

2010

# Jamming the Culture?: A Critical Analysis of the Billboard Liberation Front

Christina Henderson  
*University of Windsor*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Henderson, Christina, "Jamming the Culture?: A Critical Analysis of the Billboard Liberation Front" (2010). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/2>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email ([scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca)) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.

“Jamming the Culture?: A Critical Analysis of the Billboard Liberation Front”

by

Christina Henderson

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Communication, Media, and Film  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2010

© 2010 Christina Henderson



### **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

## **ABSTRACT**

Consumption and the ideology of consumerism, as vital elements that fuel the capitalist system, have come to be legitimated as normative practices within contemporary western society. The social influence and economic power held by corporations has helped them to establish discursive legitimacy, so that citizens have become marginalized and left without access to meaningful participation in cultural production. I argue that culture jamming, in particular, is a resistance strategy that aims to confront the ideological nature of consumerism, refuses to accept the colonization of the public sphere by private interests, and hopes to open up the dominant forms of communication to public participation. Not without its limitations, this tactic is heavily criticized for posing little threat to consumerism at best, and contributing to the dominant ideologies at worst. By conducting a critical discourse analysis of the website of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), I will assess the organization's effectiveness as a counter hegemonic force, revealing how they use language in the attempt to challenge and reinterpret dominant discourse.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My sincerest appreciation to all of you who helped along the way. To my committee, thank you for not only being a part of this, but also for your contributions. For my family and friends, I am grateful for all of your support. And to Val, if I could only put into words what your dedication has meant to me, my project would have been nothing without you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Culture.....	3
Hegemony and Counter Hegemony.....	5
Resistance .....	13
<b>III. CONSUMER CULTURE AND CULTURE JAMMING</b>	
A Brief History of Consumer Culture.....	15
Culture Jamming: An Overview.....	27
The Historical Precedents of Culture Jamming.....	34
The Contemporary Objectives of Culture Jammers.....	40
(i) Confronting the Ideological Nature of Consumerism .....	41
(ii) Reclaiming the Public Sphere .....	45
(iii) Democratizing the Media .....	51
Is Culture Jamming Counter Hegemonic?: The Critics.....	55
<b>IV. A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE BILLBOARD LIBERATION FRONT</b>	
The Billboard Liberation Front: A Profile .....	61
Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis.....	69
Text Analysis #1: "The BLF Manifesto" .....	75
Text Analysis #2: "Wachovia Bank: Money to Burn" .....	82
Text Analysis #3: "The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement: A Comprehensive Guide to the Alteration of Outdoor Advertsing..	87
<b>V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A: "The BLF Manifesto" .....	112
Appendix B: "Wachovia Bank: Money to Burn" .....	114

Appendix C: "The Art and Science of Billboard Liberation: A Comprehensive Guide to  
the Alteration of Outdoor Advertsing " ..... 117

**VITA ACTORIS** ..... 125



## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The average consumer encounters over 6,000 marketing messages every day (Tesky, 2008), and that is compared to approximately 1500 in 1984 (Rumbo, 2002). This ubiquity illustrates that advertising has become an integral element of contemporary western society, helping to advance and sustain a culture of consumption. Many people now define their identities, values, and goals around consumerism, rather than citizenship. The social influence and economic power held by corporations has helped them to establish discursive legitimacy, so that citizens have become marginalized and left without access to meaningful participation in cultural production.

In order to counteract this state of affairs, several forms of resistance have emerged. My thesis, at the most fundamental level, is an investigation of the dialectical relationship between the promotion of consumerist ideologies and the colonization of public space by private corporate interests, and the active resistance that has developed and continues to develop to challenge these ideologies and reclaim this space. More specifically, I will focus on the anti-corporate, anti-consumerist resistance strategy that has come to be known as “culture jamming.” While it is generally agreed that culture jamming is a resistance strategy aimed at consumer culture, there is a debate that becomes apparent between the advocates and the critics concerning its effectiveness as a tool for social change. The advocates argue that culture jammers, in philosophy and practice, create counter hegemonic discourses against consumerism. Others, however, have criticized culture jamming for posing little threat to consumerism at best, and contributing to the dominant ideologies at worst.

S.L.T. McGregor argues, that “people need to think about improving their living conditions rather than accepting and coping with their present conditions. That improvement is contingent upon people being conscious of social realities that exploit or dominate them and then demanding liberation from these forces” (2004). In my thesis, I hope to foreground an understanding of the forces that reproduce relations of power and dominance as seen through the eyes of culture jamming activists. By investigating the hegemonic relations of capitalism as sustained through consumer culture, I hope to reveal the ideological nature of consumerism, as well as make visible the way in which the public sphere has increasingly become colonized by private interests. Through the exploration of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), a culture jamming organization, I will investigate whether this strategy can be considered a counter hegemonic force aimed at challenging dominant ideologies. Particularly, my research focuses on the analysis of three texts from the website of the BLF, asking whether the discourse in these texts can be considered counter hegemonic.

## **CHAPTER II: Conceptual Framework**

This thesis incorporates several key concepts which have been derived from a critical cultural studies approach and is therefore essential that I begin with a discussion of them. Focusing on the concepts that provide a foundation for my thesis, this chapter will begin with a definition of culture as it pertains to my work specifically. I will then delineate the theories of hegemony and counter hegemony, both of which contribute to the cornerstone of my conceptual framework. And finally, I will articulate how resistance is defined for the purposes of my research.

### **Culture**

*“Culture is one of those words that people use all the time but have trouble defining”*  
– Wendy Griswold (1994: 1)

*“Culture, in the Marxist sense, is a site of struggle”*  
– Fred Inglis(2004: 23)

Raymond Williams’ description of culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1976: 87) acts to recall the long and complex historical development of the term. Given that “culture” is rooted in several languages and has been “refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings” (Hebdige, 1993: 358). These numerous and differing accounts have been appropriated within various academic disciplines in the attempt to describe social existence, as well as by social groups and individuals in the attempt to make sense of their social reality. Since, as Williams argues, “it is easy to react by selecting one ‘true’ or ‘proper’ or ‘scientific’ sense and dismissing other senses as loose or confused” (1976: 91), my aim here is not to provide a “correct” or even concrete definition

of the grand concept that is culture. Instead, as it is generally agreed that culture “can only be understood in the context of its use,” it is my intention to provide a definition of culture that is most relevant to my thesis (Hecht, Baldwin, & Faulkner, 2006: 72).

In this context, I will employ a concept of culture that foregrounds issues of power. Rona Tamiko Halualani (1998), in his explanation of culture asks, “Who ultimately has the power/privilege/right to define and reproduce ‘culture’? Who benefits from the creation of ‘culture’?” (266-267). It is in this cultural studies approach that “the question of focus moves from what culture is...or even how it comes to be...to questions of whom it serves” (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006: 20). From the 1970s, theorists within the discipline of cultural studies have adapted the work of Antonio Gramsci to analyze culture as a system of power relations (During, 1993). More specifically, culture has come to be understood through his concept of hegemony. Kate Crehan (2002) points out that “the concept of hegemony helps us to grasp how power is lived in a given context, and how certain regimes of power – remembering that no regime is uncontested – are produced and reproduced in the day-to-day lives of individuals” (200).

Gramsci’s primary concern was with the way in which class relations were lived at specific times and places; and essentially how these classes existed within a particular set of power relations. While contemporary cultural studies looks beyond class relations to include a wide range of factors (i.e. gender, race, etc.) that influence social oppression, Gramsci’s theories remain relevant because he theorized that culture provides the tools that people need to understand as well as *change* the world they live in, a view which many cultural theorists share (Crehan, 2002).

## Hegemony and Counter Hegemony

*“The first element is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led...is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is it the objective to create conditions in which this division is no longer necessary?”*

- Antonio Gramsci (1971: 144)

The Gramscian notion of hegemony is invoked by many scholars (Carroll, 1997; Downing, 2001, Hacket & Carroll, 2006) in a critique of power relations within society. Specifically, William K. Carroll, as well as John D. H. Downing attempt to situate social movements in relation to hegemony and counter hegemony. Although I have referred to culture jamming as a resistance strategy as opposed to a social movement, I feel that this literature remains relevant since counter hegemony is not limited to social movements alone, but can also be applied to activism and resistance more generally.

When the term hegemony is applied, it is suggested that “a certain way of life and thought is dominant, and is diffused throughout society to inform norms, values and tastes, political practices and social relations” (Katz, 2006: 335). This dominant way of life and thought has the effect of solidifying the dominance of one group over others. This occurs when certain ideologies

come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society – bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but ‘universal’ plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. (Gramsci, 1971: 181-182)

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony makes the attempt to understand how such power relations which maintain and reinforce numerous inequalities are produced and reproduced in everyday life (Crehan, 2002).

Crehan (2002) notes that power relations, for Gramsci, exist within a spectrum of dominance varying between coercion and consent. Hegemony operates under a condition known as manufactured consent, “with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci, 1971: 244). In such a case, the subordinate group acts in the interests of the dominant out of free will. This however will only occur when the subordinate group accepts this dominance as legitimate and natural. Gramsci (1971) notes that for this to happen, dominance must not be overtly explained or justified; it must appear as though it is the natural order of things so as to go unquestioned. He states that “the belief is common that obedience must be automatic...and that not only must it come about without any demonstration of necessity or rationality being needed, but it must be unquestioning” (145). Such a form of dominance is achieved when the interests of the dominant group, disseminated through material resources and social institutions, are articulated and justified as the general interests of everyone, which comes to be accepted as common sense (Morton, 2007). In this way, there are different groups that battle to represent *their* interests as the interests of the entire society, so that when hegemony is won, it appears as though “the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups” (Gramsci, 1971: 182). Not all groups however have equal access to the resources necessary to disseminate their perspectives in the attempt to redefine these common sense assumptions (Faulkner, *et al.*, 2006). Without the alignment of interests, people may feel manipulated and come to understand their subordination as unnatural. This would eventually lead to the necessary use of coercion in order to maintain dominance through, for example, the use of military or police force, or overt legislation. Carroll (1997)

points out that the naturalization of dominance and the consent that this can invoke acts to fulfil “a role that direct coercion can never perform: it mystifies power relations and public issues; it encourages a sense of fatalism and passivity towards political action; it justifies every type of system-serving sacrifice and deprivation” (24). The validity of common sense invites people to consent to their own oppression. Additionally, Gramsci (1971) notes that fatalism and passivity are common since it has come to be a certainty that things exist as they do because “it is ‘natural’ that it should exist, that it could not do otherwise than exist, and that however badly one’s attempts at reform may go they will not stop life going on” (157). Such fatalism thrives under hegemony since an alternative way of life is made to appear as though it is not natural and therefore cannot come into existence. Such an outlook works to keep the prevailing hegemonic order unquestioned and unchallenged.

The use of ideology in a hegemonic sense serves to obscure relations of dominance through normalization, which occurs by embedding it within everyday social forms and processes, such as educational institutions, literature, media, laws, religion, etc. Ideologies work as a part of the psyche, “they ‘organize’ human masses, and create the terrain on which men [*sic*] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci, 1971: 377). Notably, the most prominent, yet concealed effect of ideology is that of maintaining the social order. Tuen van Dijk’s (1993) analysis of the ‘access to the means of communication’ is valuable to understanding the way in which dominant groups advocate certain ideologies. He contends that dominant groups have the ability, through access to the means of communication, to influence discourse in such a way that the knowledge, attitudes, norms, and values of subordinate groups coincide with the interests of the dominant group. Curran *et al.* (1982) also argue that any messages produced will be

favourable to those who control the means of production. In other words, control over resources is conducive to control over the messages, representations, and ideologies produced. The media are vehicles through which particular ideologies are promoted and social dominance is legitimated and naturalized. Denis McQuail (1994) adds that such control over the production of messages, representations, and ideologies works to marginalize those voices which lack resources and power. In doing so, "those most likely to challenge these arrangements are unable to publicize their dissent or opposition because they cannot command resources needed for effective communication to a broad audience" (82). This, in effect, allows the dominant groups to maintain their positions without being widely challenged.

From this, it is understood that culture is the site where people make sense of their world through the socially shared meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions that are infused as common sense. This includes "the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute a way of life of a specific group" that appears ordinary and sometimes remains unconscious (Eagleton, 2000: 34). This not only guides how people make sense of their world, but also how they conduct themselves in everyday life. Common sense is developed through culture "in a series of ideological, religious, philosophical, political, and judicial polemics, whose concreteness can be estimated by the extent to which they are convincing" (Gramsci, 1971: 178). Furthermore, culture is also understood as the site where certain groups acquire and maintain dominance through the normalization of ideologies which not only serve their interests but also discourage alternative views. Such ideologies, which are rarely made explicit, often go unquestioned or resisted.



Gramsci (1971) also theorized that such an organization of power is only momentary, that “what exists at a given time is a valuable combination of old and new, a momentary equilibrium of cultural relations corresponding to the equilibrium of social relations” (398). Given that power is only temporary, domination is never stable, but always struggling to maintain its legitimacy. In this way, Halualani (1998) argues that

culture is the contested discursive terrain of meaning among various groups that occupy differently situated power positions. Thus, culture is ultimately linked with power....Here, on such a terrain, a dominant group (or the powerholders)...with a particular ideology or system of beliefs and thought hold the power to determine what ‘culture’ is for society and to what ends this ‘culture’ will serve. (264-265)

This struggle to define and redefine the normal meanings of everyday life is the way in which culture becomes the site of contention. It is “upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise. Those forces seek to demonstrate that the necessary and sufficient conditions already exist to make possible, and hence imperative, the accomplishment of certain historical tasks” (Gramsci, 1971: 178). What becomes an essential component for Gramsci, cultural studies theorists, and resistance groups alike concerning hegemonic culture is the notion that the system of power relations that keeps people in their position of subordination and “the forms of cultural organisation which keep the ideological world in movement” are not natural but manufactured, and therefore are *changeable* (ibid.: 342). Gramsci (1971) states that “the lower classes, historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negotiations, via their consciousness of the identity and the class limits of their enemy” (173). This optimism suggests that first, “people need to be made self-consciously and *critically* aware of the incoherence and inadequacy of the taken-for-granted, common sense assumptions” so that they can resist oppression and define for themselves what is meaningful (Crehan, 2002: 114).

There is no instance of hegemony in which there is complete consent of all the dominated. This indicates that power in modern societies is never fixed or permanent, but exists in a constant negotiation of struggle and resistance by groups who attempt to win the consent of other groups. In the struggle over hegemony, Gramsci refers to the important role that “organic intellectuals” play in promoting certain ideas which “enable a particular social class or group to articulate its own interests by generating an alternative worldview in opposition to the dominant hegemony” (Rumbo, 2002: 136). For Gramsci, such individuals “must have the capacity to be an organiser of society in general,” who “are for the most part ‘specialisations’ of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence” (1971: 5, 6). Intellectuals then are defined by their particular social role in encouraging and leading a group in their struggles and realizing their goals in the pursuit for counter hegemony.

Given that the system of power relations that keeps people in their position of subordination is not natural but manufactured, it must be understood that it is changeable. In coming up against contradictions, hegemonic forces must alter and revise in order to maintain their position. The “emphasis on the continual construction, maintenance, and defence of hegemony in the face of constant resistance and pressures is reflected in...the potential for ‘counter-hegemony’” (Morton, 2007: 97). Counter hegemony is the attempt to challenge dominant ideological frameworks and replace them with a radical alternative (Downing, 2001). Carroll (1997) stresses that such challenges and transgressions “necessarily entail a *dis*organization of consent, a disruption of hegemonic discourses and practices” (25). Without stating it as such, Ian Angus (2001) in his short essay “Emergent

Publics: An Essay on Social Movements and Democracy,” theorizes the connection between hegemony and counter hegemony. He states that

prevailing relations of power are considered normal by the majority of the population. In order for the system of power to change, something prior must happen. Many people must begin to see these relations of power not as natural and inevitable, but as specific and changeable. That is to say, the common-sense assumption that a relation of power is normal must give way to the notion that it is an imposition, an effort, an injustice, and that it deserves to be changed. (73)

Any attempt to replace a hegemonic order with a radically different outlook can be challenging and daunting at best. In the face of these challenges, resistance groups must avoid strategies that “seek solutions within the existing hegemony” and in the end are a reproduction of power relations (Carroll, 2006: 20). Carroll (1997) suggests that there is always a possibility of creating new injustices. For example, when a resistance group offers up their interests as most relevant, it can have the effect of relegating those with differing views to the margins. Carroll (2006) states it is essential that “remedies for social injustice that merely *affirm* a group’s status or entitlements within an existing order must be distinguished from remedies that *transform* the world in ways that abolish underlying generative mechanisms of injustice” (20). The following delineates, from the perspective of Gramscian theory, what is necessary for effective counter hegemony.

Essential to any counter hegemonic initiative is that it opposes common sense in such a way that the initiative aims to deconstruct these views. Gramsci’s “war of position” is what such entities need to strive for. Owen Worth and Carmen Kuhling (2004) explain that in a war of position, “the entire legitimacy of hegemony is contested by an ideological attack not only on the major agencies and structures of the order, but also on the complex forms of civil societal common sense that hold the order together” (35). Such an ideological

struggle not only hopes to challenge the legitimacy of common sense, but also hopes to threaten the consent to the hegemonic order by exposing the vulnerabilities (ibid).

In order to successfully construct a war of position and induce social change, a “historical bloc” must convene. Led by organic intellectuals, a historical bloc is the assemblage of several subordinated groups in an alliance that bridges differences, by “identifying the interests and the requirements common to all the national forces, in order to set those forces in motion and lead them into struggle” (Gramsci, 1971: 78). Such an alliance would require the coming together of numerous oppressed social groups of various demographics on a global level. Hagan Katz (2006) argues that “for a historic bloc to be effective it needs to be a coalition of forces,...that avoids localism or nationalism, and promotes global solidarity through networking that links the global and the local – a unifying, non-homogenizing, and indigenizing strategy of resistance” (337). In order to rival the prevailing hegemony, a collective must be established that understands and accepts difference but which also recognizes the commonalities within that difference so as to transcend narrow interests (Carroll, 2006). Additionally, Katz (2006) goes on to note that an effective historical bloc “does not duplicate power disparities inherent in the existing world-system” but through such a coalition, aims to decentralize them (337). Along with making power structures visible and challenging them in such a way that a radical alternative seems plausible, Hackett and Carroll (2006) insist that another key aspect of counter hegemony is that those who are challenging the dominant ideologies are not seeking “counterpower.” Instead, they are “undoing the local and dispersed powers that routinely keep people in their places as disciplined subjects” (204). In this sense, counter hegemony is not about replacing the existing power structure with a different set of power relations, but rather

suggests a radical alternative to replace the existing conditions, of which “the new philosophy cannot coincide with any past system” (Gramsci, 1971: 455). As such, a historical bloc “must involve organizations interested in different issues, and representing different interests, groups, and regions – it should be diverse and inclusive” (Hackett & Carroll, 2006: 338).

### **Resistance**

*“The specific dimensions of either a form or theory of resistance will depend on the nature of the particular struggle in question.”*

- Beverly Best (1998: 24)

Beverly Best (1998) articulates that “how we define social spaces determines how we are able to envisage the practices that take place there” (27). As such, the way in which I have defined culture for the purposes of my thesis has implications concerning how I will characterize resistance. Francis Mulhern (2000) asserts that Gramsci “had pioneered the study of culture as a mode of political struggle, as the site and means of the effort to establish, or resist or counter, the non-coercive rule of dominant class blocs, their ‘hegemony,’ the historical ‘common sense’ that secures the actual ‘consent’ of the oppressed” (103). This suggests that people are not passive recipients of domination, but rather people employ “human agency to question, reject, modify, or incorporate dominant ideologies and cultures” (Sandlin and Milam, 2008: 345). Since culture is historically and situationally specific, so too is resistance. In this sense, resistance must be related to a certain struggle or context of domination. In particular, I define resistance as it pertains to consumerism. According to Jennifer A. Sandlin and Jamie L. Callahan (2009), “consumer resistance...includes the ways in which consumers counteract a variety of market practices

and the ideology of consumerism, or the ways in which consumers enact ‘a broad set of oppositional consumption meanings’” (89). Resistance, as I will be looking at it, is the struggle to question and confront the common sense meanings that act to maintain the dominant ideologies of consumerism.

In relying on the above characteristics that identify a resistance group or strategy as counter hegemonic, I will subsequently analyze whether the Billboard Liberation Front can be considered such a force. First however, it is important that I outline not only the hegemony that culture jammers find themselves up against, but also the arguments of the critics who question their effectiveness for meaningful social change.

## CHAPTER III: Consumer Culture and Culture Jamming

### A Brief History of Consumer Culture

*"If it is true that in today's 'consumer society' we are born to consume, it is also true that consumption has cultural and practical implications that go way beyond satisfying our daily needs through commodities"*

- Roberta Sassatelli (2007: 6)

*"The consumer has been depicted as someone who undergoes a senseless work routine only to get the money necessary to acquire more commodities"*

- Roberta Sassatelli (2007:126)

Consumer culture has typically been associated with the western world since, from the onset, it was a one of the ways in which the west differentiated itself from the rest of the world. In this sense, some have suggested that consumerism represents "civilization," progress, freedom, rationality, and that it has been important in promoting a western way of life (Slater, 1997). In order to understand how such a lifestyle has become synonymous with the western world and how it has projected itself as "natural" and "inevitable," it is imperative to recall the developments that have occurred over the past few centuries.

Dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, market exchanges were becoming more common as more people "received cash incomes and were required to purchase consumption goods, rather than producing most of what they required for themselves and obtaining the rest in local barter arrangements" (Onufrijchuk, 1997: 65). At this time, consumers knew how the goods were produced as it was done locally and in a method that the consumers were familiar with. With the onset of urbanization between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries however, the production and distribution of goods became mediated by differing entities. Still, goods were produced on a small scale in workshops or households. While there was an increase in the availability of commodities, consumption was a privileged activity reserved for those of

the upper classes. During this time consumerism was made respectable through its connection with the private lives of the bourgeoisie (Slater, 1997). A small market with limited products allowed early consumers of the mid-1800s to use consumption as a way to form a social identity and to distinguish themselves from other social status groups. Colin Campbell (1994) explains that being a consumer was a way to display one's wealth. Such an exhibition "requires the individual to engage in conspicuous (and wasteful) consumption" (49), which can be understood as a form of luxury in contrast to consumption for practical necessity (Sassatelli, 2007). As well, Roberta Sassatelli (2007) notes that consumption was very much associated with leisure as those of the upper classes had the time to shop and the time to enjoy their purchases. She states that "shopping became a typically bourgeois activity, a socially approved way of spending time" (45). The introduction of department stores within urban centres gave these consumers a greater choice of goods and services, and at the same time, these spaces became places of leisure (ibid.).

