to the manipulation, on computers, of symbols that stand in for the manufacturing process. The engines of industrial production have slowed, yielding to a phantasmagoric capitalism that produces intangible commodities — Hollywood blockbusters, television sit-coms, catchphrases, jingles, buzzwords, images, one-minute megatrends, financial transactions flickering through fiberoptic bundles. Our wars are Nintendo wars, fought with camera-equipped smart bombs that marry cinema and weaponry in a television that kills. Futurologists predict that the flagship technology of the coming century will be "virtual reality," a computer-based system that immerses users wearing headgear wired

for sight and sound in computer-animated worlds. In virtual reality, the television swallows the viewer, headfirst.

II. Culture Jamming

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

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

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

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

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

Part artistic terrorists, part vernacular critics, culture jammers, like Eco’s “communications guerrillas,” introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations. Intruding on the intruders, they invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously, they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent. Jammers offer irrefutable evidence that the right has no copyright on war waged with incanta-

tions and simulations. And, like Ewen's cultural cryptographers, they refuse the role of passive shoppers, renewing the notion of a public discourse.

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

Jamming is part of a historical continuum that includes Russian samizdat (underground publishing in defiance of official censorship); the anti-fascist photomontages of John Heartfield; Situationist detournement (defined by Greil Marcus, in *Lipstick Traces*, as "the theft of aesthetic artifacts from their contexts and their diversion into contexts of one's own devise"); the underground journalism of '60s radicals such as Paul Krassner, Jerry Rubin, and Abbie Hoffman; Yippie street theater such as the celebrated attempt to levitate the Pentagon; parody religions such as the Dallas-based Church of the Subgenius; workplace sabotage of the sort documented by *Processed World*, a magazine for disaffected data entry drones; the ecopolitical monkeywrenching of Earth First!; the random acts of Artaudian cruelty that radical theorist Hakim Bey calls "poetic terrorism" ("weird dancing in all-night computer banking lobbies...bizarre alien artifacts strewn in State Parks"); the insurgent use of the "cut-up" collage technique proposed by William Burroughs in "Electronic Revolution" ("The control of the mass media depends on laying down lines of association...Cut/up techniques could swamp the mass media with total illusion"); and subcultural bricolage (the refunctioning, by societal "outsiders," of symbols associated with the dominant culture, as in the appropriation of corporate attire and *Vogue* model poses by poor, gay, and largely nonwhite drag queens).

An elastic category, culture jamming accommodates a multitude of subcultural practices. Outlaw computer hacking with the intent of exposing institutional or corporate wrongdoing is one example; "slashing," or textual poaching, is another. (The term "slashing" derives from the pornographic "K/S" — short for "Kirk/Spock" — stories written by female *Star Trek* fans and published in underground fanzines. Spun from the perceived homoerotic subtext in *Star Trek* narratives, K/S, or "slash," tales are often animated by feminist impulses. I have appropriated the term for general use, applying it to any form of jamming in which tales told for mass consumption are perversely reworked.) Transmission jamming; pirate TV and radio broadcasting; and camcorder countersurveillance (in which low-cost consumer technologies are used by DIY muckrakers to document police brutality or governmental corruption) are potential modus operandi for the culture jammer. So, too, is media activism such as the cheery immolation of a mound of television sets in front of CBS's Manhattan offices — part of a protest against media bias staged by FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting) during the Gulf War — and "media-wrenching" such as ACT UP's dis-

ruption of *The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* in protest of infrequent AIDS coverage. A somewhat more conventional strain of culture jamming is mediawatch projects such as Paper Tiger Television, an independent production collective that produces segments critiquing the information industry; Deep Dish TV, a grassroots satellite network that distributes free-thinking programming to public access cable channels nationwide; and Not Channel Zero, a collective of young African-American “camcorder activists” whose motto is “The Revolution, Televised.” And then there is academy hacking — cultural studies, conducted outside university walls, by insurgent intellectuals.

Thus, culture jamming assumes many guises; let us consider, in greater detail, some of its more typical manifestations.

