Visual Resistance: How to Challenge Brand Messages Visually

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VISUAL RESISTANCE: HOW TO CHALLENGE BRAND MESSAGES VISUALLY

by

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ABSTRACT
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This study examined brand messages and anti-brand messages (spoof ads or ad-busts) as cultural products that represented opposing ideologies in contemporary society. It sought to understand how people used visual devices in these cultural products to create persuasive messages that would advance their preferred ideologies. Visual ideological messages were analyzed using Kress & Van Leeuwen's semiotic methods for reading images and Mike Cormack's method for ideological critique.

The study found that creators of anti-brand messages used a number of methods to visually argue their points. Most common was to take the imagery from the original messages and assign an alternate meaning to it with new taglines or via associations with negative symbols. Another common method was to use hyperbole and parody to show the absurdness of the proposition in the original message.

Studying spoof ads or ad-busts and comparing brand messages with anti-brand messages is a useful way to unpack how visual rhetoric works – each one illuminates the other – looking at the original big brand campaigns shows us what ideologies are being promoted by big brands, the major producers of our culture. Looking at the ad-busts helps us see how the original visual arguments are made. Looking at both helps us see literally how each side "sees" the issues.

Visual representations of people and ideas influence viewer perceptions and thereby influence culture, laws, and policies. As members of a democracy, it is critical that we are able read and write so that we can participate in the shaping of our culture. It is equally critical that we understand how arguments are made in visual texts so that we can offer effective critiques when necessary.

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Introduction

This study examined brand messages and anti-brand messages as cultural products that represented opposing ideologies in contemporary society. It sought to understand how people used visual devices in these cultural products to create persuasive messages that would advance their preferred ideologies.

Advertising messages surround us. Because of this, some argue that advertising and branding messages have become our culture (Lasn, 1999). The messages in advertisements represent our deepest aspirations – they tell us what we should want and who we should want to be. As such, they are ideological texts. Advertisements make heavy use of visual language in their persuasive messages but while we are taught in school to analyze literary texts and to communicate with words and numbers, we are not taught how to communicate with images in as much depth. It is important that we learn how images work and we need tools for understanding how visual messages affect us so we can offer a critique or articulate a counter position. As semioticians Kress & Van Leeuwen put it in their 2006 monograph *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, "Analyzing visual communication is, or should be, an important part of the 'critical' disciplines. [...] We see images of whatever kind as entirely within the realm of the realizations and instantiations of ideology, as a means – always – for the articulation of ideological positions" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.5).

Consider for example the highly acclaimed video spot called *Onslaught* created by McCann Ericson in 2007 for Dove. Critics and reviewers from esteemed publications such as *Ad Age* wrote articles proclaiming there was finally a company that got marketing and social responsibility to mix. In the *Onslaught* video, Dove juxtaposed images of a little girl around seven or eight years old with imagery of hyper-sexualized women from advertisements, and images of diet ads and plastic surgery, making the case that girls are subjected to an "onslaught" of such imagery from a very young age and that this is harmful to women's health and self esteem. Their message: "Talk to your daughters before the beauty industry does" (Unilever, 2007).

The only problem was that Dove's parent company, Unilever also owned Axe Body Spray, a brand known for the exploitative imagery of women it used to promote its product to young men. Perhaps not surprisingly, shortly after the release of *Onslaught*, a viral anti-ad video called *A message from Unilever* (Clifton, 2007) was produced as a response to *Onslaught*. In this anti-ad or subvertisement, the exploitative images in the original video were replaced with images from Axe body spray commercials, making the argument that parent brand Unilever only allows sub-brand Dove to protest such imagery in order to gain a market with people they had alienated previously. But the most interestingly revealed dynamic in this pair of ad/anti-ads is that Unilever was using *the very same imagery* to promote diametrically opposed ideological positions concerning the objectification of women depending on the brand that they were advertising.

In the Dove advertisement, images of model-perfect women were shown in a negative light, the proposition being that these images are harmful to women and girls. In the Axe ads from the same parent company, these same images were shown as the prize

that male users of Axe would win by using the body spray. In this way, Unilever revealed themselves as a company with something for everyone, showing that they do not really stand behind any particular ideological position, they stand behind any position that will help them sell a product or open up another market.

Looking at subvertisements (spoof ads) is useful because the visual devices they use to respond to advertisements reveal many of the tactics used by the advertising industry and the ideologies that brands promote with the goal of selling products and services. Analyzing them helps us understand more about how advertising images communicate, giving us the skills and tools needed to think critically about the ideologies they advance and to articulate an opposing position.

This study examines parodied advertising campaigns that were created by media activists as attacks on brand messages via three case studies. The first case study looks at spoof ads created by *Adbusters*. This case was chosen because looking at these parodies that came at the dawn of the era of digitally produced graphic design provides a historical context to the tradition of using the "jammed" brand message as a tool for political action.

The second case study analyzes an elaborate hoax based on a Chevron advertising campaign that was created by an activist group called the Yes Men. This is an interesting case study that was chosen because the Yes Men picked up the ad busting gauntlet and took it beyond simple print subvertisements created in the early days by Adbusters. The Yes Men upped the ante by adding a crowd sourced campaign, a public relations hoax, and using its media and PR savvy to turn the media against itself, doing a significant amount of damage to the original campaign.

Different from the first two case studies which were created by groups that could be called professional, the third case study looks at a spoof campaign conceived and created by a "lay-person" (a non-designer) as a critical response to the way women are depicted in the advertising imagery of American Apparel. This case study is chosen as an interesting demonstration of how savvy people have become to the media and visual communication devices used by brands and it is an example of the kinds of effective, culture influencing arguments that are being made visually by non-professionals.

This study asks and attempts to answer the question: "How do creative activists use visual rhetoric to challenge brand messages?"

Research Question

How do creative activists use visual rhetoric to challenge brand messages?

Theoretical Frameworks

Semiotics

Advertising has been studied through the viewpoints of many disciplines including psychology, anthropology, semiotics, culture studies, and others. This study is an ideological critique of ads and spoof ads, looking at advertising through the lens of

semiotics “ the discipline that focuses on how signs (such as brand names) and texts (such as ads and commercials) generate meaning” (Danesi, 2008, p. 2). Semiotics helps us decode the meaning in advertisements by giving us the theoretical tools for analyzing how we make meaning from images as well as giving us the terms we need in order to talk about how the images convey meaning (Danesi, 2008, p.17).

Semiotics originally started as a method for medical diagnosis. A *semeion* which means mark or sign in Greek is the outward manifestation of an inner disease. In medicine, a sign would be symptom. For example, a cough could be a sign for a cold or a bruise could be a sign for a broken bone. This unit of meaning has two parts: the visible symptom and the inner condition it might indicate. These kinds of signs are natural signs since they are not human invented (Danesi, 2008, p. 17). Other kinds of natural signs might be storm clouds indicating imminent rain, or smoke indicating fire. Conventional signs work like natural signs but they are invented by humans in order to communicate. Like the medical signs, they also have two parts, the physical part called the signifier which would be the image, the word, or the sounds that stand for something else and the signified which is the thing that is being indicated. The word apple is a signifier for the fruit which is the signified. An apple could also be a symbol, representing ideas and cultural associations or connotations. In western culture, the word for or image of an apple might signify a computer company, Eve and the original sin, or temptation.

Ideology

An ideology is defined as "A systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct. Also: the forming or holding of such a scheme of ideas" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). In other words, when looking at visual rhetoric, critics should ask themselves what sort of world is being created for the audience. What are the rules of that world, who are the heroes and villains, and how do the rules of that world affect the audience. In movies and other stories, one can find many examples of ideology conveyed through the characters. In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, the heroes represent the ideology that simplicity and strong character are preferable to grandeur and the weaker character of the wizard (Brummett, 2011, p.168).

Encoding and Decoding

Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding (1980) serves as a background for this analysis. Though campaigns are not analyzed in depth using this theory, his theory provides a useful foundation for thinking about how communication works because it refutes traditional "effects" theories. These "hypodermic needle" theories assumed that advertisements were one-way messages that passive audiences absorbed without question. Hall argued that in order for communication to happen, receivers have to "read" or decode messages and they could do this from either a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading. The preferred reading was the one that the advertiser or sender

hoped the receiver would use (Danesi, 2008, p.124). The negotiated reading was the one that audiences or readers used when they agreed with part of the message but perhaps not all of it. The oppositional reading was the one that not surprisingly, refuted the preferred reading. The messages in spoof ads can be great examples of an oppositional decoding or reading purposefully in action, this is why this theory is mentioned and included in the framework.

Literature Review

Culture, Art, and Advertising

Culture can be thought of as the set of shared meanings and customs of a group of people as shared in common symbol systems (Cormack 1995, p. 27). Advertising and traditional art are both cultural products.

In this study, when referring to traditional or fine art, in order to differentiate it from advertising art, the objects referred to are paintings, drawings, or sculptures that were not created as a promotion for a product, a brand, or as an object with practical use like a chair that was meant to be sat in or a cup that was meant to hold liquid. This is a traditional viewpoint that distinguishes the fine arts from the decorative or applied arts (Danesi, 2008, p. 119).

Advertising can be thought of as any materials and messages produced to make a product or service more desirable, potentially creating demand for and increasing sales of

that product or service. Advertisers and artists use the same kinds of visual rhetorical devices to communicate their messages and influence audiences (Danesi, 2008, p. 3).

If we think of culture as the set of shared meanings and customs of a group of people as shared in common symbol systems (Cormack 1995, p. 27) it could be argued that advertisement is our culture now. The average person in 2006 was exposed to more than 3000 advertisements a day (Danesi, 2008, p. 4). How many fine art objects is the average person exposed to each day? It could be argued that some of the most widely shared symbol systems in American culture now come from advertising imagery, making brands our culture. Critics like Kalle Lasn, founder of *Adbusters* and initiator of the Occupy Wall Street movement, would say that we do not have high culture, we have advertising culture. We "join the conversation" and "share our stories" on branded social media sites where marketing managers mine our updates to deliver just the right promotion to us at just the right time. "American culture is no longer created by the people. […] Brands, products, fashions, celebrities, entertainments – the spectacles that surround the production of culture – are our culture now" (Lasn, 1999, p. xiii).

One reason Pop Art (short for populist art) was so successful was that it used a language of images that people were used to seeing in everyday life. Pop-art's original purpose was to critique mass-consumption and industrial production but it wound up bringing traditional art and mass culture closer together. "The pop-art movement bestowed on common people the assurance that art was for mass consumption, not just for an elite class of cognoscenti" (Danesi, 2008, p.15). Though the language and symbol systems of traditional fine art and advertising have a lot in common (Berger, 1972), the language of advertising images might seem more accessible because we have been

surrounded by it since birth and it is not locked away in special buildings. Brand and advertising images contain a set of meanings that reflect who we are to ourselves, visually representing our collective identity, helping us figure out which tribes we belong to. We are so surrounded by this imagery that it is practically invisible to us (Berger, 1972).

According to Raymond Williams, culture mirrors the system of production in a society. In capitalist society the advertising industry is the largest employer of artists, writers, and musicians. "Yet…men who were or wanted to be writers or scholars, are now, with every appearance of satisfaction, advertising men, publicity boys, names in the strip newspapers […] The new cheapjack is in offices with contemporary décor, using scraps of linguistics, psychology and sociology to influence what he thinks of as the mass mind" (Williams, 1958, p. 7).

In other words, instead of using skills and knowledge that come from "real art and science" to improve the lot of humanity, advertisers apply their skills toward manipulating the public in order to gain profits (Williams, 1980, p. 734). Culture is created by people who would be artists if they were not forced to make a living selling their talents to the advertising and publicity industry. Lasn (2000) might argue that culture is not created by artists, it is created by corporations that own artists.

How Advertising Images Communicate

Discussions of truth or implicit meaning in advertising imagery are not productive for this study, though there is a long tradition in the literature of looking at images in

advertisement from this perspective (Scott, 1994; Johannesen, Valde & Whedbee, 2008). The issue with truthfulness and representativeness in advertisements is that the propositions made in visual ads rarely are factual "this is what the product will do" kinds of messages. These would be the kinds of messages that would pass or fail a "truthfulness" test based on whether or not they accurately recounted verifiable facts. Advertisers do not communicate factually, they communicate rhetorically by making associations between their product and an idea, an emotion, or an aspiration. They are more like poetry. "And how can one verify the truthfulness of a feeling or a poem?" (Johannesen, Valde & Whedbee, 2008, p. 111)

Advertising images persuade us in the same way that spoken or written text might, using rhetorical devices such as metaphor or simile (Barthes, 1977; Durand, 1980; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Images communicate on several levels: linguistic, denotative, and connotative. The denotative message is the thing that is signified by an image, without any attached meaning i.e., a cigar is just a cigar. The connotative message of an image carries layers of associations and cultural meanings i.e., a cigar is a phallic symbol or reminds us of mafia movies. In an example given by Roland Barthes in his 1977 essay "Rhetoric of the Image," the colors and objects in an advertisement for tomato sauce carry a connotative message of "Italianicity". They stand in as signs that represent Italian culture.

He argued that just like composing a persuasive message with spoken and written language, the manipulation of visual elements and their relationships is a way of encoding messages with the hope that they will be received in the way the encoder intended.

Barthes went on to explain that advertisers often need to add a linguistic message to reinforce the "preferred" connotative meaning or encoding of the image. Because images can carry many connotative meanings, the linguistic messages are used to push the viewer down the path that the creator of the message wants them on. It suppresses other meanings, especially negative ones.

Another problem with assuming images convey a universal truth is that this assumption ignores the context of the cultural learning that needs to be in place in order for the imagery in advertisements and the persuasive messages they send to be understood (Barthes, 1977; Durand, 1987; Scott, 1994). As Barry Brummett puts it in his book *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* (2011), "Rhetorical critics should not assume that an image just 'is' or that it conveys clear and obvious meanings to an audience. Images may be thought of as placeholders for a meaning that the audience must assemble. Critics should explore the ways that images are organized and the contexts within which they are viewed in order to understand the interpretations that may be made of them" (Brummett, 2011, p. 168).

The Meanings of Images Change Depending on Context

Building on ideas from semiotics and semiology, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the meanings of images and words are elastic and depend a lot on their context. They say that we are sign-making animals and we use images, words, sounds, and other symbols, connecting them in infinite combinations in order to communicate with each other. They explain that the way images communicate is not due to properties inherent in

images themselves, images are more like empty containers for meaning. Sign-makers pick images and visual forms as representations of meaning based on the properties that are most useful or accessible to them in the moment. For example, a child telling us a story about a car might draw circles, chosen for their visual similarity to a wheel and also for the circular motion that wheels make and how that circular motion of the arm is required in order to draw a wheel. The circles themselves do not have an implicit meaning. With another signmaker in another situation, a circle might represent an eye, or a lake, a sun, a bullet hole (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.12).

This is the realm that advertisers work in. Playing with the meanings and associations in imagery, they make connections with their products ideas, or fantasies, compelling buyers to buy the fantasy by buying the product or service they are selling. "Cigars can be sold in the name of a King, underwear in connection with the Sphinx, a new car by reference to the status of a country house" (Berger, 1972, p.140). Images in ads are usually not about direct representation; they are about persuasion, association, and fantasy. The fact that images are "imprecise and ultimately meaningless is an advantage: they should not be understandable, they should merely be reminiscent of cultural lessons half-learnt" (Berger, 1972, p. 140).

Advertisers and anti-advertisers both take advantage of the ambiguity of meaning or multiplicity of meanings that images convey. Therefore, "the rhetorical critic of visual images [...] looks for ways in which the ambiguity of images allows appeals to social solidarity, seems to create collective memories, and resolves social conflicts with rhetorical effects" (Brummett, 2011, p. 170).

Visual messages communicate in similar rhetorical patterns that language does by way of signs, symbols, and icons, but one key difference between how images and language communicates is that entire visual compositions or characters can stand in as signs for an ideology, a story, a history a culture in a way that linguistic communications can not (Edwards, Janis & Winkler, 1999). A red apple could symbolize an entire story and ideology from western Christianity, the story of Adam and Eve, a computer company, ideals of innovation, beauty, or ease of use (Edwards, Janis & Winkler, 1999). This dynamic is especially apparent in political cartoons that riff on popular images using depictions of politicians and celebrities in order to make a statement or poke fun at politics and government.

Cartoonists have to use imagery that we are familiar with in order to make their jokes, otherwise we would not understand them and their message would be lost. An example that is often cited is the "Raising the flag on Iwo Jima" image of WWII soldiers photographed by Joe Rosenthal. In contemporary culture, this image is a symbol of collective effort, nobility, and patriotism. It functions as "a visual reference point that forms the basis of arguments about a variety of themes and subjects" (Edwards, Janis & Winkler, 1997, p. 294).