Robert Bocoock (1993) suggests that the beginnings of what we now call consumer culture in the western world can be traced back to the economic developments that occurred from 1880-1920. It is during this time that some of the basic features of contemporary society were established. The inclusion of the lower classes in the world of consumption was made possible by "increased urbanization and industrialization, and improvements in transportation and communication technology...[as well as] the creation of mass products and their marketing and distribution on a national scale" (Stole, 2001: 89). By the end of the 19th century, Bocoock (1993) recalls, the production process had seen significant changes in management and technical abilities. There was the emergence of capitalist entrepreneurs interested in the mode of production, and the new classes of



worker and owner (14). Additionally, with the introduction of the assembly line and the birth of mass production, goods were made faster, cheaper, and in greater quantities. Stuart Ewen (1976) argues that in order for this capitalist mode of production to survive, the market had to grow horizontally, vertically, and ideologically. This meant that the market had to expand from a local to a national level and it had to include the working classes. Additionally, these newly included members of the marketplace had to be convinced that they were now consumers. Higher wages allowed workers to consume the goods they were producing, and the shorter work hours allotted them the leisure time to enjoy them. However, worker roles still provided the core sense of social identity and the imagined shift from producer to consumer was not an easy transition as these producers were accustomed to thriftiness and were reluctant to spend their earnings on what seemed to be unnecessary and frivolous luxuries. This lack of willingness to consume was a major issue that needed to be confronted. Sut Jhally (2000) explains the problem of capitalism is not that of production, but of consumption. It is essential that commodities “go through the circuit of distribution, exchange and consumption, so that profit can be returned to the owners of capital and value can be ‘realized’ in money form. If the circuit were not completed the system would collapse into stagnation and depression” (28). Bocoock (1993) further clarifies the vital role of consumption within the capitalist system, stating that

[it] has been a crucial component in the way in which modern capitalism has been sustained, for the simple and obvious reason that, unless products could be sold in return for money, there would be no profits. Capital, which is invested in productive industry, requires a return on the investment, a return which can only be derived by the sale of goods and services at a profit. There is obviously no point in producing unless something is consumed and profits are generated thereby. (35)

This point made by Jhally, Bocoock, and others (Ewen, 1976; Leiss, 1990; Lury, 1996) is important in recognizing the ever important role that consumption plays even in today's economy.

Jhally (2000) highlights the role that advertising played in the promotion of consumption, stating that "so central is consumption to [capitalism's] survival and growth that at the end of the nineteenth century industrial capitalism invented a new unique institution – the advertising industry" (28). Thus, in response to the vital importance of consumption to mass industrial capitalism, advertising and market research were "introduced to maximize and rationalize the consumer habits of these new consumers" (Grossberg, *et al.*, 1998: 212). Between 1880 and 1910, annual advertising expenditure rose from \$30 million to \$600 million (Budd, *et al.*, 1999). This illustrates the emphasis put on advertising in this period. Advertising was the way to first, communicate to the masses information about the products and second, to convince the masses that they needed them. These early years of advertising focused mainly on the product itself and its objective utility. Essentially, workers and those of the lower social classes had to be convinced that they were now consumers. During this stage, the advertising industry had to convince businessmen that they were fundamentally important to the distribution and circulation of commodities.

By the 1920s, advertising had established itself as a legitimate industry and a shift began to take place such that advertisements began to suggest the practical as well as non-practical benefits and uses of the product to potential consumers (Ewen, 1976; Lury, 1996). Building on Ewen's (1976) argument concerning the ideological spread of the market (as mentioned previously), this initial attempt to mobilize people as consumers was a way of controlling consumption in a more consistent manner. Thus, advertisements emphasized

conformity and belonging, while at the same time, the intention was to create desires and habits that would cause consumers to respond to changes in predictable ways (ibid.). Advertisers portrayed the mass public not as a collective group of citizens, but as individual consumers who were engaged in the act of buying. In order for people to take on the social identity of the consumer, consumption had to be legitimately dubbed as a means to participation in the community. This legitimation occurred through the use of political metaphors by advertisers who equated consumption with citizenship, the consumer with the citizen, and a consumer standard of living with democracy (McGovern, 1998). In all these ways, consumption became the way in which one's civic role and public identity were affirmed, and was thus a tangible representation of political participation. Grossberg *et al.* (1998) contend that the ideological function of advertising in the early part of the twentieth century was twofold; "advertising not only had to define the particular desires and needs of these new consumers, it had to make *them* think of themselves as consumers as well" (213). In this sense, advertising, as a communicator of social cues became the way in which people were socialized as consumers.

Consumption had found its roots in the 1920s and 1930s, it was at this time that the "characteristic institutions and habits of consumer culture...assumed the central place that they still occupy in American life" (Fox, 1983: 103). The sought out plan to facilitate the survival of industrial capitalism began to solidify in the 1920s. As Ewen (1976) notes "the attempt to create a national, unified culture around the social bond of the consumer market" (54) was becoming a reality. As workers were encouraged to think of themselves as consumers rather than producers, people increasingly began to accept consumption as a major focus of everyday life. The rise of consumer interest groups in the 1920s and the

development of consumers as a focus of study both in academic and market research helped to play a role in centralizing and normalizing consumerism. Moreover, the implementation of consumer-oriented government policies also aided in stabilizing consumerism's position within society. For example, American president Franklin Roosevelt introduced the New Deal in 1934 to help restore the economy after the Great Depression. Paradoxically, it was during the Great Depression that people came to understand the vital position that consumption held in their lives. Ewen (1976) argues that advertising helped to maintain consumption's legitimacy during this era, stating that "advertisers waited for a better selling day and reminded people that the products would be there when needed" (204). Advertising had a difficult task; while the function was to ensure the perpetual consumption of commodities and help to advance the transition from a world of production to a world of consumption, it was at a time when people were unable to afford abundant consumption. Roman Onufrijchuk (1997) points out that one way to ensure that consumption would continue was to introduce branding. Since mass produced goods were indistinguishable from one another, competitive branding arose to differentiate between similar generic commodities (Klein, 2000). Brand names were established to represent particular companies and their products so as to invoke recognition and loyalty among consumers.

Dan Slater (1997) contextualizes consumer culture during the era of modernity, explaining that this was an era in which the individual within a mass society was seen to experience the world as a free and rational being, not bound by tradition, but free to pursue personal interests. This is an important argument to understanding why early on, advertisers and marketers promoted the idea that consumerism was the path to modernity.

As Slater points out, the relationship of consumerist ideology to modernity is important in understanding the neo-liberal ideologies of liberation and individualism that are dominant today. Furthermore, some characteristics of modernity, such as the positive views towards organization, science, and technology, were reinforced by the emergence of mass production. Additionally, consumerism was consolidated by the fact that consumers were seen as individuals free to choose among goods and services.

Slater (1997) points out that by the 1950s, there was abundant evidence to suggest that a consumer society was firmly established, whereby most values, goals, practices, and institutions were consumption based. During this time, what is known as 'organized capitalism' was developing, where economic organization and managerialism was seen as the sure way to prosperity and stability. Slater maintains that consumer culture was centralized as "the engine of prosperity, a pre-eminent tool for managing economic and political stability and the reward for embracing the system" (11). Rising economic standards were increasingly equated with a rising standard of living. The emergence of the occupational class within organized capitalism saw the rise of consumption as a distinguishing factor by which people identified themselves and others within the stratification system (Bocock, 1993). Conspicuous consumption, in this sense, was an indication of social status through the display of wealth. In the act of open and wasteful consumption, individuals would compare themselves and compete with others through the commodities they possessed and displayed (Campbell, 1994).

The introduction of television enabled the dissemination of consumerist ideologies at an unprecedented level. During a time of post-war economic boom, what was especially endorsed was the notion of economic nationalism, which embraced government regulation

and intervention. As well, people were encouraged to participate in the further stimulation of the national economy. Joy Parr (1999) indicates that for “the first fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, the liberal idea that the consumer interest could be a powerful directing force in the economy was not an absurdity” (84-85). This meant that the choices consumers made were not only believed to be free and self-sufficient, but also that these decisions had real effects in terms of what was produced for consumption. While the idea of consumer sovereignty had been continually advocated since the mid-1920s, it was clear that the conditions for such a possibility were not evident. Essentially, “buyers did not have ‘perfect’ knowledge of goods for sale in the market” and therefore they could not make rational choices that were independent from outside influence (ibid.: 99). This indicates that consumers did not necessarily have the power to decide what was produced.

The recent stages of consumer culture began in the 1980s, when consumerism became exemplified within neo-liberal ideologies. What is described by many authors (Carroll, 2006; Harold, 2007; Kidd, 2002) as the ‘enclosure of the commons,’ neo-liberalism can be characterized by “biopiracy and the wholesale commodification of nature, commercialization of culture and intellectual activity, corporatization and privatization of public institutions and utilities” (Carroll, 2006: 14). In 19<sup>th</sup> century England, the commons, or common lands, were taken over, fenced off, and turned into private property (Harold, 2007). The ‘commons’ was a system of agricultural production in which farmers worked under a structure of open fields, common rights, and the shared use of resources in an area. Not limited to geographical space, the commons was a participatory system that extended to political, economic, social, and cultural life. Under an ethos of self-sufficiency, the commons were not private or state controlled. What was produced was not for trade or

sale in a market, and the resources used were not managed by the state. However, a new class of landlords emerged and in order to exploit wool production for capital they fenced off these lands. Without access to communal resources, people were caused to disperse to urban areas in the search for paid labour (Kidd, 2002: 67-69). “Neo-liberal economists invoke the ‘tragedy of the commons’ arguing, as did the first feudal landlords, that the resource necessarily be enclosed under corporate control in order to make it more efficient and stop its unregulated over-use” (Ibid.: 66). Under such an ideology, the shift from economic nationalism to neo-liberalism was largely in response to the economic instability of the previous era. This instability, characterized by high inflation and high unemployment, was pinned on the government’s inability to manage the economy. This provided the opportunity for those who favoured and benefitted from little government involvement to promote deregulation and privatization (McQuaig, 2001). As neoliberal views began to take hold, the government relaxed its policies and limited its role in the economy, thus enabling more economic freedom for corporations (Bakan, 2004). This has included what Naomi Klein (2007) has labelled the ‘policy trinity,’ which consists of the eradication of the public sphere (privatization), liberation for corporations (deregulation and free trade), and minimal social spending (cutbacks). Within a neoliberal context, deregulation becomes an increasing trend; state policies that protect the public’s interest are lessened or cease to exist. This prompted a crisis of the public service sector as it had to compete with private interests that had the resources to excel in a deregulated environment. Without regulation, corporations would be open to participate in free trade, take advantage of resources and labour, and exploit all avenues in the pursuit of profit. It was, and continues to be, a common belief that “the public interest is best served by the market” (Calabrese, 2004: 5). Increasingly, the

public's interest was put in the hands of private enterprises which sought profits as their number one priority. Neoliberal ideology promotes the 'free hand of the market;' under such a theory, it is argued that government regulations need to be lifted so as to allow the market to operate to its fullest potential. Milton Friedman, an economist and leading advocate of neoliberalism, asserted that "just as the ecosystems self-regulate, keeping themselves in balance, the market, left to its own devices, would create just the right number of products at precisely just the right prices produced by workers at just the right wages to buy those products" (Klein, 2007: 58). Klein (2007) explains that, for neoliberals, the free market is a scientific system; if there is a problem, it is because the market is not entirely free.

In accordance with neoliberal characteristics, "consumer culture was seen in terms of the freedoms of the market and therefore as the guarantor of both economic progress and individual freedom" (Slater, 1997: 11). More than ever before, not only did the consumer become self-interested in the pursuit of individualistic wants, "consumer choice became the obligatory pattern for all social relations and the template for civic dynamism. Collective and social provision gave way to radical individualism" (ibid.: 10). Collective issues were pushed to the margins so that individual needs and desires could be highlighted. One of the more prominent ideologies stemming from this was that the common good would be realized through the pursuit of individual interests within a competitive marketplace (Sassatelli, 2007). Joel Bakan (2004) illustrates this mode of thinking by quoting a for-profit school advocate who states that "People tend to react to economic incentives as a reason to do things" (116). In this sense, the common good is allegedly ensured because people are motivated by selfish and individualistic rationales.



While neoliberalism is not a natural and inevitable progression in economic development, it has become a dominant ideology that has gained legitimacy through its comparison to the failure of socialism and fascism. “Since [fascism] led to the most destructive war in history and...[socialism] is portrayed as a monotonous daily life that lacked even the most banal consumer delights,” neoliberalism is presented as the best option to date (Perry, 2006: 158). Some have suggested that what is also appealing about neo-liberalism is that free trade has allegedly become one of the most peaceful forms of interaction between countries (Slater, 1997). Although such an assertion is highly debatable, dominant ideology suggests that with the free market comes an abundance of goods and services and broadened consumer choice (Klein, 2007).

Ewen (1976) reasons that “as we look at the social roots of the modern consumer culture... we can perceive it as something other than the unquestioned social ‘given’ that it purports to be” (189). What becomes evident is that it is not a natural or inevitable progression in the unfolding tales of history. Instead, consumer culture is the result of several ideological forces that have worked to advance its legitimacy and achieve a dominant position in western society. If consumer culture did not progress naturally, it is then implied that it has been manufactured, shaped, and reproduced in quite specific ways. In each subsequent era of consumer culture, the beneficiaries must consciously promote and control consumption in ways that sustain consumerism as a dominant way of life. For instance, the introduction and use of advertising specifically as a method of dispersing social cues about consumer behaviour is evidence of this (Onufrijchuk, 1997). From the onset of mass production, it was important to employ “a broad scaled strategy aimed at selling the way of life determined by a profit-seeking mass-productive machinery” and to direct ways of

thinking and behaving that was prescribed by such an ethos (Ewen, 1976: 54). Throughout its history, it is apparent that “the success of capitalist production and consumption requires that people remain satisfied and cooperative” (Morris, 2001: 19). In this sense, domination within a consumer culture has always required that people become predictable as consumers; that on the one hand, they have desires that can never fully be satisfied, but on the other, that they continue to consume and are satisfied with the system as a whole (Ewen, 1976: 84).

Consumer culture continues to hold a dominant position in western society. It is so intertwined in daily living that it has become not only normalized, but also largely unquestioned. It is in this way that people willingly participate in consumer culture and reproduce the ideologies that normalize it. In recalling consumer culture’s history, Ewen maintains that “we see it born as an apparatus for doing battle for the control of social space. It was born and continues in contestation for control over daily life” (1976: 189). In this sense, consumer culture can be seen as one viewpoint, one way of life that is struggling to maintain its position and sustain its legitimacy. While consumer culture leaves little room for marginal voices by suggesting that there is no alternative way of life, it is evident through the resistance groups that have emerged that there is space for such voices and that alternative ways of life are feasible. It is these resistance groups that question the legitimacy of consumer culture and its associated power relations. Even though consumption is the dominant way that culture is lived, it is certainly not the only way (Slater, 1997). For many people, culture jammers as a resistance group, have come to represent this reality.

## Culture Jamming: An Overview

*“marketing for the people”*

- The Billboard Liberation Front (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/>)

The term ‘culture jamming’ is thought to have been coined in 1985 by Negativland, a San Francisco college band on their recording *JamCon '84*. These musicians referred to billboard activists and other media saboteurs in their attempts to direct audience attention to the original strategy of corporations (Klein, 2000). Locating the instance of origin, the band’s words describe culture jamming:

as awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life grows some resist. The skilfully reworked billboard...directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy. The studio for the culture jammer is the world at large. (Negativland 1985/1994)

By definition, culture jamming employs human agency by rejecting and changing the unidirectional communicative relationship. In a challenge to traditional “roles,” a part of the audience takes the role of media and cultural producer, altering and subverting the original encoded message. By transforming consumerist messages into alternative media and using it as the medium by which to communicate to other citizens, these activists aim to encourage citizen participation and resistance to the social order by creating awareness about the effects of consumer culture. Culture jamming is motivated by a multitude of issues, employs a wide variety of tactics, and embodies numerous organizations and individual activists (Cammaerts, 2007). For this reason, there are several accounts of what culture jamming is. The general consensus among scholars is that culture jamming is about sending subverted or counter-messages in an alternative manner, within a mainstream context.

Kalle Lasn (1999), founder of the Adbusters Media foundation and a well-known advocate of culture jamming, simply states that “corporations advertise. Culture jammers *subvert*” (131). On a fundamental level, Lasn is able to frame the oppositional debate between corporations and culture jammers. Naomi Klein (2000) furthers this distinction, stating that culture jamming is a form of dissent that attempts to produce “counter-messages that hack into a corporation’s own method of communication to send a message at odds with the one that was intended,” and in doing so it turns the corporation’s message against itself (281). This brief definition is not quite adequate for understanding what “jamming the culture” actually entails. As such, it is important to break down what is meant for the culture to be jammed.

Tim Jordan (2002) argues that society exists within a realm of cultural codes which influence the way people think and behave. These codes can be broken or “jammed,” such that messages and ideologies can be subverted. By drawing attention to the origin of the term “culture jamming,” Marc Dery (1993) identifies that the word “jamming” is a form of CB radio terminology in which one illegally disrupts radio broadcasts and transmissions “with lip farts, obscenities, and other equally jejune hijinx” (4). Culture jammers disrupt *cultural* transmissions; they “introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations” (ibid.: 5). To do so, culture jammers begin with the already established dominant cultural codes and subvert these codes through a creative means, such as “humour, mocking, satire and parody,” to create alternative meanings (Cammaerts, 2007: 72). Similarly, Tom Liacas (2005) identifies culture jamming as a sort of play, by which culture jammers “toy” with forms of communication and interaction that are familiar to us (such as billboards or language) as well as imagery (such as

logos), in order to turn the message against the culture that created it. He goes on to state specifically that “this contemporary game is played predominantly with symbols and signs in a society that has come to be permeated with them” (62). Culture jamming is thus commonly understood as a metaphor in the sense that it stops the flow of consumer culture, and instead opens up an active two-way flow of culture and communication (Sandlin & Milam, 2008).

Thus, culture jamming can be seen as a resistance strategy whereby activists creatively interpret and reinvent taken for granted meanings and messages. In a similar way, Christine Harold (2004) understands that culture jamming does not necessarily refer only to the jamming or interruption of media messages, but also to the “artful proliferation of messages, a rhetorical process of intervention and invention, which challenges the ability of corporate discourses to make meaning in predictable ways” (192). This field of creativity opens up a space for the audience to become artists and activists and to participate in the active production of cultural meanings.

The Adbusters Media Foundation, established in the 1990s, has brought widespread recognition to this resistance strategy by bringing culture jammed images into the mainstream. At the same time, the numerous organizations that have been established around the world have created an international network. Over the past twenty years, globalization and the recent development of widely accessible technology has made culture jamming possible on a larger scale. This has made the creation and distribution of culturally jammed works much easier (Klein, 2000). For example, “scanners and software programs like Photoshop now enabl[e] activists to match colors, fonts and materials precisely” (ibid.: 285). As technological developments have allowed culture jamming to become more high-

tech in the physical world, the rise of the internet has brought culture jamming into cyberspace. Jeffery Juris (2005) points out that “by significantly enhancing the speed, flexibility, and global reach of information flows, allowing for communication at a distance in real time, digital networks provide the technological infrastructure for the emergence of contemporary network-based social movement forms” (191). While the relatively inexpensive and easy to use software has had profound effects on the side of production, the internet has effected culture jamming quite significantly in terms of distribution and global connectedness. This includes the distribution of digitally created or reproduced parody advertisements through emails, listservs, websites, and so on. Moreover, without completely ignoring such issues as the digital divide or corporate control of the internet, it can be argued that the internet is a medium that is fairly accessible and open to participation. In this sense, individual activists and organizations, in their efforts to create awareness, can get their messages, ideas, strategies, tactics, artworks, etc. across to a larger and international audience. Cammaerts (2007) argues that it is not possible to know how far the distribution of culture jamming has reached, but he contends that the internet has undoubtedly played an important role in the quick and cheap dissemination of messages across the globe, in building and maintaining networks, and in decentralizing political action. It is essential to recognize however, that culture jamming must still operate on the local and physical level, just as is the case with other activists that move between online and offline activity. Furthermore, the use of the internet must “be seen in conjunction with other media usages and not in a dichotomous perspective of ‘old’ versus ‘new’ media” (ibid.: 86). In this sense, culture jamming works within a local and global network that is connected through a combination of existence in physical, electronic, and cyber-space.

As a strategy of resistance, culture jamming can take several forms. The first and most common takes the form of the “subvertisement.” Taking aim at large corporations, these anti-advertisements are parodies of familiar advertising campaigns that mimic “the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double take as viewers realize what they’re seeing is in fact the very opposite of what they expected” (Lasn, 1999: 131). In altering or jamming the advertisement, the culture jammer uses images and text that aim to shock or disgust consumers (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009). The intention is to grab people’s attention and to shed light on the untruthfulness and ubiquity of advertising and brands in order to raise critical consciousness. Harold (2007) points out that for this strategy to be effective in any way, the jammer must keep the original form of the logo or advertisement closely intact, while at the same time, deriding the content. The power of the parody advertisement, she argues, lies in the “recognizability of the ubiquitous brands they target” (35). While corporations spend billions in marketing their brand every year, the culture jammer uses “the master’s own very expensive and shiny tools to dismantle the master’s house” (ibid.: 36).

A second form of culture jamming is pranking. A prank is a type of practical joke or trick, usually of a playful nature. For this reason, Harold (2004) understands that pranksters can be seen as comedians, in such a way that “comedians diagnose a specific situation, and they try something to see what responses they can provoke” (194). As a culture jammer, a prankster is a performance artist or media hoaxer that playfully utilizes the dominant modes of communication instead of opposing them. Harold (2004) identifies a prank not as an act of direct opposition, but as an act of appropriation. In a type of “stylistic exaggeration” (196), or “elaborately staged deception” (Dery, 1993: 6), the culture jammer appropriates

and augments a mode of communication in a playful way so as to interrupt the normative pattern. The power of the prank lies in the notion that “contemporary commercial culture is dependent on consumers having somewhat routine responses to words and images” (Harold, 2007: 107). In this way then, pranksters “jam” the conventional flow of consumer culture by reconfiguring the modes of communication.

Third, culture jamming can also be represented by what Lasn (1999) refers to as “cyberjamming.” This refers mainly to the presence of culture jamming online. Aside from creating a website or posting digital culture jams online, there are several other ways in which people can participate in “cyberjamming.” Among these tactics are cyberpetitions, virtual protests, virtual sit-ins, and gripe sites. Cyberpetitions are petitions that people can access online, add their name to, and email back to a source. A virtual protest is a way to help people find creative ways of protesting. Virtual sit-ins, which can be a part of virtual protests, involve mobilizing several people to simultaneously request more information from a targeted website than it can handle, therefore shutting it down. And gripe sites are websites dedicated to revealing the realities of a particular corporation or brand.

