09 2003

Culture Jamming and Advertising Techniques

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The close-up of a lipstick extended from its shaft adorns the cover of the magazine *adbusters* like a bloody fingertip: a figure from advertising techniques seen a thousand times is robbed here of its smooth, glistening surface; the red mass of color looks more like a battered house facade. To the right of this strange tower form "Cool Fascismo" is written in black letters - the title *adbusters* is set in Gothic type. We browse through the magazine and find an article with the question "Is America Becoming Fascist?"[1]

In 1954 Guy Debord created a collage dealing with the Spanish Civil War ("Time passes, in fact, and we pass with it"). Altogether the six pictures read like the text of a film script: Franco, a dead person in a street battle, finally a mid-shot of a parade of troops. A text is mounted on the right side underneath this picture: "Beautiful lips wear red" - an incomplete snippet from a widespread lipstick ad at that time.[2]

The picture of the lipstick in hundred-fold magnification as eyecatcher and the hidden reference to the lipstick that itself remains invisible - two variations that utilize the technique of re-interpretation used in culture jamming and which could not be

more different. The staging of political messages with the means of advertising techniques all the way to the choice of terms ("global fascism" as advertising hyperbole) and Guy Debord's collage technique that originated in the logic of the art field, which also seeks to devalue the specific mediality of advertising techniques as detournement in addition to the political statement.

In theories about the economy of attention, the advertising technician appears as an attention catcher: he stages the spectacle in stronger and stronger dosages and takes care to employ technically sophisticated means of production. The producers of culture jamming, if we think of actors such as those from the magazine *adbusters*, for example, who partly have day jobs in the advertising industry to carry on their deconstructions at night, profit from the fact that they are successful in the logic of the predominate attention economy: they hit a "nerve". They intervene "spectacularly" - which is why they arouse the interest of the advertising industry, because the culture jammers produce exactly that which does not succeed in the everyday malaise of advertising suffering from the scarcity of attention: in the spiral of the generation of attention, in the thin air of stale effects, they are still able to arrange an edible crumb of spectacular goods. If the culture jammers want to communicate "oppositional readings" of advertising too, they are assured of the respect of the advertising technicians, to the extent that an attention kick promising to animate the market like a new drug is admirable. Since the sixties the advertising industry has systematically subsumed everything that is "hip" and especially that which John Fiske called the rebellious side of the "popular culture" that he enthusiastically embraced. In his book "The Conquest of the Cool", Thomas Frank demonstrated the naivety of a thesis like this.[3] The band *Negativland*, which first circulated the concept of culture jamming,

experienced in 1997 how the advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy, described by Frank as one of the most important agencies in the context of the appropriation of hipness, asked the band for a soundtrack for the new advertising spot for Miller Genuine Draft. The band commented: "Today they absorb the core and tell you there is no more resistance, that all resistance is futile."[4] Conversely Kalle Lasn and his classic consume-critical campaign "buy nothing day" had to deal with an appropriation from the left: the slogan of the counter-campaign was "steal something day".[5]

The incipient rule-breaking in the act of culture jamming, whether it is an aesthetic or social intervention in "alien material", is not a technique that is limited to the actors of culture jamming. It even seems to belong to the arsenal of ritually practiced ceremonies of neo-liberal culture: when Daimler-Chrysler introduced the brand "Maybach" in 2002, a campaign was launched in the print media, which demonstrated well that breaking the rules is treated as a social ideal. The ad picks up on the as yet undisputed high degree of legitimacy of art in the form of an "image transfer"[6]: the gaze is drawn to a horizontally divided picture; in the top part the brand "Baselitz" is represented by an upside-down portrait of a woman; in the lower part, on a light background, is the car. The two picture sections are linked by a line of text that says: "*leadership is about breaking rules*."[7] The picture by Baselitz is mounted in the shining world of the luxury automobile, appropriated, functioning as a kind of social montage. The social use of the picture - initially linked with the social locations assigned to it, such as museums or galleries - is relocated, drawn into the world of commercial advertising images. The text link "interprets" the picture by Baselitz, but at the same time it also picks up the ideal of breaking rules that circulates in society. In conjunction with its neo-liberal

renewal, the dominant elite has found that the production of social insecurity, rule violations, anomy - once monopolized by the "left" - can better serve to promote their interests than the call for a welfare state order[8] that is already obsolete. For this reason, the point of this advertising image is not to address the potential buyers segment; a diffuse mass audience is infiltrated with the idea that Daimler Chrysler has recognized the sign of the times. The rule violation that is meanwhile treated as a social ideal is *one* of the reasons that culture jamming has become a hype in recent years.[9]