"Each use of the Iwo Jima image as parodied in editorial cartoons, contributes to the meaning of the image and to the way in which the image defines and constructs a political and ideological reality" (Edwards, Janis & Winkler, 1997, p. 295). Like political cartoonists, media activists and culture jammers "define and construct a political and ideological reality" (Edwards, Janis & Winkler, 1997, p. 295) by manipulating and re-

presenting advertising imagery from big brands, contributing to the ideological debates in our culture and attempting to influence them through visual critique.

Culture Jamming: Resisting Advertising Culture

A culture jammer is a communication activist who uses the language of advertising and mainstream media to subvert dominant ideological and mainstream media messages. They "jam" culture by responding to prevailing cultural messages using the same visual and rhetorical devices that publicity and brands use, thus laying bare the mechanisms of communication and implication that are at work, bringing them to light and opening them up for discussion and critique. In a sense, culture jammers are fighting to take down the dominant code or ideology by decoding and then reencoding brand messages from an oppositional stance (Danesi, 2008).

An audio-collage band called Negativland originated the concept of cultural jamming in the early 1980s. They transferred the idea of radio jamming (the illegal practice of interrupting or pirating radio broadcasts, hijacking the airwaves with subversive or nonsensical interjections), to billboard jamming, the defacement of billboards, turning advertising messages into political commentaries or critiques of consumerism (Dery, 2011). In *JamCon84*, a Negativland cassette only album, the narrator explains:

> As awareness of the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life […] some resist. The possibility of adding pimples to the retouched photo of the face on the cover of America are only now being seen as artistic territory […] The skillfully reworked billboard, with new lettering painted in the same style as the original had, turning strategic

> corporate elements back on themselves […] directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy in the context of a thoughtful reaction. The studio for the cultural jammer is the world at large (Negativland, 1984).

Writer Mark Dery was inspired by *JamCon84*, Negativland's "work in general" and several other artist and media activist groups who were working to "expose the ways in which corporate and political interests use[d] the media as a tool of behavior modification" (Dery, 2011). The concept and the term "culture jamming" made its first appearance in mainstream media in Dery's December 1990 article in *The New York Times* called The Merry Pranksters and the Art of the Hoax (Dery, 1990).

Dery pointed to Bakhtin's writings on the medieval carnival (a yearly, legal revelry in which the poor banged on the doors of the rich demanding food and drink), as the root of the practice of culture jamming. He fleshed the concept out using "postmodern theory, Baudrillard, McLuhan, and Stuart Ewen's politicized histories of consumer culture" (Dery, 2011). In her book on anti branding, *No Logo* (2010), Naomi Klein discusses culture jamming in contrast with other forms of media and advertising criticism. Unlike traditional media and advertising criticism which targets particular elements within advertisements and examines what the effects of these elements are on viewers (who are often portrayed as helpless receivers of these advertising messages), culture jamming, Klein says, targets the entire system of advertising and consumption. It targets advertising itself. In several examples from the Great Depression era, she shows how "An anti-advertising movement emerged that attacked ads not for faulty imagery but as the most public face of a deeply faulty economic system" (Klein 2010).

Though many others came before him, Kalle Lasn, head of the Canadian Anti-consumerist publication *Adbusters* is perhaps the most famous of the thinkers who advanced the ideas about culture jamming (Dery, 2011). Lasn was introduced to the concept by Dery who, after having written the December 1990 article for *The New York Times*, wrote a series of articles for *Adbusters* on the topic and its associated theories. "Lasn took the idea and ran with it," Dery said, branding *Adbusters* as the voice of culture jammers everywhere. Lasn did not cite Dery in his book *Culture Jam*, but he does acknowledge the influence of the Situationists and the ideas of McLuhan and Guy Debord in his work. The Situationists were an activist group from France active in the 1940s and 1950s known for their *détournments* – literally turnings around or subversions of prevailing norms and ideas. They staged pranks and sought to confuse and scramble the messages of dominant culture in an attempt to get people to live a less mediated existence (Lasn, 1999; Dery, 2011).

Criticism.

Critics of culture jamming and especially of *Adbusters* cite several problems. First, they argue that creating spoof ads or making fun of brands is not particularly threatening to big brands – the style just gets coopted into a new "edgy" aesthetic or copywriting voice to be used in service of the brands. (Dery, 2011; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2010; Klein, 2010).

Secondly, critics argue that real social change does not happen just because a critic makes a scathing poster. As Mark Dery (2011) words it, culture jamming and media

criticism could be seen as a "grad student's intifada". Real resistance to the forces of capitalism, they say, requires direct action – protests, sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, or even violence (Klein, 2010; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2010).

Finally, others point out that publications like *Adbusters* make arguments that seem to portray people as helpless victims of advertising messages (Dery, 2011; Klein 2010; Danesi, 2006). They say that Lasn and the writers who contribute to *Adbusters* make the same mistake that the "hypodermic needle" effects researchers made in the past – not acknowledging that people interpret advertising messages based on their own experiences, often not taking them seriously at all. They make the mistake of not respecting viewers' critical faculties, assuming that they are hypnotized and that their behavior is ruled by advertising messages (Klein, 2010; Danesi, 2006). As Klein (2010) says, advertising theories based in a "hypodermic needle" theory will never offer a solution to the problem of advertising. "Such a theory can never hope to form the intellectual foundation of an actual resistance movement against the branded life, since genuine political empowerment cannot be reconciled with a belief system that regards the public as a bunch of ad-fed cattle, held captive under commercial culture's hypnotic spell" (Klein, 2010).

Despite the criticisms, Dery (2011) and Klein (2010) both point out that *Adbusters'* call to be critical of brand messages and teachings of media literacy are critical to our democracy. Klein says that for many, Adbusting is the "gateway drug" that leads to real resistance – and that for an idea to gain traction, it needs to be visualized somehow, that culture jammers engage in the important work of offering alternative

visualizations of concepts such as happiness and fulfillment, rather than leaving those representations solely up to brands and advertisers.

How it works.

Culture jammers, do their work using “guerilla semiotics”, a term that Mark Dery invented based on Umberto Eco’s writings on “semiological guerilla warfare” (Dery, 2011).

Adbusters, for example, engages in resistant cultural production as they seek to subvert the meanings of culture’s dominant symbols. “Through its ‘subvertisements’ or ‘jams,’ it disrupts dominant ‘memes’ (corporate symbols, ad slogans, etc.) of popular culture in ways that expose negative and oppressive social, environmental, cultural, or ethical consequences of the practices of multinational corporations. If, as Lasn (1999) argues, ‘whoever has the memes has the power’ (p. 123), then one potential avenue for social change lies in hijacking memes to disrupt and counteract the very messages they are trying to convey" (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010, p. 253).

Anti-ad campaigns typically work by the use of strategic juxtapositions (Demo, 2000, p. 249) depriving advertising or brand messages of their metaphorical strength, often by amplifying the repressed connotations in the original imagery or copy (Danesi, 2008). A famous example from the Guerilla Girls is the broadside “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. [sic] Museum?” (1989).

> In this piece, an odalisque figure, appropriated from Jean August Dominique Ingres’s 1814 painting of the Grand Odalisque, anchors the poster and is positioned in opposition to the bold-face punch-line that reads “Less than 3% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are

> women, but 83% of the nudes are female" Unlike the figure in Ingres's painting, this odalisque dons a gorilla mask. The text/image juxtaposition and implied contrast between the Ingres and Guerrilla Girl odalisque create an argument by incongruity that challenges art world claims of gender equality (Demo, 2000, p. 133).

Another key tactic that culture jammers use is détournement – rerouting spectacular images, environments, ambiences, and events to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them" (Lasn, 1999, p. 100).

A picture, especially one found in an advertisement, is never just a picture. Images make powerful visual propositions to viewers and they reflect and promote political, corporate, and cultural ideologies. How exactly do images do this? In the methods section below, I will discuss how I deconstructed visual texts using semiotic tools from researchers Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) and Cormack's (1995) framework for ideological critique.

Methods

This study consists of three case studies. In each of the case studies, the compositions and visual elements are analyzed using semiotic methods from Kress & Van Leeuwen as spelled out in their 2006 book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Ideological messages in ads and anti-ads are analyzed using Cormack's method for ideological critique (1995), pointing to semiotic elements as evidence. As outlined in the introduction, these three case studies were chosen to demonstrate how this genre of

subvertising has evolved from a practice done by "fringe" groups to a mode of visual protesting that is being done increasingly by "regular" people.

The first case study looks at spoof ads found in the following categories on the *Adbusters* website: environmental ads, ads that parody advertising, ads that parody fashion, and ads that parody consumerism. All ads from these categories are analyzed, 43 in total. These texts from *Adbusters* were chosen because *Adbusters* was an early pioneer of this genre of parodied ads and looking at how they handled these topics gives historical perspective to how culture jammers have used ad spoofs as a political tool.

The second case study is an analysis of a 2010 spoof ad campaign called *Chevron thinks we're stupid* credited to the Yes Men (Zax, 2010). The spoof campaign was a critique of a public relations campaign released by Chevron called "We Agree".

Sixty-six spoof ad posters from the Spoof Gallery on the *Chevron thinks we're stupid* website (2010) are analyzed. Every third ad was used for this study. Ads that were not in English or that did not have an image associated with the text were not used. This case was chosen as example of the continuation of this genre of subvertising. The Yes Men used ads, PR spoofs, and their media savvy to do significant damage to Chevron's campaign.

The third case study looks at a mock photo campaign created by Nancy Upton in 2011 as a critical response to American Apparel's plus-sized model search campaign. Upton's campaign visually criticized the kind of imagery that American Apparel uses in their advertisements to depict women by imitating it and making fun of it. All images for the campaign that are located on Upton's blog *Extra Wiggle Room* are analyzed in comparison to fifteen American Apparel print advertisements retrieved from the

American Apparel website between December 2011 and February 2012. This case study is chosen as an interesting demonstration of how savvy people have become to the media and visual communication devices used by brands and it is an example of the kinds of effective, culture influencing arguments that are being made visually by non-professionals.

These texts were analyzed by looking at them in a first "pass" using Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) method for reading images from a semiotic perspective as a broad framework for interpreting and discussing the meaning of the visual elements in the texts. Special attention was paid to the particular symbols and signs that were chosen to tell a story. In subsequent "passes", the meanings of the visual texts were examined more holistically using Mike Cormack's (1995) method for ideological critique. In other words, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) was used to read the images, and Cormack (1995) was used to read *into* the stories that the images told about the ideologies and the cultural beliefs of the producers who made them. Both methods used in this study are explained in more detail below.

Kress and Van Leeuwen's Method for Reading Images

Kress and Van Leeuwen's book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) was written in order to "provide inventories of the major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of visual semiotics, and to analyze how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image makers" (p.1). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) map the grammar of visual design into

three functional categories of how images impart meaning: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In "reading" images, we are asked to consider them via these three lenses or metafunctions.

Ideational.

The ideational concept lets us talk about how signs and images represent the real world. It provides us with the language and tools needed to discuss narrative and conceptual patterns we might find in visual texts. The ideational concept breaks down to two sub-categories of analysis. The first is the narrative; the second is the conceptual.

It is within the narrative category that we can ask questions like "Is there a story or an unfolding of events implied or depicted in this image? If so, what is the story being shown?" When answering the question, using evidence found in the image, we would point to actors and "vectors" in the image, for example, what are the participants (actors) in the image doing to, with, or for each other? What are the action and the direction (vector) of the action within the image?

Within the conceptual category, we can look at and discuss classes and hierarchies, and look at how the structure of the text might communicate ideological or cultural messages. In other words, we can look at the participants and vectors and then ask ourselves, "What is the relationship of the parts to the other parts in this image? Are there subordinate or dominant elements?" This could be answered by referring to the image and pointing to larger or smaller objects, distant vs. near objects, strength of color

or contrast of objects compared with one-another, repetition or number of objects versus other objects, etc.

The ideational concept allows us to talk about the meaning of a visual text by pointing to elements within the text itself.

The next concept to be discussed, the interpersonal, is reminiscent of the ideas of Stuart Hall (1980). It expands the circle of analysis from looking at objects within the text, to letting us explore the relationship between signs, the producers of signs and the receivers of the signs.

Interpersonal.

It is within this category that we can ask ourselves questions like "what does the author of the visual text want us to think about what we are looking at?" We would answer the question by pointing to elements within the image such as framing, distance, perspective and gaze. For example, in the case of photographs, the photographer stands in as a proxy for the viewer if the viewer were standing in the exact position of the photographer in the moment that the image was captured. This is how the relationship of the producer to the viewer is indicated. The producer in the case of photographs stands in *as* the viewer.

If the subject of the photograph is a person and the person is gazing directly at us, this means that we as viewers are being asked to interact with the subject. The person depicted acknowledges our presence and "demands" something of us. If the person is not looking at us, then we are at liberty to inspect them. If the perspective makes us look up

or down at a person, a power relationship is also indicated: looking up at a subject situates us below them, looking down situates us above them. This maps to language based metaphors – he is below me means I have power over him, she is above me means she has power over me. The key question to ask here is, what position would the photographer have to be in in order to see this scene in this way (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 143).

While the ideational aspect lets us look at how elements of visual text make meaning, and the interpersonal aspect widens the focus of analysis by letting us look at how meaning is made by looking at the relationships between the producer of the image and the consumers of the image, the textual widens the scope further by letting us look at how the visual elements in a text make coherent, believable meaning within the culture in which they were produced. It most closely corresponds with Cormack's method for ideological critique in the category of judgment and style (which will be explained below).

Textual.

The textual concept is dependent on cultural learning and the time and place in which the text was produced. When looking at a visual text through the textual lens, we might ask ourselves "What do these signs mean in the world that the producer came from? What do they tell us about the culture in which the text was produced?" In other words, visual elements do not convey universally understood meaning. We have to look at the signs and visual elements in terms of what they mean in a *particular* culture, time,

or place. For example, in China, red symbolizes luck. In the United States, red often signifies danger, passion, or heat. The textual is also where we look at the use of style and composition, framing, and salience of elements pointing to them in order to answer our questions.

The textual concept is concerned with the entire system in which communicative events are produced and consumed. In other words, in looking at a text located within a specific culture, we can avoid problems with misinterpreting visual texts based on the interpreter's cultural learning.

Cormack's Method for Ideological Critique

In his book *Ideology* (1995) Mike Cormack points out that ideologies are encoded in cultural products such as advertisements or even "objective" newspaper articles, and are often hard to detect because, as members of the culture in which they were produced, they seem natural to us. To uncover ideologies and show that they are socially constructed rather than natural and inevitable, Cormack suggests a systematic reading that considers the content, structure, absence, style, and mode of address found in a text.

The content of a text includes any overtly stated beliefs or values made in the text, (these are called judgments), vocabulary (i.e., freedom fighters vs. terrorists), characters (who are the heroes or villains in the text?), and actions (what are the characters doing, or what is happening in the text?) (Cormack, 1995, p.29). The content and the structural elements (explained below) in a visual text are found mostly within the ideational realm in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) semiotic system for reading images.

Ideology is also embedded into the structure of a text. In a linear text such as a newspaper article, information delivered first is most recent or most important. In visual texts, larger elements or elements given more visual weight are more important. Compositions that work horizontally can be read in western languages from left to right. When an image is shown on the left with text on the right, the image shows a "given", that is something that the viewer would already know. The "new" that is, the issue to be addressed in the way the advertiser wants the reader to think about it, is the text placed to the right of the image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.177).

Ideology in texts can also be uncovered by looking at what is absent from the piece. Analyzing a text for absence starts with looking at what claim the text is making and what issues the text may be avoiding in order to make an ideological argument without problems. For example, "A work of fiction which claims to represent every day life but has no female characters" (Cormack, 1995, p. 31). Or a photo essay claiming to represent every day life at a university might show a larger percentage of images of people from diverse backgrounds than actually attend the university.

Style indicates ideology via the non-structural elements of how a message is encoded (Cormack, 1995, p.32). Style can include use of color scheme, graphic styles (polished vs. rough, sketchy vs. photographic, formal vs. casual) and influence how a message is received. These visual elements map to the textual realm in Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) system for reading images. For example, visually, style can identify the sender of a message as a member of a group – using an inappropriate style or using a style inappropriately would cause the proposition of the visual text and the creator of it to lose credibility with the intended audience for the message. Imagine an annual report for

the Bank of America designed with collaged text and tattoo filigree elements as embellishments for an example of how visual style conveys preferences and membership in groups. Or, imagine a parent trying to speak in teen "lingo" to his or her child and the eye-rolling that ensues.

