

Nov 17th, 12:00 AM

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### Citation

Haylock, B. (2004) Revolutionary Images and Images of Revolution. Graphic Resistance Through Culture Jamming and Radical Commodities., in Redmond, J., Durling, D. and de Bono, A (eds.), *Futureground - DRS International Conference 2004*, 17-21 November, Melbourne, Australia.  
<https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2004/researchpapers/134>

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# Revolutionary Images and Images of Revolution Graphic Resistance Through Culture Jamming and Radical Commodities.

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The matters of graphic design's political significance and social responsibility are topics of discussion that seem to be alternately fashionable or taboo. In recent years, there has been much discussion and debate in graphic design circles surrounding the concepts of 'graphic authorship' and 'culture jamming', particularly as regards the role that graphic designers may play in the latter. Indeed, one may even hazard a claim that there has been a marked level of excitement about the idea of culture jamming: here finally is a way that graphic designers can (apparently) legitimately lay some claim to political agency, to an active and meaningful participation in society.

Culture jamming offers both a practical blueprint and some social theoretical foundation according to which graphic designers might play a consequential role in shaping their world, emancipated from their typical realm of corporate subservience. Culture jamming, however, is obviously not the only means through which graphic design may be of political significance. This article, therefore, is not focussed specifically upon culture jamming; rather, the article is concerned with the broader question of graphic resistance, and particularly also with the question of graphic design's significance within the context of what might be termed 'radical commodities'.

The term 'radical commodities' is used to describe commercial products that explicitly advocate an oppositional politics, and which, in particular, typically also present a forthright critique of the practices of late-capitalist society; these are fundamentally paradoxical objects whose apparent ethic is at odds with their being as commodity. Significantly, however, these are also products that differentially actualise an alternative politics. This paper focuses upon the significance of visual communication as regards four cases, namely the products of: Rage Against The Machine, a (now-defunct) political rap/rock band; The Body Shop, the multinational manufacturer and retailer of nature-inspired cosmetics and toiletries; Naomi Klein, a journalist and author of the best-selling book *No Logo*; and Michael Moore, the best-selling author and award-winning documentary filmmaker, whose work includes *The Awful Truth*, *Stupid White Men*, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. All of these cases are paradoxical to the core, for each advances an oppositional political position, an ideology that flies in the face of contemporary capitalism, yet they all tender unequivocally commercial products—and indeed apparently lucrative ones at that.

This paper seeks to argue that there is a key difference between culture jamming and radical commodities: where the former is confined to the realm of images, the latter in fact have some recourse in the material world. That is to say, where culture jamming can offer only the signs of resistance, radical commodities may constitute a substantive alternative (even if not always holistically so). Thus, the paper argues, it is in the move toward a synchronicity of image and practice that the revolutionary potential of radical commodities—and indeed the revolutionary potential of visual communication—truly lies.

# Revolutionary Images and Images of Revolution

## Graphic Resistance through Culture Jamming and Radical Commodities

The matters of graphic design's political significance and social responsibility are topics of discussion that seem to be alternately fashionable or taboo. In recent years, there has been much discussion and debate in graphic design circles surrounding the concepts of 'graphic authorship' and 'culture jamming', particularly as regards the role that graphic designers may play in the latter. Indeed, one may even hazard a claim that there has been a marked level of excitement about the idea of culture jamming: here finally is a way that graphic designers can (apparently) legitimately lay some claim to political agency, to an active and meaningful participation in society.

Brought to widespread attention by *Adbusters* magazine, and described as "semiotic terrorism" (Jordan 2002: 104) or a tactic of 'media sabotage' that aims to "invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously ... decrypt[ing] them, rendering their seductions impotent" (Dery 1993), culture jamming is clearly a radical activity that is particularly well-suited to the visually literate. Its methods include 'billboard liberation', 'uncommercials' and 'subvertisements'. Culture jamming offers both a practical blueprint and some social theoretical foundation according to which graphic designers might play a consequential role in shaping their world, emancipated from their typical realm of corporate subservience. Culture jamming, however, is obviously not the only means through which graphic design may be of political significance. This article, therefore, is not focussed specifically upon culture jamming; rather, I am concerned here with the broader question of graphic resistance, and particularly also with the question of graphic design's significance within the context of what might be termed 'radical commodities'.