Sniping and Subvertising

“Subvertising,” the production and dissemination of anti-ads that deflect Madison Avenue’s attempts to turn the consumer’s attention in a given direction, is an ubiquitous form of jamming. Often, it takes the form of “sniping” — illegal, late-night sneak attacks on public space by operatives armed with posters, brushes, and buckets of wheatpaste.

Adbusters, a Vancouver, B.C.-based quarterly that critiques consumer culture, enlivens its pages with acid satires. “Absolut Nonsense,” a cunningly-executed spoof featuring a suspiciously familiar-looking bottle, proclaimed: “Any suggestion that our advertising campaign has contributed to alcoholism, drunk driving or wife and child beating is absolute nonsense. No one pays any attention to advertising.” Ewen, himself a covert jammer, excoriates conspicuous consumption in his “Billboards of the Future” — anonymously-mailed Xerox broadsides like his ad for “Chutzpah: cologne for women & men, one splash and you’ll be demanding the equal distribution of wealth.” Guerrilla Girls, a cabal of feminist artists that bills itself as “the conscience of the art world,” is known for savagely funny, on-target posters, one of which depicted a nude odalisque in a gorilla mask, asking, “Do women have to get naked to get into the Met. Museum?” Los Angeles’s Robbie Conal covers urban walls with the information age equivalent of Dorian Gray’s portrait: grotesque renderings of Oliver North, Ed Meese, and other scandal-ridden politicians. “I’m interested in counter-advertising,” he says, “using the streamlined sign language of advertising in a kind of reverse penetration.” For gay activists, subvertising and sniping have proven formidable weapons. A March, 1991 *Village Voice* report from the frontlines of the “outing” wars made mention of “Absolutely Queer” posters, credited to a phantom organization called OUTPOST, appearing on Manhattan buildings. One, sparked by the controversy over the perceived homophobia in *Silence of the Lambs*, featured a photo of Jodie Foster, with the caption: “Oscar Winner. Yale Graduate. Ex-Disney Moppet. Dyke.” Queer Nation launched a “Truth in Advertising” postering campaign that sent up New York Lotto ads calculated to part the poor and their money; in them, the official tagline, “All You Need is a Dollar and

a Dream” became “All You Need is a Three-Dollar Bill and a Dream.” The graphics collective Gran Fury, formerly part of ACT UP, has taken its sharp-tongued message even further: a superslick Benetton parody ran on buses in San Francisco and New York in 1989. Its headline blared “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do” over a row of kissing couples, all of them racially-mixed and two of them gay. “We are trying to fight for attention as hard as Coca-Cola fights for attention,” says group member Loring Mcalpin. “[I]f anyone is angry enough and has a Xerox machine and has five or six friends who feel the same way, you’d be surprised how far you can go.”

Media Hoaxing

Media hoaxing, the fine art of hoodwinking journalists into covering exhaustively researched, elaborately staged deceptions, is culture jamming in its purest form. Conceptual con artists like Joey Skaggs dramatize the dangers inherent in a press that seems to have forgotten the difference between the public good and the bottom line, between the responsibility to enlighten and the desire to entertain.

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

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

After reeling in the media outlets who have taken his bait, Skaggs holds a conference at which he reveals his deception. “The hoax,” he insists, “is just the hook. The second phase, in which I reveal the hoax, is the important part. As Joey Skaggs, I can’t call a press conference to talk about how the media has been turned into a government propaganda machine, manipulating us into believing we’ve got to go to war in the Middle East. But as a jammer, I can go into these issues in the process of revealing a hoax.”

Audio Agitprop

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

Billboard Banditry

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

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

San Francisco’s Billboard Liberation Front, together with Truth in Advertising, a band of “midnight billboard editors” based in Santa Cruz, snap motorists out of their rush hour trances with deconstructed, reconstructed billboards. In the wake of the Valdez disaster, the BLF reinvented a radio promo — “Hits Happen. New X-100” — as “Shit Happens — New Exxon”; TIA turned “Tropical Blend. The Savage Tan” into “Typical Blend. Sex in Ads.” Inspired by a newsflash that plans were underway to begin producing neutron bombs, a Seattle-based trio known as SSS reworked a Kent

billboard proclaiming “Hollywood Bowled Over By Kent III Taste!” to read “Hollywood Bowled Over By Neutron Bomb!,” replacing the cigarette pack with a portrait of then-President Ronald Reagan.