The voice or mode of address can also indicate ideology (Cormack, 1995, p.31). This is the way in which the text is directed or aimed at us. Advertisements and newscasts tend to directly acknowledge the audience and address them. Indirect address can be found in sports events and fiction. This mode ignores the audience. Ideology is indicated here in the content of the address – what does the speaker want the audience to think about the text or the situation and what voice do they use in order to persuade the audience? When discussing the voice or mode of address in the visual texts, this study points to the visual elements of perspective, framing, distance and gaze as evidence for arguments about the intended meaning of the text. With respect to a semiotic analysis, these come from in the interpersonal realm (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 52) explained earlier.

Similar Studies That Used the Methods Described Above

For this study, I looked for studies that used Kress & Van Leeuwen's semiotic methods and Cormack's methods in order to see how the studies were set up and how they might be helpful to the design of this study. I eliminated studies that did not use Cormack (1995) or Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) as the main framework for analysis and I only looked at studies that were published in journals, though there were several

theses that were also of interest. Below, the studies most relevant to this study published since the year 2000 are discussed.

Studies that have used Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006).

Three studies were found that used Kress & Van Leeuwen's method for "reading" images that were relevant to the analysis in this study.

The first was a semiotic analysis of a photo essay from *Time Magazine* called The Great Divide (Time, 2008). In this study (Goodnow, 2010), the author compared the visual depictions of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and found that visual bias was present in the essay. Beyond the obvious differences in depictions, such as the photos of Clinton being in black and white and the photos of Obama being in warm color, the researcher found that images of Clinton invariably showed her in busy, cluttered environments, serious, working, perhaps with supporters in the background. Semiotically, black and white photographs feel stark and remote, and imply an exposé, documentary style whereas warm color is more friendly and intimate. Never showing Clinton interacting with supporters or family members also served semiotically to make her seem remote and distant. Contrasting this with the photos of Obama, in which he was invariably depicted as a central figure surrounded by loving family members in intimate settings – and never doing any actual work, the author argued that visual bias was present in the photo essay. Though she did not claim directly that this impacted the outcome of the 2008 primaries, she indicated that her study could help explain how such visual bias is transmitted in news outlets and picked up by readers.

This study was helpful in guiding the analysis of the American Apparel spoof campaign created by Nancy Upton (2011) since it was entirely photographic (Upton's spoof did not have any text or taglines). In comparing the American Apparel ads and their depictions of women – and what these depictions tell us about what women are supposed to look like and what women do with Upton's depiction revealed a lot about the conflict between the fashion and beauty industry and "regular" women who are tired of the fashion industry making them feel inadequate. Goodnow's study provided some good examples for what to look for in photographs and how to discuss them.

The second study looked at the visual branding of environmental issues such as climate change as found in stock photography on the Getty Images website (Hansen and Machin, 2008) which was promoting green issues as a marketing opportunity. In this study Kress & Van Leeuwen's method was used to deconstruct the ways that Getty Images was suggesting that corporate advertisers and designers depicted "green issues" in their advertising materials. In an especially insightful connection made by the researchers, they connected to search terms with what Getty suggested could be "said" with the images returned in the search results. In their analysis of imagery, they found that environmental issues were often depicted with representative imagery of people and places rather than actual, recognizable imagery of people and places, thus suppressing more controversial representations. This study situates the visual depiction of green issues in the struggle to enact policies that will protect the environment against corporate desire to promote continued consumption while avoiding a real attempt to address these issues.

The study above offered examples of how to deconstruct "environmental issues" branding messages, known to many culture jammers as "green washing" and it directly applied to my comparison of the Chevron *We Agree* (2010) campaign to the *Chevron Thinks We're Stupid* (2010) spoof campaign.

The third study reviewed for methodology was a visual semiotic analysis of advertisements for fashion dolls (Almeida, 2009). In this study, Almeida examined the content of advertisements for Bratz dolls, comparing them to Barbie dolls. Pointing to the use of darker, muted colors in the backgrounds of the ads, one argument the author made was that the dolls were more appealing to young girls because they reflected a more modern, less romanticized view (i.e., not pink) of femininity. She noted that these advertisements, like others, reflected embedded societal views about what it means to be a woman. As such, the dolls were always depicted *as* something rather than as *doing* something: "top-notch, funky, fashionable, cutting-edge and super-cool". She argued that these depictions stem from an ideology that values beauty and fashion consumerism for women over being an active influential shaper of culture.

Examples of analysis from this study were useful in guiding the analysis of gender-based fashion industry advertisements depicted on the Adbusters website as well as the American Apparel advertisements and Upton's (2011) spoof of American Apparel's typical depictions of women because they cover the same topic.

Studies that have used Cormack (1995).

Two studies were found that used Cormack's (1995) method for ideological critique in the same spirit as this study did.

The first was a study of racial tensions as depicted by "newspapers of record" in France and the United States (Darling-Wolf, 2010). In this study, the bilingual researcher found that when covering the 2005 riots in France or in covering Hurricane Katrina, each paper depicted the domestic problem by characterizing the events as being the fault of the victims. *The New York Times* for example, was more likely to characterize Katrina victims as slothful and personally responsible for their plight, while *Le Monde* was more likely to indicate that Katrina victims were hurricane victims and also victims of institutionalized racism in the United States.

The second was a textual analysis of the characterization of American citizens of Japanese or Arab/Middle Eastern ancestry as "Other" after foreign attacks on U.S. soil – Pearl Harbor, and the twin towers in New York City respectively (Brennen & Duffy, 2003). This study differed from the first in that it analyzed how the rhetoric changed over time. In both cases, the study looked at the connection between the intensity of the newspaper's depiction of the Other and the government's attempts to assume more power and curtail citizen civil liberties as necessary measures for protecting the U.S. from a foreign threat.

Though these studies did not look at visual texts, they offered helpful examples for this analysis. If these studies had looked at visual texts for how these events were portrayed, the researchers might have looked at how the characters were portrayed. Did the Katrina victims look poor? Were their clothes ripped and ragged and dirty? What

were they doing? Were they lounging on a stoop drinking from a paper bag? In the case of the Japanese-Americans who were sent to internment camps and the Muslim-Americans after 9/11, did photographs show them with furrowed foreheads and serious, devious plotting facial expressions? Did they appear furtive and dangerous? Were they shown in shadowy environments? The textual descriptions that are pointed to as evidence in the Darling-Wolf (2010) and the Brennen & Duffy (2003) studies map easily to visual depictions. The Darling-Wolf study in particular offered an example of how to compare depictions from the perspective of an in-group and an out-group and this is comparable to my analysis of brand and anti-brand messages. Similar to the Goodnow (2010) study the Brennen & Duffy (2003) study offered a good example of how to look at characterizations of groups and people and make the argument that these characterizations can influence laws and public policy.

As shown in the example studies above, ideologies are encoded in cultural products but they can be hard to detect because, as members of the culture in which they were produced, they seem natural to us. Cormack's method offered a systematic way to uncover the ideologies in texts and helped identify the stories that were told or the arguments that were made by the advertisements and the spoof-advertisements that were studied. Kress & Van Leeuwen's framework for reading images provided the tools for pointing out how those arguments were made visually.

In the analysis portion of this study, when referring to character, judgments, style, actions, mode of address, I am referring directly to Cormack's (1995) method for ideological critique. When referring to perspective, actors, goals, vectors, point of view, angle, analytical, narrative, or classificational aspects of an image, I am referring directly

to Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) method for reading images. When referring to given and new or ideal and real, I am also referring to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) and their method for finding the meaning in compositions.

Analysis

Case One: *Adbusters*

Background on Culture Jamming and the Adbusters Media Foundation.

The Adbusters.org tagline on its website reads, "We are a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society" (http://adbusters.org).

Now 98,167 strong, the Adbusters Media Foundation got its start in 1989 when Kalle Lasn and a handful of documentary filmmakers convened to produce a series of forest industry anti-ads for television in response to a greenwashing campaign called Forests Forever that was airing on CBC and other British Columbia television stations. The greenwashed campaign had been created by the British Columbia Council of Forest Industries, an affiliation that represented logging industry interests, as a PR campaign meant to counteract mounting negative public sentiment and pressure from environmental

groups that could lead to restrictions on logging and clear-cutting in the old growth forests in the area.

Armed with their new commercial that was professionally produced, Lasn and Shmalz approached the CBC about buying airtime. Officials refused to sell airtime to the duo, arguing that their message challenging the "forests forever" campaign was advocacy or issues advertising, a format not allowed by the station. Infuriated that commercials that supported pro-logging messages were not considered issues advertising and were thus allowed to air, Lasn and Shmalz wrote to newspapers, staged protests, and drummed up public outrage that the station would not give equal access to opposing messages. Though they never succeeded in getting the CBC to air their commercial, they did succeed in getting the station to pull the Forests Forever campaign (Lasn, 1999).

Lasn dubbed the fight for equal access to mass media information outlets "Media Carta" – a proclamation that corporations should not be the only voices heard and disseminated. Media Carta argues that citizens should also have access if we are to have a democracy.

Lasn, who grew up in Estonia during Soviet rule, said that Soviet dissidents would often complain that there was no public sphere of discourse in their country – that it had been oppressed by communist rule. He points out that people from Western Countries condemn governments that oppress public discourse, censor media, or punish citizens for speaking out against their governments. He argues that in democratic countries, there also is no public sphere – here, he says, you are allowed to speak out against the government, but not against the sponsors (Lasn, 1999, p. 53).

This right to speak out against sponsors is at the core of *Adbusters* crusade. They fight advertising with advertising, using theory and tactics from several theoretical backgrounds, but especially from the Situationists, who Lasn says are the founders of a movement that "first applied the spirit of anarchy to modern media culture" (Lasn, 1999 p. 100).

Anti-advertising is one of the many forms of activism used by the culture jammers and by *Adbusters*. Other forms used include direct activism, protests and street theater, flash mobs, etc. often incorporating humor to get their messages across and to counteract the forces of consumer culture. *Adbusters* is behind many campaigns including Occupy Wall Street. They distribute their messages via their website (adbusters.org), their print magazine, major television networks such as CNN and other venues including social media.

The focus of this thesis is anti-advertising. Anti-advertisements or spoof ads are used as a tool to combat what they call the pollution of our mental environment by corporations and advertisers. They are used to sell ideas rather than products – and in fact, they usually fight the idea of selling products. "Buy Nothing Day" would be a good example of that sort of campaign. Arguing that advertisers have taken over public space and mental space, intruding on individual lives in every corner from classrooms to school bathrooms, *Adbusters* encourages people to reclaim their minds, identities, culture, and public space from advertisers and corporations by stalling the system – refusing to buy anything for a day.

The next section discusses the ways the *Adbusters* used visual rhetoric to respond to the images of consumer culture – to fight the meme war (Lasn, 1999) or for the

language of images (Berger, 1972). I analyzed forty-six spoof ads from adbusters.org. In the first part, I looked at ten spoofs to see how they used visual rhetoric to show how the advertising and branding system works, in the second part, I assessed eleven anti-ads to see how they show the dark side of the fashion industry, and in the third part, I examined twenty-four anti-ads to see how they say consumerism and its imagery affect our mental and physical environments. In the conclusion I brought all the types together to see the overall picture they create of our culture and the ideologies that promoted consumerism.

Analysis.

The Ad Game

When viewed as a group, the ten subvertisements collected from the Adbusters.org spoof gallery portrayed the advertising industry as an unethical, corrosive, exploitative system. Three of the ads made people from very poor countries who are the makers of the products we buy visible, asking us to make the connection between our habits of consumption and the people and environments that are exploited in the making of them. Other ads showed how advertisers attempted to cover every inch of environmental and mental space with their messages, wishing to indoctrinate us from birth, until we are fooled into believing that we can only buy our identity or find our tribe through shopping.

How was the connection made between advertising and the dark side of consumerism and the exploitation of others that is necessary in order to sustain our lifestyle? One subvertisement (Figure 1) did this by spoofing Apple's advertisements for

their iPad 2 tablet. The tagline for the spoof read “Thinner than ever” a play on the wording in the original iPad ads. In first world cultures, thinness is an ideal, but in the spoof ad a dark emaciated starving child was shown, the extreme of thinness, reaching for the gadget that was being handed down to him or her by the disembodied hand of a white person. This was a narrative image. A story was being told here – recognizable by the strong diagonal vector created by the hands and the iPad in the middle (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The connection between the disembodied white hand, ostensibly representing the first world and the hand of the starving dark skinned child was the iPad. The characters (discussed by Cormack) or participants (discussed by Kress & Van Leeuwen) in the story were the first world, the third world, and the iPad. The iPad connected the other characters in an unequal relationship. The white hand was above the dark child. Adults typically have more power than children do. Showing this relationship visually reinforced the message of domination.

The image had no background to give it context – the narrative was not taking place in a particular setting or place – instead the creator used style to position the subvertisement as a response to the original Apple campaign. In Cormack’s (1995) writings, style was any non-structural element in an image (p. 32). Creating the spoof in the style of Apple ads worked to make the viewer connect the ad with Apple. Visually, it is the same idea as imitating someone’s voice. The context and layers of meaning were communicated via the white hand and the dark child and what each represented. In this way, the participants themselves were analytical – the white hand was the carrier that represented all white people – or the first world, and the dark child represented all starving third world citizens.

Two other ads asked us to make the connection between the advertising industry, consumerism, the first world, and the third world. One read, “got milk?” The subhead questioned “Why are one billion people dying of hunger while another one billion are dying of excess?” (Figure 3) In sharp contrast to the original got milk campaigns created by Goodby Silverstein & Partners for the California Milk Processor Board that featured healthy celebrities with milk mustaches representing health and wealth **(#citation),** the image in the subvertisement seemed to be from Africa and featured emaciated children scratching in the ground for food. It was a narrative image that told a story of starvation and want. The gaze of the participant or character in the foreground gaze formed a strong vector – his body was crouched on the ground – the perspective of the camera looked down on him. If we were to describe this scene in words, we might have started by writing, “the downtrodden African child…” The camera angle visually communicated the child’s lowly position in comparison to our own. His gaze looked up at something, but without reaching – perhaps he was looking at another photographer not in the scene. We were not participants in the scene – the participants seem unaware of our presence, so we can scrutinize them at will. But the view we got of the scene via the position of the photographer’s lens showed us looming over the child, we were close enough to reach out and touch him or her. And we appeared to be at the same level as the person or thing that the child was looking up to that was outside of the frame; perhaps another photographer. This aligned us with the photographers – though we were in the scene, we were observers from above, not equals with the people being observed, not sharing in their experience so much as watching it. Like the phrase “thinner than ever”, in a poor country, the question “got milk?” took on a whole new meaning when paired with an

image of a starving person, especially in comparison to the over consumption of the first world.

The third image that asked us to make this connection is Figure 2 – called “Joy” from the series “The Big Sell”. This image was a demand image as discussed by Kress & Van Leeuwen. In this photographic spoof ad, the participant, (whom we might have imagined to be from the third world as indicated by his dark skin, and the barren dry landscape behind him) looked at us, holding up a bottle of Joy dishwashing detergent. The facial expression of the participant was a little tough to read, he appeared to be holding up Joy as a reflection – a question to us about what our Joy might mean for people like him. Neither the look, nor the body language was confrontational but the character faced us frontally, asking for an interaction. As if to say, “is this what you mean by joy? Because your joy might mean my suffering.”

Advertising is corrosive.

Commercial messages seep into even the most sacred private spaces in life eating away at our healthy desires and normal human instincts, perverting them and then selling them back to us. In Figure 8, the tagline read, “Advertising is brain damage”, over an orgy scene reminiscent of a Hieronomous Bosch painting. Satanism was implied via the pentagram drawn on the floor, and the black clothing most of the participants wore. The participants or characters were all in various sexual positions and they had no faces. The scene was all avarice and desire; the action was all about consuming and being consumed. This was a narrative scene, there were vectors and a story is happening here,

but it was not a demand image – no one was looking at us. As in pornography, we were invited to look without being detected. The men appeared very soft and vulnerable – they were the goals, the women were the actors, stepping on a pale, soft, exposed male belly with a spiked heel, eating an apple, feeding another woman, stabbing another woman, but always posed in such a way that we could view their bodies (Berger, 1972), also reminiscent of porn and how male sexual fantasies are visually rendered.