By the term 'radical commodities', I mean to describe commercial products that explicitly advocate an oppositional politics, and which, in particular, typically also present a forthright critique of the practices of capitalist society; these are fundamentally paradoxical objects whose apparent ethic is at odds with their being as commodity. Significantly, however, these are also products that differentially *actualise* an alternative politics. This paper will focus upon the significance of visual communication as regards four cases, four producers of what may be deemed radical commodities, namely: Rage Against The Machine, a (now-defunct) political rap/rock band; The Body Shop, the multinational manufacturer and retailer of nature-inspired cosmetics and toiletries; Naomi Klein, a journalist and author of the best-selling book *No Logo*; and Michael Moore, the best-selling author and award-winning documentary filmmaker, whose work includes *The Awful Truth*, *Stupid White Men*, *Bowling for Columbine*, for which he received an Academy Award, and, most recently, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for which he received the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or. All of these cases are paradoxical to the core, for each advances an oppositional political position, an ideology that flies in the face of contemporary capitalism, yet they all tender unequivocally commercial products—and indeed apparently lucrative ones at that.

It is frequently understood, critically but also popularly, that contemporary society is all-but-dominated by image-based commerce—certainly, one needn't look very far to appreciate that we are inundated by commercial imagery. In light of such an observation, it follows that the realm of images might be the field upon which we could best contest the hegemony of corporate interests—indeed, such an assumption is a fundamental premise of culture jamming. It is my position, however, that such an assumption is also deeply problematic. My objective in this article is not to proffer an out-and-out treatise against culture jamming, or against the would-be potency of images in activist applications, but rather to explicate, from a critical theoretical perspective, some of the fundamental complications that are inherent in supposedly oppositional uses of visual culture within a society whose visual environment is almost entirely commodified; I shall also reflect upon some historical moments wherein these complications have played themselves out.

### **A brief genealogical foray into the sociology of the commodity**

So as to provide some foundation for the analyses and critiques that follow, it is necessary to offer some theoretical extrapolation of the concept of culture jamming, along with a very concise but nevertheless critical overview of sociological conceptions of the commodity. Culture jamming is a mode of resistance borne of and adapted to a very particular social formation, namely an advanced variety of capitalism manifest as a ubiquitous mass of (corporate) imagery; Guy Debord, the principal theorist of the Situationists—the renowned French left-wing movement of the 1960's—famously labelled such a social formation “the society of the spectacle” (Debord 1994). Debord claims that “[t]he spectacle is not merely a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” and that “[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (1994: 12). Debord's conception of the spectacle, therefore, is essentially merely a revision of Karl Marx's notion of ‘commodity fetishism’, albeit a necessary one at that, not because Debord's theoretical formulation is significantly more complex than that of Marx, but rather because *the commodity-form itself is today more complex*, it is omnipresent and all-but-omnipotent. Marx perceived the fetishism of commodities as anything but benign; rather, he understood that it serves to alienate individuals from one another and from their own ability to labour. That is to say, the logic of capitalism does not merely alter the way in which we perceive the material products of human labour and the objects of human need, but, as Georg Lukács observed, it also “stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” (1971: 100). Capitalism's impact, therefore, is both *objective and subjective*; it begets both alienation and *reification*.

Thorstein Veblen, studying America's affluent classes, brought to light a (now-famous) phenomenon, which he termed ‘conspicuous consumption’. Veblen's analysis saw commodity-objects used not to satisfy material needs, but as visible tokens of wealth in a game of social one-upmanship; we might retrospectively understand that Veblen—somewhat ahead of his time—

recognised commodities as *signifiers* of wealth (and thus of power). Nowadays, however, the commodity's sign-function or sign-value (see Baudrillard 1981; 1996) is no secret; today's Western (or *Westernised*) consumers unanimously and intuitively understand that commodities may signify not merely an abundance of capital, or *cultural* capital (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), but also many facets of one's personality, namely such traits as taste, sexuality or subcultural affiliation. The convention whereby one is able, or indeed *compelled*, to render visible the deepest qualities of one's humanity is in fact central to the society of the spectacle. Lukács observed that "[j]ust as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man" (Lukács 1971: 93). Indeed, this tendency toward abstraction and complexification remains patently in force: its contemporary extremes—respectively objective and subjective—are to be found in the futures market and in 'lifestyle branding'.