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

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

III. Guerrilla Semiotics

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

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

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

This is not to say that all of the jammers mentioned in this essay knowingly derive their ideas from semiotics or are even familiar with it, only that their ad hoc approach to cultural analysis has much in common with the semiotician’s attempt to “read between the lines” of culture considered as a text. Most jammers have little interest in the deliria that result from long immersion in the academic vacuum, breathing pure theory. They intuitively refuse the rejection of engaged politics typical of postmodernists

like Baudrillard, a disempowering stance that too often results in an overeagerness for ringside seats at the gotterdammerung. *The L.A. Weekly*'s disquieting observation that Baudrillard "loves to observe the liquidation of culture, to experience the delivery from depth" calls to mind Walter Benjamin's pronouncement that mankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." Jammers, in contrast, are attempting to reclaim the public space ceded to the chimeras of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, to restore a sense of equilibrium to a society sickened by the vertiginous whirl of TV culture.

IV. Postscript From the Edge

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

When I first met my wife, she was immersed in trading options. Her office was in the top of a skyscraper in Boston, and yet, in a very real sense, when she was at work she was in a world that could not be identified with any single physical location. Sitting at a computer screen, she lived in a world that consisted of offers and trades, a world in which she knew friends and enemies, safe and stormy weather. For a large portion of each day, that world was more real to her than her physical surroundings.

In the next century, growing numbers of Americans will work and play in artificial environments that only exist, in the truest sense, as bytes stored in computer memory. The explosion of computer-based interactive media seems destined to sweep away (at least in its familiar form) the decidedly *non*-interactive medium that has dominated the latter half of this century: television. Much of this media may one day be connected to a high-capacity, high-speed fiber optic network of “information superhighways” linking as many homes as are currently serviced by the telephone network. This network, predicts computer journalist John Markoff, “could do for the flow of information — words, music, movies, medical images, manufacturing blueprints and much more — what the transcontinental railroad did for the flow of goods a century ago and the interstate highway system did in this century.”

The culture jammer’s question, as always, is: Who will have access to this cornucopia of information, and on what terms? Will fiber-optic superhighways make stored knowledge universally available, in the tradition of the public library, or will they merely facilitate psychological carpet bombing designed to soften up consumer defenses? And what of the network news? Will it be superseded by local broadcasts, with their heartwarming (always “heartwarming”) tales of rescued puppies and shocking (always “shocking”) stories of senseless mayhem, mortared together with airhead banter?

Or will the Big Three give way to innumerable news channels, each a conduit for information about global, national and local events germane to a specific demographic? Will cyberpunk telejournalists equipped with Hi-8 video cameras, digital scanners, and PC-based editing facilities hack their way into legitimate broadcasts? Or will they, in a medium of almost infinite bandwidth and channels beyond count, simply be given their own airtime? In short, will the electronic frontier be wormholed with “temporary autonomous zones” — Hakim Bey’s term for pirate utopias, centrifuges in which social gravity is artificially suspended — or will it be subdivided and overdeveloped by what cultural critic Andrew Ross calls “the military-industrial-media complex?” Gibson, who believes that we are “moving toward a world where all of the consumers under a certain age will...identify more...with the products they consume than...with any sort of antiquated notion of nationality,” is not sanguine. In the video documentary *Cyberpunk*, he conjures a minatory vision of what will happen when virtual reality is married to a device that stimulates the brain directly. “It’s going to be very commercial,” he says. “We could wind up with something that felt like having a very, very expensive American television commercial injected directly into your cortex.”

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

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

ogy because of their cultural status are denied access — they nonetheless represent a profound improvement on the homogenous, hegemonic medium of television.

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

This medium gives us the possibility (illusory as it may be) that we can build a world unmediated by authorities and experts. The roles of reader, writer, and critic are so quickly interchangeable that they become increasingly irrelevant in a community of co-creation.