In Figure 5, advertising and consumerism had branded a baby and burned away an identity. Animals are branded with a mark to signify that certain humans own them. In this way, to be branded or to wear a brand is to signify that the company whose mark you wear owns you. The title of the subvertisement "Tabula Rosa" (Figure 5) is a play on the term Tabula Rasa, a term that means that humans from birth are an empty slate, that what they become depends on nurture and his or her environment. Right from the beginning of life, the subvertisement seemed to say, the corporations and the advertisers begin branding and claiming us. On the innocent soft baby flesh, there were black brands, like tribal tattoos signifying that the brands were our tribe now. And the mother, while not tattooed, had a ring of dots around her nipple. Most likely the artist put this there just to give emphasis to that area, but it did communicate the idea that the baby was sucking from the breast of the brands culture, until the baby grew up, and as shown in the Barbara Krueger piece, our identities were formed by what we bought. "I shop therefore, I am." Taking one of the great maxims of philosophy from Rene Descartes, "I think therefore I am" (Garber, 2003) and replacing the action of thinking and great human discovery which is something that cannot be bought, with the action of shopping was also the idea behind the ad that read "Nothing. What you've been looking for" (Figure 4) Even in

school, while in the privacy of the restroom, brand messages were impossible to escape. Figure 9 showed a young man standing at a urinal, staring at a commercial on a monitor, that asked kids to "Aim Higher" by fighting for ad free zones in schools (Figure 9).

Advertising is unethical.

Figure 7 was a spoof for a fictitious conscience easing formula called Ethic-eze that made the case that advertisers must either have no conscience or have to suppress it with a potion. In other words, the ad argued that for people who make a living in the advertising industry, having ethics is a liability. This subvertisement communicated its proposition along with several sub-propositions through its illustrative style and use of copy. The style of the spoof is reminiscent of the illustrated advertisements from the 1930s to the 1950s that portrayed the "good life" in U.S. magazines like *Life*. As Cormack (1995) discusses, absence can be a strong indicator of ideology. In the 1950s, American life was portrayed as prosperous, healthy, and as the best life that could be had in the world. What was absent from these portrayals was any indication of the income disparity, racism, sexism, and political corruption that were also part of American life at that time. In the subvertisement, a clean cut, white toothed, plaid shirted white man smiled at us, looking us directly in the eye offering us a bottle of 'Ethic-Zee'. "Admen!" the headline shouted, directly addressing the viewer making the assumption that they were an "ad man". The headline told us who the intended audience for this piece was – or who was being talked about. "Nagging doubts? Trouble sleeping? Has pimping for the man got you tossing and turning?" Then on the next line, "You need Ethic-Eze!" "Fast

acting relief for your troubled conscience." "Recommended by 4 out of 5 psychiatrists." This sub-idea also implicated the psychiatry profession as unethical by evoking the ads for antidepressants that are marketed in order help ease the symptoms of a troubled conscience that comes from working for an unethical system or that people take anti-depressants to cure a "disease" that is actually a healthy response to the our deeply troubled system.

Then, in a nod to snake-oil type ads, there was a testimonial "Feelings of remorse nearly ruined my career at Sasquatch & Sasquatch. But now I'm proud of the work I do. Ethic-Eze made shedding pounds of guilt almost effortless. Thank you." The shedding pounds reference evoked the many useless weight loss remedies that were hawked by advertisers and pharmaceutical companies. In looking at the entire text of this ad, the participant in the ad, the visual message of his gaze and social distance reinforced the 'salesy' voice of the text (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). His expression of forced cheerfulness looked like that of a salesman – and he was within the social distance that we would only allow a close friend in. Salespeople sometimes impose on personal space in order to corner a person and get their attention. There was no visual context or background in this ad – any context or subthemes were found in the text, for example, the phrases "shedding pounds of guilt", "working for Sasquatch & Sasquatch", and "Recommended by four out of five psychiatrists. The illustrated model's facial expression, the smile and the offer of the product told us how we were expected to or how we were being invited to respond – by accepting the product offer.

This ad composition could also be read by considering the given and the new. On the left side of the ad, was the given – what we already would know about admen or

salesmen – that they would smile, intrude on your personal space, demand interactions from you whether you wanted them or not, and they would try to sell you something. On the right, we had the "new" information – or what it was that the creator wanted you to think about the image. The text reinforced that this was someone trying to sell us something – and that by showing us the unethical behavior of admen trying to sell us a "snake-oil" to ease our conscience, they said that this guy, who represented all admen, was unethical and they answered the question "How can 'ad men' live with themselves?"

Fashion Adbusts.

What did the culture Jammers say about fashion? They said that those who followed fashion were herd following conformists who unwittingly bought into an industry with a terrible dark side. They showed the exploitative side of the fashion industry that abused the people employed in sweatshops who made the fashions, the emaciated people who modeled the fashions, and the insecure people who thought they had to buy the fashions in order to be loved, happy, or socially accepted.

Figure 17, for example was a conceptual image – in the original advertisement, Christy Turlington, a fashion model stood in a white environment a bit to the side so that we could look at her. Her skin, the light, everything in the image was unmarred beauty, but on a bare patch of skin closest to us we could see an angry raised patch of skin branded with a scribble tattoo that read "Bvlgari". It was a little bit reminiscent of barbed wire that conjured up ideas of imprisonment and injury if a person were to attempt an escape. Like Figure 5, the Tabula Rosa image, in this piece, the model was no longer just

a representative of the brand Bvlgari; she was the property of Bvlgari. She had been branded, which has implications of mortification of the flesh and of being owned like livestock. This ad visually represented the "dark underside of the making of the perfect persona." The art pieces brought out what was absent -- the real person beneath the flawless exterior (Bueti, 1997). The way these pieces were created, by pressing with ballpoint pen from the reverse side of the page to create a relief that was then photographed again also suggested our complicitness in our own bondage – in these images, the branding came from within. But the problem with branding as in fashion was that it was not an owner that did it to us, what they did with their persuasive fantasy ads was persuade us to do it to ourselves. Two spoofs on the Obsession ads (Figures 11 and 13) also illustrated this idea.

Figure 11 was a narrative – as though the true story of Calvin Klein was being told, another meaning for the word Obsession (for women) as associated with the designer brand was offered. Here we could see a woman with her back turned to us, she was naked and she was hovering over a toilet bowl, about to throw up. The camera angle looked down on the model, as if to say "the poor lowly woman with the eating disorder" – and since her back was to us, the viewpoint looked as though we had just walked in on her or caught her in the act. The character was a woman and she was vomiting, destroying the glamor of the fashion industry and the original ads. The Obsession for Men (Figure 13) ad showed a male model with a perfect body, looking down his pants, presumably obsessing about his genitalia. Here the lack of background in the image gave no context to the narrative and might have indicated that he was not at all interested in the outside world, just in his obsession with himself. These subvertisements used the same

technique of beauty and "visual seduction" (Buetti, 1997) that the original fashion industry ads used. But the subvertisers added a shocking element, (a scar, an eating disorder) that indicated the disturbing side of the industry.

An ugly side of the fashion industry is that it exploits people to sell the products by making them feel insecure about themselves and that it exploits sweatshop workers in third world countries who make the fashions. Figure 16 “chicken” visually argued that Calvin Klein used female children in sexual imagery to sell his products – that the designer saw them and portrayed them as fresh meat or “fresh young chicken” in a colloquial reference to child pornography (Lasn, 1999). This advertisement made a statement about the models – it was a conceptual and analytical image as opposed to a narrative image. It had a carrier (the implied model) and representative “parts” that made up a model (Kress & Van Leeuwen). But instead of being made up of beautiful skin, being tall and thin, etc., the model was actually made up of packaged and butchered up meat sold as the body’s most desirable parts for a certain price per pound. The message was that Calvin Klein or the fashion industry saw women as meat – and got women to see themselves as meat. Though the image was not a narrative, it still had characters. The villain was Calvin Klein. The victims were his models and the women who admired them.

The original Diesel ads were some of the strangest examples of co-option in advertising to come out. Bob Garfield once referred to advertisements like this one made popular by Diesel and Benetton which featured dying aids patients and children playing in trash heaps as advertrocities (Garfield, 2007). In a spoof for Diesel ‘Brand O’ jeans, (Figure 12), the creator of the spoof used a narrative format with three layers of

embedded context – The spoof ad was a photograph of a billboard in a blighted neighborhood in an English-speaking country. The ad billboard in the photograph featured two Aryan models in a sexual position advertising Diesel jeans. The billboard in a billboard was shown posted in what looks like an Asian country under military rule – an image of western opulence and decadence above the plainly dressed darker citizens – but what was so odd about the original ads was that the ads were almost spoofing themselves in making reference to the other side – the makers of our clothes as victims of our consumerism and decadence. And in a freaky post-modern twist, the spoof ad situated the original in the blighted, possibly northern locale showing decay and poverty all around. Kalle Lasn (2000, p. 23) suggested that these kinds of advertisements represented the darkness of current times in which even the art directors who created the ads might not have known what they were doing. He suggested that in our mediated reality, advertisers needed to deliver higher and higher levels of shock voltage in order to be stimulate us and get us to pay attention to their messages, until one day, our senses would be entirely deadened.

In Figure 19, a subvertisement for Benetton read “The True Colors of Benetton.” An angry man faced us, his mouth stuffed with U.S. money. The subvertisement referred to Benetton’s practice of using issues imagery of people from poor countries to indicate that they cared about social justice issues in their magazine “Colors” while in fact running a profitable business selling clothing produced in sweatshops by people like those depicted in the magazine. What Benetton and Diesel had in common is that they used imagery of the results of their exploitative business practices – to sell their fashions. They were exploiting exploitation. In the Benetton anti-ad, the model faced us directly

and confronted us with an angry expression. It appeared as though we just told him to stuff it – or made him stuff it. It was a demand image. We were being directly addressed by the model's gaze and forced to confront the 'True Colors of Benetton' by the creator of the image. The Diesel ad was more oblique – we could only see the photo from an off-angle so we were really being asked to interact more with the environment that the ad was living in. And by doing this, we then had to look more closely at the environment portrayed in the billboard. We were being asked to see the spectacle that was the spectacle of Diesel using spectacle to sell its products.

Lastly, sheep were common characters in the fashion and branding subvertisements communicating the idea that people who follow brands too religiously are like sheep, herding animals that cannot think on their own. Two ads out of the eleven in this group referenced herds, one visualized it with a herd of sheep (Figure 10), the other visualized it with an empty head and a Gap logo. The Gap logo ad was an illustrated silhouette that assigned a new meaning to the word 'Gap' illustrating the gap between the silhouette's ears. At the bottom, the tagline 'follow the herd' referred to the idea that people who needed someone to tell them what to do were the ones that followed brands.

Consumerism.

According to the subvertisers, the system of consumerism depended on keeping people from thinking for themselves – keeping them sheep like so that they would do what the fashion industry told them to do. It depended on fostering a psychological

disconnect between the consumer and what would truly bring him or her happiness, love, life. A brightly colored, candy-coated spoof visualized this "mediated reality" (Lasn, 1999) for us: "GLUTTONY –WARNING: HIGHLY ADDICTIVE May cause psychological disconnect between self and reality. UNDESIRABLE EFFECTS INCLUDE: monomania, egomania, paranoia, apathy, affluenza, boredom, and despair" (Figure 42). A grouping of skulls offset the bright colors and the sticky sweet treats in the subvertisement. The symbolism was reminiscent of oil paintings that used skeletons and skulls to represent vanity. When people think for themselves and their instincts are intact, they are less likely to spend money they do not have on products they do not need for the sake of vanity. This threatens an economic system that depends on continual growth and continual consumption.

In the consumerist ideal, the biggest human accomplishment is being able to buy things, especially expensive things. This was represented in a comic (Figure 35) that showed a man and a woman – presumably a couple who were facing us, but talking to each other. Like in reality television, everything was for display, including our own interactions. "Look Honey, I bought something today," the man said. "Oh darling, I'm so proud of you!' responded the woman. Humanity was devolving due to the 'buyalogical' urge – in a poster showing evolution silhouettes, the human figure started upright but became increasingly burdened by his or her packages and purchases (Figure 39).

Consumerism was represented as a prison. In two anti-ads, barcodes turned into jail bars (Figure 37 and Figure 41). In another ad, the prison was the consumer's bedroom, "The more you consume, the less you live." The woman or character in the image was a prisoner. Where a woman was shown eating something, laying in bed,

surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam, the environmental pollution of brands and products – Safeway bags and logos taped to her wall, a television glowing at her as she lays limp and helpless in her bed – remnants of life boxed up and caged in an aquarium on a shelf. The light of the rest of the world glowed from outside her window, but she stayed inside limp and helpless in her cage, looking at us in a "demand" that we consider the implications of her imprisonment by all the trappings of the so called good life.

The system of consumerism is maintained by preventing consumers from looking beyond the promise of shopping. In Figure 44, Paris Hilton, a symbol of shallow celebrity glamor winked and told us "Everything is fine, keep shopping." In other words, the subvertisers were saying that the system of consumerism depended on us not thinking too much. Figure 43 was a print that read "It is pretty amazing that our society has reached a point where the effort necessary to extract oil from the ground, ship it to a refinery, turn it into plastic, shape it appropriately, truck it to a store, buy it, and bring it home, is considered to be less effort than what it takes to just wash the spoon when you're done with it." The spoon was shown above this statement, an every day object put on stage so that we can begin to think about it.

Environmentalism.

The Adbusters subvertisements in the "environmentalism" category argued that we live in a toxic culture in which natural sustaining environments that provide health and life have been replaced by plastic fake junk that steals life and original thought and that we anesthetize ourselves with medications, shopping, fantasies, and television. They

portrayed our mental and physical space as a poisonous environment polluted by advertising and brand messages.

Figures 21 and 22 are two conceptual classificational ads. The first asked us to "Name these brands" and then "Name these plants." The second ad asked us to "Name these revolutionaries" and then "Name these celebrities." The questions were shown at the top of the page, with the images we should name beneath them. Each question and set of images fills up half of the page, dividing the page into left and right respectively. Classificational ads can be recognized as taxonomies (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). There were groupings and participants in groupings. In these ads, the superordinate, the over-arching category was not shown, so we had a covert taxonomy. A covert taxonomy relates to Cormack's concept of absence in the sense that in order to get the message or ideology that a covert taxonomy communicates, we first have to notice what is not depicted and ask ourselves why. We also have to ask ourselves what would have to be true about the participants in order to have classified them in the way they have been depicted (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 87-105).

In Figure 21, we could say the superordinate, or the thing that bound these brand images and plant images together was that they are both found in our environment. When looking at the ad this way, it immediately got the idea across that we could probably name more brands than plants because we see more brands in our environment than we see plants. It could also have been indicating the idea that we know what we prioritize – and that we prioritize the mediated environment over the natural one. Figure 22 spoke to the mental environment a bit more. On the left, we were asked to "Name these revolutionaries" The images showed great thinkers like Martin Luther King Jr. and Karl

Marx. On the right side of the page, we were asked to "Name these celebrities" and we could see the famous heads of celebrities and pop culture figures such as Justin Bieber. Here, the super-ordinate could be called "influential people" and the idea it communicated was that our world is more influenced by the carriers of the ideals of consumerism (spectacle, drama, sex, and glitz) than by the carriers of ideas that make the world a better place to live. In our culture we do not take the time to learn about or are not exposed to great ideas. Instead we promote and privilege celebrities. These two pieces represented the idea that in our mediated environment, we privilege fantasy over reality and that rather than learn about the natural environment or important ideas, we learn about brands and celebrities.

In the same way that brands have taken over plants and celebrities over good ideas, several spoof ads in the "environmentalism" category argued that TV is taking over real thought. That it brainwashes us and indoctrinates us into a culture where we do not know what real life is anymore and we are incapable of having our own thoughts. (See Figures 23, 25, 27, 28, 31 & 32). Visually this takeover of our control was represented in several ways. In Figure 28, a disembodied head had no eye – instead, the TV had the eye. This was a narrative image with a diagonal vector that connected the person and the television. The television eye emanated hypnotic rays that took over and entranced the viewer. It was a representation of how people see everything through the magic eye of television rather than having critical faculties or an eye of their own. The vector was diagonal, implying a destabilization of the status quo or common order of things. Our perspective was at an oblique angle to the participants, but perspective-wise we had

power, we were at the same eyelevel as the television, so the implication was that we could make the choice that the anti-ad asked us to: “Escape the fantasy.”

Figure 23 also represents the eye of the television as becoming the eye of a person. This anti-ad was a demand, a baby was looking directly at us – her face and skin lit up as though by a television’s glow. Where her eye should have been, a television with an eye in the screen was shown. Her mouth was a bit slack, she had a hypnotized expression as though she had already been brainwashed. The tagline “She’s got your eyes” sealed the meaning – you are indoctrinated by the television and in turn your children are. We have no chance; we are all under the control of the all-seeing television eye.