At the latest since Benjamin's picture shock analysis and his reference to the qualities of a distracted perception, the intellectual world thinks it has seen through advertising techniques. Even if Benjamin's enthusiasm is dampened somewhat in the darker passages of the chapter on cultural industry by Horkheimer and Adorno, in the tradition of this approach there has been no contradiction to the assessment that the communication model of advertising has become the dominant model of communication as a whole throughout society.[10] And specifically because of this dominance - according to the culture jammer - political interventions should also be undertaken in this medium. But how? In which direction does the clash of signs throw sparks? Is it a matter of deregulating familiar signs with the consequence of an optimization of attention that only consolidates the power of advertising, or can the "flow of the spectacle" actually be interrupted in the condensed language of advertising? Kalle Lasn speaks of the "meme wars" in this context. Units of information processed as shock communication leap "from brain to brain to brain".[11] And the battle of the memes, a "guerrilla information war", has to be conducted by special agencies "to put out a better product and beat the corporations at their own game".[12] A change in society then results when the battle of habits can be

steered in a different direction. In this context, one "magnificent victory" can already be reported: "The tobacco war marked the first (and so far the last) time anti-ads beat product ads in open meme combat in a free marketplace of ideas ... beating the enemy on TV was the key."[13] Many of the anti-smoking ads stay as close as possible to the "original", showing the Marlboro rider, for example, and dubbing him with a voice that does not speak of freedom, but of sickness ("Bob, I've got emphysema"). The altered ad operating with an appeal to fear uses a rhetoric that is hardly still conventional today ("even your parakeet is in danger of an early death"), but the point is found, of course, in the appropriation of the original - a classic device for generating shock, what is familiar becomes alien.

In the following we will make an analytical distinction between two practices of culture jamming: an internal strategy that orients its practices especially to the existing forms of advertising techniques, "alternatively"communicating a broad range of themes, such alcohol abuse, tobacco abuse all the way to political issues in the context of globalization, key word "No Logo". This is contrasted with an external use of culture jamming, where the technique of communication, the attention economy itself becomes the object of discussion, where the "triumph of advertising in the cultural industry, the compulsive mimesis of the consumers with regard to the cultural goods that is immediately seen through"[14] is to be subverted by excluding distraction, for example, as the dominant form of reception. These practices naturally arise in the field of art. [15]

In his bestseller "Culture Jam" Kalle Lasn described the goal of the culture jammer: "Culture Jamming is, at root, just a metaphor for stopping the flow of the spectacle long enough to adjust your set."[16] Yet this magical formula formulated in the manner of

advertising techniques, as enticing as its content may seem, needs to be more closely examined. When Benjamin undertook his analysis of the film, he also touched on issues of progressive art that dealt with the "remodeling of the apperception apparatus". "From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality."[17] In our context it is interesting to follow the career of John Heartfield, who joined the Dadaist group as a trained advertising technician, then becoming one of the most well known photo montage artists in the twenties. Whereas the "stimulatory flood" due to the dissolution of familiar structures of meaning in picture-text montages is represented chaotically, aggressively in the early Dadaist manifestos, Heartfield developed a new medium of political agitation with a technically perfected photo montage. He used documentary and self-staged photo material and constructed this in the direction of an unequivocally political thesis. The legibility of his works, especially those published in the Workers Illustrated Newspaper (Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung), was generally assured by the fact that the photo material was assembled in such a way that new messages emerged from it. In fact, advertising technique used similar procedures during this period: it also began using montage. The procedure of montage can principally be subsumed under the heading of the quotation, so that montage can be understood as a procedure for conjoining what does not belong together.[18] In this sense, culture jammers are naturally also montage producers. What distinguishes them from Heartfield and this tradition is the way they deal with "alien material". Heartfield created picture-text montages that were composed of publicly familiar visual material; the gaze stumbles into this picture and puts the pieces together to form an unequivocal structure of meaning. One of his most famous