In like fashion, ever-cheaper, increasingly sophisticated desktop publishing packages (such as the software and hardware used to produce this pamphlet) ensure that, in a society where freedom of the press — as A.J. Leibling so presciently noted — is guaranteed only to those who own one, multinational monoliths are not the only publishers. As Gareth Branwyn, a one-time ‘zine publisher and longtime resident of virtual communities, points out,

The current saturation of relatively inexpensive multimedia communication tools holds tremendous potential for destroying the monopoly of ideas we have lived with for so long...A personal computer can be configured to act as a publishing house, a broadcast-quality TV studio, a professional recording studio, or the node in an international computer bulletin board system.

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

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

Then again, involvement in virtual communities and the ‘zine scene is rapidly expanding beyond mere hobbyism: as this is written, approximately 10 million people

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

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

Acknowledgements

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

Points of Departure

Craig Baldwin, *Sonic Outlaws* (c/o Artists Television Access, 415-824-3890, or by mail from 992 Valencia Street, San Francisco, CA 94110, VHS, 87 minutes, \$30, make check payable to Craig Baldwin). Baldwin, an independent filmmaker, is an appropriationist auteur par excellence, equal parts Eisenstein and dumpster-diver. His docu-

mentary *Sonic Outlaws* uses the legal and media brouhaha stirred up by Negativland's illegal sampling (and howlingly funny parody) of a U-2 song as a springboard for deeper thoughts on copyright in the age of digital reproduction and private ownership of the public airwaves. Audio Dadaists and unrepentant plagiarists Emergency Broadcast Network, the Tape Beatles, and John Oswald are also featured.

"Billboard Liberation Front Manual," *Processed World* #25, Summer/Fall 1990, pps. 22-6. This and other back issues may be ordered from 41 Sutter Street, #1829, San Francisco, CA 94104.

The BLF has also published *The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement* (San Francisco: Los Cabrones Press, \$1.50). No more information is available as this is written; writing to *Processed World*, which acts as an intermediary for the BLF, might prove fruitful.

William Board, "Alter a Billboard," *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Summer 1983, pps. 114-116. Do's and don't's for would-be "midnight billboard editors," written by a pseudonymous member of Truth in Advertising. \$7, *Whole Earth Review*, 27 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, CA 94965.

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

Robbie Conal, *Art Attack: The Midnight Politics of a Guerrilla Artist* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992). At last: the ideal gift for insurrectionists — a coffee table art book about a wheatpaste warrior.

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

Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching, Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood, eds. (Tucson: Ned Ludd Books, 1987). Chapter 8, "Propaganda," includes sections on "Billboard Revision" and "Correcting Forest Service Signs." The jury is still out on Earth First!, which often crosses the line from righteous ecopolitical rage to neo-Luddite knee-jerking (hence the name of the publishing company). That said, the

authors' folksy pragmatism, anarcho-libertarian humor, and iron-spined resolve in the face of bulldozers and chainsaws is truly inspiring.

The Happy Mutant Handbook: Mischievous Fun for Higher Primates, ed. Mark Frauenfelder, Carla Sinclair, Gareth Branwyn, Will Kreth (Riverhead Books). Includes brief profiles of Chris Baldwin, Joey Skaggs, the Cacophony Society, and the Billboard Liberation Front, as well as articles on hacking, DIY radio and TV, shirking work, and hit-and-run ontology-wrenching (pranks).

Abbie Hoffman, *The Best of Abbie Hoffman* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1989). Chapter 43, "Guerrilla Broadcasting," includes nuts-and-bolts "how to" sections on pirate radio and outlaw TV.

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

Roar! The Paper Tiger Television Guide to Media Activism, The Paper Tiger Television Collective, eds. (New York: The Paper Tiger Television Collective, 1991). This thoroughgoing, irreplaceable guide to culture jamming proves, to mutilate Mao, that power springs from the barrel of a camcorder. An essay by Schiller, together with a lengthy "how to" section, make this a must. Write to 339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012.

Sabotage in the American Workplace: Anecdotes of Dissatisfaction, Mischief, and Revenge, ed. Martin Sprouse (Pressure Drop Press and AK Press). Studs Terkel's *Working* for the deskilled, downsized, or just plain disaffected.