In an ad for “Turnoff TV Week” (Figure 31) the television was also shown as having power, emanating forcefield-like from its screen is a hypnotic spiral that entranced the viewer making him helpless and forcing him to do the TV’s bidding. In the bottom panel, next in the sequence, the viewer zapped the television back with his remote. “Shut up,” he said, rendering the television powerless. Both of these messages asked the viewer to take power back from the television and both represented TV messages as a hypnotic force field rendered with ray-like action lines that connected the characters of the television with the viewer.

Facelessness and barcodes showed up again in Figure 26 which showed a man with his back turned to us who has a barcode tattooed to the back of his neck. The tagline read, “The product is you.” Faces and eyes are what we associate with autonomy, soul, consciousness and thought. Similar to the branding ads (See Figures 4 & 5 for example) the idea here was that people are just part of an inventory and that there is an automated

system for tracking them. The jail bar/barcode visual helped the artists communicate the connection between consumption and prison. In Figure 27, the victim was imprisoned by addiction to television rather than fantasy or barcode jail bars. This ad was a woodcut style print that showed an electrical cord used as a tourniquet to tie off an arm. Instead of track marks, this junkie had an electrical outlet, angry and red with a drop of blood, making the visual connection between intravenous drug addiction and television addiction, as if to say, "the drug intake site is here." When someone is addicted to drugs, he or she will do whatever it takes to get his or her fix. But the fix, while bringing short term happiness does not ultimately help with the root problems – this was the idea with the Prozac ad (Figure 24) as well – like the Ethic-Eze ad (Figure 7), it was rendered in a retro style reminiscent of a time when everything was glossed over and covered up – the tagline on the box read "America's #1 selling drug!" Though this is the legal drug, it is also like heroin; it brightens your mood without fixing the underlying symptoms. It is a drug dealt by the pharmaceutical industry, which is sustained by selling people drugs they do not need. What was clearly absent in the ads for antidepressants was any reference to the problems of the world that would make someone so depressed in the first place (if they only thought about it).

The spoofs above are listed on the Adbusters site as environmental ads, but they were referring to the mental environment and the cultural environment. Only two ads in this category referred to the natural environment (i.e., Earth). The first of these (Figure 33) showed the earth squashed in the middle by a tire-track. The tagline read "What was that bump?" The implication was that our driving is destroying the earth and in our hurry to get here and there we have little regard for what might be in our way and for the

environmental damage we were doing (Figure 33). In the second ad, (Figure 34), a barren landscape was shown behind molecule-like structures that serve as the background for the tagline, “Imagine a future where carbon is oxygen conflict is peace and dirty is clean.” In the lower part of the ad, another slogan read “Green is the new black”. The word green was colored black and the phrase “is the new black” was colored green in an interesting visual twist that underscored the meaning of the phrase. The logos of oil companies Chevron, Shell, and others were shown to the right at the bottom making the connection between environmental damage and green washing double speak.

Adbusters conclusions.

The subvertisers used several visual themes or vocabularies to assign different meanings to the imagery of fashion. Sheep, barcodes as jail bars, junkies, and slack-jawed mesmerized brainwashed consumers were common visual themes. Where advertisers used iconographic imagery of models and opulence to send us the message that if we buy the product we will be as beautiful as the model as appealing and always socially accepted, or that the key to happiness is in making all the right purchases and wearing all the right brands, the subvertisers used that same imagery to peg brands as signs of our own imprisonment. The subvertisers showed us that advertisers maintain their hold over consumers through the addictive drug or fantasy world of television. The subvertisers showed us that the brands will only bring us enslavement – and that the brands are out to imprison us by stunting our normal and healthy human instincts.

Case Two: Chevron Gets Punked

We Agree: Chevron's original campaign.

In 2010 in the wake of the British Petroleum Gulf of Mexico oil spill, which was one of the worst in history, Chevron commissioned an advertising campaign called "We Agree". Identified as part of an effort to repair the image of big oil, many connected the advertisements with Chevron's plans to begin drilling in the area (Casselman, 2010).

A visual departure from the usual big oil messages featuring "frolicking children, serious scientists, and splendid vistas of mountains and rivers," (Casselman, 2010) the campaign was designed in the manner of street art or hand made band posters – a style that evokes the look of materials created by people who are critical of oil companies and other big businesses (Casselman, 2010). Meant to be a response to oil industry critics, the Chevron public relations effort highlighted "the common ground Chevron share (d) with people around the world on key energy issues" (Casselman, 2010). According to a Chevron press release, the campaign print and TV spots focused on five themes:

> Growth and jobs – demonstrating Chevron's strong reinvestment of profits into energy development, local economies and job creation;
>
> Renewable energy – describing Chevron's leadership in the development of renewable energy and the promotion of energy efficiency;
>
> Technology – showcasing the advanced technologies Chevron is investing in to find new energy and work cleaner, smarter and safer;
>
> Small business – highlighting Chevron's support of small businesses and supply chains around the world;
>
> Community development – emphasizing the partnerships and programs Chevron is involved in to support health, education and socioeconomic development in the communities where it operates.

> "We hear what people say about oil companies - that they should develop renewables, support communities, create jobs and protect the environment - and the fact is, we agree," said Rhonda Zygocki, vice president of Policy, Government and Public Affairs at Chevron. "This campaign demonstrates our values as a company and the greater value we provide in meeting the world's demand for energy. There is a lot of common ground on energy issues if we take the time to find it"
>
> (Chevron Launches New Global Advertising Campaign: We Agree, 2010)

Each advertisement in the campaign featured a "hero" shot of a person voicing what Chevron spokespeople identified as common complaints about the oil industry. Each "complaint" was rendered in rough bold text with a screen-printed look on wrinkled newsprint with a torn edge. (See Figures 1-9.) The television spots showed a representative of an issue of concern on one side of the screen and a Chevron employee on the other side of the screen explaining how the company was working to address these concerns. Toward the end of the spots, the voices converged in a representation of agreement – of being on the same side of the issues. (Chevron Launches New Global Advertising Campaign: We Agree, 2010).

Environmental activists called the campaign *greenwashing*, a term that describes a form of propaganda or publicity used by companies to "present an environmentally responsible public image [and] regarded as being unfounded or intentionally misleading" (Oxford, E.D., 2012). Notably absent from the campaign, said the activists, was any reference to Chevron's history of environmental and human rights abuses in the areas where they drilled (http://chevronthinkswerestupid.org/weagree). At the time the We Agree campaign was released, Chevron had spent eighteen years fighting an international legal battle in Ecuador over environmental damage in the Amazon caused by Chevron

"through faulty drilling techniques" (Daily, 2010). "The oil giant has prioritized this high-priced glossy ad campaign that attempts to trick us into believing it is of the people, for the people," said Maria Ramos of the Rainforest Action Network. "Just because it says so in the ad does not mean its true" (Daily, 2010).

As Cesar Maxit, a Washington, D.C. street artist put it, "Chevron's original ads say 'Oil companies should get real' […] what does that mean? […]We agree. How about "Oil companies should clean up their messes? Do you agree with that? I think that most people *would* agree with that but maybe Chevron does not" (Rainforest Action Network, 2010).

Chevron's ad agency asked Maxit if he and his crew would help paste up the campaign posters on his city walls. He agreed to help and the agency sent him the artwork—but instead of putting the posters up, he contacted the Rainforest Action Network and asked them if they were interested in beating Chevron to the punch with a counter-campaign. They said they were (Rainforest Action Network, 2010).

Chevron Thinks We're Stupid: The Yes Men's rebuttal.

Using the files Maxit had forwarded to them, the Rainforest Action Network teamed up with the Yes Men, a group of artist activists, to create a preemptive guerrilla strike meant to deprive the original campaign ads of their power to improve the company's public image.

This integrated anti-marketing counter-campaign featured a fake press release announcing a fake website that was launched before Chevron could launch its own site.

According to the Yes Men, the spoof website was built to feature "more truthful" "improved" advertisements that would honestly address the social injustices and environmental abuses the company was known for. A number of news outlets including Fast Company were fooled by the fake campaign (Zax, 2010). Later that day, as Chevron issued its official "We Agree" press release, company public relations staff discovered that the hoax press release and website had already been launched, which forced Chevron to publish another press release that denounced the hoax and attempted to clarify which materials were Chevron produced and which were not. Anticipating that this would happen, the hoaxers responded with an "improved" response press release on Chevron's behalf, another hoax. In the confusion, several news outlets reported stories combining real and hoax information, (Yes Men, 2010) contributing to the spectacle and causing significant damage to the original campaign. "We demolished their campaign online. If you search for it, you get our ads," (DiNovella, 2010).

The idea behind the spoof campaign, according to one of its creators Jacques Severin who goes by the alias Andy Bichlbaum, was to expose how advertising works (DiNovella, 2011) and to rob positive press from Chevron, directing media attention to the company's record of abuses instead. Each battle in the counter campaign was fought strategically in order to elicit a specific reaction from the oil giant which would then elicit coverage in the media. In this meme war, the media activists fought to associate Chevron and the imagery in the We Agree campaign with dishonesty and environmental abuses, rather than with transparency and environmental responsibility.

The initial press release and hoax campaign served several key purposes: first, by baiting news outlets to cover the spoof campaign, they created a loop of events that

would ensure that the counter voices were covered for some length of time. In covering the initial hoax, responsible news outlets then had to publish corrections. Later stories would cover Chevron's reaction to the hoax, why the hoax was done, reactions to the reactions, etc., thus bringing to light the issues that the activists claimed Chevron was hoping to wash over, suppress, or minimize. The oil giant's efforts to improve its public image were thwarted for very little money (compared with the estimated $90 million spent by Chevron) by a determined group of activists who knew how to work the system.

Later, as part of an ongoing campaign to 'kick Chevron in the brand' as Kalle Lasn would put it (Lasn, 1999) the Yes Men invited the community with the following message to download spoof posters to put up in their cities or to create their own and submit them to the chevronthinkswerestupid.org site.

> **The folks at Chevron must really think we're stupid.**
>
> They think we'll fall for their ridiculous attempts to greenwash the company's image even while they refuse to take responsibility for Chevron's oily messes and human rights abuses in countless communities around the world.
>
> Let Chevron know that we're not fooled and that we agree oil companies should clean up their messes. Share the spoof posters and videos on this site, or better yet, create your own!
> ("Chevron Thinks We're Stupid," 2010)

The next section discusses the ways the ad spoofers used visual rhetoric to respond to Chevron's ad campaign. All of the ads were parodies that used the visual language of the original ads in a way that subverted Chevron's original message. As a counter message to Chevron's attempt to characterize the company as the hero in a quest to provide energy and progress to humans story, the activists characterized Chevron as

the villain – a corrupt, untrustworthy corporation that would stop at nothing in its quest for power and profit.

Analysis.

Favorite characters in the spoof ads were maleficent evil beings like Voldemort (Figures 82 & 115) from the children's book series Harry Potter and unethical opportunist types like Don Draper from the television series Mad Men (Figure 65). Both characters served as anti-icons. Voldemort is known for killing or torturing whatever stands between him and his goals. Don Draper, a Madison Avenue advertising executive, is known for his cynical lack of conscience. It is easy to imagine Draper creating a spin campaign in order to dupe the public into thinking that an oil company with an extensive record of environmental abuses really meant what they said when they claimed that "Protecting the planet is everyone's job" (Figure A).

Because all of the anti-campaign posters imitated the original campaign in composition, style, and voice, they can be classified as parodies. A parody is a satirical imitation of something exalted (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005). Its purpose is to reframe what is admired or upheld into something ridiculous and is often used as social criticism with the goal of reform.

All of the spoofs were parodies, but the layouts were executed in one of two ways: text with a spokesperson image (See figures 69 & 70 for example), or text with a photographic "given" (See figure 55 or 56 for example). According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006, p. 180), in side by side commercial advertisements, when a photograph

appears on the left, the photo usually represents the given which is what we already know about a situation and the text represents the new, or what it is that the advertiser wants the viewer to think about the image. This research refers to the two types as "spokesperson" and "given". Using either the spokesperson or the given technique, the spoofers employed one of three strategies for communicating their message that Chevron is evil, greedy, corrupt, unrepentant, and not to be trusted.

The first technique they used was to replace the hero shot in the original ads with an anti-spokesperson or character like Voldemort from *Harry Potter* or Darth Vader from *Star Wars* (See Figure 111 for example or Figures 82 & 115) associating their characteristics with those of the oil company.

The second technique they used copied the image to construct a voice that would be associated with an evil or corrupt person or entity. In these ads, the creator aimed to have the reader ask him or herself "what kind of person would say such a thing?" (See Figure 118 for example.)

The third technique that the spoofers used was to create hoax pieces. The most effective ads in this group were highly polished. They looked so similar to the original ads that readers would ask themselves whether the ads were real or not.

The First Technique – Spokesperson or Character.

Advertisers often use a celebrity or other well-known figure as a spokesperson to endorse a brand or product. In doing this, the advertisers are asking the audience to make a mental link between the positive qualities of the spokesperson and the brand.

Endorsements are an effective way to gain credibility with an audience (Hallahan, 2005). Audiences who might otherwise ignore or dismiss a message might be more inclined to give it credence if it comes from a figure they trust. The original Chevron We Agree campaign did not use celebrities or spokespeople in their ads in this way – in Chevron's ads, the headshots represented a critical voice – but they did use endorsements to gain credibility. Some of the ads prominently featured the signatures of leaders of non-profit or social justice groups (See figures B & D for example). Showing these next to the signature of a Chevron leader in the original ads was a tactic that the creators used to show dual endorsement (Hallahan, 2005): to show that Chevron endorses social justice causes, but perhaps more importantly to show that there are social justice causes that endorsed Chevron.

Chevron's critics played with the endorsement advertising convention to promote the opposite message – a vision of the character of Chevron (and other oil companies) as predatory opportunists. In addition to the evil characters like Voldemort mentioned earlier, the subvertisers cast political characters in the spoof campaign including Hitler – "Our national policies will not be modified, even for scientists" (Figure 91), Sarah Palin – " I can see sludge & dead birds from my window" (Figure 62), Condoleezza Rice – "Breaking the glass tanker ceiling is easier than you think!" (Figure 84), Richard Nixon – "I am not a crook." (Figure 63), and Jimmy McMillan of the Rent is Too Damn High Party – "Because the cost of cleanup is too damn high!" (Figure 58), a range of personalities from evil and terrifying to comically populist. Another common character in the spoof ads was the crook.

Crooks and gangsters.

The Richard Nixon poster especially was a pointed articulation by dissenters that Chevron's campaign to present a good image of the company did not work (Figure 63). The left side of the Nixon spoof ad featured a traditional illustration of the former president with the Chevron logo positioned to look like an armband – the kind that would be worn by a member of a militia or the military. In the ad copy on the right, Nixon's iconic denial of wrongdoing, "I am not a crook," is qualified with a smaller line of text beneath it that reads "and neither is Chevron." In case ad viewers still did not get the association between crooked use of power and Chevron after seeing the image of a famous crook and reading his famous denial, the ad creators reinforced the message and removed all doubt by placing Richard Nixon's signature next to the signature of a Chevron leader, two side by side endorsements of the campaign. Nixon's signature caption reads "Richard M. Nixon. Former President of the United States. Well known Crook." Using Nixon, a well known crook in a parody of Chevron's ad campaign and showing him denying that he was a crook sent a pointed message about how the dissenters judged the We Agree campaign: as a denial of criminality by crooks.

Another similar kind of spoof ad featured criminal or corrupt spokespeople who, unlike Nixon did not bother to deny their behavior and business practices. Two of these characters, Al Capone and C. Montgomery Burns are shown saying "This is America. Justice Should Favor the Rich," (Figure 96) and "Capitalism is the legitimate racket of the ruling class" (Figure 114). Al Capone is an iconic mafia gangster and notorious killer. C. Montgomery Burns, CEO of Springfield Nuclear Power Plant is a cartoon character from The Simpsons who represents the stereotypical corrupt energy mogul focused only

on pursuing profits without concern for the environment or people. For example, in one episode of the television show The *Simpsons*, Burns attempted to block out the sun so that the residents of Springfield would be forced to pay for energy twenty four hours a day. Another ad, in an apparent reference to Chevron's reputation for leaving environmental messes in third world countries features 50 Cent, a gangster rap singer declaring "F*ck your hood. I'm gettin' money" (Figure 108). Including these kinds of characters in the ads was a way of visually communicating the proposition that Chevron is an unrepentant and corrupt gangster that cares about profits, not about people or social justice causes.

Evil, maleficent characters.