Finally, consumer boycotts are another way that culture jammers illustrate their resistance. The Adbusters Media Foundation (AMF), for example, has for numerous years promoted ‘Buy Nothing Day,’ a yearly event that urges citizens to resist purchasing for one day. This event appropriately takes place on “Black Friday,” the first shopping day after American Thanksgiving, which is traditionally the busiest shopping day of the year in the US (Budd, Craig, and Steinmann, 1999). The AMF also promotes similar activities which represent the boycotting of consumerism, including the “Credit Card Cut Up” where volunteers stand in shopping malls and offer to cut up people’s credit cards in response to



excessive interest rates and mounting debt; the “Zombie Walk,” a march of people dressed as zombies walking around shopping malls, representative of the spectator role that consumerism assigns; and “Whirl-Mart,” where people gather together and walk around a store with carts in a huge line, but refuse to buy anything (<https://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>).

There has been some debate about whether culture jammers constitute a “proper” social movement—that question, while significant, is beyond the scope of this thesis. For my purposes here, I refer to culture jamming as a resistance strategy. Nonetheless, advocates of culture jamming, particularly Lasn (1999) have argued that culture jamming is *the* social movement of this era, stating that culture jammers are “a loose global network of media activists who see ourselves as the advance shock troops of the most significant social movement of the next twenty years” (xi). This “loose global network” consists of various activists, groups and individuals, with numerous agendas. Cammaerts (2007) argues that “jamming is present at so many different levels and moves in so many different directions” (74). As such, there is limited common ground for a movement to form. Due to the desire for anonymity, the lack of communication between culture jamming organizations and individual culture jammers, and the infinite amount of issues that are being fought for, it “often result[s] in the proliferation of different messages and a confusing array of regulatory systems” (Bennett & Lagos, 2007: 202). These implications can be problematic in classifying culture jamming as a movement.

## The Historical Precedents of Culture Jamming

*“We place ourselves in a revolutionary continuum that includes, moving backwards in time, early punk rockers, the '60s hippie movement, a group of European Intellectuals and conceptual artists called the Situationist International..., the surrealists, Dadaists, anarchists, and a host of other social agitators down through the ages whose chief aim was to challenge the prevailing ethos”*

- Kalle Lasn (1999: 99)

In order to understand the emergence of culture jamming, it is essential to comprehend the historical context which created the conditions for its existence. Liacas (2005) argues that it is necessary to start at the beginning of the twentieth century with the rise of mass production, mass consumption, and mass communication. With mass production and consumption came an overflow of information, “and industrial societies had to seek out and develop more efficient codes of communication to deal with it all” (63). He argues that this gave greater importance to the use of symbolic languages as the means to make sense of a dense amount of complex information. Liacas contends that the initial reactions to this communicative world of signs were evident in art movements beginning post-WWI with the Dadaists and Surrealists. Such artists rejected the normative standards of art and would take everyday objects and place them within absurd contexts. The Dadaists created what is referred to as “ready-mades” or “found art” (*objects-trouvés*), which carried “the idea of attributing a different meaning to an object” (Cammaerts, 2007: 75). Their actions, which often included performance art (such as public gatherings and demonstrations) as well as the publication of journals, relied mainly on chaos and disorder, without attention paid to logicity. Stemming from Dadaism, the Surrealists presented an appearance of absurdity, often creating optical illusions in their art in the attempt to confuse the audience (ibid.). Cammaerts (2007) also cites the art movement known as

Fluxus as a possible ancestor to culture jamming. Much like Dadaism and Surrealism that went before it, Fluxus was a counter-artistic movement that aimed to challenge the normative definition of art. What set Fluxus apart is that it “explicitly integrated making art with cultural and socio-political criticism of society and the way it functions” (75). These artists often combined different media in new ways to create new meaning.

Bertolt Brecht, a theatre director in the first half of the twentieth century, focused on using theatre as a medium for participatory art. Brecht was not counter-artistic, instead he aimed for a restructuring of theatre to a new social use, for the democratization of theatre and art through participation (Mitchell, 1973). Influenced by Marx, Brecht introduced ‘epic theatre’ in the 1920s, which was about rewriting historical events. He used this original method of theatre as a way to experiment with “whether a historical event and its literary treatment might be made to turn out differently or at least be viewed differently, if the processes of history are revalued” (ibid.: xii). The premise was that, with a re-evaluation of history and with the awareness that there was a possibility that history could have been different, it would inspire the audience to make a change. Using specific techniques to remind the audience that the play was merely a representation of reality, and not reality itself, it was hoped that “the audience would compare the play with their own experiences and stories and so would import their own narratives into the production” (Downing, 2001: 63). As a critical theorist, Brecht’s overall goal was to get the audience to become critical about social injustices so as to leave the theatre and effect change. Most important to Brecht’s theory and method of theatre was *Verfremdungseffekt*. Translated as the “defamiliarization effect” or “estrangement effect,” *Verfremdungseffekt* was a way to make the familiar, unfamiliar. In removing an event’s familiarity and obviousness, it would

create a moment of realization about its unnaturalness. At a point that something (i.e. a historical perspective for Brecht) had become natural to the extreme that it was no longer noticed, Brecht hoped to intervene (Carney, 2005). Using songs, signs, and devices to disrupt the flow, as well as direct address to the audience (ibid.), epic theatre “does not reproduce conditions but, rather, reveals them. The uncovering of conditions is brought about through processes being interrupted” (Benjamin, 1973: 4). In a similar vein, culture jammers aim to reveal the conditions associated with consumer culture by interrupting or jamming the process. Additionally, both culture jamming and Brechtian theatre use techniques that “connect dissimilars in such a way as to ‘shock’ people into new recognitions and understandings” (Mitchell, 1973: xiii). Both are concerned with social change arising from critical awareness.

In the mid-20th century, among such European artists and intellectuals as Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, the Situationist International (SI) emerged. As a culture jammer himself, Lasn (1999) asserts that this movement has been the foundational influence for culture jamming, arguing that Situationists were the “pioneer[s] of the mental environment” (102). For Lasn, the mind is a resource that needs to be protected. He argues that the similarity between the Situationists and culture jammers is that both groups aim to free the mind from oppressions created by the conditions of consumer capitalism.

In the wake of the invasion of American consumerism in Western Europe post-WWII, and at a time when there was a widespread shift in identity from worker to consumer, critics of these conditions began to emerge. Influenced by Marx, the Situationists contended that due to mass production and standardization in modern capitalist societies, peoples’ consciousness had become alienated from everyday life, and society had become a

“spectacle.” The spectacle is everyday life, as lived through pre-packaged and mediated experiences. Lasn (1999) explains, “everything human beings once experienced directly has been turned into a show put on by someone else” (101). In this sense then, the spectacle had “kidnapped” authentic human experience. As a mode of social control, the spectacle “affirms and normalizes the standard order of life such that workers/consumers remained complicit with and imbricated in iniquitous relations of power, unable even to imagine alternatives” (Haiven, 2007: 93). It was argued that class inequality was normalized and maintained through this ritualized spectacle to a point that society was unable to imagine an alternative to capitalistic organization.

In order to reclaim authentic experiences, the Situationists drew upon specific tactics that created situations which could not easily be reproduced or mediated by the technology of the spectacle (Harold, 2007). The most widely known of these tactics, and that which is most commonly compared to culture jamming, is *détournement*. Klein (2000) defines *détournement* as “an image, message or artifact lifted out of its context to create new meaning” (282). Translated as a ‘turning around,’ this tactic has much to do with the idea of replacing the spectacle with an authentic experience through displays of absurdity in everyday life. *Détournement* theoretically works by opening “up the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to it. It gives us the time and space to come up with some other way of being in relation at that moment. It introduced a stutter, a hesitation” (Sandlin, 2007: 79). The purpose was to help break people out of their everyday routines, so as to encourage them to participate in political action, and eventually stimulate a fight against class inequality (Haiven, 2007). Targeting high culture and consumer culture as representative of the capitalist class, and using art as the medium, the premise is that if

reality is made up of signs, it is essential to subvert these signs at the level of everyday life in order to change society's order. Some examples of *détournement* include modifying or reworking signs in storefronts, placing one's own text in old cartoons, or making collages out of commercial or government images (Harold, 2007; Sandlin and Callahan, 2009).

Many scholars (Cammaerts, 2007; Rumbo, 2002; Sandlin, 2007; Thacke, 2008) cite Situationism as "the origin of the idea of culture jamming," arguing that the Situationist idea of subverting meaning in a form of political activism is fundamental to culture jamming (Heath & Potter, 2004: 7). Max Haiven (2007), on the contrary, provides an interesting critique. While he does not disagree that Situationism can be seen as having an influence on culture jamming and that similarities can be drawn between the two groups, he asserts that there are significant differences that set them apart. His main argument is that the Situationists focused their attention on the rectification of class inequality and that culture jammers fail to address the power relations of class, race, gender, etc. Using *Adbusters* magazine to highlight the differences, he argues that they each have a differing view of what is problematic about the spectacle. He contends that while the Situationists saw the spectacle as a hegemonic force in the subordination of the working class, culture jammers see it as the impediment to authenticity. The difference lies in the idea that inauthenticity, for culture jammers, merely restricts people from individual freedom, and is not a means of social control, as the Situationists saw it. Authenticity, for culture jammers, is more about individual emancipation and freedom than collective class consciousness. Additionally, Haiven (2007) argues that each group has a differing view of the public sphere. For the Situationists, the "objective was to create spaces where people could experience the *collective potentials* of being beyond a consumerism that was always seen as part and parcel

of a set of ubiquitous capitalist relations of property, production, and reproduction” (95).

Haiven maintains that there is no collective notion in participating in individual acts that are intended to free one’s own mind from the spectacle, as the culture jammers do. While their acts of *détournement* are similar in nature, it is the motivation behind these acts that marks the difference between the Situationists and today’s culture jammers.

Haiven instead compares the culture jamming movement to that of Gestural Abstraction, which is concerned with artistic freedom. Gestural Abstraction artists rejected conservative norms in their work as representation and celebration of the individual’s freedom under capitalism in Western Europe post-WWII. He argues that culture jamming actually promotes the neoliberal ideology of individualism, and states that while their visual content may be quite different, what these two entities have in common is that “the celebration of the romantic quest of the individual artist...is enshrined as the means to emancipation” (97). As well, both groups see themselves as superior outsiders, Gestural Abstractionists as outsiders distinguished from those who contribute to the conventional ideals of art, and culture jammers as outsiders who have not yet freed themselves from consumer culture.

In looking at further alternate views that consider different influences other than Situationism, it is valuable to touch upon Vince Carducci’s (2006) article “Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective.” In his work, he presents expressivism as an influence on culture jamming. Expressivism emerged in the mid-1700s, in an era characterized by the hard science of the Enlightenment. Rejecting such objectivism, expressivists saw the ‘inner voice’ as the way to find “truth.” By “privileging intuition over rationality, emotions over logic, and creative imagination over formal education,” they conceptualized that truth was within

oneself, it could be found, for example, in feelings and emotions or through creation (Carducci, 2006: 120). By investigating the categories of culture, media, and social movements, he finds that “principles of subjective authority embedded in the expressivist tradition permeate culture jamming” (118). In the area of culture, both search for authenticity. Expressivists favour culture, represented as the natural and moral, over civilization, which was regarded as the artificial. Culture jammers search for “good culture” (i.e. the authentic, natural, original, truthful, etc.) by jamming “bad culture” (i.e. the Spectacle, mediated, manufactured, artificial, etc. ). In terms of media, both aim for the clarification of obscured or distorted meanings. Carducci (2006) notes that the expressivist concept ‘civilise’ or bad culture can be related to the term ideology in the sense that ideology can act to obscure and distort. Culture jammers aim to expose the true nature behind consumerist ideology and the media that promote it. As a social practice, culture jamming, similar to expressivism, sees “culture as a site of political action...as a viable path to social change” (ibid.: 130). The expressivists, as well as culture jammers, see culture as a site of contestation.

### **The Contemporary Objectives of Culture Jammers**

*“Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we live in the twenty-first century. We believe culture jamming...will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society.”*

- Kalle Lasn (1999: xi)

As previously noted, several scholars have suggested that culture jamming is a strategy aimed at resisting consumer culture. Consumerism has become a culturally embedded practice so pervasive that it is nearly impossible to opt out of; we are so surrounded by it that it has become invisible. This so-called ‘consumer culture’ involves



going beyond the acquisition of goods, it is about a way of life. Specific values, goals, practices, and institutions have come to be defined by this dominant way of life and standard of living has come to be equated with the quantity of consumption. The main objective of culture jammers, as Cammaerts (2007) argues, is to create counter hegemonic discourses against consumerism.

In the following sections, I will highlight the research that has identified the specific issues of consumerism that culture jammers aim to counter. There are three interrelated aspects of hegemonic relations which are confronted by culture jammers. The first is the ideological nature of consumerism; the second is the colonization of the public sphere by private interests; and the third is the commercialization of the media. Each of these is unpacked below.

***(i) Confronting the Ideological Nature of Consumerism:***

Bocock (1993) contends that “consumption as a set of social, cultural and economic practices, together with the associated ideology of consumerism, has served to legitimate capitalism” (2). In essence, consumption is the vital element that fuels the capitalist system as it ensures the constant flow of capital. In their analysis of consumer movements, Robert Kozinets and Jay Handelman (2004) agree that consumerism has become a dominant ideology that legitimates capitalism and perpetuates its continuation. Hegemonically, “the success of capitalist production and consumption requires that people remain satisfied and cooperative” (Morris, 2001: 19). Consumer culture is accepted as natural, it is reproduced in our everyday thoughts and actions.

Ideologically, there is no alternative seen to consumer culture. Herbert Schiller (1989) discusses that the reason this occurs is because consumption has been legitimized

and naturalized. He asserts that the outlook “at this time is that there are no alternatives to the rules by which economic, political, and cultural affairs are ordered” (5). Although consumption appears as the natural order of things, it can be argued that from the outset “there were political and cultural scripts which constructed commodity value, contributing to the structure of prices and...to making commercial exchange widely legitimate and highly desirable” (Sassatelli, 2007: 19). Jordan (2002) is helpful in outlining the way in which ideology works through consumerism and the way in which it is constructed, established, and naturalized. He begins with an analysis of cultural codes, stating that much of the world is bombarded with messages that promote a cultural code aiming to persuade people to participate in consumerism. Morris (2001) agrees that this includes “diverse sets of images, meanings, and values, encouraging certain patterns of behaviour that tend to favour the consumption of its products” (18). This cultural code becomes a way of life that engages people not as citizens, but as consumers whose primary goal is the endless acquisition of commodities. Such an ideology is reflective of the private interests of profit-seeking capitalists who have the means to disseminate these ideas.

In contemporary society, culture jammers target the symbols and codes that are most representative of the dominant ideologies promoting consumer culture: brands. Harold (2007) explains that “since markets are often saturated with mass-produced products that are more or less indistinguishable from one another, brands – by attaching to consumer goods a carefully crafted lifestyle, image, and attitude – provide the mechanisms for the individualization necessary in the marketplace”(xxii). In other words, brands are not about selling a specific product, they are selling a way of life associated with the product. Carducci (2006) provides a useful analysis of brands as ideological tools, stating that “brands

are overt parts of the sign system of consumer culture...[which] reveal the dual nature of goods as bearers of commercial ideology, agents of social control, and as autonomous forms of expression, things used to construct personal and social meaning” (127). Brands represent the dominant ideology of consumerism, and encourage the consumption of goods by channelling people’s desires, assuring them that commodities will help them obtain a certain lifestyle. Brands also act as an avenue for people to express their identities by displaying specific goods which convey information about their individuality (Lury, 1996). People have come to understand that through buying certain brands, people are displaying who they are and what they represent according to the lifestyle or images associated with a particular brand. Jordan (2002) points out that it is this “corporate production of symbolic codes, which attempts to structure our unconscious desires and needs, that is most deeply opposed by culture jammers” (109). What makes consumerism vulnerable to challenge, Morris (2001) argues, lies heavily in its reliance on symbolic codes, inclusive of brands. This is primarily due to the arbitrariness of meaning that is applied to such codes, which opens up space for the interpretation of meaning. People “are capable of ‘reading’ messages in ways that the programmer did not intend, perhaps even in opposition to the dominant code” (20). W. Lance Bennett and Taso Lagos (2007) explain that there is another reason culture jammers target brands. They argue that the attraction to brands is that culture jammers can use the work already done by corporations to send messages to audiences. The use of familiar brands may help in getting the audience’s attention.

Advertisements are also ideological tools for consumerism. Their function is “the promotion of consumption as a meaningful and legitimate social activity” (Sassatelli, 2007: 134). Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004) argue that “advertising was not just the

promotion for specific goods, it was propaganda for the capitalist system. It created what came to be known as ‘consumerism’” (27). Jhally (2000) explains that advertising, through its mere pervasiveness and through the stories that it tells, is the way in which people come to be socialized as consumers. It is how they come to understand that the satisfaction of needs is met through consumption, what is important, how to behave, and what is considered good and bad. He expresses that “the story that is used to ensure this function is to equate goods with happiness” (30). If people believe that their happiness rests in the acquisition of goods, that their needs are met through commodities, then the capitalist problem of production (i.e. that commodities must be sold) has found a solution. Jhally (2000) asserts that “the real source of happiness – social relationships – are outside the capability of the marketplace to provide” (ibid.: 31). Yet people are socialized to believe the opposite, and therefore they will continue to consume in order to reach a paradoxically unobtainable satisfaction. This generation of the need for material things (i.e. false needs) functions as a control mechanism over consumers to keep them consuming (Sassatelli, 2007). Advertising draws people away from what has the potential to truly satisfy them, keeping them unsatisfied and on an endless pursuit of happiness through consumption. Jhally (2000) explains that “advertising reduces our capacity to become happy, by pushing us, cajoling us, to carry on in the direction of [material] things” (32). In order to appear as though commodities can satisfy our real need for social relationships, advertisers have attached images of happiness, images of social life, to their products. In what Marx terms commodity fetishism, “commodities not only hide but come to *stand in for or replace* relationships between people” (Lury, 1996: 41). Goods take on a life of their own, while their material production and arbitrary price remains hidden. “The fetishism of the

commodity in modern society is strategically manipulated in the practices of packaging, promotion and advertising...goods are said to be fitted with masks expressly designed to manipulate the possible relations between things on the one hand and human wants, needs and emotions on the other” (ibid.: 41). Partly due to advertising’s involvement in the promotion of consumerism, culture jammers have chosen advertisements as sites of resistance.

Slater (1997) highlights two prominent ideologies that are promoted within consumer culture in order to ensure the support of capitalism. Firstly, he states that “the right and ability to be a consumer is the ideological birthright of the modern western subject” (27). Thus, it is assumed and taken for granted that one can and must consume; it is a right and an obligation. Secondly, he indicates that consumption is seen as a private and individual choice, which “is an extremely compelling image of freedom” (27). The ideological assumption that connects consumption to the rights and freedoms of citizens is further covered in my second area of focus that culture jammers are resisting: the colonization of the public sphere by private interests.

***(ii) Reclaiming the Public Sphere:***

In addition to challenging the dominant ideology of consumerism, culture jammers also aim to challenge the increasing presence of private interests within the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas envisioned the public sphere as the arena in which individuals would deliberate about public matters. The public, for him, could mean a number of things, including:

(1) state-related, (2) accessible to everyone, (3) of concern to everyone, and (4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of ‘private’...[which is referred as] (5) pertaining to private

property in a market economy and (6) pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life. (Fraser, 1992: 128)

The public sphere is what bounds the state to its citizens, and citizens to each other. This is where citizens come together to debate about common interests. Thus, as Downing (2001) suggests, the public sphere is not necessarily a space in geography, but the activity of public conversation, including “information, communication, debate, media” (29-30).

In the 1980s, the economic ideology known as neoliberalism emerged and began to dominate political and social thought. With deliberate efforts, “neoliberal politics constitutes the explicit project within which hegemony has been recomposed in the past three decades” (Carroll, 2006: 13). What seems to be occurring, is that the public and private spheres are merging, not in a mutual manner, but in a way that the private sphere is invading the public.<sup>1</sup> Due in part to an excess of corporate lobbying and the pressure of economic globalization, state governments have reduced the legal constraints that once limited private entities from controlling aspects of the public sphere. The ‘enclosure of the commons’ is a neoliberal imperative that allows for private interests to govern citizen needs. Bakan (2004) explains that “through a process known as privatization, governments have capitulated and handed over to corporations control of institutions once thought to be

---

<sup>1</sup> It is not to be overlooked that Habermas’ literature (Habermas, 1989) references the intertwining of the public and private spheres. Stating that from its inception, the “public sphere evolved in the tension-changed field between state and society. But it did so in such a way that it remained itself a part of the private realm” (ibid.: 141), and that ongoing, the two have overlapped in many ways. Within the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, “the long run state intervention in the sphere of the society found its counterpart in the transfer of the public functions to private corporate bodies. Likewise, the opposite process of a substitution of state authority by the power of society was connected to the extension of public authority over sectors of the private realm” (ibid.: 142). He also argues that attempts to completely separate each other have failed. Within the literature that I have researched concerning consumer culture and culture jamming, Habermas’ overlapping concept of the public sphere is examined in the context that considers the corporate colonization of the public sphere through the private ventures of advertising, branding, sponsorship, etc.

inherently 'public' in nature. No part of the public sphere has been immune to the infiltration of for-profit corporations" (113). The consequences are immeasurable. Klein (2007) points out that even without total deregulation, what is left is "the real world track record of the free market crusade: the dismal reality of inequality, corruption and environmental degradation left behind when government after government embraced [Milton] Friedman's advice" (60). Furthermore, even though supporters of neoliberalism boast that it generates profitability, in the long term it actually produces economic disparities as well as frequent instability (Carroll, 2006).