Thus, Debord's notion of the spectacle describes anything but an unbiased totality of mediating images: indeed for Debord, the spectacle is "ideology in material form" (1994: 149-154). That is to say, the spectacle is the manifestation of a capitalist ideology, of the profit motive, whose apparent effect is a sinister objectification and quantification of the innermost qualities of humanity. Culture jamming is motivated by this very assumption, namely that a very particular and indeed insidious system of values imperceptibly inheres in the spectacular society. In fact, 'culture jamming'—an expression coined in 1984 by the experimental band Negativland (see Dery 1993)—is, in essence, simply a contemporary term for the Debordian concept of *détournement*. The Situationist tactic of *détournement* is, in intention (and in literal translation), a *diversion* from the spectacle: if the spectacle is an enthralling yet alienating soliloquy, *détournement* (or culture jamming) is an interruptive and notionally dialogical rebuke, a space for critique and for the expression of oppositional ideas.

### **Revolutionary images and images of revolution**

Having thus covered some chiefly theoretical ground, we may now move toward a few analyses proper. The so-called 'radical commodities' that are the particular focus of this article of course do not constitute culture jamming in the typical sense. However, a number of parallels may be drawn between the two phenomena, particularly insofar as both apparently constitute some manner of radical incursion into the spectacle by way of the spectacle's own institutions—i.e. they *excorporate* spectacular strategies (on 'excorporation', see Fiske 1989: 15). We may understand that both radical commodities and culture jamming constitute a semiotic resistance to the spectacle; that is to say, theirs is a war of signs and meanings. This war, however, is waged on the spectacle's turf, according to the spectacle's own rules of engagement. Suffice to say, the inherent risk in such a scenario lies in the fact that the revolutionaries' tactics, and indeed the war itself, may come to be incorporated into the spectacle, may come to be seen as simply another spectacular event for the public's entertainment and enjoyment.

In spite of their similarities, if we juxtapose culture jamming and radical commodities, it becomes apparent that the visuality of each phenomenon is of quite a different order to that of the other. Where radical commodities present *images of revolution*, it may be understood that culture jamming produces *revolutionary images*. That is to say, where the radical commodities here analysed evoke the notion of revolution through combinations of signs, culture jamming is itself a radical act *based in* signs; hence we may make the distinction between images of revolution and revolutionary images. Jean Baudrillard (in an essay that predates his notoriously post-theoretical position of more recent years) charts the evolution of the nature of the image, from a profound symbolism to its current spectacular state; he theorises a progression from *representation* to *simulation*. Specifically, Baudrillard posits four successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 6)

This is a useful formulation against which we can map the phenomena of radical commodities and culture jamming. Radical commodities aspire to a revolutionary reality, to such substantive changes as: ecological business practices and fair trade (The Body Shop); well-endowed legal representation for incarcerated minority political figures (Rage Against The Machine); grassroots political organisation and autonomy (Naomi Klein); and more humanitarian corporate policies and a genuinely democratic political system (Michael Moore). Theirs, therefore, is a revolutionary face that—purportedly—accurately reflects a truly radical core.

In actuality, however, the face of the radical commodity is, according to Baudrillard's formulation, an image of the second order: it is typically a revolutionary *façade*, albeit an image that does not necessarily denature so much as it *exaggerates* a revolutionary reality—this is an activism frequently more radical in appearance than in practice. In contrast, when the ostensibly revolutionary signs of radical commodities become co-opted and incorporated into the system, yet are subsequently consumed with the view that their consumption still constitutes some manner of revolutionary practice, they move from the second to the third order of the image. Take, for example, the oft-reproduced image of Che Guevara's face—itself an abstraction of Alberto Korda's photograph *The Heroic Guerrilla*, of 1960—that has been described as “the all-purpose symbol of revolution and idealism” (Brown 2003: 55). Rage Against The Machine consistently hung a flag bearing that image onstage during their concerts, and used the image on the cover of a single; additionally, Tom Morello, the group's guitarist, has claimed that:

[o]f course evoking the symbols of revolutionaries like Che Guevara, Angela Davis and Emeliano Zapata means little in and of itself, but when you link them to the modern day struggles of Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, the Zapatistas and battles against police brutality ... it demonstrates that young people today can be part of an ongoing resistance to oppression. ... We have allied ourselves with

people like Che and Angela because their struggles directly relate to the struggles of today. (Morello 1996)

Morello thus acknowledges that an image like that of Che is today essentially devoid of revolutionary meaning, but alleges also that the image can be reinvested with political significance if it is associated with contemporary struggles, such as those for which he and his group are ostensible spokespersons. In its original context, that is in a Cuba of times past, the image of Che would almost certainly have reflected the revolutionary spirit of a people. In the employ of *Rage Against The Machine*, the image masks and exaggerates the revolutionary reality of a rock-music commodity that is only somewhat activist. But, when the image is co-opted and proliferated on a plethora of decidedly non-radical commodities, such as lip balm (*Che lip balm*), jeanswear (*Lee Jeans*) and ice-cream (*Streets Magnum Cherry Guevara*), and is subsequently consumed as the object of a quasi-revolutionary act—that is, if it is consumed out of sympathy for Che’s cause and ideals—then it is consumed as a signifier of revolution behind which there lies no revolutionary reality: it therefore *masks the absence* of a revolutionary reality.

Culture jamming, in contrast, and as mentioned previously, may be understood not as images of revolution but rather as revolutionary imagery. While radical commodities belong essentially to the second of Baudrillard’s phases, culture jamming—depending upon the particularities of its method—either constitutes a means of exposing advertising imagery’s distortion or negation of reality, or it itself belongs to the fourth phase, to the order of simulacra. I shall clarify this distinction. The ‘Culture Jammer’s Manifesto’ makes such claims as “[w]e will take on the archetypal mind polluters and beat them at their own game” and “[w]e will uncool their billion-dollar brands” (Lasn 2000: 128). Some instances of culture jamming aim to critique and destabilise the spectacular systems of branding and advertising by co-opting their language (both visual and verbal), before subsequently reorienting that discourse explicitly toward the material reality that is otherwise masked or denied therein. An example of such a culture jam is ‘Joe Chemo’, a parody of the Camel Cigarettes character ‘Joe Camel’, which seeks to ‘uncool’ cigarette advertising by explicitly illustrating the carcinogenic effects of smoking (see [www.joechemo.org](http://www.joechemo.org) or Lasn 2000: 156). In contrast to this patently tendentious variety of culture jamming, some culture jams serve to subvert the intended reading of an advertisement, but do not make any explicit reference to a profound (or profoundly absent) reality: this is exemplified by the partial disablement of a mall’s light-sign and billboard advertisement, such that “HILLSDALE – The Beginning of Something Wonderful” is modified to read “LSD – The Beginning of Something Wonderful” (see [www.billboardliberation.com/LSD.html](http://www.billboardliberation.com/LSD.html)). Whilst the latter variety of culture jamming does admittedly disrupt the normally smooth operation of the spectacle, thus potentially inciting its audience to question an habitually passive acceptance of the spectacle’s monologue, it is nevertheless the case that such culture jamming fails to transcend the realm of simulacra, of simulated hierarchies and values; it fails to crack the mirrored façade of the spectacle’s hyperreality, and thus is itself merely a simulacrum of resistance.

### **Incorporation, simulation and radical efficacy**

As has been broached above, there looms, in a war of signs, the omnipresent threat of incorporation, the threat that one's enemies might defuse one's weapons and repurpose them to their own ends. Yet, as radical commodities and culture jamming comprise imagery of differing orders, so too does the threat of incorporation face each phenomenon differently.