One third of the spokesperson ads featured the word evil or used an evil character to represent the voice of Chevron. In addition to the Voldemort posters mentioned earlier, there were other examples. Spike the Vampire from Buffy the Vampire Slayer asked "And What? You are shocked & disappointed? We're evil!" He signed his poster with blood spatters (Figure 107). Smeagol from Lord of the Rings hissed, "We wants it. We needs it. MUST have the precious" (Figure 106). Leatherface, who signed his poster with a psychotic scribble, swung his murderous chainsaw high above his head "NGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!" (Figure 88), Darth Vader from Star Wars explained his lack of remorse and his hunger for power: "If you only knew the power of the dark side" (Figure 111).

Context also added layers of meaning to characters when they were used in spoof ads. The context was almost a text within a text; it carried clusters of meaning and signification that affected how the motivations and the actions of the characters in their environments were interpreted. The context gave us extra information about what to think about the people and events depicted in a text. Characters from pop culture and politics such as Sarah Palin (Figure 62), who had a reputation for being pro-oil and anti-environment were also used by spoofers to get us to make a mental link between their words and Chevron's deeds. Characters from movies with an environmental theme like Wall-e and Avatar evoke Chevron's reputation of avoiding responsibility for damaging environments (Figures 93, 98, & 70).

In one such ad, the villain from Avatar, Colonel Miles Quatrich, is shown saying "We'll do it with minimal casualties to the indigenous. It'll be humane. More or less" (Figure 93). In Avatar, a movie centered around an environmental conflict, Colonel Quatrich was the ruthless chief of security driven to destroy the habitat of the indigenous Na'vi population of the world of Pandora. Showing him in this spoof ad, the creators of the spoof asked viewers to make a mental link between the unethical characteristics and attitudes of Colonel Quatrich, and the unethical characteristics of Chevron and its attitudes toward the indigenous people in Ecuador and other third world countries -- that they are another dangerous aspect of the environment—not quite human, more like flora and fauna—potentially dangerous or carnivorous, meant to be conquered, there for our use—that stood between the company and the oil they were after.

Characters that represented activist voices.

Not all of the spokesperson ads represented characters that would be associated with Chevron. There were three in the thirty spokesperson ads in which the character was intended to be associated with the activists rather than with Chevron (Figures 64, 70, & 74).

One of these, a poster that used artwork from the environmental movie Wall-E (Figure 70) showed two robots holding hands as they surveyed a decimated environment lit by the fires from burning oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico. The caption reads "Eeeeevill." In another, Bender the robot from the television show Futurama says: "Chevron can bite my shiny metal ass" (Figure 64).

The character of Chevron.

The characters of this first type of ad created by the spoofers were invariably villains. According to Cormack's method for ideological critique, this reveals the ideology of the activists – that Chevron (and other oil companies like Chevron) is evil and corrupt.

The second technique: Chevron as the voice of evil.

While the first technique used actual evil characters to make a case that Chevron was evil or psychopathic, in the second technique, the spoofers used parody to construct

the voice of a sociopath or psychopath: remorseless, dishonest, calculating, and driven – letting nothing stand in the way of unlimited profits, even undeniable evidence of wrongdoing. They associated this voice or manner of speaking with that of public relations professionals.

New, given, absence.

These ads more closely imitated the original campaign than the ads that used evil characters. In both the spoof ads and the originals, the photograph represented what was given, what was already known – and the text represented the new – that is, what the creator wanted us to think related to the photo. The spoofers however, replaced Chevron's rather unmoving or uncontroversial, emotionally neutral images with imagery of human and animal suffering and environmental disaster that was meant to shock, issues that more accurately represented what activists were concerned about (See Figures 59 & 113 for example). Relating this idea to Cormack's method for ideological critique, visually the spoofers used this type of ad set-up to bring out that which was absent from Chevron's "greenwashed" campaign – any substantive issues or reference to human rights and environmental abuses. With the spoof ads in this style, the activists visually made their case that in order for Chevron to make its argument without problems, the company had replaced heated issues with watered down lookalikes.

For example, the ads that showed an image of environmental decimation with a spin statement, the spoofers used absence to construct a dishonest voice that lied by omission (See Figure 106 for example). In other ads the evidence image was shown next

to a statement meant to be the true voice of Chevron beneath the spin. For example, there were several ads that showed oil clean up efforts or decimated swamps with text such as "we do not really care about our mess in Ecuador" (Figure 73).

Style.

In some of the spoof ads, the copy read like the voice of someone who was remorseless and indifferent to the suffering of others (See Figure 103 for example), in others it read like the voice of a con or a predator, who would say whatever they thought their victim wanted to hear in order to gain their trust so that they could victimize them later (See Figures 86 & 117 for example). Relating to Cormack's method, in this way, the spoofers were trying to get us to make a mental link between the behavior of public relations professionals and sociopaths by exaggerating their communication *style* and the kinds of things they say.

When complete denial or covering up of the facts is impossible, sociopaths, psychopaths, and other parasitic or opportunist people will use a variety of techniques to deflect blame or avoid responsibility (Oxford University Press, 2009). Their communication style and behaviors are characterized by superficial charm, pathological lying, egocentricity, callousness and lack of remorse, and a lack of empathy (Oxford University Press, psychopathy, n., 2009). Sociopathology or Antisocial personality disorder "is characterized by a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others" as well as "Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying or swindling for pleasure or personal gain; lack of remorse for the mistreatment of others, as indicated by

indifference and rationalization" (Oxford University Press, antisocial personality disorder, n. 2009).

The video Great Moments in Chevron PR (Rainforest Action Network, 2012) was a mashup of news clips of Chevron scientists and PR professionals talking about the Chevron lawsuit in Ecuador that exemplified this kind of minimizing, and denial of responsibility. Silvia Garrigo, Chevron's Manager of Global Issues was shown in a clip from 60 minutes claiming "There has been no detection of any type of toxin that is not naturally occurring in the environment and that is dangerous to human health." The video cut to another clip of Sara McMillen, Chevron Chief Environmental Scientist condescending to the interviewer: "There is no evidence that there is an increase in cancer – and I know that that's very difficult to explain because of the science behind it…" The video cut back to Silvia Garrigo with a slightly smirking, slightly embarrassed smile, as though even she did not really expect anyone to believe what she was about to say: "Well, I have make-up on and there's naturally occurring oil on my face. It doesn't mean that I'm going to get sick from it."

Several of the spoof print ads exemplified another flavor of spin, that of creatively representing the facts to make a negative seem positive. Figure 105 is such an example "Truly, the only thing better than a rainbow: A double rainbow," reads the caption to an image of a marsh reeds peaking up through rainbows of oil. Another pairs an image of a turtle floating, presumably dead in a sea of amber oil with poetic aspirational ad copy. "Amber is the color of your energy…shades of gold displayed naturally…" (Figure 116).

Figure 75 was a strong example of the construction of the voice of someone who enjoyed exploiting others for personal gain. This ad was posted over a warning sign on a

Utah park fence that barred access to an area that had been contaminated by an oil spill. The spoof ad taped over the sign read “Been there, done that” shown next to a photo of a bulletin board with photos tacked to it of previous places where Chevron had oil spills as though this Utah park was just one more notch on Chevron’s belt used to track its many conquests. Figure 76, a photo of the same poster on a bathroom wall, got this meaning across by equating Chevron’s behavior to that of the guy who writes, “for a good time call.” Both of these figures were examples of how the environment or the context that the ads were placed in added to the meaning of the messages in them.

Another example of callousness showed a photo of starving African children next to the headline “Black gold!” (Figure 120). This was a play on the wording from the Beverly Hillbillies television show theme song. And another ad featured an idyllic nature scene with copy that read, “Yes, it is beautiful now but just give us time” (Figure 78). Both showed the behavior of a person who lacks empathy or compassion, who sees nature and humanity as objects to exploit – means to their ends.

In looking at Cormack's methods, the spoofers constructed this voice by imitating the communication *style* of advertising and public relations practitioners who used spin, minimizing and covering up – and used of absence to make their propositions without problems – in order to avoid responsibility for environmental damage or human rights violations. The power of this technique used by the spoofers is that it asked the viewer to ask themselves “What kind of person would say or do such a thing?” and directed the answer to the only one possible: “Only an evil, sociopathic, dishonest person would say such a thing.”

The third technique: Hoax ads that characterized Chevron as unrepentant.

While the second technique amplified that which was absent, the third technique – the hoax, worked to show outcomes that activists and many people would love to see, but probably were too good to be true. These ads were ones that were featured initially on the hoax website chevron-weagree.com as bait for journalists to report on, drawing attention to more substantive issues than those in the original campaign.

These ads most closely related to the Yes Men's signature technique of *détournement*: impersonating corporate representatives at conventions and talks and having them announce that they were going to make reparations past abuses. Probably the most famous example of this tactic was their Dow Chemical Bhopal Disaster prank. Disguised in a thrift store suit under the fake moniker Jude Finistera, Jacques Servin (a.k.a. Andy Bichlbaum) posed as a Dow Executive in a BBC World News interview. He announced to the world that Dow Chemical would mark the 20th anniversary of the Union Carbide Chemical plant explosion in Bhopal India by paying twelve billion dollars (the amount Dow paid to acquire Union Carbide) in reparations to victims of the disaster.

The full interview ran twice before Dow noticed that "alas and alack, it has done the right thing" (Yes Men, 2004), and for two hours the story was at the top of Google's news service. Dow lost 2 billion dollars on the German stock exchange as shareholders panicked– In a statement responding to the fake claims, a Dow spokesperson responded, "What we cannot and will not do... is accept responsibility for the Bhopal accident" (Yes Men, 2004 quoting CEO Michael Parker, November 28, 2002).

Another example that might be closer in form to the hoaxed Chevron ads would be The Yes Men's fake *New York Times* print and online editions put out in 2009. The

paper looked almost exactly like the original, but the headlines read like a liberal fantasy: "Iraq War Ends," and "Ex-secretary apologizes for W.M.D. scare." Yelling, "get your New York Times for free! Free copy of the New York Times," hundreds of volunteers handed out thousands of copies of the paper in key locations around the city – including in front of the New York Times Building. (Yes Men's Fake New York Times, 2009.) In the documentary "The Yes Men Save the World," (2009) New Yorkers were shown reacting to the good news at first with surprise, then with smiles. "Well sure, why not? Why should not we have a paper like this? We should make these things come true," some said.

Compared with the original We Agree ads, the fakes juxtaposed a slightly more controversial headline such as "Oil companies should fix the problems they create" (Figure 56) with photos that when read with the ad text written exactly in the style of corporate communication, could also plausibly have been real even if it would have been a stretch of the imagination to believe they came from the oil company. These spoof ads worked by drawing readers in, making them wonder whether the oil company was really going to make reparations or begin cleanup efforts. When the reader figured out that the ad was a spoof, the reader might have said to him or herself something like "Oh, right. It is an oil company. They would never take responsibility for an environmental disaster if they could find a way not to. Oil companies do not care about anything other than profits." What the activists were banking on was that many take for granted that oil companies and big business are corrupt, but still have hope that they will behave ethically.

Relating to Cormack, in looking at the "characters" in these ad-stories and the action (what the characters were doing), the character of Chevron was made to do the right thing i.e., behave in an environmentally or socially responsible way. And in manipulating the outcome of press coverage for these stories, the company was forced to damage its own image by being forced to respond that they would not actually be "cleaning up their mess" or be "putting safety first". It was kind of like when your big brother grabbed your hand and made you hit yourself all the while saying, "stop hitting yourself". The genius of this technique was that even if Chevron tried to offer a reasonable rebuttal, the sound bite of the corporation saying that in fact they were not going to do "the right" thing as depicted in the hoax ads was more compelling – and more memorable. We are used to hearing big business claim to act in a socially responsible manner, but we would be shocked if they were actually telling the truth. When the company responded to the fake ads, this was made clear.

To make a hoax ad, the creator had to have a high degree of skill. Obvious design gaffes like centered typography with no leading were similar to grammar mistakes in pfishing emails – they gave the hoax away right away (See Figure 85 for example) and it was important that at least one leading journalist took the bait. Otherwise, it would have been unlikely that the activist group would have gotten coverage.

As in the Bhopal disaster prank, some questioned whether this kind of prank is ethical. The spoofers pointed out that it is just another hoax that exposes the biggest hoax of all – the original campaign which attempted to disguise the voice of big oil as the voice of concerned citizens by co-opting the visual style of street artists and putting forth non-issues instead of putting the 90 million dollars or so that they spent on greenwash

toward making reparations or conducting business responsibly. They point out that these hoaxes go on as daily business and no one questions their ethicality.

Case two conclusions.

Chevron reacted to the hoax campaign in a statement issued to the press. "Unfortunately, there are some that are not interested in engaging in a constructive dialogue, and instead have resorted to rhetoric and stunts. Today, activist groups have attempted to interrupt the conversation by issuing a fake press release and establishing a counterfeit website, which are not affiliated with Chevron" (Brown, 2010). But if Chevron were truly interested in engaging in a constructive dialogue, they would have addressed the activists' concerns directly. It appeared that Chevron considered dialogue to mean that only non-critical, agreeable responses were allowed. The company was unhappy when the activists demanded that the conversation focus for a while on the issues that were absent from the original ad campaign.

The activists hurt Chevron's brand by assigning alternate meanings to the imagery and statements in the original campaign, a key method that visual activists use in fighting the meme wars (Lasn, 1999) or for the language of images (Berger, 1972). By changing the new or the given in the ads the spoofers drew out connotations that had been repressed in the original, less controversial campaign (Barthes, 1977), directing the conversation toward the issues that were of concern to them.

While Chevron used the signature endorsements from non-profit and social justice groups to characterize itself as a socially responsible corporation in the first technique,

the activists used images of villains and evil characters with their signature endorsements to argue that Chevron was evil and power-hungry. While Chevron used a tactic of speaking in the voice of activists to characterize themselves as partners working on issues, the activists used parody and hyperbole to imitate the voices of sociopaths, psychopaths, and advertising public relations professionals to construct the voice of Chevron as that of a cynical opportunist or unrepentant predator. While Chevron used hero shots and non-issues to create a campaign that would make it seem as though they were doing the right thing, the Yes Men created a hoax campaign in which they actually did the right thing – and then had to admit to the press that they had no intentions of doing the right thing.

Case Three – American Apparel and The Next Big Thing

Analysis and background.

Doing the right thing is a common theme in spoof ads and media pranks, especially in the fashion industry. In the 1990s when activists focused intensely on fighting sweatshops, culture jammers delighted in exposing unethical business practices of apparel companies (Klein, 2010). In a spoof on Nike from the group of ads covered in the first case, an Asian woman with no shoes looked down at us – she was in a dynamic running pose but she was holding a baby (Figure 46). The copy read, “you’re running because you want that raise, to be all you can be. But it’s not easy when you work sixty hours a week making sneakers in an Indonesian factory and your friends disappear when

they ask for a raise. So think globally before you decide it's so cool to wear Nike." Another spoof (Figure 45) showed an athletic shoe divided into sections by a dotted line. One part said "Nike $250", the other said "Sweatshop $.83".

American Apparel – the subject of my third case, is a U.S. based clothing manufacturer known for its anti-sweatshop stance and its progressive business practices. Nevertheless it wound up on the wrong side of the spoof that is covered in this study. The targeted campaign was a plus sized model search contest that American Apparel launched in August, 2011with this call to potential contestants:

> Think you are the Next BIG Thing?
>
> Calling curvy ladies everywhere! Our best-selling Disco Pant (and around 10 other sexy styles) are now available in size XL, for those of us who need a little extra wiggle room where it counts. We're looking for fresh faces (and curvaceous bods) to fill these babies out. If you think you've got what it takes to be the next XLent model, send us photos of you and your junk to back it up.
>
> Just send us two recent photographs of yourself, one that clearly shows your face and one of your body. We'll select a winner to be flown out to our Los Angeles headquarters to star in your own bootylicious photoshoot. Runners up will win an enviable assortment of our favorite new styles in XL!
>
> Show us what you're workin' with! (Odel, 2011 or see Figure 148 for screenshot)

Nancy Upton, a 24-year-old actor from Los Angeles found out about the contest and was so offended by its language and "terrible puns, " (Stewart, 2011) that she decided to fight back – by entering the contest. She contacted Shannon Skloss, a good friend of hers who photographed Upton at her mother's house in Hollywood as she smashed her face into pies, bathed in ranch dressing, and inhaled whole roasted chickens in the swimming pool (Braiker, 2011; Hartman, 2011; Martin, 2011; Stewart, 2011).