As the public sphere has increasingly been captured by private interests, notions of the collective have given way to individual pursuits. Consumer culture promotes the ideology that we are not a society of citizens involved in collective issues, but rather that we are individual consumers whose primary aim is the endless acquisition of commodities. To promote this ideology, neoliberals follow the argument that "the free market is a perfect scientific system, one in which individuals, acting on their own self-interested desires, create the maximum benefits for all" (Klein, 2007: 59). The common good is guaranteed to be realized through the market, of which the demand for commodities, ensures that people will get what they want and "need." Sassatelli (2007) explains that "each consumer makes self-directed choices which, put together with those of other consumers, create a 'demand' to which production can do little else but respond" (58). In this sense, the production of commodities is represented as a service for the good of society and is merely a response to people's wants. Within consumer culture people are not seen as citizens, they are seen as consumers, whose needs are best met through free market competition, whereby companies compete to provide the "best" goods and services for the consumer. When

people identify themselves within this culture, they are asked “to think of themselves as individuals in need, who require commodities to become who they are, as private competitors for plenitude in personal and economic markets” (Budd, *et al.*, 1999: 16). As consumer culture allows for self-identity through the acquisition of things, it promotes the notion that the possession of commodities inwardly and outwardly defines people. This encourages an individualistic and competitive way of life and enforces personal responsibility for an individual’s set of choices. Individualism carries with it the ideology of freedom through consumer choice and individual rights (Carroll, 2006). This is “a project that elevated atomized citizens above any collective enterprise and liberated them to express their absolute free will through their consumer choices” (Klein, 2007: 60). People are able to purchase whatever products they consider useful by independently comparing the range of goods available to them without the influence of others (Sassatelli, 2007). Overall, the ideology of individualism acts to disregard collective issues and erode collective solidarities that have the potential to find “cooperative solutions to problems facing humanity” (Carroll, 2006: 18). Instead it emphasizes “solving problems in ways that promote competitiveness and capital utilization” (*ibid.*, 17).

Charles McGovern (1998) provides a synthesis of the way in which the legitimization of consumerism developed. He states that it occurred through the use of political metaphors by advertisers who equated consumption with citizenship, the consumer with the citizen, and a consumer standard of living with democracy. In all these ways, consumption became the way in which one’s civic role and public identity were affirmed, and thus it became a tangible representation of political participation. A foundational basis



for many of these political associations within consumerism is the link to democracy. Ewen (1976) explains that

The process of consumption provided an effective arena for democratic participation. By buying the goods of large industries, and by participating in the economic solvency of these industrial giants, people were electing a government which would constantly be satisfying their needs and desires; the democratic process was becoming one which was turning the political realm away from its traditional governmental concerns and solidifying it within the economic processes of modern industrial capitalism. (91)

If democracy is rule by the people, and political participation is expressed - however poorly - through voting, then purchasing was equated with voting as an expression of free and individual choice, and in this way, by purchasing brand name advertised goods, consumers were electing products to public service and electing the corporations that would provide them.

Additionally, essential to democracy is the equality of all its citizens and the equality of opportunity and access to political participation (Angus, 2001). McGovern (1998) addresses the ideology of equality within consumerism. He argues that despite its guise of open and democratic choice and possibility, consumerism offers a stratified system of inequality. Hegemonically, "the dominance of a culture in a society does not require all that society's members to be able to participate in that culture on the same terms...its dominance is felt to the extent that people's aspirations, their hopes and fears, vocabulary of motives and sense of self are defined in its terms" (Lury, 1996: 7). Advertisers' reference to the democracy of goods implies that mass production, with its wide distribution of a large quantity of relatively low priced goods allows for equal access to these goods. This assumption of social inclusiveness implies that all consumers can participate. It ignores any inequalities that would prohibit an individual from participating or which would allow some

to participate more than others, such as economic status. Consumerism specifically, and capitalism more generally, make no effort to distribute capital or resources equally. Such associations are a major issue in that they act to hide and reinforce the inequalities inherent within capitalism. Thus, even though consumption is emphasized as citizenship and a form of social inclusion, consumerism holds empty promises of opportunity and equality.

There have been considerable changes to public spaces over the past century which signify the pervasiveness of consumer culture. Public spaces have traditionally been seen as sites where citizens can gather and communicate (Fraser, 1992). Rob Shields (1992) points out that today, what is recognized as public space is often times under private ownership or sponsorship so that more and more, public spaces are being colonized by private entities with commercial interests. He contends that this has implications for people's sense of community and the collective. Schiller (1989), as well as Bakan (2004) both offer the 'street' as an example of the colonization of public space, which has become a central public place "where people meet and congregate, where they rally, protest, march, picket, shout through microphones, convey various forms of information, and simply enjoy their freedom just to be in public" (Bakan: 130). This form of civic life now takes place on private property that appears public. Not only are these spaces covered with advertisements, they are often owned by large corporations, which have the ability to control what happens and who is allowed on their premises (ibid.). In this process of shrinking public space, citizens have fewer places to express their democratic rights.

Societies that operate within the late capitalist ethos have transitioned to what Joseph D. Rumbo (2002) calls a "pseudopublic" world of privatized consumption. He recalls Jurgen Habermas' contention that

the rights and responsibilities of citizens have been reduced to their rights as members of consuming publics...[and] the increased 'colonization' of airwaves (discursive space), physical landscapes (public space), and lived experience (psychic space) by marketers permeates the fabric of our cultural lifeworld and hinders the exchange of rational discourse. By colonizing public, discursive, and psychic spaces, [consumerism] becomes a central part of our commonly held cultural repertoire, one whose hegemonic control over these spaces poses enormous obstacles for those who wish to reclaim them. (129)

It seems to be the case, as argued by Bakan (2004), that there is no place for escape from commercial messages. The advocates of culture jamming argue that culture jammers in philosophy and practice want to change this, starting "a new war of position to reclaim public, discursive, and psychic spaces" (ibid.: 138).

***(iii) Democratizing the Media:***

The public sphere is the space where the interchange of ideas occurs, the space where people should be able to participate equally in public conversation (Hesmondhalgh, 2000). Within societies of large populations, mass communication is often times essential to maintaining the public sphere. Communication, in this sense, is mediated by an interlocking system of media institutions. Thus, as Hackett and Carroll (2006) argue, "prospects for democracy hinge on the patterns of communication and power that media institutions enable" (40). Following this argument, many scholars (Downing, 2001; Hackett, 2001; Hackett & Carroll, 2006) suggest that democracy throughout society relies heavily upon the democratization of the mass communication system, i.e. the media.

The media are one of the primary avenues by which citizens can access the public sphere and communicate with each other within mass society. Since there is arguably a "democratic deficit" (Hackett & Carroll, 2006) by which not all citizens are given equal access to participation, the "media now loom as necessary sites of intervention and struggle" (ibid.:

12). Culture jammers aim to participate in this fight. Such activists assert that the current media system fails to promote a truly democratic environment, and thus they seek to actively change this.

There are numerous areas by which the media contribute to the democratic deficit (ibid.). First, the media are not open to the public as a means of debate and decision-making since they do not provide equality of access to information or participation. Second, there has been a centralization of power, which is not synonymous with the democratic value of equality. Centralized power within the media system involves the concentrated ownership of media enterprises. The problem rests in the influence that the owners have in deciding what “issues enter the public arena, and how they are framed; so their political interests and causes have an unfair advantage” (ibid.: 5). Third, since the media fall under a commercial system where profit is the main objective, access to participation and information is granted to those who are able to afford it. This creates inequality of access. Fourth, there is an economically motivated rationale for the homogenization of content. Homogenization ultimately results in a lack of diversity of voices, such that those voices which are most profitable will be heard, while the others are silenced and marginalized. Fifth, there has been an increasing trend towards individualized practices, such as media fragmentation, which serve to weaken the solidarity of community and of the collective. Sixth, communication itself is being threatened by undemocratic commercial interests. In this way, there has been a trend towards the transformation of “the public commons of knowledge into a private enclosure of corporate-controlled commodities” (ibid.: 9). Seventh, communication policies, which are of direct concern to all citizens as they form the boundaries by which communication can occur, are often times legislated without public

awareness and in the interest of corporations and media enterprises, even though it is the government's role to protect the public's interest. And finally, the democratic deficit can also be attributed to "the erosion of privacy and free expression in the media" (ibid.: 10). Such a tendency acts to censor some voices, while enabling others to be heard.

The problem is that "in a capitalist society, where media are businesses first, the capacity of the dominant media to represent diverse interests, and to provide the space for democratic dialogue, is never secure" (ibid.: 3). Culture jammers are concerned here with media *reform*, which involves restructuring or fixing the current public service system so that it adheres to democratic, not capitalistic, values.

Activists criticize the current communication system for not being democratic. Behind this issue is the argument that there has been an infiltration of commercial motives within the public service sector of the media industry. This ultimately results in a decline of this sector serving the interests of citizens. This shift occurred mainly during the 1980s, when neoliberal ideologies of individualism, competition, and privatization thrived. Deregulation and neoliberal trade policies allowed the elimination of barriers to cross-media ownership, which created the conditions for convergence of media and telecommunications industries that had previously been kept separate through regulation. Corporations came together to create powerful mega-enterprises that thrived from vertical and horizontal integration. Critics argued that greater industry concentration would mean "greater shrinkage in the number of voices in the news, public affairs, and entertainment and that market censorship would impede public awareness and stifle public debate that had little chance to be heard" (ibid.: 6). Censorship, as imposed by media producers who wish to avoid content that could harm their profit, acts to threaten the "overall quality of public

knowledge and discussion about issues of vital importance” (ibid.: 7). The concentration of ownership under the control of a few corporations within the media system has resulted in inequality of access to information and participation in the sense that there are now fewer voices and opinions expressed.

There is also the assertion that “media should progress ever nearer to an ideal of freedom and independence and away from dependency and control” (Rozumilowicz, 2002: 12). For this reason, many activists advocate for *radical* media, arguing that there should be a media system independent of state or corporate control. Alternative media are an attempt to “subvert the social order by reclaiming the means of communication” (Langlois & Dubois, 2005: 9). Thus, culture jammers, autonomous of state or private control, take on the role of media producer and assume a democratic responsibility. Such media are ‘alternative’ in the sense that they provide a direct challenge to the current mainstream system by “express[ing] an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing, 2001: v). Thus, alternative media may serve a counter hegemonic function.

David Hesmondhalgh (2000) maps out a model suggesting what a democratized media system could look like. He purposes that participation and access must be open and equal to all; that organizations should operate collaboratively and co-operatively; that creative workers need greater equality of reward, opportunity, and conditions; that resources must be distributed evenly; that there needs to be the encouragement for the audience to become producers; and finally, that whatever is produced must be diverse and innovative.

Culture jammers aim to democratize the media through their methods of taking over the already established means of communication. In doing so, the aim is to rescue the media from the ideological forces of consumerism, and to create a public forum, devoid of commercial influences.

### **Is Culture Jamming Counter Hegemonic?: The Critics**

*“And this politics, which seems to be becoming remarkably fashionable in a variety of circles, must be critiqued as not only inadequate for confronting the contemporary global political and cultural hegemony of neoliberalism, but in many ways rehearsing key tenets of neoliberalism”*

- Max Haiven (2007: 86)

Carroll (1997) argues that there are many challenges to building counter hegemony, stating that we must always ask: “to what extent are such coalitions vehicles for a Gramscian ‘war of position,’ and to what extent are they mere mechanical and instrumental assemblages of convenience that decompose at the next political conjuncture” (29). While offering up various critiques, there are several authors that maintain that culture jamming fails to present itself as a counter hegemonic force. Such critics contend that culture jamming either does very little to threaten the consumerist way of life or that it actually reinforces particular dominant ideologies.

Some critics (Cammaerts, 2007; Carducci, 2006; Juris, 2005; Liacas, 2005) argue that culture jamming will not bring about revolution on its own; instead, it must be combined with other, more traditional forms of political activism and it must be connected to larger movements. Bennett and Lagos (2007) argue that due to a desire for anonymity, there is a lack of communication between culture jamming organizations as well as individual culture jammers which leads to conflicting ideals. The implication proves to be problematic in the

sense that it “often result[s] in the proliferation of different messages and a confusing array of regulatory systems” (202). Without initiatives towards communication and common ground, it is difficult to build a hegemonic bloc and a foundation for resistance. The desire for anonymity is generated from the reality that many culture jamming practices are illegal. As such, many organizations are exclusionary, and do not encourage inclusive participation, discussion, or debate. The consequence is that “as much as the recipients of a pre-packaged message can enjoy the wit of the finished product, they have not taken part in the appropriation and alteration of that message” (Liacas, 2005: 66). Instead, these organizations hope to motivate people to join in by participating independently, without being a part of a truly interactive collective. The problem that Carducci (2006) finds with this is that “personal liberation is embraced...as an end in itself and not a step in the emergence of universal class consciousness” (126). In this sense, individual critical awareness is deemed more important than collective resistance to systemic oppression.

The question is also posed as to whether culture jamming can actually raise consumer awareness. At times, what can occur is that “some audience members, upon experiencing a culture jam, react with anger not at consumerism but at the culture jammers themselves” (Sandlin & Milam, 2008: 342). While not intended, this outcome can act to dissuade and alienate people, not attract and “save” them. Much of this anger is a consequence of the lack of reflexivity on a part of the culture jammers. Sandlin and Milam (2008) explain that culture jammers point their critique outwards by identifying what they believe is wrong with society. However, “effective critique must point inward and outward at the same time” (346). Culture jammers often insist that their philosophy and tactics are the right answer, the right way, and the only way to effect social change. They also often



represent consumerism as immoral. Without taking into consideration that such a view is not held by all members of society, culture jammers and their actions may appear “offensive, judgemental, and oppressive” (ibid.: 343). In a reproduction of domination, culture jammers may end up dictating how people should think and behave, which coincidentally acts to oppress the very consumers they hope to “enlighten.” The stance of culture jammers is based on “the assumption that anti-consumption ideology is somehow a preferred moral condition and that anyone not in agreement is immoral or wrong” (ibid.: 344). Through this way of thinking, they project a patronizing attitude of smug “self-righteous elitism” (Harold, 2007: 55). They see and represent themselves as “elevated above the multitude of duped consumers...able to see beyond the veil of consumerist ideology” (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004: 696). As a result, culture jammers view consumers in a conflicted light. They see them as a contributing factor to the problem, as carriers of the culture of consumption, as “unreflective being[s], unable or unwilling to ‘understand’ or ‘think about’ their own consumption” and thus they feel disgust towards consumers. At the same time, they also see them as people that need to be saved or awakened from their consumer trance (ibid.: 698). Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that a more effective consumer activist ideology that hopes to bring about critical awareness would not radically exclude consumers, nor would jammers distinguish themselves or claim superiority over them.

Liacas (2005) asks, “Can something that grows out of the mainstream possibly serve to change it?” (65). In asking such a question of culture jammers, it is important to consider the following. First, culture jammers address their audience as consumers, not citizens. By using the already established consumerist codes and forms as their basis, they hope to

influence the audience's consumer behaviours. A prime example is the creation of products by culture jamming organizations, which are made to represent an anti-capitalist ethos. While they are produced under conditions that reflect environmentally friendly and fair labour practices, they remain within the consumerist system. Second, it is important to consider that culture jammers, incorporating elements of parody and satire, often structure their organizations to mimic corporations. Such efforts serve to represent hierarchy and stratification, not the decentralization of power. In what ways can culture jammers create a radical alternative necessary for effective counter hegemony if they are perpetually linked to the culture they hope to eradicate? The aforementioned authors believe that culture jammers fail to provide an alternative outlook to consumerism by participating in the system.

Jordan (2002) wonders "whether culture jamming offers a way beyond these languages [of corporate desire] or is potentially another version of them" (117). He questions whether it would be more useful to attempt to create new cultural codes than to simply attempt to redefine the already existing ones. Haiven (2007) argues that some culture jamming tactics actually serve to promote the same ideologies as neoliberalism, the force that they presumably seek to counter. For example, he mentions that *Adbusters* encourages the self-interested distinction of being able to separate oneself from consumerism. Such "privatized acts of resistance," he states, adhere to the ideology of individualism, which discourages collective action (103). The major issue Haiven finds with this is that it "promises (easy) action. And...it is not a substitute for the hard work of collaboratively building the constituency and collective agency we need in order to bring such a democracy about" (107). Culture jammers promote individualized solutions, and thus

suggest, perhaps inadvertently, that the means to emancipation and social change is through individual acts of resistance.

Hackett & Carroll (2006) point out that culture jamming is competitive in nature since such activists compete with corporations to “uncool” their brands. Such activity is “more about the competitive pursuit of cultural distinction – a dynamic that does not subvert but that actually drives consumer capitalism – than they are challenges to hegemony” (207). By joining in the competitive market, whether it is through the creation of products or through marketing campaigns, culture jammers attempt to combat consumerism with more consumerism. Heath and Potter (2004) point out that through this, “the struggle for status is replaced by the quest for cool, but the basic structure of competition remains unchanged” (322). Additionally, culture jammers may act to help the corporations and brands they are opposing. In the very act of using the name of the brand, “they acted in essence as advertisements for those brands” (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009: 99).

Heath and Potter (2004) also assert that culture jamming contributes to the very system it aims to challenge. Arguing that resistance “has come to be one of the major forces driving competitive consumption,” what appears to be occurring is that corporate tactics, in the effort to minimize the effects of resistance, have actually come to appropriate such tactics and strategies in their marketing campaigns (129). Cammaerts (2007) explains that corporations “use jamming techniques as a ‘hip’...communication strategy, thereby reducing it to a marketing technique – unjamming the jam so to speak” (88). In this sense, the ‘commodification of dissent’ has become a new niche for corporations. This refers to the process by which corporations are able to appropriate different forms of creative resistance, turn them into commodities, and sell them (Sandlin & Milam, 2008).

Culture jammers aim to counter the culture of consumption. However, Heath and Potter (2004) argue that culture is not a whole, it is a mixture of various social institutions that are, for the most part, unjust. To assume that all social injustices stem from consumer culture as a whole, and to resist this culture as an entirety is therefore “not just unhelpful, it is positively counterproductive” (8). They further their argument by asserting that the realm of consumption is primarily dictated by the relations of production. To this end, they state that “the only way you can reduce consumption is by reducing your contribution to production,” and therefore merely challenging consumerism is not effective (112). Without addressing the realm of production, culture jammers ignore the relationship between labour and capital, which is at the foundation of systemic oppression. Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale (2009) argues, that “any ‘counter hegemonic’ strategy must therefore address not only the realm of consumption but *by necessity* the realm of production and the economic exploitation of labour by capital” (233). In this sense, class politics, which is a major factor contributing to the current system of power relations, is largely ignored by culture jammers.

Taking the above criticisms into consideration, I will proceed with a critical analysis of the Billboard Liberation Front.

## CHAPTER IV: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Billboard Liberation Front

### The Billboard Liberation Front: A Profile

*"We offer a broad range of black-bag operations and cultural jam services, from project management and subversion consulting to media manipulation and thought placement."*

- The BLF (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/clients.html>)

The Billboard Liberation Front (BLF) is an organization dedicated to the "improvement of outdoor advertising" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/aboutus.html>). They are the oldest and longest running group of their kind, and the originators of the term 'billboard liberation' (Skarphol Kaml, 2003). This group of culture jammers emerged from the San Francisco Suicide Club in 1977. This original organization was a secret society that carried out light-hearted practical jokes and stunts for amusement, adventure, and simply to challenge that which is considered ordinary so as to "experience things they haven't experienced before" (<http://www.suicideclub.com/cacophony/cacophony.html>). Co-founders Gary Warne and Adrienne Burk led the members of the Club one night to a billboard with an advertisement sponsored by the cosmetics company Max Factor. As a group they were not to vandalize the billboard, but alter it with non-damaging materials and collectively "provide the improved message" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). This event, entitled "Enter the Unknown," inspired Jack Napier and Irving Glikk to search for more billboards in San Francisco that they felt needed improvement. They were attracted to the idea of "challeng[ing] the fortune and power of corporate America by borrowing their spaces, if only temporarily, to publicize ideas of [their] own" (ibid.). With that in mind, the two Suicide Club members organized the Billboard Liberation Front and set out to alter nine billboards by Fact cigarettes on December 25, 1977, changing

the tag line of the advertisement from “I’m realistic. I only smoke facts” to “I’m real sick. I only smoke facts” (ibid.).

In 1980, they designed the alteration of a Marlboro billboard advertising cigarettes. Originally reading “Marlboro,” the new text stated “Marlbore,” which was a simple statement towards “dull advertising” (ibid.). As Lilian Pizzichini (2000) notes, the motivation behind this billboard alteration was “not that they had anything against cigarettes, they just didn’t like the outdated campaign featuring the jaw-locked he-man” (48). This highlights that the BLF’s campaigns are not necessarily motivated by individual issues, such as those associated with the tobacco industry or the environment, but by corporate advertising in general.

By the mid-1980s, several members had retired from the organization and had “got degrees, opened businesses, became doctors, lawyers, bankers and all-around pillars of society” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). While this mass departure could have meant the dissolution of the BLF, the new members of the group were motivated to continue their activities due to the neoliberal ideals that were being promoted by the Reagan-Bush administration. After a four year hiatus and with renewed motivation, the newly formed BLF targeted the Exxon Corporation after the Exxon Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska in March of 1989. Not only did they consider Exxon a stark representation of the deregulation ideals as well as the epitome of the environmental concerns of the era, they were also the producers of asphalt. The issue that the BLF had with asphalt in particular, Napier explained, is that “where there are roads, there are billboards” (ibid.). The original billboard, which read: “Hits Happen – New X-100,” was reinvented to say: “Shit Happens – New Exxon” (ibid.).

The BLF continued to expand in the late 1980s, as more and more members took on a greater number of projects. Alongside this expansion, it began to gain recognition around the San Francisco area, including being named among the “Top Ten Media Heroes for 1991” in *Utne Reader* magazine. This undesired attention was the cause of another temporary interruption in the BLF’s activities. Considering that the group conducts illegal acts, they sought to avoid media attention but remain as a presence that would be noticed by the public only for their messages. In order to ensure anonymity and avoid exposure, each member uses an assumed name. As Skarphol Kaml (2003) points out, these aliases “enable the group members to protect their identities while still publicizing their work” (76). Since some members actually work in the advertising industry, pseudonyms are also used in the name of job protection.

Currently there are almost seventy-five members of the BLF, which include a range of personnel responsible for carrying out the tasks for improving billboards. While the group is partly “comprised of ad men who went bad,” there are some members that continue to “work in the advertising business and denote their subversive tendencies to designing the alterations” (Skarphol Kaml , 2003: 75). As an exclusive group, members must be invited to join based on “a taste for adrenaline” and on specific skills that ensure the appropriate operation of the BLF (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). While some members work on an occasional basis and others have specific roles, collectively the staff “possess[es] both the technical skills and the creative vision to execute world-class media campaigns” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/aboutus.html>). Each member brings their own individual expertise, which when combined allows for the smooth and complete alteration of a billboard on their terms.

For the Billboard Liberation Front, culture jamming is synonymous with the professional “improvement” of billboard messages. To improve the message of a billboard is to become an advertiser, to personalize your own advertisement. They are a non-bureaucratic, “privately-held, worker-controlled” agency that offers their culture jamming services to several “clients” (ibid.). To clarify, their “clients” have not been hired by the companies themselves, instead the BLF has selected them on their own accord. As explained on the website,

the BLF is not available for general hire, and offers its services only to an exclusive list of advertisers. Our clients are carefully selected on the basis of a complex formula known only to cabal insiders, and our improvement actions are undertaken on a pro-bono basis, unfettered by the petty demands of clueless executives and weak-kneed middle managers. (ibid.)