An example of the incorporation of the imagery of radical commodities was given above in the case of Che Guevara's image; a notorious example of the incorporation of culture jamming may be found in the case of an infamous Australian advertising campaign for the sportswear company Nike: the campaign's billboards featured a large image of a new Nike football boot and the copy "The most offensive boots we've ever made"—a polysemous statement with an apparently principal reference to the offensive or forward line in football, but with an allusion also to the multitude of sweatshop-labour allegations that the company faced at the time. These billboards were shortly 'liberated' by the FFFF, the 'Fans Fight for Fairer Football' group, who were apparently a protest group campaigning not against the corporation's labour practices but against the 'unfair' technological advantage offered by the new Nike boots; the billboard liberations were supported by black-and-white FFFF posters and a website, both of which were conspicuously plebeian in their design. It was subsequently revealed, however, that the FFFF was in fact a construct, a product of Nike's advertising agency, and a premeditated component of the entire campaign. The tactics of culture jamming were co-opted as a part of the spectacle; corporate monologue was disguised as participatory dialogue.

Thus culture jamming—a tactic of diversion through revolutionary imagery—is incorporated into the system through the co-option of its tactical language as a spectacular manner of speech: a tactic that means to tear spectacular images from the sanctity of their self-referential logic is reduced to a game of self-effacing parody, wherein spectacular images are granted new alibis in a simulated reality.

In contrast to culture jamming, radical commodities present images of a revolutionary reality that they differentially actualise; but, if their imagery is co-opted to the service of conventionally capitalistic commodities, it may take one of two paths. Firstly, images of revolution, such as that of Che Guevara, may be readily perceived as anachronistic in their incorporated context and may thus be subsequently consumed as what they are, namely images that 'mask and denature a profound reality'—this manner of consumption *defers* the revolutionary sentiment, possibly beyond the realm of consumption. However, if such images are indeed consumed as images of revolution—that is, with sympathy for Che's ideals, for example—then they constitute a pseudo-revolution, a revolution that is *entirely internal to the spectacle*—these images of revolution consumed *qua* revolutionary act therefore constitute the abolition of the revolution, they in fact *mask the absence* of a revolutionary reality. Baudrillard states:

The demand for revolution is ... a living demand, but so long as it is not actualised in practice it will be consumed as the idea of Revolution. ... Consumed, that is, and

at the same time consummated—hence also destroyed. To say that the revolution is consumed/consummated in the idea of the Revolution means that the revolution is both fulfilled (formally) and abolished in that idea.... (1996: 203)

Thus, if the images of revolution are consumed as if such consumption constituted a revolutionary act, the revolution disappears into the shadow of its absence. The same would be the case even as regards the given radical commodities, for not one of those examples is so fundamentally and substantively radical that its consumption alone could constitute a genuinely revolutionary act.

Stuart Ewen contends that “[b]y reducing all social issues to matters of perception, it is on the perceptual level that social issues are addressed. Instead of social change, there is image change. Brief shows of flexibility at the surface mask intransigence at the core” (1988: 269). This is definitely true of the spectacle, but such an observation also brings to light a shortcoming of culture jamming: culture jamming certainly constitutes a legitimate means of democratic expression, but its radical effect is largely limited to *image change*. Ewen also argues:

There must be a reconciliation of image and meaning, a reinvigoration of a politics of substance. Only then will people be able to ensure ... that images of freedom, satisfaction, and social resistance are meaningfully engaged with the resources and real options available to us in the world we inhabit. (Ewen 1988: 271)

It may be better to seek instead a reconciliation of *image and practice*, a reversal of the deceptive and abstracting tendencies of the spectacle. Herein lies a key difference between culture jamming and radical commodities, for where the former is confined to the realm of images, the latter have some recourse in the material world, some capacity to reach below the surface of the spectacle and to transform its otherwise intransigent core, perhaps in the manner of radical Trojan horses. Where culture jamming can offer only signs of resistance, radical commodities may constitute a substantive alternative (even if not always holistically so), as exemplified by The Body Shop’s fair trade programs and Rage Against The Machine’s benefit concerts. It is with the move toward a synchronicity of image and practice that the revolutionary potential of radical commodities, and the revolutionary potential of visual communication, truly lies.

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