Upton won the contest by popular vote on the American Apparel web site, probably through the support of like-minded women and the media exposure she got for her ingenious response, which went viral. Publications such as Jezebel, and television shows such as Good Morning America picked up the story of the spoof contest entry, bringing significant negative attention to American Apparel, hurting its brand.

In the third case, I looked at how Upton and Skloss responded visually to American Apparel's plus sized model campaign. I started by looking at the American Apparel brand imagery to see what messages the company sent about itself and about women through its advertisements. This helped to answer the question of why a company that strives to conduct business ethically has generated so much bad will by women like Upton and publications like Jezebel that usually are supportive of such business practices. Looking at American Apparel's brand imagery and Upton & Skloss's visual critique helped reveal the ideologies of female beauty and sexuality that continue to be promoted through images.

American Apparel.

American Apparel is the largest clothing manufacturer in the United States producing basics like T-shirts and underwear for sale at hundreds of locations around the world. The company describes itself as vertically integrated meaning that all knitting, dying, sewing, design, photography, marketing and distribution are done in their Los Angeles facilities (http://investors.americanapparel.net/). The CEO, Dov Charney says that American Apparel pays at least twice what apparel laborers earn in other locations in

the U.S. and in addition, employees have access to health insurance, an onsite medical clinic, free long distance phone calls anywhere in the world, and English as a second language classes. Charney's outspoken stances on immigration reform and the eradication of sweatshop labor are part of the American Apparel brand and have made their way into several campaigns like the one below:

> **Fuck the brands that are fucking the people.**
>
> Garment sweatshops all over the world, paying below poverty wages to defenseless, intimidated workers, are being supported by the big U.S. clothing brands. It is their dirty little secret. Do not buy into their polished RV, magazine, and billboard flag-waving good-guy bullshit propaganda. They're no better than common criminals, and you should not be an accessory to their exploitation. American Apparel is the Sweatshop-free T-Shirt anti-brand (Figure 124).

Another campaign from 2008 calling for immigration reform featured two employees from Guatemala and connected the U.S. immigration system with apartheid and purgatory (Figure 146). Charney created this campaign, issued press releases and attended marches in an effort to use his access to media and his branding clout to influence policy and gain the attention of political leaders.

When first starting out, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, most of American Apparel's ads were black and white text heavy ads that described the merchandise and occasionally featured Dov Charney's portrait (See Figure 145 for example). In subsequent years, the American Apparel brand and graphic style became known for its

provocative, sexualized images of young people (Wolf, 2006). Respected publications like AdAge have called American Apparel's branding cutting edge:

> Say what you will about American Apparel and its famously pervy founder, Dov Charney, who is the mastermind behind the ongoing campaign. His ads are not only hot (they show his sexy employees modeling the merch) and briskly reinforce the brand message (which is about well-constructed, no-frills, eminently wearable, sweatshop-free clothing), but are refreshingly not celebrity-obsessed (Dumenco, 2005).

Explaining the company's use of real people in its ads and its non-airbrushed aesthetic, American Apparel online advertising strategist Ryan Holiday said, "We photograph models in a way that's honest. We are not so constrained by the rules" (The Week, 2010).

In a 2005 SF Gate column, Mark Morford praised the brand for being sexy by being real:

> But you really must applaud the advertising, the unabashed sexiness, the open appeal to youthful sensuality sans explicit raunch or the typical hints of pedophilia or abuse or typical obnoxious modeling gloss. There is, for example, no silicone. There is no collagen. No Botox. There is no obvious retouching and no major Photoshopping to eliminate bulge or nipple or shiny forehead and there is occasional body flab and stocky leg and there are plenty of "average" (read: nonanorexic) female body types, and as mentioned all the models are amateurs, real women and men, and each is funky and ethnically mixed and unexpected, and Charney even leaves in the red eye and the sweaty lips and the odd angles and there is an air of salty delicious intimate funk to the pictures that makes you go, now this is what T-shirts should really be all about.

In his argument above, Morford might have said the ads did not have the typical hints of pedophilia or abuse because the ads lacked the fantasy gloss that we are used to. He may have been interpreting the "real" aesthetic as a more truthful and inclusive portrayal of sexuality because the models were not perfect.

Critics however, said that the ads were still exploitative of women. The UK banned an American Apparel ad in 2008 for using a model who appeared to be underage (Casey, 2008). In November of 2007, a 50 foot tall New York billboard featuring a topless woman in tights bent over some kind of ledge was graffitied with bright green spray paint: "Gee, I wonder why women get raped," (Martineau, 2007), connecting American Apparel's sexualized brand imagery with the promotion of violence (Martineau, 2007).

Sex sells.

How the models were recruited also was also a source of controversy. The "real" models that Charney used in his advertisements were employees and often times his sexual partners, a fine line between portraying consenting adults in sexual situations and sexual harassment. In many of the ads, little clues pointed to Charney's sexual partnership with the model – his possessions in a bedroom, often his bedroom (Wolf, 2006). In this way Dov Charney modeled his own persona, branding himself after Larry Flint of Hustler magazine or Hugh Hefner or Playboy magazine; men who are both known for having multiple partners at one time and for building fortunes by selling images of naked women.

Other American Apparel images featured regular women (not models) in highly sexualized imagery. Charney had recruited many of the women from city streets around the world– a practice that pimps and sexual predators also engage in in order to sexually exploit vulnerable young women.

In the Sophie ad (Figure 130) for example, the copy explained that Charney met the subject of the ad on the street and asked if he could photograph her. The advertisement showed Sophie later that evening in her sweat socks and underwear climbing over Charney who lay on his back in baby-blue running shorts. The harsh flash and the snapshot aesthetic of the photo with its accompanying story evoked news of runaway teens lured into a life of prostitution.

In another ad (Figure 143), the photographer looked down over a woman in her underwear laying on her back on some rocks, in a night scene lit by a single harsh flash. The image looked a bit like crime scene or court evidence photography. The viewpoint as discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) put us in the position of the sexual partner, the police officer, or perhaps the rapist. In another ad (Figure 135) a woman posed on a bed in an image that looked more like an everyday snapshot captured by her partner than a studio produced photo. The bed had a plain wrinkled comforter on it, the bedroom seemed small, a bookshelf was visible in the background. It was a room that is easy to imagine oneself in, which brought the imagery closer to our every day reality.

It could be argued though that the ads above are simply depicting one flavor of sexual preference or lifestyle, not necessarily prostitution or sexual exploitation of women – until looking at Figure 144. This advertisement was for silver disco pants and showed a topless model under the headline “Treats for Tricks”. The ad addressed American Apparel customers directly. This mode of address as discussed by Cormack (1995) told us how we were supposed to respond to the proposition – that female American Apparel customers as represented by the model in the ad were “tricks” – a slang term for a low cost (cheap) prostitute.

It had been argued that the stories of how the models were recruited, the sexual scenes in the ads, and the unglossed style as discussed by Cormack in the advertisements worked to communicate an aesthetic and ideology of meaningless sex, partying, and drug use (Martineau, 2007). The aesthetic was reminiscent of drug and prostitution culture – it might have been more disturbing because the images looked too real – they were not separate from us in the same way that the highly polished fantasy fashion ads that we are used to seeing are.

Conflicting messages.

A claim that the images were not sexually exploitative of women might have been backed up with the argument that these ads showed little life stories or bios next to the women, indicating an interest in their professional lives and accomplishments. But the images and the stories sent conflicting messages.

If we read them as analytical images as discussed by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), then we would have expected to see the images set up a certain way. Usually, an image of a professional or a person in a certain role will be wearing the clothing or uniform appropriate to their profession if applicable. Such images almost always will include props or tools that these professionals would use, or a product they had made. In addition, the professionals will often shown in the environment they work in – an operating room for a surgeon or the decorated baby's room for an expectant mother for example (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 107). But in the American Apparel advertisements, the images of these women subordinated their professional role or

accomplishments to their sexual roles. The women were shown in sexual poses wearing American Apparel clothing in random or indeterminate environments.

In The Knit Dress ad (Figure 142) for example, on the left, the model in the ad wore a somewhat see-through dress and lay in a hammock in a casual night scene. She looked at the camera with a slight smile. It was a somewhat sexually suggestive pose. The copy on the right of the advertisement explained that the woman had been a friend of Charney's since he met her on the street when she was 15 years old and that they have been visiting each other at least once a year since they met. Now, the ad said, she had just gotten her Master's degree in Oncology. This was a story of a friendship, but the model was in a sexually suggestive or flirtatious pose. It begged the question, what kind of relationship did she and Charney have? Did he solicit her when she was underage?

In an ad headlined *¡Mamacita!* (Figure 133) a woman looked at us with half closed eyes in a sexually suggestive gaze. The word *mamacita* in Spanish translates directly to English as little mama. Men commonly use it as a catcall. The image was at the top half of the page and showed to us an image of the ideal woman as explained by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006). At the bottom of the page the copy explains that the woman pictured was a longtime American Apparel employee who was about to become a mother. The advertisement was supposed to congratulate her.

The composition of the ads was revelatory. As discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen, in Figure 142, The Knit Dress, and other similar ads the image on the left showed what is given, i.e., what it was that we already knew about the issue. In many of the American Apparel ads, what was given was that women would be displayed in a sexual manner to sell the products. The copy on the right was what was new – or what it

was that the creators of the ads wanted us to think about the images. In Figure 142 the new was that the woman was also interesting because she was an oncologist and a friend.

In other ads including the Mamacita one (Figure 133), the compositions could be read according to the ideal and the real as discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen. In these ads, the sexy photograph on the top represented what was ideal. The story on the bottom represented what was real or kind of mundane: The woman could be a doctor or a mother or a friend, but the ideal was that she was also sexy and available.

The American Apparel ads might have made women and feminist men uncomfortable on a visceral level because they indicated that our society mainly imagines and depicts women as sexual objects, even if they are interesting for other reasons such as professional accomplishment. As Berger asked (1972), what violence would those images do to our perceptions if we were to use male models in the same poses and scenarios as the women?

Another source of controversy that the American Apparel imagery stirred up was how porn itself is viewed by different groups of people. To Charney, and people like him, including many women, porn is a representation of sexual freedom and open mindedness. In fact, many of the women in the soft-core looking advertisements, including the one that was spray painted with the phrase "Gee, I wonder why women get raped," (Figure 147) were self-portraits sent in by women who admired the brand or worked at American Apparel (Bennet, 2007).

But other women are not buying it. To them it represents the exploitation and subordination of women even if the women are subordinating themselves. They say the imagery goes against the company's socially responsible business ethos:

> I find it quite ironic that a company that so heavily markets itself as being 'socially responsible' is quick to perpetuate the sexual subordination of young women—airbrushed or not," says Sara Sheridan-McAndrew, a gender and social policy master's student at the London School of Economics. "They are sending the message that social responsibility is about money alone—as long as you pay the women inside the factory a legal wage you're absolved from exploiting them in other ways (Bennet, 2007).

They say the ads are the same old tired portrayals of women in the same old binaries: desirable/not-desirable, worth paying attention to/not worth paying attention to.

Finally, critics say that the imagery of the women in the ads is not truly diverse. Plus sized women have expressed frustration at the lack of size offerings in American Apparel stores as well as the tendency for the line to run small. The story of April Flores, a plus sized adult star who approached the company about starting a plus sized line and being rebuffed by a story employee who said "but that's not our demographic," has become part of the mythology surrounding American Apparel's anti-plus sized prejudices (Stewart, 2011).

In this context, Amy Odel of New York Magazine was one of the first reporters to cover the plus sized model contest. She noted the company's past exclusion of clothing in larger sizes and wondered whether American Apparel's falling stock prices and immanent bankruptcy had anything to do with their new effort to reach out to a previously untapped market of plus-sized consumers (Odel, 2011).

When Nancy Upton found out about the plus sized model contest, she immediately reacted to the style of writing "Wow, they really have zero respect for plus-sized women. They're going to line them up like cattle and make puns about them until they're blue in the face" (Braiker, 2011; Hartmann, 2011; Stewart, 2011; Martin, 2011).

She wondered why they couldn't have just promoted their new line with a tasteful ad campaign featuring attractive plus-sized models with a headline that "simply said 'Now available in sizes through 2XL' (Stewart, 2011).

The more Upton thought about it, the more irritated by what she called the fake-chummy tone of the ads and the campaign's entire premise. In an interview about her spoof campaign, she told Jezebel magazine that "Based on their 'Hey, come on, fatties, we want you to play, too' tone," she thought "it would be kind of brilliant to respond in a, 'Thanks for letting me play, just let me try put down the pizza, first' similar mocking tone" (Stewart, 2011).

Upton and Skloss's American Apparel spoof.

To analyze the images of Upton created by Shannon Skloss, it helps to look at them as a response to the imagery of fashion in general rather than as a response to American Apparel specifically. The images do not really compare. Rather than responding to specific American Apparel ads by twisting their slogans or visuals in the ways described in the first two cases in this study, Skloss and Upton created imagery that mocked the whole fashion industry. The only photos that look similar to the style of the American Apparel ads are the ones showing Upton devouring ice cream in her knee socks and underwear (Figures 160, 161, and 162).

The photographs made a visual argument that the fashion industry characterizes women who are overweight as uncontrolled eating machines. The images were all analytical images. Even the images with vignettes or mini narratives in them are

analytical in the sense that Upton was representing herself as all "fat" girls in the eyes of the beauty industry. In the images, she was the carrier of fatness. The representative parts – or characteristics of fatness that she embodied included a lust for food, that she ate all the time, and could not stop – in other words, that she had no self-control.

In our society, fat women have been represented for a long time as the "anti-ideal" – the woman who is helpless against her uncontrolled bodily lusts. Women can also represent a dangerous archetype, a devouring force (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 1122). If we look at advertisements as cultural products that teach us how to behave, then it is interesting to note that women are rarely shown eating a regular meal in advertisements. When shown eating, women are shown "indulging" or "sinning" when eating high calorie foods that could cause them to gain weight, or "being virtuous" when eating diet foods (Bordo, 1993).

Upton & Skloss might have been specifically reacting to the idea that depicting a larger woman getting sensual pleasure from food and not apologizing for it is just not done—it is a taboo of sorts. Women who are overweight are supposed to feel ashamed and humiliated (Bordo, 1990). So it is interesting that Upton and Kloss picked up on this message and amplified it with their spoof, their thesis being I am a size 12. I just cannot stop eating. They used hyperbole and parody to show our culture's subconscious idea of what fat girls are like via their images of Upton smashing pies into her face, looking like a vampire or zombie (Figure 150), bathing in ranch dressing (Figures 152, 153, 154, 155), and downing an entire chicken while in the swimming pool (156, 157, 158, 159).

Looking at the grouping of ads that show Upton eating chicken in the pool, the fashion imagery can start to be deconstructed as well. What was interesting about the

"eating chicken in a pool" series was that even though this image would be highly implausible in real life, most viewers would not question glamor ads like this one because this style of imagery is so common. These images are not comprehensible in terms of what is actually happening – most people do not actually eat chicken in pools with all of their clothes on.

In order to understand this image it helps to break down the ideational elements in it and deconstruct some of those meanings. Ideational elements in the images included the chicken, the pool, the woman, and her clothing. Swimming pools in our culture are something that wealthy people own. The clothing Upton was wearing could also be called glamorous. The elegant white shirt, the long black gloves, the dark glasses and the heavy makeup represented her as a glamorous woman of wealth. That she was in the pool with this clothing on indicated that it was disposable, that she had money to burn if they got ruined. Here, although the scene was sexually suggestive, instead of being shown with a sexual partner, she was shown with the food, indulging in the sensual pleasure of eating chicken. She represented her hunger for food as sexual desire (Bordo p. 108). Right away we know it is a spoof of the fashion industry because we are used to seeing this kind of imagery in fashion ads, but when we see Upton devouring the chicken in the pool, we actually notice the imagery she is imitating – we resee it – and how ridiculous it is.

If we were to ask ourselves *why* it seems normal to see glamor and fashion imagery such as this, then we need to dig a little more deeply into the symbolism. While a pool might symbolize wealth and Californian glamour, a woman in a pool might offer some older kinds of archetypes. The woman at her bath is such a common sensual image in the western oil painting tradition and this might be why the fashion imagery seems

familiar (Berger, 1972, p. 50; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 72). The ritual of the bath symbolically can mean a purifying act associated with redemption and forgiveness of sin, but it is also a symbol of sensuality. Advertising regularly coopts the imagery and traditions of fine art because both advertising imagery and fine art imagery are a promotion of celebration of wealth and property (Berger, 1972, p. 139). The woman at her bath is often portrayed as an object of voyeurism, the ideal spectator is assumed to be male (Berger, p. 50).