works, the "Millions" montage (1932), is a highly complex, unique picture composition, which bridles the shock of montage in that a narration is ultimately recognizable, which interrupts the state of distraction.[19] Culture jammers generally leave the picture composition much more to the "alien material"; they specifically make use of the attention stimulation associated with it to invert the message through minimal alterations: (s)hell. Distraction is not didacticized here, but rather continued through alienation. Whereas Heartfield refers reception to a level of cognitively penetrating the picture, culture jammers rely entirely on the form of the spectacle to introduce a polar reversal into the distracted appropriation. Everything should work the same way as in advertising, but the other way around. The illusory world of marketing strategists is presented by first creating the impression of a "pollution"; a convention is broken, because the aesthetic integrity of the ad is distorted. The pollution introduces the shock of an oppositional meaning.[20]

Naomi Klein sees in this type of communication "just a tool - one of many - that is used, borrowed and loaned in a much broader political movement against branded life."[21] In other words, the relativization of culture jamming's possibilities for impact, which Kalle Lasn probably does not share in this form, is concentrated once again on the question we started with. Can something of the intentions pursued by the culture jammers actually be realized in the medium of distraction through counter-distraction? The tobacco wars were successful for the culture jammers. But what does this success actually consist of? The habit of smoking is, in fact, on the decline in wealthy western countries, especially among the middle class; however, the economic activities of the cigarette corporations have not ceased at all. They have moved to other countries. "Smoking was uncooled, and no amount of PR money

could buy the cool back," according to Kalle Lasn.[22] This statement, formulated in the style of advertising hyperbole, not only ignores the material reality of the cigarette corporations, it also conceals the fact that a thoroughly ascetic health consciousness was introduced along with the anti-smoking campaign, an element of subjectivity that could well be called a "self-technology" from Foucault's perspective and is to be assessed as a resource for controlling people in neo-liberal times.

"It is not pictures of guns that kill, but guns," according to Mitchell. In his opinion, it is not "scopic regimes" (Martin Jay) that represent the "greatest political danger of the present". He regards the "heroic, iconoclastic art theoreticians" in their striving to decipher the "power of images" as a new version of the "Young Hegelians" that Marx parodies by reproaching them that "the monsters sprung from their foreheads (...) have gotten out of hand".[23] Just as doubt in the "power of images" is right in a certain sense, we can also criticize the practices of the culture jammers, to the extent that they mistake their attack on advertising images with an attack on the overall constitution of society. However, this general "suspicion" can only really become explicit in individual cases. It is not a coincidence that the activities of the culture jammers are directed specifically against corporations, which are highly dependent on their symbolic advertising presence.

It is maintained in "self-concept research" that advertising is especially successful, when it strengthens the self-concept of the consumers. Sidney J. Levy formulated this thesis in 1959 in the essay "Symbols for Sale", which is considered a classical text in advertising research. As he explained, "the product will be used and enjoyed (...) when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself."[24] How the

consumer thinks about himself (or herself) is, to a large part, "constructed" by the advertising industry itself, according to the counter-thesis. Erving Goffman also speaks of the manipulation thesis in the context of his analysis of the "commercial realism" of advertising techniques. Like Benjamin, Goffman believes that advertising functions according to the model of the fleetingly perceived world as it has been practiced in the large cities of the 20th century. When advertising technique then assumes certain elements of the "social cosmology" (Galtung), the impression frequently arises that it has itself "constructed". He claims that this is nothing from "real life", however, but rather an obtrusive staging starting from depth psychology, which awakens "artificial" needs - so anyone who takes the appeals seriously is naïve. What is the difference then between the picture shock scenes of advertising techniques and real life? Goffman proposes speaking of a "hyper-ritualization" of advertising technique. "An advertising photo is a ritualization of social ideals, from which all the processes and meanings in which the ideal is not present have been omitted - edited out of what has been made visible, so to speak."[25] This purity of representation also occurs as a claim in social life "at ceremonial occasions, expressions of sympathy, a sudden meeting with friends and similar high points of everyday life. In advertising as in life, we are interested in the colorful poses, the externalization ..."[26] From this perspective advertising only "manipulates" in the sense that it stylizes, conventionalizes an already existent repertoire of "ritual idioms" - Goffman basically attempts to show that people frequently act in social situations in accordance with the logic of advertising technique, not because of its hegemonial impact, but because this is what the social world demands - this is Goffman's impression at least. In the appropriated counter-advertising world of the culture jammers ritualized social ideals are also communicated with an externalizing