Thus, they pick certain corporations and their billboards according to specific criteria and reasons known only to the group members. They conduct their activities free of cost to their clients and without their knowledge or consent first.

Their dedication to professionalism has become a major focus of the organization. In accordance with their high standards of quality, the group remains committed to “taking care not to damage the original message beneath” (ibid.). The aim is not to emphasize damage done to the original billboard, but to emphasize the reconstructed message. The importance of “improving” the message is essential to the BLF’s version of culture jamming. D.S. Black (1999), in his article *Fauxvertising, FSU-ism and other Semiotic Attacks on Consensual Reality*, explains what it means to “improve” a message through his description of ‘fauxvertising.’ He states that

an existing message is creatively falsified to reach a higher truth or deeper meaning. It takes an unacceptable sales pitch and turns it into a provocative statement. Instead of harnessing human desire to sell something one may or may not need, the idea is to identify what is really at stake, subvert the ad and jumpstart discussion



about issues that concern all of us. Which is the last thing advertisers want us to do, have a debate or foster discussion. (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/faux.html>)

“Improving” an advertisement then, is to give the message a better quality by revealing some sort of concealed truth, pointing out the illogicality of consumer culture, and stimulating further discussion.

Their focus on professionalism is also evident in the attention they pay to detail. In order for the improved billboard to appear as though it was constructed by the original advertiser, “they photograph, measure and chip paint colours from targeted signs” (Skarphol Kaml , 2003: 77). Their attention to detail also helps them to avoid detection. They set up decoys, look outs, prepare escape routes, go through rehearsals, “monitor traffic activity in the area, and temporarily disable lights before pulling off their orchestrated predawn operations” (ibid.: 78). Additionally, as a professional agency, the BLF posts press releases for each of their campaigns on their website along with photographs of the altered billboards.

Equally important to the BLF is that their culture jams be light hearted. For them, culture jamming is about getting a serious point across in a humorous and sarcastic manner. Napier states that “if anything lightens someone's day through humour or a momentary identification with something outside of themselves that gives them ideas, how can it be bad?” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/response.html>). Instead of using shock as a technique to grab attention and invoke critical thinking, the BLF uses humour in the effort to be more inviting and less crude.

One essential aspect of the BLF is that what they do is not just about “improving” the messages of billboards, but it is also about personal experience. In an interview with Jill Sharpe in 2001, a member of the BLF explains that “culture jamming has to do with ‘being

with other human beings and having an adventure – where you’re not just consuming prepackaged events or experiences” (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009: 106). Jack Napier states in an interview with *Advertising Age’s Creativity* that one major goal of the BLF is to “have fun, screw with the media a bit, and get off a few good one liners” (Nomai, 2008: 219). However, there is more depth to the activities of the BLF than simple practical jokes: they also have a strong “critical understanding of the cultural power of the media and communication (advertising in particular), the concentration of this power in corporate hands, and the ability of people to resist” (ibid.).

Their focus on advertising in general has much to do with the ideological position it holds in contemporary western culture. The BLF maintains that “the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>). In their mission statement, written by Jack Napier and John Thomas, they offer up several reasons why they assert this position. First, they indicate that advertising has come to infiltrate almost every aspect of our lives, including religion and art, so that our lives resemble a sequence of television commercials. Second, all other media have come to serve the interests of advertisers and to serve the purpose of circulating advertisements; they have surpassed viewer interest and creative design. Third, the acquisition of goods has become the principle goal and highest achievement for people, and it is advertising that has helped to create this culture of consumption. The BLF is therefore founded on the notion that “He who controls the Ad speaks with the voice of our Age” (ibid.). And so they argue, that since advertising has become so central to society, it is necessary to effect change at this level.

Using the 'subvertising' method, culture jamming for the BLF is most effective when used on billboards. The members of the BLF reason that the billboard, among all the forms of media that disseminate advertisements, is the most inescapable, as well as the most accessible to physically alter. They believe billboards "are the only form of advertising the consumer can improve. You can't do it with radio or television ads or magazines" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). They also assert that billboards are the most unavoidable form of public advertising, stating that "you can switch off/smash/shoot/hack or in other ways avoid Television, Computers and Radio. You are not compelled to buy magazines or subscribe to newspapers" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>). While they mention that other public advertising such as posters cannot always be avoided, it is the Billboard that is so ubiquitous and entirely inescapable. The issue they take with billboards is not that they exist, in fact Napier states, "I really have nothing against billboards...I don't want to cut billboards down. It's just that I'm kind of tired of being communicated to constantly by advertisers who want me to buy their product" (cited in Whalen, 2004: 2). They avow that "to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>). Their purpose is not to eliminate billboards, but instead to "improve" them by taking control of the messages.

They argue that the oppressive nature of the billboard is that it exists as a corporately dominated form of mass communication. They critique the concentration of media in corporate hands, arguing that access to billboards is available only to those who have the financial and cultural resources to own this public space. Nomai (2008) states that "through the physical appropriation of the spaces purchased by communication

corporations and utilized by advertisers, the BLF critiques not only the messages of marketers and advertisers but also the imbalance of communicative power that favors media corporations” (194). In this sense, billboard improvement for the BLF is about changing and taking control of the messages that are pervasively commercial, as well as freeing the billboard from corporate control. This critique, however, is rarely stated outwardly in the messages or texts of the altered billboards. Instead, they attempt to inscribe their critique in their act of billboard alteration itself (Nomai, 2008). As previously noted, the BLF’s goal is a billboard for each individual. “Until then,” they state “we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>). The BLF believes that “everyone who wants their own billboard should have one,” and they hope to materialize this idea through example (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). The goal in itself “suggests that media concentration is not in the best interests of a culturally expressive society” (Nomai, 2008: 228). Dating back to the original billboard improvement of the San Francisco Suicide Club, when Gary Warne instructed to the group, “we’re going to alter this billboard, and we’ll decide what it should say,” culture jamming for this group has been about making an advertisement and the message your own (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>). In an interview, Jack Napier, CEO of the BLF, stated that “once you change the message, it becomes yours” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/response.html>). Culture jamming for the BLF then is about being able to freely and truly express oneself. They argue that billboards are the way in which people can express themselves and be heard. However, “the range of debate and the opportunities for marginal voices to be heard has been limited

by the dominance of commercial factors that operate as a de facto regulation of who can speak” (ibid.: 221). The BLF attempts to ensure that these instances do not go unnoticed by not only changing this one-way form of communication, but also by publicizing a marginal voice through billboard improvement. They are, as they declare, in the business of “marketing for the people” (<http://www.billboardliberation.com>).

The BLF’s vision to “market for the people” is not about encouraging “the people” as a unit to move towards collective action. Instead, what they market is the ability and opportunity for individual people to be able to express themselves. If expressing oneself freely is the means to emancipation, then individual liberation is their ultimate goal. This goal of individual and personal freedom is what the critics of culture jamming are so sceptical about. The critics argue that this ideology of individualism acts to overlook the need for collective action in developing a counter hegemonic initiative necessary to achieve social change. As such these critics of culture jamming may find it problematic that the BLF structures itself according to such an ethos.

### **Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis**

*“CDA is necessary for describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life reflected in text.”*

- Sue L.T. McGregor (2004: <http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/mcgregorcda.html>)

The methodological approach most fitting for my research is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Norman Fairclough (2003) labels CDA as both a method *and* a theory. The theory that grounds this approach suggests that issues of social inequality have much to do with the concealment, legitimation, and reproduction of relations of power and dominance through discourse. Ideology is viewed as a real material practice mediated by symbolic

forms such as language and texts (Wodak, 2003) so that “dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine everyday forms of talk and text that appear ‘natural’ and quite ‘acceptable’” (van Dijk, 1993: 254). Ideologies become practices embedded within everyday life through discourse. CDA views discourse as a practice that reproduces relations of power. Taking this theoretical approach into account, CDA as a methodology is an investigation of the “discursive reproduction of dominance” (van Dijk, 1993: 259). CDA attempts to reveal the relationships between power, discourse, ideology, and social inequality. Primarily, critical discourse analysts take *texts* as their object of study. Texts are viewed as instances of written or spoken language use. More importantly however, CDA examines discourse, of which the text is a part. *Discourse*, which has a wider application than the text, is the complex social practice of language use (Titscher, *et al.*: 2000) as well as the “spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals learn to think, act, and speak” (McGregor, 2004). It is discourse that creates the conditions for the production and interpretation of a text. The third level of analysis is the *context* that has an effect on both the text and discourse. Context allocates where, when, why, and how texts and discourses are produced. Thus, CDA aims to demonstrate that “a text, a description of something that is happening in a larger social context replete with a complex set of power relations, is interpreted and acted upon by readers or listeners depending on their rules, norms, and mental models of socially accepted behaviour” (McGregor, 2004). In other words, critical discourse analysts attempt to link the micro (texts) to the macro (context) through discourse.

The exploration of these three levels is conducted in a critical manner. This has developed out of critical theory which reveals oppressive relations and aims to empower

individuals to become agents of change toward social justice. Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren (2005) state that “critical research attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially effect their lives. In this way, greater degrees of autonomy and human agency can be achieved” (308). Critical discourse analysts however, are not content with just critically analyzing the ways in which language and discourse reproduce dominance and social inequality. There is the additional goal for analysts to connect their theories and research to practice, to the everyday lived inequalities. In this way, the main objective of CDA is to go beyond mere explanation and understanding; it must seek emancipation and change. CDA then, is both deconstructive and constructive. The idea is that when social power relations are made visible, it leaves room for resistance and for the challenging of these relations. Huckin (1997) explains that

reality is not seen as immutable but as open to change--which raises the possibility of changing it for the better. By focusing on language and other elements of discursive practice, CDA analysts try to illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favor the interests of those same forces. By unmasking such practices, CDA scholars aim to support the victims of such oppression and encourage them to resist it. (<http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/mcgregorcda.html>)

For critical discourse analysts, texts can be viewed as sites of struggle over dominance, where challenging ideologies and discourses may emerge (Wodak, 2003). Without critically analyzing discourse to reveal relations of power and dominance, oppression and marginalization may go unchallenged and unchanged. Therefore, the success of critical discourse research is measured by its effectiveness, relevance, and its contribution to change (van Dijk, 1995).

CDA is a problem-based methodology, meaning that research begins with the identification of a problem, mainly a social issue. The next step is to select a text to base the

analysis, such as a song, website, or interview. For a more comprehensive study, Huckin (1997) asserts that it is essential to first approach the text in an uncritical manner, not as a researcher, but as an undiscerning audience member. It is upon second analysis that the researcher approaches the text with a critical lens.

Fairclough (2003) asserts that once a problem has been identified and a textual unit of analysis has been chosen, research begins with an attempt to reveal the obstacles that prevent the problem from being resolved. This question regarding the barriers to such a resolution involves asking how social life is structured in such a way so as to avoid solution. The next step of analysis takes into account how the discourse itself is structured within the text. Huckin's (1997; 2002) work is particularly useful with this level of analysis due to his specificity and the detail he provides. To begin, the text should be taken as a whole. First, it should be located within a *genre* or text type. This "allows the analyst to see why certain kinds of statements appear in the text and how they might serve the purposes of the text-producer, as encoded in that genre." Second, a researcher must identify the perspective, slant, or spin the producer of the text has presented, which Huckin also refers to as *framing*. Content can be framed through *foregrounding* and *backgrounding*, or respectively, emphasizing (either through physical placement or size, or through word choice or structure (Huckin, 2002)) and de-emphasizing specific concepts. The most powerful method of backgrounding is the omission of relevant ideas, information, concepts, perspectives, and so on. The important point about omission is that "it is difficult to ask questions about something that is not even there" (Huckin, 1997), however what is left unsaid is often times more important than what is stated. Another framing technique is the use of *extended metaphors*, which are metaphors carried and referenced throughout the text. Third, the



text should be combed for *coherence*, or “the ability of the text to ‘hang together’” (Huckin, 2002: 161). In analyzing textual coherence, the researcher can reveal the background knowledge that the author is attempting to evoke. Fourth, the analyst should look for *auxiliary embellishments*, or non-linguistic features that draw attention.

On a more micro level, the next step for Huckin is to investigate the text sentence by sentence. First, *topicalization* “is the positioning of a sentence element at the beginning of the sentence so as to give it prominence” (ibid.: 160). This form of foregrounding can frame a sentence in order to influence the audience’s view point. Second, researchers should identify the *transitivity* within sentences, which refers to the agent-patient relations in a sentence. This analysis looks at the subjects’ position in terms of power relations: who appears dominant, subordinate, active, passive? Third, *omission* of information in a sentence can be seen as occurring through the use of passive verbs and normalization. Fourth, *presupposition* of specific sentences must also be considered so that common sense statements can be questioned. Fifth, *insinuations*, or suggestive statements, are a manipulative element requiring background knowledge. Such statements are not easy to question since the audience is held responsible for the interpreted meaning that is derived. Sixth, sentence analysis should also include a consideration of *presupposition*, which involves the use of language in presenting certain ideas as common sense or truth.

Huckin also suggests that it is important to explore in more detail the words and phrases within a text. First, researchers must take into account the *connotations* or special meanings of specific words. Connotations, including *code words*, develop out of the use of words or phrases in particular contexts and are understood through cultural knowledge. Second, *lexical choice* can set the tone of the text to convey a sense of certainty and

authority, or doubt and questionability. Lexical choice can also convey the *register* of the text, whether the text is formal or informal, or how it connects to a particular group or activity. Third, it is important to look at the author's *classification*, or how they choose to name or label things.

My own analysis provides secondary research on the website of the BLF. For the purpose of this thesis it is not possible to analyze the entire website and therefore is necessary that I outline the parameters of my research. I selected three specific texts from the website to constitute a sample for analysis. First, I analyzed the mission statement, or "manifesto," that the organization has posted. Second, I chose one of the several campaigns that the BLF has organized. In particular, I chose the Wachovia Bank billboard campaign (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/burn.html>), set forth on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Third, I investigated one of the ways in which the BLF encourages participation. For this, I examined the article entitled, "The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement: A Comprehensive Guide to the Alteration of Outdoor Advertising" (<http://www.billboardliberation.com/ArtAndScience-BLF.pdf>). Respectively, each of these texts is an indication of the organization's aims and objectives, how they are currently attempting to fulfil these objectives, and the ways in which they are encouraging citizens to participate.

To begin, I read each text uncritically. I then read each text under a critical lens, keeping in mind the theories of hegemony and counter hegemony, as well as the aims and objectives of culture jammers and the related criticisms. I proceeded to make notes asking the questions: what does this text reveal about culture jamming? What does it reveal about the BLF? Can this text be considered counter hegemonic? I moved forward with my analysis following Huckin's (1997; 2002) framework, applying only the elements that were relevant

and appropriate. In no way do I claim that my analysis is a discovery of the “truth,” nor that it is necessarily the only reading that can be taken from these texts. However, through close attention to the detail in these texts, I can only uncover a reading that is in conjunction with my particular research question (Gill, 1996). In what follows, I hope to discover whether these texts reveal counter hegemonic discourse or not.

### **TEXT ANALYSIS #1: “The BLF Manifesto”**

**Appendix A:** <http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>

A prime example that can be used to explore the aims and objectives of the BLF is their mission statement, titled “The BLF Manifesto” (Appendix A, <http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>). I chose this text because as a “manifesto,” it is an outright proclamation of the BLF’s beliefs, principles, and intentions. This declaration is the foundation for the organization’s fundamental motives and objectives.

With an all-knowing voice of authority, the BLF presents the ideals in their Manifesto not only as correct and legitimate, but also as the only way the world exists. In particular, the use of the phrase “it is clear,” and the word “all,” are demonstrations of such a tone. For example, the statements “*it is now clear* that the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology” (Manifesto, para 1, italics mine) and “*It is clear* that He who controls the Ad speaks with the voice of our age” (para 9), project a tone of authority. The phrase “it is clear,” implies that such knowledge is necessarily obvious and true. Furthermore, the use of the word “all” indicates that everything is included in what is being stated, without exceptions. For instance, the Manifesto states that, “Desire, self worth, self image, ambition, hope; *all* find their genesis in the Ad” (para 1), “Advertising suffuses *all* corners of

our waking lives” (para 2), “*All* old forms and philosophies have been cleverly co-opted” (para 4), and “the Ad defines our world, creating both the focus on the ‘image’ and the culture of consumption that ultimately attract and inspire *all* individuals” (para 9). Such words and phrases presuppose the truth of these statements. A prime example from the text that illustrates such modality is the following sentence; “Of *all* the types of media used to disseminate the Ad *there is only one* which is *entirely* inescapable to *all*” (para 10). Each of the italicized words in the sentence connote an unquestioning truth, without exceptions, such that it appears factual. Other modal words and phrases used in this text that signify truth and legitimacy include, “beyond debate” (para 1), “solely” (para 3), “by and large” (para 5), and “ultimately” (para 9). On the contrary, words and phrases that would cue possible alternatives such as “might be,” “it is argued,” “we believe,” “could,” etc. are omitted. This acts to present the Manifesto as an all-encompassing truth. In order to direct the audience to believe and trust that they are the voice of reason and truth, the BLF represents itself as the voice of authority that is accurate and correct. In foregrounding their version of the world as the correct version, as the only way the world exists, it excludes all other beliefs, opinions, and voices that may define the world in a different way.

This authoritative voice also indicates that the BLF views their audience as duped consumers who need to be taught or shown the right path. First, the text is structured for easy understanding. The BLF uses bullets or point form notes as auxiliary embellishments (Huckin, 2002) so the audience can identify and follow each point made without difficulty. Second, the BLF uses the term “the masses” (Manifesto, para 11) to refer to the people that they hope to reach. This term has a negative connotation, referring to a mass society, comprised of a group of people, unable to think for themselves, who are controlled and

manipulated into serving the interests of a small elite. The BLF, in this sense, sees itself as outside and above this mass society. Connoting a sense of righteousness in what they do and know, the BLF has already entered “the High Priesthood of Advertisers” (para 12). Therefore, they are able to teach or show the way to those who are not yet enlightened. Such an outlook dictates to people what they *do* know, and what they *should* know. This can be seen to represent power relations between the BLF and the audience. The BLF sees itself in a position of power, as those responsible for enlightening and guiding the duped consumers. Not only can this be seen as a form of oppression and a reproduction of domination, it can also effectively act to anger and dissuade people.

The projected voice of authority displayed in this Manifesto also acts to speak for all people. In using the following phrases, “we form *our* ideas” (para 1), “make *us*” (ibid.), “we are as *a people*” (ibid.), “*our* waking lives” (para 2, italics mine), “*our* dreams” (ibid.), “the people” (para 3), “*our* world” (para 9), and “everyone” (para 10), the BLF assumes there exists one homogenous population. While this discourse may seem inclusive, it may actually work to exclude and marginalize people. Whose lives, dreams, world are they referring to? Who are “the people?” It cannot be presupposed that all people share the same interests, or even that all people consume or are effected by advertising and the media in the same way. In making this assumption, the BLF takes for granted the notion of homogeneity and excludes many different perspectives.

The BLF places importance on advertising by consistently using the phrase, “the Ad” (ibid.) throughout the article. Commonly, the use of “the” in reference to a noun acts to emphasize its singularity, and the use of the capital “A” makes this phrase more prominent grammatically as well as visually. The capital “A,” similar to the capital used at the beginning

of specific words throughout the Manifesto (“Ad,” “Advertiser,” “Advertising,” “Billboard,” “High Priesthood”) is a foregrounding technique applied for textual prominence. It emphasizes the term’s importance and singularity, as well as visually drawing the reader’s attention towards the phrase, thereby framing the text to connote advertising’s significance.

The BLF additionally foregrounds advertising by opening their Manifesto with, “In the beginning was the Ad” (para 1). Initially, this statement sets the theme of the subsequent text. It acts to draw the reader’s attention to focus on advertising by indicating that this is what the article will mainly be concerned with. On a secondary level, this statement reveals a great deal about the BLF’s ideals. First, by opening with this statement, the BLF is placing utmost importance on advertising. Second, and more importantly, the statement, “In the Beginning was the Ad” (ibid.) insinuates that “the Ad” has always existed. Just as something that has naturally and unquestioningly been present from “the beginning” of time, the BLF portrays advertising as an entity that exists on its own, without a history of its inception and development. The advocates of consumerism have actively worked to present advertising as something that seamlessly exists as a natural part of our landscape, not as something that has been manufactured, constructed, and inserted into our daily lives. The BLF, in making such a prominent statement, aligns itself with this view. In depicting advertising as its own agent, as an element that has naturally come into being, the BLF omits the long history that represents advertising as a product of careful development. This supports the taken for granted view that reflects consumerism’s unquestioned existence and capitalism’s inevitability. Recalling my argument, the main problem of capitalism is that of stimulating consumption. Advertising is the vital element that plays a role in the promotion of consumption, and ultimately in fuelling capitalism’s staying power.

This equation that connects these three entities is omitted by the BLF. Without making these connections clear, they remain largely invisible so that consumerism and capitalism remain widely accepted as natural. While the main objective of a counter hegemonic organization would be to deconstruct such an ideology, the BLF acts to reinforce it.

The use of the phrase “the Ad” in conjunction with other statements, implies that the world is structured around advertising or “the Ad.” For instance, the BLF suggests that our personalities, characteristics, ideas, etc. are a result of advertising, stating that, “Through the Ad and the intent of the Advertiser we form our ideas and learn the myths that make us into what we are as a people” (para 1). They suggest that advertising has not only bombarded the physical landscape, but also people’s consciousness, asserting that, “Advertising suffuses all corners of our waking lives; it so permeates our consciousness that even our dreams are often indistinguishable from a rapid succession of TV commercials” (para 2). They also declare outright that, “the Ad defines our world” (para 9), and “to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise” (para 11). Through these statements, not only does the BLF imply that advertising is a natural part of the world, and thus simply how the world is, they also imply that everything in the world is influenced by advertising, and that advertising is at the foundation for the ills of society. The implications of this are two-fold. First, such a one-sided view is deterministic. It does not allow for other factors and effects, and therefore, does not take into account other possibilities for existence. Second, since the existence of advertising is natural and inevitable, and since it shall always exist, change for the BLF, must revolve around advertising. By seeking change through advertising, as an element that fuels the capitalist system, in what ways can the BLF truly hope to present a radical alternative?

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the BLF fails to discuss the bigger picture, of which advertising is only a part, and thus they do not truly discuss the current hegemonic system. In this case, capitalism is a topic completely omitted from the Manifesto. If their critique begins with advertising, then it should develop to include and focus on capitalism as the underlying system that not only needs excessive consumerism to survive, but also is the very reason for advertising's existence. It is capitalism, not advertising, that is at the root of the injustices discussed by the BLF, including advertising's pervasiveness, commodification, the unequal access to communication, etc. As such, it can be argued that the BLF misdiagnose the source of the problems that they define. How can a solution be found if the problem has not adequately been addressed? How can a radical alternative to the current system be suggested if no attention is paid to the actual system in place?