Test Card F: Television, Mythinformation, and Social Control (AK Press, POB 40682, San Francisco, CA 94140-0682). A spleen-filled rant on "the media machine" as engine of social control, lashed together with punk and neo-Situationist collages. The back cover declares, "Using savage image/text cut-and-paste, *Test Card F* explodes all previous media theories and riots through the Global Village, looting the ideological supermarket of all its products." A Molotov cocktail for the mind.

Endnotes

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

2. Roger Cohen, "The Lost Book Generation," *The New York Times*, "Education Life" supplement, January 6, 1991, pg. 34.

3. Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 18.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

5. Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 5.
6. From a transcript of "Illusions of News," the third episode in the PBS series, *The Public Mind with Bill Moyers*, p. 5.
7. Alex S. Jones, "Poll Backs Control of News," *The New York Times*, C24, January 31, 1991.
8. Neal Gabler, "Now Playing: Real Life, the Movie," *The New York Times*, Sunday, October 20, 1991, Section 2, pg. 32.
9. Mark Crispin Miller, "Deride and Conquer," in *Watching Television*, ed. by Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1987), p. 228.
10. Ben Bagdikian, "Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation*, June 12, 1989, p. 819.
1. Herbert Schiller, *The Nation*, July 4-11, 1987, p. 6.
2. Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, "Anti-Hero: What Happens When Network News is Owned and Sponsored By Big Corporations That Need To Protect Their Own Interests?," *Spin*, volume six, number four, July, 1990, p. 75.
3. Gabler, *ibid.*
4. Marshall Blonsky, *American Mythologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 231.
5. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 11.
6. Umberto Eco, "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare," in *Travels in Hyper-reality* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1986), pps. 138, 143, 144.
7. Stuart Ewen, "Living by Design," in *Art in America*, June, 1990, p. 76.
8. A line lifted, out of context, from Marguerite Sechehaye's *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968), p. 19.
9. Jello Biafra, interviewed in *Pranks!: Re/Search #11* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1987), p. 64.
20. Quoted by Karrie Jacobs, in *Metropolis*, July/August 1990, and reprinted in the *Utne Reader*, March/April 1991, p. 91-2.
2. *God Family Country* is available from DOVentertainment, 2 Bloor Street West, Suite 100-159, Toronto, Canada M4W 3E2, as is *Bob's Media Ecology*, by Producers For Bob; *Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury*, by the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, was released by 4th & Bdwy/Island, and should be stocked by most major record retailers; the cassette-only *Oil War*, by Chris Burke, can be purchased directly from the artist (\$5.95 check or money order to Chris Burke, 111 3rd Avenue, #12-E, New York, NY 10003).
22. Harry Goldstein, "Billboard Liberation: Talking Back to Marketers By Taking Outdoor Advertising Into Your Own Hands," in the *Utne Reader*, November/December 1991, pps. 46-48.
23. David Ferman, "Pastor Leads War on Billboards," in *Adbusters*, Fall/Winter 1991, p. 41-2.
24. Stuart Ewen, "Desublimated Advertising," *Artforum*, January, 1991, p. 26.

25. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 9.
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27. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 54.
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29. W. Daniel Hillis, "What is Massively Parallel Computing?," in *Daedalus*, Winter 1992, p. 13.
30. John Markoff, "Building the Electronic Superhighway," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1993, Section 3, p. 1.
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32. Loc. cit.
33. William Rolf Knutson, a computer programmer, fiction writer, and occasional *Mondo 2000* contributor, in a private e-mail letter to the author, March 25, 1993.
34. Gareth Branwyn, "Jamming the Media," in *Black Hole*, ed. by Carolyn Hughes, (Baltimore: Institute for Publications Design, Yale Gordon College of Liberal Arts, University of Baltimore, 1992), pps. 1-2.
35. Mitch Kapor, quoted by Bruce Sterling, in *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Bantam, 1992), p. 298.
36. Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), p. 113.
37. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 282. This passage appears only in the original, unrevised edition of the book.

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<markdery.com/books/culture-jamming-hacking-slashing-and-sniping-in-the-empire-of-signs-2>

There are no superscript reference numbers for the endnotes in the text body.

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