effect. They are consumed by those who can connect their "self-concept" with the transformed message. From this perspective culture jamming represents the folklore, in a sense, of those who find themselves in resistance against the symbol world of the advertising industry or the social world it represents. The special attraction of this affirming medium is that within this symbolic dispute the opponent is not only made "tangible", but is even directly "conquered" - in this moment of intervention, where the energy of the opponent is turned against him as in Japanese martial arts, the defeat appears to be "manifest". Following Goffman, we can call this "hyper-ritualization".

On the other hand, "enlightenment" is linked with the political interventions of the culture jammers. Like advertising, the ritual is intended to influence a diffuse mass audience.

In terms of advertising technique, "market research" proves whether influencing effects have occurred. In order to have criteria for making a distinction at this point, attention should be given to the social location of the intervention. The publication of a high gloss brochure like *adbusters*, which cultivates culture jamming as an aesthetic form, is worlds apart from interventions in the tradition of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), where there are direct interventions in the public space occupied by advertising. Whereas the *adbusters* project builds up a counter-empire of its own with marketing strategies oriented to "corporate identity" (the sale of T-shirts, shoes: "the unswoosher", etc.), thus assuming elements of alternative culture, which are, however, no longer under the pressure of an anti-economism, the other actors are more concerned with attacking the omnipresence of the world of advertising in public space. The magazine *adbusters* activates a "target group" - in other words a social conglomerate with certain characteristics that are relevant to the product range of the project.

Enlarging the target group depends, among other things, on whether the social humus that the project lives from flourishes or not. The cultivation of culture jamming, its aesthetic differentiation, creates a consumer segment that grows, if it is well tended. Intervention in public space calculates differently: here - before political convictions are communicated - the monopoly of the public "demonstration of industrial power" is attacked first of all. It is as though the frozen ritualisms of advertising technique were suddenly brought to life through the intervention of culture jammers and become "uncanny" in the Freudian definition of the term: the alienation points to the familiar that has been left out of everyday experience, the experience of public space blocked by advertising. The act of deciphering the political message follows subsequently. Because of the given picture shock communication, the possibilities of communicating are generally too little complex and can only develop their effect, as Naomi Klein has described, in the overall context of the communication of other media.

In this way a different social use of culture jamming becomes evident, which we would like to summarize here in two "positions", although they do not occur in this purity in reality. One is a strategy that strengthens the social cohesion of the resistant group within the framework of the hyper-ritualization taken from advertising technique, and the other is a strategy operating in public space, which intervenes in the force field of symbolic representations, and questions with every political message that is communicated how the privatized use of the public sphere by economic rulers is taken for granted. It has been demonstrated that the surprise coups of the culture jammers first attain significance as political intervention, when their social use is designed to penetrate into fields that are "obedient" to advertising technique. In his criticism of "Neue Sachlichkeit" ("New Objectivity"), Walter

Benjamin said that it "supplies the production apparatus without changing it"[27] and wished for actors instead, who should emphasize the "revolutionary utility value", for example of photography. The culture jammers' reinterpretations shake the production apparatus of advertising technique, sometimes with material consequences for the companies - yet at the same time they also ensure that consumption criticism, e.g. in the version of *adbusters*, itself becomes the object of consumption. This dilemma is avoided by the kinds of practices that reflect on the production apparatus in Benjamin's sense and therefore dispense with the comfort of a high gloss brochure in favor of a re-appropriation of public space.

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[1]Shivani, Anis (2003): Is America becoming Fascist? In: adbusters. Journal of the Mental Environment. September/October 2003. No page number.

[2]The collage is depicted in, among others, the book by Ohrt, Roberto (1990): Phantom Avantgarde. Hamburg. p. 90.

[3]Frank, Thomas (1997): The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism. University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London.

[4]Quoted from: Klein, Naomi (2000): No Logo! Munich, p. 308/9.