One of the most prominent statements that the BLF makes in their Manifesto to solidify their perspective is, "the Billboard Liberation Front states emphatically and for all time herein that to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise" (ibid.). The words "emphatically," "all," and "herein" use the authoritative voice of absolute truthfulness and conviction discussed previously. Additionally, the upper case letters in the words "Advertise" and "Exist" not only point to the importance of this part of the statement, it also indicates its factuality. Moreover, this statement indicates that advertising is a fundamental structure within society that cannot be eliminated as it ultimately holds the world and everything in it together. By maintaining and asserting such ideals, the BLF does not effectively attempt an ideological attack on advertising as an agent of consumerism and capitalism. Instead, they seem to accept and embrace it by placing utmost importance on it,



even suggesting that advertising is synonymous with life and existence. Additionally, such a statement foregrounds the consumerist ideology which reminds people that advertising is a natural, inevitable, and important part of society. Not only does this promote advertising's presence, it legitimates its existence.

The BLF also goes on to state that their "ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen" (para 11). With the belief that advertising is a fundamental cornerstone of society, they also believe that any change should include, not eradicate, advertising. Instead, it is the control of the ad that needs to be addressed and changed. Such a goal reflects the ideologies of control and possession so important under a consumerist and capitalist ethos. Individual ownership and property are fundamental ideals that allow capitalism to make sense to people on a daily level. Change, in this case, is sought *within* the existing system as such ideologies that aim to maintain capitalism's functioning are reinforced. In dissecting this sentence further and focusing on the phrase, "personal and singular," it can be understood that the BLF's focus is on the individual. While their goal may seem inclusive since it suggests finding a solution for "each citizen," such a goal does not foster a collective. The lexical choice here to use "each" instead of "every" hints at individualism. The word "each" is a reference to everyone, separately and individually. To use the word "every" on the other hand, would suggest being a part of a group. Also, the frequent use of "their own," "your own," and "you" when discussing their goal, is also a demonstration of their focus on the individual. There are several instances that illustrate this point, including "their very *own* rooftop" (para 11, italics mine), "alter it to *their own* design" (ibid.), "Each time *you* change the Advertising message in *your own* mind, whether *you* climb up onto the board and physically change the original copy and graphics or not,

each time *you* improve the message, *you* enter the High Priesthood of Advertisers” (para 12). Their mission is to democratize advertising so that every individual has their own billboard. This mission is not about coming together in a collective. Instead, the BLF promotes the consumerist ideology of individualism by encouraging people to become culture jammers and alter advertising messages on their own. Two questions must be asked: What will change if everyone alters the advertising messages in their own minds? And second, in what ways do the actions of changing a message individually foster the collective participation necessary for counter hegemony?

### **TEXT ANALYSIS #2: “Wachovia Bank: Money to Burn”**

**Appendix B:** <http://www.billboardliberation.com/burn.html>

As their main tactic of resistance, the BLF chooses a billboard advertising campaign from a specifically targeted company that they believe needs “improving,” and proceeds to alter the message. These campaigns are examples of how the BLF is acting to fulfil their aims and objectives. Therefore, I have chosen to analyze one billboard alteration campaign as a sample via the press release associated with this campaign. In the effort to parody a professional advertising company, the BLF issues press releases on their website for the campaigns that they have executed. In particular, the press release that I analyze concerns the Wachovia Bank campaign carried out November 8, 2008 (Appendix B, <http://www.billboardliberation.com/burn.html>). This text follows the template of a general corporate press release, which contains information about the company and the campaign, and includes before and after pictures of the billboards.

Rico T. Spoons, “Director of Offense” from the BLF, writes this release on behalf of their “partner,” Wachovia Bank. Since Wachovia Bank has had no part in writing this release, the BLF has complete control over the content. Initially it appears as though the text was written from a neutral perspective between the two organizations with the statement, “The Billboard Liberation Front has partnered with Wachovia to release a daring advertising campaign that celebrates Wachovia’s new money management strategy” (Wachovia, para 8). However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that the information provided reflects negatively on Wachovia. This is expected given that the press release is a parody, meaning that while the appearance of the release may seem as though it is legitimately in conjunction with Wachovia, the undertone is very different. The overall insinuation is that Wachovia is careless with their investors’ money, providing such little return that they may as well be burning it.

The BLF’s main criticism attacks the mismanagement of people’s money by major banks as well as by the government. In stating, “Wachovia/ A Division of the US Treasury” (Appendix B), they imply that the two have come to serve the same corporate ideology in the U.S., which has failed the people who rely on them. What is interesting about their critique is that it overlooks the entire legitimacy of banking and money more specifically. Money, and its partner banking, both hold esteemed and crucial positions in the capitalist system. Their existence has come to seem natural and inescapable, and therefore remains largely unquestioned. As agents of capitalism, this common view that people have about money and banking helps to maintain and reproduce this hegemonic system. In mentioning these elements, but not questioning their legitimacy, the BLF fails to truly deconstruct the capitalist system.

Taking the original headline of the billboard, “Watch your little ones grow” and changing it to read, “Watch your little ones burn,” with the image of a pile of burning money (Appendix B), the BLF relies on the cultural knowledge of the audience to understand this parody. This parody is a theme that founds the campaign and is present throughout the article, and thus it is essential that the audience understand it. The press release informs the reader that the new money management campaign instituted by Wachovia bank includes the burning of their clients’ money. For example, the CEO and president is quoted as stating the bank has “instructed [their] staff in all 21 states that [they] have offices in to start bundling greenbacks into tight rolls, perfect for small stoves and ovens” (Wachovia, para 10). The BLF expects that the audience will comprehend the parody as well as the new message of the altered billboard.

The problem with this expectation however, is that the press release provides only general information concerning the advertising campaign. It fails to provide any substantial background information that could hint at the reasoning behind the campaign. Why has the BLF chosen Wachovia specifically? What was it about their money management strategy that caught their attention? Is it just Wachovia, or are they referring to all banks? One example of background information that has been left out concerns a reference to Golden West, a major US bank, quoted by Dr. John Silvia. He states, “After *that golden shower* we got from Golden West, we decided to fight fire with fire and start bailing for our clients and stockholders” (para 9, italics mine). While the expression “golden shower” can refer to the act of urinating on another person, it can also imply humiliating someone. The release does not explain what this humiliating event was and thus does not seem to fit.

Furthermore, in relying on the audience to interpret this information on their own, with little to no explanation risks that the audience may “miss the joke” and not fully understand the point of the campaign. In this instance, the campaign may act to alienate and marginalize those who do not understand or possess the appropriate background knowledge for understanding. The problem here lies mainly in using a parody as the primary way of putting out information about a campaign. There is substantial background information that is omitted. In using a parody, the BLF presupposes that the audience has all necessary information and resources to grasp the irony within the text.

Knowing that the press release is a parody and that Wachovia has not had a part in its production is helpful in discerning the use of fabricated quotes. The quotes that are used cannot be taken for granted as legitimate. The release claims to quote Thomas J. Wurtz, (Chief Financial Officer of Wachovia Bank), Dr. John Silvia (Managing Director and Chief Economist), and Robert K. Steel (Chief Executive Officer and president). While one would not at first assume that these people have been cited falsely, it is more evident upon further exploration. The most notable indication is the phrasing of the quotes. For instance, Thomas J. Wurtz is quoted as saying that due to the decline in the value of the American dollar as well as investments, “the true value of the average savings account or investment portfolio [is] roughly equal to a bucket of warm piss” (para 9). Not only would a Chief Financial Officer of a major bank not admit to such an equivalency, a person in such a position would most likely not openly use the phrase “warm piss” in reference to money value, or in a professional media release. Similarly, it also does not seem likely that the Managing Director and Chief Economist would suggest that another major bank gave

Wachovia a “golden shower” (ibid.). The use of fabricated quotes acts to slant the article, framing Wachovia in a negative light.

The question that arises is whether the use of parody can be an effective counter hegemonic strategy? The use of false quotes by the BLF is very much a part of the parody of this particular culture jam. Since it is generally not a common or credible practice to falsify quotes, the audience, upon recognition of this may feel uncomfortable, resentful, or cynical not only towards the campaign, but also towards the BLF as an organization. In such an instance, the audience may direct their anger towards the BLF, instead of at the intended target. Such cynicism and anger may not be optimal in fostering critical awareness.

Additionally, in mimicking a press release, the BLF creates a parody using a mainstream form of communication in the attempt to get their message across. The first issue with this is that it addresses the audience not as citizens, but as “shareholders and clients” (para 7), as owners and investors, and as people who a part of the consumerist and capitalist system. In using the phrases “shareholders and clients” and “your money,” the BLF relates to the audience only on these terms. Secondly, as a parody, there is little room in this text to provide a clear vision of an alternative way of life. Is it possible to provide such a vision if they rely on discourse that replicates and is a part of the hegemonic system? Using language that replicates capitalist discourse can encourage people to think within these terms, not apart from them. It can be argued that a radical alternative would in no way resemble the elements of the existing capitalist system. To provide a vision of an alternative way of life other than capitalism would require it to be produced and evolve independently of this system.

Another point of notification regarding this press release concerns the audience that the BLF is aiming to reach. Since one of the initial aims of culture jamming is to create critical awareness, the people they aim to reach are those who have been blanketed by the hegemonic relations of consumer culture and capitalism, and have yet to realize their subordination. While the altered Wachovia billboard has the potential to reach a broader audience, the press release may not be so successful. Since the press release is only distributed on their website, those who are not actively seeking such information are not likely to come across it. Who then does the BLF realistically hope to reach? Who comprises their main audience? As previously argued, the BLF expects their audience to possess the appropriate background knowledge needed to understand the message they are attempting to get across. If their main audience consists of people who are already informed, then the BLF is “preaching to choir,” or speaking mainly to those who already share and understand their perspective. The problem this creates in building a successful counter hegemonic strategy is that it fails to reach out and communicate with those who are not yet converted, to those who do not understand the message they are trying to get across, to those not seeking such information, to those who are not yet critically aware. For a hegemonic bloc to form and grow, there must be an effort to reach out to these people.

**TEXT ANALYSIS #3: “The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement: A Comprehensive Guide to the Alteration of Outdoor Advertising”**

**Appendix C:** <http://www.billboardliberation.com/ArtAndScience-BLF.pdf>

The BLF has written a manual for do-it-yourself billboard alteration, entitled “The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement: A Comprehensive Guide to the Alteration of Outdoor Advertising” (Appendix C, <http://www.billboardliberation.com/ArtAndScience-BLF.pdf>). This

article provides step-by-step directions about how to alter a billboard, from the perspective of the BLF. In this way, it is an important text to analyze since it can be an indication of the ways in which the organization encourages participation.

In producing a manual that instructs people on how to go about doing something, they are ensuring that they are not only knowledgeable about the topic, but also that they are reliable enough to illustrate how to do it best. The BLF does not state in this article that this is the only way to alter billboards, but they do imply that in following their method, one would receive the most effective results. For example, they state

Though the sudden urge to just climb up a sign and start hacking can occasionally be overwhelming, in our experience this type of ‘impulse improvement’ tends to deliver unsatisfactory results, at necessary personal risk. The guidelines that follow draw on the BLF’s proud 27-year history of planning and executing without injury or arrest. (Appendix C: 118)

This indicates that without following the carefully detailed guidelines of the BLF, billboard alteration can be rather difficult, prompt greater risk, and be unsatisfactory in result.

Additionally, without their direction, people would resort to “hacking” instead of “improving” the billboard. Hacking, in this sense refers to cutting, slashing, damaging, etc. a billboard without aim or direction. As such, the BLF also indicates that people need to be taught the right, most effective method. Similar to a student-teacher relationship, the BLF places itself in a dominant position, responsible for guiding the unknowing students.

The discourse that is relied on in this article works to present the BLF as the experts of billboard alteration. In the introduction they state, “The procedures outlined here are based on our 20+ years’ experience executing billboard improvements professionally, safely, and (knock wood) without injury or arrest” (ibid.: 117). Trust on a part of the audience is meant to be built early on in the article, which is why they have placed such a statement at



the beginning. Once again, three pages later (ibid.: 118), they remind the reader of their expertise and length of involvement in the field. By foregrounding these references through repetition, the BLF attempts to present their organization and method not only as the most legitimate, but also as the most correct.

The BLF attempts to frame this manual as an objective text. As such, the BLF foregrounds in the introduction, “we have made a conscious effort to steer clear of ideology and stick to methodology” (ibid.: 117). The contradiction that becomes apparent in making such a statement however, is that while they claim this text to be objective and free from ideology, it is evident upon further examination that it is not. Why does the BLF want to disguise their ideological stance in this article? Why do they want this text to appear neutral and objective? The BLF hopes that the appearance of objectivity will presuppose that the article is legitimate, reliable, and correct, which would allow for manipulation of the audience who may proceed in reading the text as truthful and factual. If the audience sees the text in this light, the BLF is able to insert their ideologies and beliefs without stating them outright. The BLF omits itself as the agent responsible for invoking these ideologies, and manipulates the audience to think that they have come to these conclusions on their own. In this way, the BLF very subtly slants the article to guide the audience towards a particular perspective. What becomes evident is that the BLF, once again, oppressively sees their audience as passive dupes who need guidance to find the right path.

The BLF immediately aims to cast billboards in a negative light. The first sentence of the introduction is a metaphor that asserts, “Billboards have become as ubiquitous as *human suffering*, as difficult to ignore as *a beggar’s outstretched fist*” (ibid., italics mine). Another metaphor used, also in the first paragraph, is that billboards are “Larger than life,

subtle as *war*" (ibid.). These metaphors carry negative associations, comparing billboards to very prominent global issues. Also, they are stated at the beginning of the manual, which can help to set the tone, guiding the audience to identify billboards as the "bad guy."

Another way the BLF sets the tone in framing billboards as the enemy is by using phrases to describe the effect that billboards have on people. By stating that, "you enter the realm of *their impressions*," "they *assault your senses* with a complex coda of *commercial instructions*," "you receive *their instructions*," "You can't run and you can't hide" (ibid.), they are implying people are passive recipients of billboards, that they guide and instruct people, and that people's lives are under their command. While the BLF maintains that they "have made a conscious effort to steer clear of ideology" (ibid.), they have actually already set the tone of the text in the short introduction paragraph previous to this statement. Thus, although the text appears objective, they have already established a perspective that slants the article, guiding the audience to see billboards in a negative light.

While the BLF presents billboards negatively, they simultaneously present billboard alteration positively. First, the process of billboard alteration is depicted as a relatively easy and simple activity. To do so, the article is structured for easy understanding. It is divided by headings and subheadings, with each step or direction carefully laid out and detailed. While they state that billboard alteration can seem "overwhelming" (ibid.: 118), they also imply that it is made easy by following their guidelines. Furthermore, the BLF's lexical choice in this article also frames the text to represent billboard alteration positively. The consistent use of the word "improvement" throughout the article to classify the process of billboard alteration connotes betterment, and presupposes that billboard alteration is a good thing. Additionally, they apply optimistic, constructive, encouraging terms that

connote success, completion, accomplishment, and triumph. For example, the BLF uses the word “executing” (ibid., 120, 122, 123) to refer to the process of performing a billboard alteration. In this sense, “executing billboard improvements” (ibid.) signifies that the action is being carried out, completed, accomplished, put into effect, etc. In terms of the results that the billboard alterations can have, the BLF has chosen to use the following phrases; “the most *effective* alterations” (ibid.: 117), “*powerful* improvements are occasionally executed” (ibid.: 120), “an improvement with *impact*” (ibid.: 121), “the greatest possible number of *‘impressions’*” (ibid.: 123). Not only do each of these statements insinuate that the alterations will have a definite result, they use strong, powerful words to describe the possibility of these results. What the BLF omits however is a discussion of the possibility that the altered billboard may have no effect, in which case it would go unnoticed. Such a discussion has been left out so as to avoid the acknowledgment that there is a possibility billboard alteration may be futile at times.

Second, while many parts of the article detail ways to avoid detection considering billboard alteration is an illegal activity, this level of risk is backgrounded by the BLF in the effort to frame billboard alteration in a positive light. The article places great importance on planning the alteration to consider “security” (ibid.: 119); ways to avoid being caught, such as not recommending “daytime hits” (ibid.); assembling a “ground crew” (ibid.: 122) to monitor the area; and ways to escape upon possible detection by the police, such as staying still, or scoping out hiding spots and preparing a change of clothes in advance (ibid.: 123). The BLF also deemphasises the legal risks associated with billboard liberation by comparing it to the safety concerns that one may consider, stating, “The risk of apprehension on a board *pales in comparison* to the risk of falling” (ibid.: 123, italics mine). Furthermore, this

risk level is seemingly lowered since according to the BLF, the police are not likely to search thoroughly upon detection, stating, “if the police do a thorough search (doubtful, but not impossible)...” (ibid.: 123). Yet another way for the BLF to background the legal risks is to use the word “apprehended” (ibid.: 122) or “apprehension” (ibid.: 122, 123) instead of arrested, detained, caught, etc. As a term with less stigma, the word “apprehend” also has positive meanings, including to grasp or take hold of; to anticipate; and to understand, think, or believe. In using a word that also has positive connotations, the act of being arrested may seem less distressing.

As a do-it-yourself guide, the BLF focuses more on individual experience than on collective participation. In laying out the steps that should be considered in order to alter a billboard, they are attempting to encourage people to go out and alter billboards on their own, not as a part of the BLF. With a focus on “you,” and “the billboard message *you* wish to improve” (ibid.: 117, italics mine), and “*your* imagination” (ibid.: 118), and “*your* alteration” (ibid.: 120), and “*your* actions” (ibid.: 123), the BLF encourages people to join in by participating independently. Furthermore, the BLF places more importance on individual experience by stating that the “success” of your alteration depends more on the person doing the alteration than on how others will receive it. They state that “The possibilities are limited only by *your* imagination” (ibid.: 118, italics mine), “the success or failure of *your* alteration will ultimately depend more on the quality of *your* thinking and the power of *your* altered message than on how well you can match a font” (ibid.: 120), and “The more creative *you* are, the more likely *you* are to get the desired response” (ibid.: 124). Success of a billboard alteration then relies more on the individual’s capacity to be creative. Such

independence and individual resistance does not advance a truly interactive collective necessary for counter hegemony.

## **CHAPTER V: Discussion and Conclusion**

There are several themes found throughout these texts, creating a common discourse that threads them together. Each theme can be related to the elements that contribute to the existence of a counter hegemonic force. To recall, counter hegemony is an attempt to challenge the dominant ideological frameworks within a society. For such a challenge to be effective, this force must oppose and deconstruct the current hegemonic relations; it must transcend narrow interests so as to facilitate the coming together of numerous oppressed groups; and it must present a radical alternative to the existing system. What I have uncovered in these texts however, reveals quite the opposite.

The first theme suggests that the discourse in these texts may act to alienate, exclude, and marginalize many people and groups in several ways. Through various means, the BLF represents itself as a voice of authority, “as aware, converted beings seeking a wider social good” (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004: 700). In their Manifesto, they present their vision of the world unquestioningly as the correct version, their views concerning the ills of society as accurate, and their ideas for change as the most effective. Such a one-sided perspective insinuates that differing views and perspectives are either non-existent or not relevant. This may alienate those who, in seeing the world in a different way, cannot relate to the text and to the views of the BLF. They may also alienate people by using parody as the main tactic in getting their message across to the audience. Since parody relies on people possessing the appropriate background knowledge to understand the message, it may exclude those who do not have this understanding or share this perspective.

In their manual, “The Art and Science of Billboard Liberation,” the BLF offers itself as the voice of authority through a display of professionalism and expertise. With a tone of

self-proclaimed superiority, the BLF presents itself as the entity not only capable of teaching those who have not yet been enlightened, i.e. the unreflective “masses,” but also the definitive group responsible for such a task. For some, this outlook may embody a sense of “self-righteous elitism” (Harold, 2007: 55). For others, it may represent a form of oppression. In this sense, people may feel they are being dictated what to think. This can create a sense of alienation and exclusion on a part of some audience members. To effectively challenge a hegemonic system, a hegemonic bloc must be formed. This group assembles under the umbrella of several groups oppressed by the current system. While narrow interests and differences are transcended to form this group, these views are not oppressed or alienated. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) note that

a more effective consumerist ideology would not radically exclude dissenting consumers. It would also not claim an essential difference from, and superiority to, them. It would acknowledge the many areas of overlap and common concern between activists and mainstream consumers...and also acknowledge the validity of their different needs (702-703)

The discourse in these texts communicates a one-sided perspective. As well, it bestows the BLF with a sense of superiority. In the above ways, such discourse may not help to attract people from the mainstream, and thus cannot facilitate the coming together of a hegemonic bloc.

Secondly, in the texts that I analyzed, the BLF does not clearly articulate a discourse that directly challenges the existing hegemonic system. The discourse does not oppose or deconstruct the consumerist and capitalist ideologies that have come to be taken for granted as common sense. The BLF represents the world as they see it through their culture jams via mainstream forms of communication, such as billboards. For instance, as a parody the Wachovia Bank, “money to burn” campaign replicates and uses textual forms of

mainstream communication, i.e. the billboard and a press release. In doing so, they borrow “heavily from the corporate marketing model in creating [their] own...marketing campaigns” (Rumbo, 202: 142). The concerns are three-fold. First, in creating a marketing campaign that directly battles a specific corporation, it can represent a level of competition inherent in consumerism and capitalism. Second, in speaking to the audience from a billboard, or from a press release, such campaigns actually address their audience as consumers, who are also identified by the capitalist system in this way. This encourages people not to think of themselves outside of these terms, but within them. This can contribute to the hegemonic way in which people are identified as consumers instead of citizens. Third, in using and mimicking such mainstream forms of communication, the BLF may act to reinforce the mainstream instead of deconstructing it. Through parody, the BLF borrows from the corporate form of communication and replicates the capitalist system. In resembling even parts of this system, the BLF is unable to suggest an alternative that deviates radically and independently.

The BLF’s Manifesto also does not oppose the capitalist system in a significant way, nor does it express the vision of a radical alternative. In the Manifesto, they imply that the world is structured through advertising. Furthermore, it has come to play a fundamental role in people’s existence. Advertising, for the BLF, is and has always been a naturally existing phenomenon, and thus, it shall continue to be. What they recommend is not a structural change that would attack advertising’s existence, but rather a decentralization in the control over advertising messages. This position does not coincide with Gramsci’s war of position. Such a view is not, as Worth and Khuling (2004) maintain, an ideological attack on one of the major agencies (i.e. advertising) of the dominant order (i.e. capitalism), nor is it



an attack on the common sense that holds this order together. Carroll (2006) argues that “the most promising articulations are those that...challenge the underlying bases for hegemony while building bases for a radical alternative” (20-21). In seeking to change the control of advertising messages, what is the radical alternative presented? How is the hegemonic order challenged? What changes? The BLF seeks their solution *within*, and not outside of or beyond, the existing hegemonic system. It is important to note that capitalism is a topic of discussion that is completely omitted from these texts. The BLF view the current state of advertising as the main problem. What they do not see is that advertising is only an agent of consumerism and capitalism, and therefore they fail to address the larger system that is truly responsible for the injustices. Not only do they neglect to question or deconstruct capitalism’s legitimacy, they actually reinforce some of its ideologies. For example, they solidify the idea that advertising is a natural and important part of society, they reinforce the position of money and banking in our lives by not questioning it, and they reiterate the ideals of possession and ownership by making it a part of their ultimate goal. All of these ideologies are essential elements within the capitalist system. The BLF’s goals then, do not represent radical change. In this way, the discourse in these texts does not oppose or challenge the capitalist system in a significant way. Without such a challenge, these texts do not represent counter hegemonic discourse as I have defined it in this context.

Another theme found amongst the discourse of these texts is the push towards individualism. The BLF’s ultimate goal, as stated in the Manifesto, is “a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen” (Appendix A, paragraph 11). Not only does this goal focus on change at the individual level, the way to effect this change is “to use any means possible

to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design" (ibid.), so that "each time you change the Advertising message in your own mind,...each time you improve the message, you enter in to the High Priesthood of Advertisers" (ibid.). Through this, the BLF promotes "individual acts of resistance" (Scatamburlo-D'Anniblae, 2009: 224), so that the way to emancipation and change is through individual experience. In this sense, personal and individual critical awareness is more important than collective emancipation. What I find most interesting about the BLF's goal to decentralize the control of advertising, taking it out of the hands of commercial advertisers, is that it does not necessarily mean the democratization of this form of communication. The BLF's goal is not about fostering participation in discussion and debate. Instead, it seems to be more concerned with each individual having control over their own billboard, displaying whatever message they want it to say, regardless of content. This is not about fostering a public sphere based on the discussion and debate of common interests. In this sense, notions of the collective are given way to individual pursuits. This follows the neoliberalist ideology which suggests that "individuals, acting on their own self-interested desires, create the maximum benefits for all" (Klein, 2007: 59). The BLF is not concerned with the democratization of the media so as to open up communication between people, but is more concerned with the freedom of speech for every individual.

Similarly, the BLF's methodology manual also focuses on individual experience rather than on collective participation. The discourse in this text suggests that the success of a billboard alteration, which for the BLF is the method for social change, depends mostly on personal creativity and thinking on the part of the culture jammers than on how people receive it. Additionally, instead of attempting to cultivate a collective based on inclusion,

participation, discussion, and debate, the BLF encourages people to join in by participating independently and on their own. Since the BLF is an exclusive organization, membership is not open to the public. Through closed doors, members are invited to join based on their expertise. Subscribing to such an ethos of exclusivity and individualism creates an indefinite amount of groups or people, all with differing ideas for change. The BLF states, “There are a million stories in the Big City, and as many reasons to want to hack a billboard. We have our reasons, and we don’t presume to judge yours” (Appendix C, paragraph 2). This can effectively create an ‘us’ versus ‘you’ mentality, which goes against the theory that counter hegemony is formed through the work of a truly interactive and democratic collective.

While the overall aim for culture jamming organizations in general is to be a counter hegemonic force against the hegemonic relations of consumerism and capitalism, this is not necessarily the case for the BLF. Based on the above findings, it can be said that the texts that I analyzed do not represent a discourse that poses a challenge to the current capitalist system in a significant way. Instead, it can be argued that the BLF may alienate some people by marginalizing perspectives that may be different from their own, as well as by presenting a dualism between themselves as enlightened activists and others as duped consumers. Moreover, they encourage individualism over the notion of the collective by placing more importance on the individual experience of altering and/or creating one’s own billboard. As such, a hegemonic bloc that requires the coming together of citizens with differing interests may be undermined by the exclusive focus on individual self-pursuits. The BLF also does not present social change that would transcend the current hegemonic system so that a radical alternative could take root. Instead, a solution is sought within this system. In these ways, the BLF does not significantly challenge the capitalist way of life.

In order to understand where the BLF lies in association to the historical precedents of culture jamming, it is important to compare and contrast the BLF to its predecessors' ideals, motivations, tactics, etc. Dadaism, Surrealism, and Fluxus are movements that, similar to the BLF, were about taking something (i.e. a piece of art, a medium, a message, etc.) out of its normal context so as to raise questions among the audience. While the latter would use illogicality, absurdity, and confusion in order to get their message across, the BLF is more about creating focus and clarity about the issues they have defined. Dadaism, Surrealism, and Fluxus were about changing the normative standards of art as a whole, finding an alternative to these definitions, and attempting to create something new, the BLF aims to redefine the contours of control over one medium, but does not create an alternative.

While using different media, Brecht with theatre and the BLF with billboards, both activists aim to make their audience critically aware. Brecht, on the one hand, invited the audience to draw upon their own experiences to think for themselves about social justice issues, while the BLF more directly states what the problem is and how it can be changed. Both are concerned with individual critical awareness as the starting point to change. The main difference that becomes apparent is that for the BLF, individual critical awareness only leads to individual acts of resistance, not to collective awareness. Brecht's defamiliarization effect was concerned with creating an interruption in a specific process so as to cause a realization about its unnaturalness. With a focus on denaturalizing things that had become natural and invisible, Brecht would draw upon history to delineate the events that created such conditions. The BLF ignores history in this way, and does not aim to denaturalize

billboards and advertising. Through the defamiliarization effect, Brecht presented ways for the audience to imagine something different, the BLF does not provide such an outlet.

The Situationist tactic known as *détournement* can be seen as very similar to the billboard alteration tactics of the BLF. Where the difference is most notable is in the motivation behind these tactics. Through acts of *détournement*, the Situationists hoped to break people out of their routines that kept them docile to the existing relations of power. Their main focus and motivation then, was class struggle. Both groups target consumer culture, however the Situationists targeted consumer culture as a representation of the capitalist class. The BLF on the contrary fails to reference capitalism at all. The BLF blames the ills of society on the corporate control of advertising and the messages produced, but they fail to address class inequality. The Situationists were about seeing and experiencing the collective possibilities beyond consumerism. The BLF is about individual critical awareness as well as encouraging people to participate in individual acts of resistance through billboard alteration either physically or in one's own mind. They are about individuals possessing their own billboards to publicize their own ideas. Additionally, *détournement* was a tactic used by the Situationists to allow people to see and think about things in a different way than what is normally presented. This was to be in direct opposition to the capitalist way of life. The BLF does not present this opposition to capitalism.

Due to the scope of my thesis, there are several limitations to my research. Since I only analyzed three texts from the website of the BLF, I have limited myself to drawing conclusions about the BLF based solely on these texts. A more comprehensive study would incorporate the entire website, focusing on all of the texts produced by the organization.

Additionally, using CDA as my methodology restricts my analysis to my own reading of the texts. Thus, the readings that I take from the texts will be bound by my own biases. In relying on a single perspective to base my research, I may miss important information. In this way, it may have been useful to combine my analysis using another methodology in order to provide multiple perspectives. For instance, an interview with a member of the BLF could provide more clear answers than can be provided using mere textual analysis. Furthermore, since my analysis is specific to the texts of the BLF, I cannot generalize my findings and apply them to other culture jamming organizations. My findings are only relevant to an assessment of the BLF. Research with a greater range could include the analysis of one or two other culture jamming organizations for the purposes of comparing and contrasting their ideals, motives, tactics, and so on.

Sandlin and Callahan (2009) remind us that “the general consensus among many researchers focusing on culture jamming...is that while some research has been conducted on such practices, there remains a need to understand it further, and particularly to better understand its potential (or lack thereof) for enacting fundamental social change” (82). Culture jamming has become a significant topic of study in an age dominated by consumerism. It is important to study such strategies and tactics so as to articulate the most effective path towards social emancipation. What I hope to contribute to the field of communication studies and social justice communities first, is an informed assessment of culture jamming’s effectiveness in terms of its objectives, and second, an awareness about the consequences of consumer culture and the commercial control of the public sphere. By identifying the roots of the issue and providing an understanding of the conditions behind

the problem, as well as identifying the barriers to change, I hope that my research can provide a resource for people to draw upon in order to understand these issues.

## References

- Adbuster Media Foundation: Campaigns: Buy Nothing Day (1998-2010). *Official Site of Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment*. Retrieved October 10, 2009, from <https://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>.
- Angus, I. (2001). *Emergent Publics: An Essay on Social Movements and Democracy*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Bakan, J. (2004). *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Toronto: Penguin Canada.
- Baldwin, J.R., Faulkner, S.L. , & Hecht, M.L. (2006). A Moving Target: The Illusive Definition of Culture. In J.R. Baldwin, S.L. Faulkner, M.L. Hecht, & S.L. Lindsley (Eds.), *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines* (pp. 3-26). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Benjamin, W. (1973). *Understanding Brecht* (A. Bostock, Trans.). London: NLB.
- Bennett, W.L., & Lagos, T. (2007). Logo logic: The ups and downs of branded political communication. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 193-206.
- Best, B. (1998). Over-the-counter-culture: Retheorizing Resistance in Popular Culture. In S. Redhead, D. Wynne, J. O'Connor (Eds.), *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies* (pp. 18-35). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- The Billboard Liberation Front: Clients. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved April 15, 2010 from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/clients.html>.
- The Billboard Liberation Front: Clients: Wachovia Bank Money to Burn. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved December 12, 2009 from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/burn.html>.
- The Billboard Liberation Front: Corporate. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved February 19, 2009 from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/aboutus.html>.
- The Billboard Liberation Front: History: Indepth Look at the Early History of BLF. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/indepth.html>.
- The Billboard Liberation Front: Our Mission: The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/ArtAndScience-BLF.pdf>.



The Billboard Liberation Front: Our Mission: The BLF Manifesto. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>.

The Billboard Liberation Front: Our Mission: Questions for Redressing the Imposition on Public Space. (1999-2010). *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/response.html>.

Black, D.S. (1999). Fauxvertising, FSU-ism and other Semiotic Attacks on Consensual Reality. *Official Site of the Billboard Liberation Front*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.billboardliberation.com/faux.html>.

Bocock, R. (1993). *Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Budd, M., Craig, S., & Steinman, C. (1999). *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Calabrese, A. (2004). Toward a Political Economy of Culture. In A. Calabrese & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 1-12). Lanham: Rowman & Litterfield Publishers, Inc.

Cammaerts, B. (2007). Jamming the political: Beyond counter-hegemonic practices. *Continuum*, 21(1), 71-90.

Campbell, C. (1994). The desire for the new: Its nature and social location as presented in theories of fashion and modern consumerism. In R. Silverstone & E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Space* (pp. 48-64). London: Routledge.

Carducci, V. (2006). Culture jamming: A sociological perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 6(1), 116-138.

Carney, S. (2005). *Brecht and Critical Theory: Dialectics and contemporary aesthetics*. New York: Routledge.

Carroll, W.K. (1997). Social Movements and Counterhegemony: Canadian Contexts and Social Theories. In W.K. Carroll (Ed.), *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (pp. 3-38). Canada: Garamond Press.

Carroll, W.K. (2006). Hegemony, Counter-hegemony, Anti-hegemony. *Socialist Studies: The Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*, 2(2), 9-43.

Chouliarki, L. & N. Fairclough. (2004). The Critical Analysis of Discourse. In W.K. Carroll (Ed.), *Critical Strategies for Social Research* (pp. 262-271). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

- Crehan, K. (2002). *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Curran, J., Gurevitch, M., & Woollacott, J. (1982). The study of the media: theoretical approaches. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (pp. 11-29). London: Methuen.
- Dery, M. (1993). 'Culture jamming: hacking, slashing and snipping in the empire of signs,' *Open Magazine* pamphlet series.
- Downing, J. D. H. (2001). *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- During, S. (1993). Introduction. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (pp. 1-25). London: Routledge.
- Ewen, S. (1976). *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Eagleton, T. (2000). *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). Critical discourse analysis as a method in social science research. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 121-183). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Faulkner, S.L., Baldwin, S.L., Lindsley, S.L., & Hecht, M.L. (2006). Layers of Meaning: An analysis of Definitions of Culture. In J.R. Baldwin, S.L. Faulkner, M.L. Hecht, & S.L. Lindsley (Eds.), *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines* (pp. 27-52). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Fox, R.W. (1983). Epitaph for Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the analysis of consumer culture. In R.W. Fox, & T.J. Lears (Eds), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* (pp. 99-141). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (pp. 109-142). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Gill, R. (1996). Discourse Analysis: Practical Implementation. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences* (pp. 141-156). London: British Psychological Society.
- Gonzales, J.A. (2001). Cultural Fronts: Towards a dialogical understanding of contemporary cultures. In J. Lull (Ed.), *Culture in the Communication Age* (pp.106-131). New York: Routledge.

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Q. Hoare & G.N. Smith, Trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- Griswold, W. (1994). *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Grossberg, L., Wartella, E., & Whitney, D.C. (1998). *Media Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (T. Burger, Trans.). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Hackett, R.A. (2001). Building a Movement for Media Democratization. In P. Phillips (Ed.), *Censored 2001* (pp. 303-323). New York: Severn Stories Press.
- Hackett, R.A. & Carroll, W.K. (2006). Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory. *Media, Culture Society*, 28(1), 83-104.
- Hackett, R.A. & Carroll, W.K. (2006). *Remaking Media: The Struggle to Democratize Public Communication*. New York: Routledge.
- Haiven, M. (2007). Privatized Resistance: *Adbusters* and the Culture of Neoliberalism. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 29, 85-110.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Halualani, R.T. (1998). Seeing Through a Screen: A struggle to "culture." In J.N. Martin, T.K. Nakayama, & L.A. Flores (Eds.), *Readings in cultural contexts* (pp.264-275). Mountain View: Mayfield.
- Harold, C. (2004). Pranking Rhetoric: Culture Jamming as Media Activism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21(3), 189-211.
- Harold, C. (2007). *Ourspace: Resisting the corporate control of culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2004). *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
- Hebdige, D. (1993). From Culture to Hegemony. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural studies Reader* (pp. 357-367). London: Routledge.
- Hecht, M.L., Baldwin, J.R., & Faulkner, S.L. (2006). The (In)conclusion of the Matter: Shifting Signs and Models of Culture. In J.R. Baldwin, S.L. Faulkner, M.L. Hecht, & S.L. Lindsley

- (Eds.), *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines* (pp. 53-73). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2000). Alternative Media, alternative texts?: Rethinking democratisation in the cultural industries. In J. Curran (Ed.), *Media Organizations in Society* (pp. 107-125). London: Arnold Publishers.
- Huckin, T. N. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. Miller (Ed.), *Functional approaches to written text*. Accessed March 9, 2008.  
[http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/pubs/BR/functionalsec3\\_6.htm](http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/pubs/BR/functionalsec3_6.htm).
- Huckin, T.N. (2002). Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse of Condescension. In E. Barton & G. Stygall (Eds.), *Discourse Studies in Composition* (pp. 155-176). Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Inglis, F. (2004). *Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jhally, S. (2000). Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse. In R. Andersen & L. Strate (Eds.), *Critical Studies in Media Commercialism* (pp. 27-39). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, T. (2002). *Activism! Direct Action, Hacktivism and the Future of Society*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Juris, J. (2005). The new digital media and activist networking within Anti–Corporate globalization movements. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 597(1), 189-208.
- Katz, H. (2006). Gramsci, Hegemony, and Global Civil Society Networks. *Voluntas Manchester*, 17(4), 332-348.
- Kidd, D. (2002). Indymedia.org: The Development of the Communication Commons. *Democratic Communiqué*, 18, 65-86.
- Kincheloe, J.L. & P. McLaren. (2005). Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (pp. 303-342). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- Klein, N. (2007). *The Shock Docterine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.
- Kozinets, R.V. & Handelman, J.L. (2004). Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 691-704.

- Langlois, A. & Dubois, F. (2005). Introduction. In Langlois & F. Dubois (Eds.), *Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance and Dissent* (pp. 9-15). Montreal: Cumulus Press.
- Lasn, K. (1999). *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Binge – And Why We Must*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Leiss, W. et al. (1990). *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being*. Scarborough: Nelson Canada.
- Liacas, T. (2005). 101 Tricks to Play with the Mainstream: Culture Jamming as Subversive Recreation. In A. Langlois & F. Dubois (Eds.), *Autonomous Media: Activating Resistance and Dissent* (pp. 60-73). Montreal: Cumulus Press.
- Lury, C. (1996). *Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- McGregor, S.L.T. (2004). Critical Discourse Analysis – A Primer. *Official Site of Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society*. Retrieved March 9, 2008, from <http://www.kon.org/archives/forum/15-1/mcgregorcda.html>.
- McGovern, C. (1998). Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900-1940. In S. Strasser, et al. (Eds.), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (pp. 37-58). Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press.
- McQuaig, L. (2001). *All You Can Eat: Greed, Lust and the New Capitalism*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada.
- McQuail, D. (1994). *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Mitchell, S. (1973). Introduction. In Benjamin, W. (translated by Bostock, A.) *Understanding Brecht* (pp. vii-xviii). London: NLB.
- Morris, M. (2001). Contradictions of Post-modern Consumerism and Resistance. *Studies in Political Economy: Socialist Review*, 64(2), 7-32.
- Morton, A. D. (2007). *Unraveling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy*. London: Pluto Press.
- Mulhern, F. (2000). *Culture/Metaculture*. London: Routledge.
- Negativland. (1985/1994). 'Over the edge, vol. 1: JamCon '84', CAS (SST 223)/ CD (re-issue – Seeland 004).

- Nomai, A.J. (2008). *Culture Jamming: Ideological Struggle and the Possibilities for Social Change*. The University of Texas at Austin: Unpublished Manuscript (Doctor of Philosophy dissertation).
- Onufrijchuk, R. (1997). Origins of Consumer Culture. In L. William, et al. (Eds), *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being* (pp. 49-71). New York: Routledge.
- Parr, J. (1999). *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press.
- Perry, J. (2006). Consumer citizenship in the interwar era: Gender, race, and the state in global historical perspective. *Journal of Women's History, 18*(4), 157-172.
- Pizzichini, L. (2000). Web of subversion. *New Statesman, 129*, 47-48.
- Rozumilowicz, B. (2002). Democratic change: a theoretical perspective. In E. Price, B. Rozumilowicz, S. Verhulst (Eds.), *Media Reform: Democratizing the media, democratizing the state* (pp. 9-26). London: Routledge.
- Rumbo, J. D. (2002). Consumer resistance in a world of advertising clutter: The case of *Adbusters*. *Psychology & Marketing, 19*(2), 127-148.
- Sandlin, J.A. (2007). Popular Culture, Cultural Resistance, and Anticonsumption Activism: An Exploration of Culture Jamming as Critical Adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 115*, 73-82.
- Sandlin, J.A. & Callahan, J.L. (2009). Deviance, Dissonance, and Détournement: Culture jammers use of emotion in consumer resistance. *Journal of Consumer Culture 9*(1), 79-115.
- Sandlin, J.A. & Milam, J.L. (2008). "Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics": Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming, and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy. *The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto Curriculum Inquiry 38*(3), 323-350.
- San Francisco Suicide Club: Cacophony. (2003-2009). *Official Site of the San Francisco Suicide Club*. Retrieved February 22, 2009 from <http://www.suicideclub.com/cacophony/cacophony.html>.
- Sassatelli, R. (2007). *Consumer Culture: History, Theory, and Politics*. London: Sage Publications.
- Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, V. (2009). Beyond the Culture Jam. In J.A. Sandlin & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption: Living and Learning in the Shadow of "Shopocalypse"* (pp.224-236). London: Routledge.

- Schiller, H.I. (1989). *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shields, R. (1992). *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Skarphol Kaml, S. (2003). *Talking Back: The Rhetoric of Billboard Liberation*. University of Minnesota: Unpublished Manuscript (Doctor of Philosophy dissertation).
- Slater, D. (1997). *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: The Polity Press.
- Stole, I. L. (2001). Advertising. In R. Maxwell (Ed.), *Culture Works* (pp. 83-106) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tesky, S. (Producer & Director). (2008). *The Selling Game* [Motion Picture]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Doc Zone.
- Thacke, W. (2008). Cultural Activism and Culture Jamming. Retrieved March 14, 2008, from <http://english.illinoisstate.edu/bmthake/folio/docs/finalcj.html>.
- Titscher, S., Meyer, M., Wodak, R. & Vetter, E. (2000) *Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse Society*, 4(2), 249-283.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Discourse, Power, and Access. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard & M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and Practices: Readings in critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 84-104). London: Routledge.
- Whalen, J. (2004). The Mayhem Is the Message. Retrieved February 26, 2009, from <http://www.joseph.matheny.com/PDFS/metro.pdf>.
- Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press.
- Wodak, R. (2003). Critical what CDA is about – a summary of its history, important concepts and its development. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 1-13). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Worth, O. & C. Kuhling. (2004). Counter-hegemony, anti-globalization and culture in International Political Economy. *Capital & Class*, 84, 31-42.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: "The BLF Manifesto"

<http://www.billboardliberation.com/manifesto.html>

The BLF Manifesto In the beginning was the Ad. The Ad was brought to the consumer by the Advertiser. Desire, self worth, self image, ambition, hope; all find their genesis in the Ad. Through the Ad and the intent of the Advertiser we form our ideas and learn the myths that make us into what we are as a people. That this method of self definition displaced the earlier methods is beyond debate. It is now clear that the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology.

- Advertising suffuses all corners of our waking lives; it so permeates our consciousness that even our dreams are often indistinguishable from a rapid succession of TV commercials.
- Different forms of media serve the Ad as primary conduits to the people. Entirely new media have been invented solely to streamline the process of bringing the Ad to the people.
- Old fashioned notions about art, science and spirituality being the peak achievements and the noblest goals of the spirit of man have been dashed on the crystalline shores of Acquisition; the holy pursuit of consumer goods. All old forms and philosophies have been cleverly co-opted and re"spun" as marketing strategies and consumer campaigns by the new shamans, the Ad men.
- Spiritualism, literature and the physical arts: painting, sculpture, music and dance are by and large produced, packaged and consumed in the same fashion as a new car. Product contents, dictated by trends in hipness, contain a half-life matching the producers calender for being supplanted by newer models.
- Product placement in television and film have overtaken story line, character development and other dated strategies in importance in the agendas of the filmmakers. The directors commanding the biggest budgets have more often than not cut their teeth on TV Ads & music videos.
- Artists are judged and rewarded on the basis of their relative standing in the ongoing commodification of art objects. Bowing to fashion and the vagaries of gallery culture, these creators attempt to manufacture collectible baubles and contemporary or "period" objects that will successfully penetrate the collectors market. The most successful artists are those who can most successfully sell their art. With increasing frequency they apprentice to the Advertisers; no longer needing to falsely maintain the distinction between "Fine" & "Commercial" art.
- And so we see, the Ad defines our world, creating both the focus on "image" and the culture of consumption that ultimately attract and inspire all individuals



desirous of communicating to their fellow man in a profound fashion. It is clear that He who controls the Ad speaks with the voice of our Age.