[5]cf.: http://www.contrast.org/KG/buynotnd.htm, 12.12.03

[6]Whereas businesses still presumed in the nineties that they could profit from the high status of art via image transfer, today it is the other way around and businesses present their unlimited power now in the formerly autonomous realm of art as "sponsors". As Horkheimer and Adorno said: "In war, goods are still advertised that can no longer be delivered, simply for the sake of demonstrating industrial power." Dialektik der Aufklärung. Amsterdam 1968, p. 193. Now they purport to advertise goods, although it is entirely a matter of the occupation of public space.

[7]The picture is found, for example, in: TIME, November 4, 2002.

[8]Bourdieu speaks of neo-liberalism as a "conservative revolution of a new type ... that on the outside has nothing in common with the old Black Forest pastorale of the conservative revolutionaries of the thirties." Bourdieu, Pierre (1998): Gegenfeuer. Konstanz. p. 44/5. On breaking rules in management literature : Bröckling, Ulrich (2003) : Bakunin Consulting, Inc. Anarchismus, Management und die Kunst, nicht regiert zu werden. In: Norm der Abweichung, edited by Marion von Osten. Zürich. p. 19-38

[9]See, for example, the articles in the magazine *form 184*, July/ August 2002: "Design kann die Welt verändern!" or the supplement for the German Marketing Day 2001 from w&v (werben und verkaufen), Süddeutsche Zeitung et al. 2001, p. 62: "Ist der Ruf erst ruiniert..."

[10]Jonathan Crary rightly points out that the description of distraction, even if it is positively assessed, is based on the presumption of an "atrophy", a "deterioration" of perception. In his view, it is more appropriate to address the question of how attention is produced among human subjects. "I maintain,

however, that attention and distraction cannot be conceived outside a continuum, in which both, as parts of a social field, in which the same imperatives and forces stimulate both the former and the latter, incessantly amalgamate." Jonathan Crary (2002): Aufmerksamkeit: Wahrnehmung und moderne Kultur. Frankfurt, p. 48. (original title: Suspensions of Attention: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture. MIT Press, 2000)

[11]Lasn, Kalle (2000): Culture Jam. How to reverse America's suicidal Consumer Binge - and why we must. New York, p. 123

[12]ibid., p. 124

[13]ibid., p. 125

[14]Horkheimer & Adorno, op.cit., p. 198.

[15]The cross-connections with Brecht's epic theater are interesting in this context. The famous "V-effect" (alienation effect) is intended to block the audience's "empathy" and establish alienation: in relation to advertising technique this would mean interrupting its specific shock technique. Cf. Brecht, Bertold: Schriften zum Theater. Über eine nicht-aristotelische Dramatik. Frankfurt am Main, p. 150ff.

[16]Lasn, op.cit., p. 107.

[17]Benjamin, Walter (1999): The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In: Illuminations (Translated by Harry Zorn), London, p. 231.

[18]Möbius, Hanno (2000): Montage und Collage, Munich, p. 195.

[19]Eckhard Siepmann has carried out a very knowledgeable analysis of the "Millionen-Montage". In: Siepmann, Eckhard (1992): Montage: John Heartfield: vom Club Dada zur Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung: Dokumente, Analysen, Berichte. Berlin. p. 168ff.

[20]In her book "Purity and Danger" Mary Douglas analyzes the attribution of the meaning of dirt and pollution as a technique for reproducing the classification systems of society. In this sense, the culture jammers' intervention is also to be seen, in addition to the communication of an alternative political message, primarily as an attack on the "sacred" facts of the consumer society. The Maybach ad for Daimler-Chrysler (above) is specifically lacking this element of pollution.

[21]Klein, op.cit., p. 319.

[22]Lasn, op.cit., p. 125.

[23]Mitchell, W.J.T. (2003): Interdisziplinarität und visuelle Kultur. In: Diskurse der Fotografie, edited by Herta Wolf, Frankfurt, p. 43. Mitchell's objection must be read against the background of his resistance to an academic discipline with the name "visual studies"; this is his way of saying that with the abandonment of one of the principle axioms of "visual culture", the justification for its existence in the academic world is also lost. One can only hope that Mitchell is actually convinced of the content that his strategic rhetoric presents.

[24]Quoted from Schnierer, Thomas (1999): Soziologie der Werbung, Opladen, p. 94.

[25]Goffman, Erving (1981): Geschlecht und Werbung, Frankfurt, p. 327.

[26]ibid., p. 328.

[27]Benjamin, Walter (1988): Der Autor als Produzent. In: Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften II, 2, p. 693.