- You can switch off/smash/shoot/hack or in other ways avoid Television, Computers and Radio. You are not compelled to buy magazines or subscribe to newspapers. You can sic your rotweiler on door to door salesman. Of all the types of media used to disseminate the Ad there is only one which is entirely inescapable to all but the bedridden shut-in or the Thoreauian misanthrope. We speak, of course of the Billboard. Along with its lesser cousins, advertising posters and "bullet" outdoor graphics, the Billboard is ubiquitous and inescapable to anyone who moves through our world. Everyone knows the Billboard; the Billboard is in everyones mind.
- For these reasons the Billboard Liberation Front states emphatically and for all time herein that to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen. Until that glorious day for global communications when every man, woman and child can scream at or sing to the world in 100Pt. type from their very own rooftop; until that day we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design.
- Each time you change the Advertising message in your own mind, whether you climb up onto the board and physically change the original copy and graphics or not, each time you improve the message, you enter in to the High Priesthood of Advertisers.

Jack Napier  
John Thomas

**APPENDIX B: "Wachovia Bank: Money to Burn"**

<http://www.billboardliberation.com/burn.html>

client: Wachovia Bank

improvement: Money to Burn

date: November 8, 2008

creative director/marketing coordinator: Milton Rand Kalman, Jack Napier | street team:  
Jack Napier, Louis Cypher | production: Ehrich Weiss, Rico T. Spoons, Duncan D'Nuts,  
Jaqoe Commerce



photos: Billboard Liberation Front

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 8, 2008  
San Francisco, CA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Intersection of Mission St.  
and Cesear Chavez, NE corner  
San Francisco

Dear Shareholders and Clients,

The Billboard Liberation Front has partnered with Wachovia to release a daring advertising campaign that celebrates Wachovia's new money management strategy. This campaign emphasizes the silver lining in the economic storm front now threatening to swamp our economy as well as our individual fiscal inner tubes.

"The calamitous decline in the value of all investments and the impending total collapse of the dollar will render the true value of the average savings account or investment portfolio roughly equal to a bucket of warm piss," noted Thomas J. Wurtz, CFO of Wachovia. Dr. John Silvia, Managing Director and Chief Economist noted: "After that golden shower we got from Golden West, we decided to fight fire with fire and start bailing for our clients and stockholders, mixed metaphors notwithstanding."

This dramatic revaluation of your money has created the opportunity for our team at Wachovia to offer a unique service to our stockholders and clients. "With what promises to be the coldest winter in years now commencing, we've instructed our staff in all 21 States that we have offices in to start bundling greenbacks into tight rolls, perfect for small stoves and furnaces," said Robert K. Steel CEO and President. "We believe this is the soundest application of our clients' money."

"'We're in the money.... we're in the money...' they sang in the 1920's. Maybe we should be singing 'Burn, Baby, Burn' in light of the modern era of fiscal management," - BLF CEO Jack Napier. Rico T. Spoons added, "The true value of this new campaign will be reflected in the "heat" it generates for Wachovia's clients."

That's right, you no longer have to worry about your money. As a matter of fact, don't bother worrying at all.

The BLF ([www.billboardliberation.com](http://www.billboardliberation.com)) has been improving outdoor advertising since 1977. Prior campaigns have included work for Exxon, R.J. Reynolds, and Apple Computers.

Wachovia Corporation (NYSE: WB), based in Charlotte, North Carolina, is a diversified financial services holding company provided via its operating subsidiaries a broad range

of banking, asset management, wealth management, and corporate and investment banking products and services.

The Department of the Treasury is a Cabinet department and the treasury of the United States government. It was established by an Act of Congress in 1789 to manage government revenue. The Department is administered by the Secretary of the Treasury.

Rico T. Spoons  
Director of Offense

## **APPENDIX C: “The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement: A Comprehensive Guide to the Alteration of Outdoor Advertising”**

<http://www.billboardliberation.com/ArtAndScience-BLF.pdf>

### **Look up!**

Billboards have become as ubiquitous as human suffering, as difficult to ignore as a beggar’s outstretched fist. Every time you leave your couch or cubicle, momentarily severing the electronic umbilicus, you enter the realm of their impressions. Larger than life, subtle as war, they assault your senses with a complex coda of commercial instructions, the messenger RNA of capitalism. Every time you get in a car, or ride a bus, or witness a sporting event, you receive their instructions. You can’t run and you can’t hide, because your getaway route is lined to the horizon with signs, and your hidey-hole has a panoramic view of an 8-sheet poster panel.

There are a million stories in the Big City, and as many reasons to want to hack a billboard. We have our reasons, and we don’t presume to judge yours. In this manual, we have made a conscious effort to steer clear of ideology and stick to methodology. The procedures outlined here are based on our 20+ years’ experience executing billboard improvements professionally, safely, and (knock wood) without injury or arrest. In most cases, it should not be necessary to follow the elaborate, even obsessive precautions we outline here. A can of spray paint, a blithe spirit, and a balmy night are all you really need.

Blank DeCoverly  
BLF Minister of Propaganda

### **Choosing a Board**

In choosing a sign, keep in mind that the most effective alterations are often the simplest. If you can totally change the meaning of an advertisement by changing one or two letters, you’ll save a lot of time and trouble. Some ads lend themselves to parody by the inclusion of a small image or symbol in the appropriate place (a skull, radiation symbol, happy face, swastika, vibrator, etc.). On other boards, the addition of a cartoon “thought bubble” or “speech balloon” for one of the characters might be all that is needed.

Once you have identified a billboard message you wish to improve, you may want to see if there are multiple locations displaying the same advertisement. You should determine which ones give your message optimum visibility. A board on a central freeway will obviously give you more exposure than one on an obscure side street. You must then weigh the location/visibility factor with other crucial variables such as physical accessibility, potential escape routes, volume of foot and vehicular traffic during optimum alteration hours, etc. Of course, if you can improve more than one board in the same campaign, so much the

better.

There are several standard sign types in the outdoor advertising industry. Knowing which type of sign you are about to alter may prove useful in planning the operation: Bulletins are large outdoor sign structures, typically situated alongside federal highways and major urban freeways. They measure 14 x 48 feet and are usually leased in multi-month contracts, meaning that an advertisement will stay in place for at least 60 days.

**30-Sheet Poster Panels** measure 12 x 25 feet, are situated along primary and secondary roadways, and are usually updated every 30 days.

**8-Sheet Poster Panels** measure 6 x 12 feet and are usually found in high-density urban neighborhoods and suburban shopping areas. They are designed to reach both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and are leased in 30-day increments.

Out-of-Home Media is the industry term for advertising targeted at people on the go, including bus shelters, bus exteriors, taxis, subway stations, street furniture (newsstands, benches, kiosks), painted walls, and “indoor out of home” locations like airports and malls.

There are of course many non-standard formats as well, and these frequently make the most intriguing targets. Oversized bulletins, animated signs, painted buildings, and boards with neon all offer unique challenges for advanced operations. Signs featuring large, illuminated text can often be improved simply by turning off a few letters, converting “HILLSDALE” to “LSD,” for instance, or “HOTEL ESSEX” to “HOT SEX.” The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

## Planning the Improvement Action

Though the sudden urge to just climb right up a sign and start hacking can occasionally be overwhelming, in our experience this type of “impulse improvement” tends to deliver unsatisfactory results, at unnecessary personal risk. The guidelines that follow draw on the BLF’s proud 27-year history of planning and executing such actions without injury or arrest.

### Accessibility

How do you get up on the board? Will you need your own ladder to reach the bottom of the board’s ladder? Can you climb the support structure? Is the board on a building rooftop, and if so, can it be reached from within the building, from a fire escape, or perhaps from an adjoining building? If you need ladders to work the board, they may occasionally be found on platforms on or behind the board, or on adjacent boards or rooftops.

### Practicality

How big are the letters and/or images you would like to change? How close to the platform at the bottom of the board is your work area? On larger boards you can rig from above and hang over the face to reach points that are too high to reach from below. We don’t recommend this method unless you have some climbing and rigging experience. When hanging in one position your work area is very limited laterally. Your ability

to leave the scene quickly diminishes proportionately to how convoluted your position has become. Placing huge words or images is much more difficult.

### **Security**

After choosing your board, be sure to inspect it, both during the day and at night. Take note of all activities in the area. Who is about at 2:00 a.m.? How visible will you be while scaling the support structure? Keep in mind you will make noise; are there any apartment or office windows nearby? Is anyone home? Walk lightly if you're on a rooftop-who knows who you're walking over.

What is the visibility to passing cars on surface streets and freeways? What can you see from your work position on the board? Even though it is very difficult to see a figure on a dark board at night, it is not impossible. Any point you have line-of-sight vision to is a point from which you can be observed. How close is your board to the nearest police station or Highway Patrol headquarters? What is their patrol pattern in the area? Average response time to Joe Citizen's call? You can get an idea by staking out the area and observing. Is it quiet at night or is there a lot of foot traffic? When the bars let out, will this provide cover-i.e., drunks keeping the cops busy-or will it increase the likelihood of detection by passersby? Do they care? If you are definitely spotted, it may pay to have your ground crew approach them rather than just hoping they don't call the cops. Do not let them connect you with a vehicle. Have your ground crew pretend to be chance passersby and find out what the observer thinks. We've been spotted at work a number of times and most people were amused. You'll find that most people, including officials, don't look up unless given a reason to do so.

Go up on the board prior to your hit. Get a feeling for being there and moving around on the structure at night. Bring a camera-it's a good cover for doing anything you're not supposed to: "Gee, officer, I'm a night photographer, and there's a great shot of the bridge from up here . . ." Check your escape routes. Can you cross over rooftops and leave by a fire escape across the block? etc., etc.

### **Illumination**

Most boards are brightly lit by floodlights of some type. Most large boards are shut off some time between 11:00 p.m. and 2:00 am by a time clock control somewhere on or near the board. Smaller boards frequently are controlled by photo-electric cells or conventional timeclocks, also somewhere on the board. If you find the photo-electric cell, you can turn the lights on the board off by taping a small flashlight directly into the cell's "eye." This fools the unit into thinking it's daytime and shutting the lights off.

As noted, most larger boards are controlled by timeclocks. These can be found in the control panels at the base of the support structure and/or behind the board itself. These panels are often locked (particularly those at the structure's base). Unless you are familiar with energized electrical circuitry and devices of this type we caution you to wait until the clock shuts itself off at midnight or so. Many of these boards run 220 volts and could fry you to a crisp.

### **Daytime Hits**

We don't recommend this method for most high boards on or near

freeways and major roads. It works well for doing smaller boards lower to the ground where the alteration is relatively quick and simple. If you do choose to work in the light, wear coveralls (company name on the back?) and painters' hats, and work quickly. Keep an eye out for parked or passing vehicles bearing the billboard company's or advertiser's name. Each board has the company emblem at its bottom center. If you're on a Sleaze Co. board and a Sleaze Co. truck pulls up, you're probably in trouble. It is unlikely that the workers will try to physically detain you (try bribery if necessary), but they will probably call the cops.

## Producing your improvement

Though powerful improvements are occasionally executed with nothing more than a spray can and a sharp wit, most actions require the production of some type of graphical overlay to alter the board's message. The more professional-looking these overlays, the greater impact your modified ad is likely to have on the public. This is not to say that every hit needs to look exactly like an original—this would be prohibitively expensive for most groups, and in these days of computer assisted photo enhancement, could arguably lead to the accusation that your hit was a binary illusion, crafted in Photoshop rather than on the urban landscape. While technical competence is a worthy goal to pursue (and a major motivator for the BLF), the success or failure of your alteration will ultimately depend more on the quality of your thinking and the power of your altered message than on how well you can match a font.

### Choosing a Production Method

Before you get too deep into the design process, you need to decide how the overlays will be produced. If you're lucky enough to have access to commercial sign-printing equipment, you can go the professional route and opt for industry-standard vinyl. Vinyl overlays are strong, light, easy to transport, and easy to apply, but unless you have an industry insider on your team, they will probably be too expensive to produce. If you or a collaborator have late-night access to the facilities of a commercial printer, neighborhood copy shop, or advertising bureau, you may be able to output your overlays on a large-format color printer or plotter. Large format ink-jet printers are now common place in offices, capable of printing 11x17 or Super A3.

Printing on paper nearly always requires a process known as "tiling"—cutting the image up into smaller pieces that are then reassembled into a whole. Popular computer programs like Quark Xpress and Adobe InDesign can perform this function automatically, by selecting the "Tiling" option from the Print menu. If you don't have access to a widetrack printer, try to locate a machine that can handle 11x17 tabloid-sized paper—the bigger your printer's output, the fewer pieces you'll have to tile back together to create a finished overlay. Most neighborhood copy shops and many corporate offices now have color printers/copiers with 11x17 output.

For low cost and maximum durability, consider canvas. When impregnated with oil-based lacquer paint, a canvas overlay has the potential to last longer than the sign surface it's affixed to. It's heavier



to carry and more difficult to secure to the sign, but it's a reliable, lowtech alternative that can be implemented inexpensively.

We don't recommend using overlays much larger than 4'x3'. If your message is larger, you should section it and butt the sections together for the finished image. It gets very windy on boards, and large pasteovers are difficult to apply.

### **Scale**

If you are changing only a small area (one letter, a small symbol, etc.) you probably do not need to go to any elaborate lengths to match or design your "overlay". You will need the measurements of the board, if your lucky the measurements on right on the board. If not, the next best method is to get cohort to stand under the board and snap a shot. Bring that image into Photoshop, knowing their actual height you can create a ratio of pixels to feet. The ratio method is also useful when trying to determine the exact height of the artwork on the board when you have the actual measurements.

### **Color Matching**

Again, using Photoshop (or GIMP if your an open-source apologist) use the eyedrop dropper tool to take a very accurate color number. If the sun is hitting the board at an angle you might get different readings at different points. Designers tend to go by numbers when choosing CMYK ink values so take a couple samples and round to the nearest 5%

### **Typeface Matching**

A perfect match isn't a requirement for an improvement with impact. One advantage is most designers have biases, only 20 typefaces are ever used in professional ads, and 80% of those are Helvetica. Try using two online resouces, Identifont.com and myfonts.com/whatthefont, to get a narrowed list of possible typefaces.

### **Producing Overlays**

After you have designed the overlay and printed out your tiles, you'll need to assemble the individual printouts jigsaw-style and glue them onto some sort of backing material. Heavy pattern paper works best for this, but you can also use 1/8-inch foamcore for smaller overlays, i.e. those less than 30 inches on a side. Start in one corner, adhering the first tile with spray adhesive to the backing material. Carefully assemble the rest of the tiles, trimming off unprinted margin space as required and laying them down one at a time, making sure all the edges are well-secured. If you get a little off-kilter at some point in the process and the pieces don't line up with absolute precision, don't worry—large-scale work is more forgiving since people will be viewing it at a distance. When all the tiles are secured, reinforce the edges with clear packing tape. If it's going to be a wet night, or if there's a chance your work may stay up for a few days or more, consider weather-proofing your overlay with a coat of clear lacquer.

### **Tiling With a Photocopier**

If you don't have access to a computer with desktop publishing software, but do have access to a good copy machine, you can duplicate the procedure described above using the copier's "enlarge" function. First, create a scale original of your overlay on a single sheet of paper, using stencils or rub-off lettering. Next, pencil a grid over your drawing, with each square being equivalent to the largest size of paper the copier can accommodate (letter, legal, tabloid, etc.). Cut the original into pieces

along the penciled lines, then enlarge each piece on the copier, going through as many generations as necessary until each piece fills its own sheet of paper. Assemble the pieces as described above, adding color with lacquer paints or permanent markers. Weatherproof if desired.

### **Producing Overlays by Hand**

We recommend using heavy pattern paper and high-gloss, oil-based lacquer paints. The lacquer paint suffuses the paper, making it supertough, water resistant, and difficult to tear. For making overlays, roller coat the background and spray paint the lettering through cardboard cut-out templates of the letters. For extremely large images or panels, use large pieces of painted canvas. The canvas should be fairly heavy to avoid being ripped to shreds by the winds that buffet most billboards. Glue and staple 1"x4" pine boards the entire horizontal lengths of the top and bottom of the canvas. The canvas will then roll up like a carpet for transportation and can be unrolled over the top of the board and lowered into place by ropes.

### **Methods of Application**

Although there are many types of adhesive that can be used, we recommend double-sided polyethylene foam tape. The tape is easily removable (but if properly applied will stay up indefinitely) and does not damage or permanently mark the board's surface. This may become important if you're apprehended and the authorities and owners attempt to assess property damage. The tape can be purchased in any general goods store, usually in the stationary section or where they sell frames, as they are designed to hold pictures. You can apply one side of the tape before climbing the board, be generous with the foam tape. Once on the board simply peel back the plastic backing and slap on. On cool nights there may be condensation on the board, in which case the area to be covered needs to be wiped down first—use shop towels or a chamois for this.

## **Executing the Hit**

Once you've completed your preparations and are ready for the actual hit, there are many things which can be done to minimize the risk of apprehension and/or injury:

### **Personnel**

Have the smallest number of people possible on the board. Three is about optimum—two for the actual work and one lookout/communications person. Depending on your location, you may require additional spotting personnel on the ground (see below).

### **Communications**

For work on larger boards where you're exposed for longer periods of time, we recommend compact CB units or FRS/GRMS walkie-talkies. Low cost CB walkie-talkies are available from Radio Shack and elsewhere, and can be fitted with headsets and microphones for ease of use. Have one or two cars positioned at crucial intersections within sight of the board. The ground crew should monitor oncoming traffic and maintain radio contact with the lookout on the board. (Note: Do not use the popular CB or FM channels; there are many other frequencies to

choose from. **A verbal code is a good idea since the channels you will be using will not be secure.**)

It's crucial that the ground crew don't lounge around their vehicle(s) or in any other way make it obvious that they're hanging around in a (likely) desolate area late at night for no apparent reason. A passing patrol car will notice them much sooner than they will notice operatives on the board. Keep a low profile. We've found that lookouts dressed as winos, or as homeless couples, are virtually invisible additions to the urban landscape. Park all vehicles out of sight of the operation.

### **Safety**

The risk of apprehension on a board pales in comparison to the risk of falling, and safety concerns should always prevail over security. If you're not an experienced climber, you're better off helping out on the ground: as a security lookout, graphic designer or publicist. Even if you are an experienced climber, we don't recommend solo actions on any board larger than 8 panels (6x12 feet). Ideally, all field actions should incorporate the buddy system, but particularly those that require any sort of rigging. If you're going to lean over the top of the board to affix any overlays, you should have a secured partner belaying you. It's a long way down, so be careful up there.

### **Clean-up**

Billboard structures are notorious trash magnets as it is; don't make matters worse by leaving your empty glue tubes, discarded vinyl backing, cigarette butts and empties on the property. The responsible billboard liberator leaves nothing of his own behind (not even fingerprints), though he may on occasion leave a cold six-pack for the benefit of those hard-working signmen assigned to the unglamorous task of un-altering his alteration.

### **Escape**

If you've done your homework, you'll know the terrain surrounding the board quite well. In the event of detection, prepare a number of alternate routes out of the area, and a rendezvous point with the ground support crew. If a patrol is approaching and you are in a difficult spot for quickly ditching and hiding (hanging on a rope in the middle of the board, for instance), **it may be better simply to stay still until they pass.** Movement is more likely to catch the eye.

Once on the ground, if pursuit is imminent, hiding may be your safest bet. If you've covered the terrain carefully, you'll be aware of any good hiding spots. Keep in mind that if the police do a thorough search (doubtful, but not impossible), they will use high-powered spotlights from cars and flashlights if on foot.

Stashed clothing in your hiding spot may prove useful. A business suit, perhaps, or rumpled and vomit-encrusted leisure wear. Be creative.

### **Publicizing Your Action**

Like the advertisements they improve, your actions should aim for the greatest possible reach. Try to time your improvement so it stays up for as long as possible, and generates the greatest possible number of "impressions." Actions executed at the beginning of a holiday weekend tend to stay up longest, since repair crews are less readily available. Yet even if your improvement survives for two or three days on a major

urban thoroughfare, it won't attain the kind of reach you can get with media attention.

### **Photographs**

Color slides are best for magazine and newspaper submissions, but online publishers prefer high-resolution .jpeg files. Be sure to get a good "before" picture of the board to be altered, ideally taken from the same camera position and at the same time of day (or night) as the "after" photograph. An "after" picture should be taken as soon as possible after the action is completed; if you want a daytime shot as well, come back for it later.

### **Press Releases**

May be serious or surreal, according to your motives and whim. Basically a cover letter for your photographs, which comprise the essence of the story. Most libraries carry one of the major PR reference guides, which list contacts for every printed publication and broadcast company in the country (while you're there, research standard AP style for press releases). Better yet, record your manifesto on an audio cassette or CD, then tape it to the bottom of a payphone outside a reporter's office and call in your "anonymous tip." The more creative you are, the more likely you are to get the desired response.

### **Postscript**

If anyone reading this primer finds it of any use in their own advertising endeavors, we at the BLF will consider it successful. We believe roadside advertising enhancement is a pastime more individuals should engage in. It's not that difficult to do smaller, low-to-the-ground boards. A quick hit-and-run on such a board will not require all of the elaborate preparations and precautions we have detailed. The more "real" messages we have on the freeways and streets, the better.

### **R.O. Thornhill**

BLF Education Officer BLF

### **Blank DeCoverly**

Minister of Propaganda

The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement was originally published in Processed World magazine. We wish to thank the PW staff for their help in making this document possible. Thanks also to Lloyd Void and Paizley Hayes of Twisted Times magazine, the Institute of Media Deconstruction, the Institute of Rational Analysis of National Trends, and—of course—the outdoor advertising industry.

Published in the USA by Infohazard Heavy Industries, a non-traceable subsidiary of NeverMind, Inc.

revised 2/08

Licensed under Creative Commons License: **Attribution**. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). **Noncommercial**. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. **Share Alike**. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

### **VITA AUCTORIS**

Christina Henderson was born July 31, 1982 in Toronto, Ontario. After graduating from Francis Libermann Catholic High School in 2001 she began her university career at York University. With Honours Degrees in both Communication Studies and Sociology, she graduated on the Dean's Honour Roll in June, 2005. She was accepted into the Master of Arts program in Communication and Social Justice at the University of Windsor for the Fall of 2007. She will graduate in the Fall of 2010