Water is a symbol of life and fertility, primordial source of all things (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 1082). In Jewish and Christian tradition, water symbolizes the beginnings of creation. The Hebrew letter Mem means womb or mother- but it is also a source of destruction – rages and tempests, floods, salt water. A woman or the womb can represent the source of life, but also the source of rage and destruction. There are also castrational, dangerous aspects of to the womb – it houses powerful desires and forces that can overtake men. Water is something we need and want, but its power is scary. Like a mother, we are dependent on it for life, but it could drown us or kill us or overpower our own will. From the point of view of a male observer, this might be like an irresistible pull that they are both attracted to and repelled by.

These archetypal meanings might partly explain why we see women in water images so much in contemporary advertisements – the woman looking at us and inviting us into the sexual act in the primordial waters of creation. In this series of spoof images, Upton is shown eating a chicken using body language that is evocative of sexual acts, the first tentative touches or tastes and then devouring the partner – or the chicken (See

Figures 156, 157, 158, & 159 for example). Her desire is shown outright which is frowned upon in our culture (Bordo, 1993).

Some of the images in this series are demand images. Upton looks at us while taking a bite of chicken, inviting us to vicariously taste it and to watch her tasting it. She acknowledges our presence and the photographer put us close enough to touch her. As she gets more and more absorbed, she stops looking at us, fully absorbed in the sensual act, downing chicken with wild abandon. Here the images turn to offer images, the viewer is allowed to just watch her undetected.

The other food-equals-sex ads were the dressing ads and the ice cream ads which both had an immersion and bathing aspect to them. The ranch dressing ads, (See Figures 152, 153, & 154 for example) were all offer images, indicated as such because the model was absorbed in what she is doing. She was not looking at us. In these photos, the model stood in the bathroom wearing a black bra, pouring salad dressing in her hair like shampoo, and then poured it over her face, several big white splotches on her cleavage, reminiscent and evocative of pornographic images of women. She appeared to be utterly absorbed in the sensual experience of pouring ranch all over her body and in her mouth. When pouring ranch into her mouth by pouring it all over her face is not enough, she bathed in it, immersing herself in the stuff. Symbolically, immersion has implications of abandonment of will or responsibility, of being overtaken by the sensual experience of the present moment (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 72).

Food and sex are sensual pleasures were conflated in this imagery. The ideology of our culture says that femininity is defined by thinness and denial of food and appetite. Women's greatest achievement is that of being desired by a man – and they only achieve

that via control over their appetites and desires. Men, on the other hand, achieve success by gaining control over others and of their environment (Bordo, 1993). In fashion imagery, women either have to choose food for their sensual pleasure or denial of food in order to be thin enough to be loved and to be a wanted as a sexual partner by a man. In fashion imagery, women are allowed to serve food, prepare food, worry about food and nutrition for meals they serve to their family, but they are usually only shown eating low calorie non-sinful foods (Bordo, 1993). For women, food is forbidden, especially things like ice cream and chocolate sauce. In Figures 160-163, a series of images showed Upton sneaking into the freezer, posing with ice cream roughly over her crotch area, and then sitting in a bra, underwear, and socks on the kitchen floor devouring ice cream and pouring chocolate sauce directly into her mouth. These ads looked the most like the American Apparel originals – shot at night or in the dark with a strong light source. The pose of the last image (Figure 163) where she sat with her legs spread, tubs of ice cream set in front of her crotch, looked the most crude and raw and were the most reminiscent of how the American Apparel ads looked. The photographer picked up on that aesthetic, but she did not actually use it. The spoof photos look more slick and polished than the American Apparel ads.

In Figure 151, Upton was served up as the main course for a feast. She lay on her stomach on the dining room table – served on a bed of leaves with an apple stuffed in her mouth. In looking at how Upton and Kloss made their visual argument about how non-skinny people are perceived by men or by the fashion industry, the most obvious statement they were making is that plus sized women are pigs. But this image has more layers of meaning related to the ideology and the symbolism in this image.

She had been sacrificed on the family dining room table. Sacrifice is the domain of women. To give themselves up for the nourishment of others is their role. The apple in her mouth immediately served to get viewers to make the connection between her and a pig since this is a common way around the world to serve pigs.

Apples have a long history of symbolism, especially in connection with women. In Latin, the word *malus* means both "apple" and "evil" (Hutchinson, p. 133). In western oil painting, the presence of an apple might be referencing original sin. In western cultures the most well known of these might be the apple that Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, causing the fall of human kind and the loss of innocence, the expulsion from the garden of Eden. "Augustus Egg, for example, in Past and Present shows a mother cast out of her comfortable home for committing adultery; the apple in the painting creates a parallel with Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden" (Hutchinson, p. 133). Eve is the mother of all women. She is the one who succumbed to temptation when the snake offered her the apple. The apple also symbolizes the discord that happened from the ultimate beauty contest "The Judgment of Paris" in which Eris, angry at not having been invited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, threw down a golden apple that would be awarded to the most beautiful woman. Venus won the apple, infuriating Juno. This is how the Trojan War began.

This is reminiscent of the way women have competed with each other over beauty prizes and male approval rather than competing for resources and accomplishment like men do. It could be said that women sacrifice themselves on the altar or beauty, in order to gain attention for their physical traits rather than their accomplishments, while men

focus on overcoming challenges and accomplishing their goals. In other words, women live and die by their vanity and lower desires.

The symbolism of the pig represents slothfulness and lack of will power – succumbing to lowly lusts or desires. It is associated with insatiability, greed, and gluttony (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 753). It is interesting that the photographer picked up on this meme or this symbol and that she and Upton made the central message of their submission to the contest as "I'm a size 12, I just can not stop eating". This is the anti-ideal in our culture that says thinness and starvation are presented as the only way for women to achieve redemption and happiness. The woman in this image might be Eve – punished for giving in to temptation and causing the fall of all human civilization. In this image, the woman, sacrificed on the family dinner table, had been defeated.

She had been utterly subdued. Her skin was shiny and glossy. Our point of view situated us above her, as though we were about to seat ourselves at the table. The role of the woman was clear. She was here for our pleasure and fulfillment. She experienced death by her own avarice. And though the photographer and Upton may not have had all of this in mind when they staged the photograph, the image showed the symbols and memes that come from our experience of how women are represented. It showed how society still "sees" women. And it showed how women "see" people who see women according to these dated stereotypes.

Case three conclusions.

These spoof images used to enter the American Apparel modeling contest were a counter argument about the ideology of gender roles – or the characters of women. American Apparel shows women as characters with interesting stories, but by visually emphasizing their sexuality, it is obvious that women's sexuality is more interesting than their accomplishments. In pornography, a common visual trope is the innocent underage schoolgirl – untouched but fertile territory waiting to be taken – visually represented with images of school girls wearing knee socks and sucking on lollipops (Hanson, 2007). In some of the American Apparel images, the women invite the viewer in. In others, they are pure object – a display of desirable parts. For many, this advertising imagery is too close to stalking and pedophilia for comfort, especially when shown in public spaces. Dov Charney, makes himself an easy target for women like Upton by styling himself after Larry Flint or Hugh Hefner, popular enemies of feminists (Wolf, 2006).

The Upton images were not really a direct response to the American Apparel images though – they were more of a general response to how this group sees fashion advertisements. The spoofs are much higher quality photos than the original images. This visual mismatch might indicate that Upton and Skloss were responding to the fashion industry and the history of how it represented women and its ideology of femininity more than to American Apparel. American Apparel is easy to react to because their imagery seems like such an obvious representation of predatory exploitative aspects of the fashion industry and how it victimizes women.

The archetypes and symbols that Skloss and Upton dredged from the societal soup and how they reused them to make pointed arguments about the ideology of women,

eating, and sexuality were especially interesting and funny. The Upton images may have been offensive to some because they showed Upton eating and in a direct display of desire (and fulfillment of that desire) as she openly scoffed the fashion industry. Women are taught in our society that to not eat or at least not to care about food is ideal (Bordo, 1993). Denying food and being thin are the goals for the ideal woman. And not seeking sex, but being sought are also the common goals. They visually argued that larger (read: non-anorectic) women are seen as uncontrolled eating machines – and as pigs who substitute food for sex. Upton and Skloss's critique of the American Apparel Plus Sized Model campaign shows and makes fun of the ideology that women have to be thin to be happy or attractive and asks us to ask ourselves why we might think that women should wait for what they want to come to them rather than using their own agency to fulfill their own desires.

Conclusion

The visual communication methods that all of the cases used involved hijacking the symbols of advertisement and assigning alternate meanings to them. This was done by substituting alternate visuals or text, but always by imitating the style of the original brands or advertisers. Like words in verbal rhetoric, images in visual rhetoric transmit and argue for or against ideologies. Images are carriers of meaning and of ideological messages. Being literate and participating in a democracy means being able to deconstruct messages of all kinds, including visual ones. We need to learn how ideas are

communicated and how persuasion works in all media (Lasn, 1999; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Studying adbusts and comparing brand messages with anti-brand messages is a useful means to becoming more visually literate. It is a useful way to unpack how visual rhetoric works – each one illuminates the other – looking at the original big brand campaigns shows us what ideologies are being promoted by big brands, the major producers of our culture (Klein, 2010; Lasn, 1999). Looking at the ad-busts helps us see how the original visual arguments are made. Looking at both helps us see literally how each side "sees" the issues. Learning how visual messages are constructed by looking at how they can be *visually* deconstructed, helps us build counter arguments when needed.

Similar to the process of reading into written or verbal rhetorical texts, we can uncover ideological messages in visual texts by asking ourselves these questions as discussed by Cormack (1995) and Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006): Who are the characters? What are they doing? How are we being addressed? What might also be true but is not being said? What do the symbols in the text mean in the culture they came from? How are we positioned in relation to the subject? What is new and what is given or what is ideal and what is real in terms of the structure of the composition? All of these elements create and carry meaning and we need to understand how this process of visual meaning making works. Just as we would expect people to know how to read and talk, we need to expect people to know how to communicate visually and how to interpret visual messages (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

In this study I looked at how creative activists used visual rhetoric to challenge brand messages. Branding is the act of creating signs (Danesi, 2006). A logo, a name, a

mark for a company is designed to carry all the positive associations with it that the company wants it to. The goal of art is to communicate ideas and the goal of advertising is to sell products – but advertising sells products by selling ideas and promoting ideologies. However, the meanings of signs change over time and depend a great deal on the context they are used in (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The practice of maintaining or updating a brand means keeping the imagery, color, and iconography relevant to the intended audience for the brand and making sure that the symbols and signs continue to communicate the intended message (Danesi, 2006).

The American Apparel and Upton studies exemplify how signs change over time. American Apparel and Dove (among others) were attempting to add larger women to their market. To do this, the companies needed to make plus-sized women visible and to validate them. The trouble was that the companies had used stereotypical representations of larger women that were insulting to them. The companies had been making larger women invisible for so long that when the companies finally acknowledged that larger women could also be seen as attractive, the larger women were angry at having endured marginalization and shame for so many years and then at the idea that after years of marginalization, the fashion industry was attempting to create a new market from their demographic (Hartman, 2011; Odel, 2011).

Upton and Skloss hijacked the symbolism of ideal femininity in fashion ads and created images of their own designed to critique and make fun of the fantasy style of fashion imagery, discrediting fashion messages and messengers.

Adbusters and the Yes Men share a mission of demanding mass media coverage of alternative ideas. The Yes Men stages pranks designed to get extended media coverage

for ideas and they made extensive use of imagery to communicate their messages in the Chevron Thinks We're Stupid campaign. *Adbusters* tries to buy airtime for their commercials and publishes an online and print magazine. All of the subjects of the case studies in this study manipulated images and symbols and used visual rhetoric to present a counter message to the ideologies promoted in big brand messages.

Adbusters points out that when they are denied the right to buy airtime on major networks for their commercials, they are denied access to the public sphere (Lasn, 1999, p. 53). What this means for our democracy is that only the ideas and imagery of major brands and corporations get transmitted via these channels. No wonder we "see" ourselves in terms of which brands we like or align ourselves with. As in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* in which the government manipulated language, creating "newspeak", banning words and reassigning meanings and concepts for example, "freedom is slavery", by limiting language, they made dissenting thought *literally* unthinkable. Similarly, when denied access to images, for example, when we only see women of one physical type, when we only see families in one particular configuration, we lose an ability to imagine alternatives or describe ourselves in another way. Anything outside of that vision becomes suspect or subject to attack. It literally limits our vision.

Visual representations of people and ideas influence viewer perceptions and thereby influence culture, laws, and policies. As members of a democracy, it is critical that we are able read and write so that we can participate in the shaping of our culture. It is equally critical that we understand how arguments are made in visual texts so that we can offer effective critiques and alternative visions (pun intended) of a better world when necessary. Studying a spoof advertising campaign is a useful way to look at the visual

mechanisms at work in advertising campaigns. The spoof ads tend to amplify the techniques used by advertising agencies, making them easier to detect and understand. Looking at the devices that are used in a successful spoof advertising campaign like the ones in this study can illuminate opposing ideologies in our culture and show how to offer effective arguments using visual methods. Studying spoof advertising campaigns and culture jams can expand our vision, beyond what the brands are selling us.

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Figures

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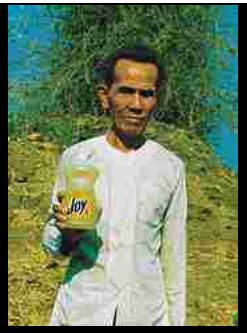

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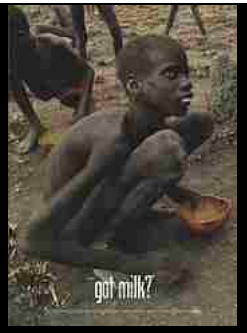

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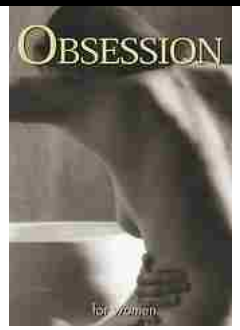

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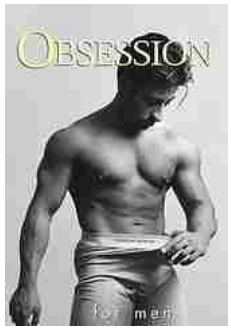

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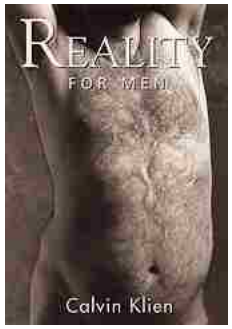

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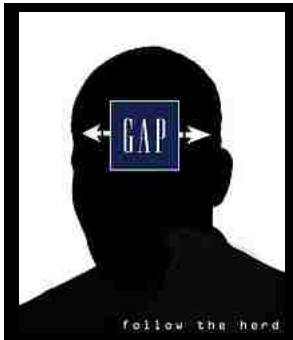

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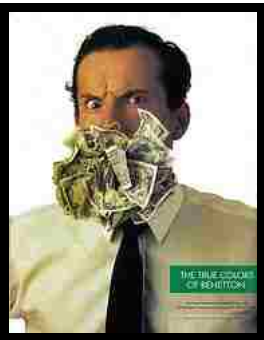

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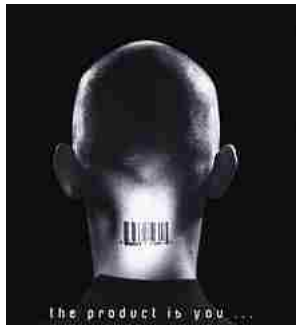

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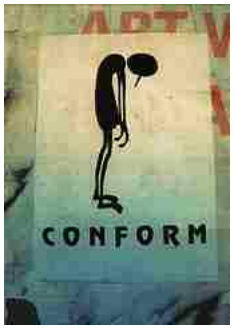

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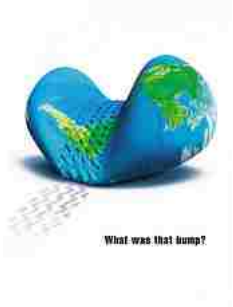

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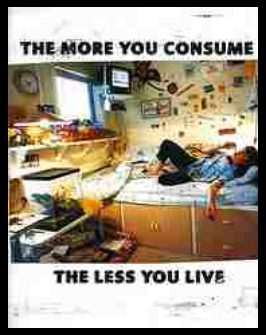

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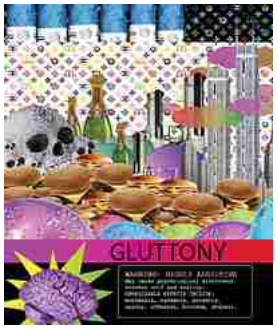

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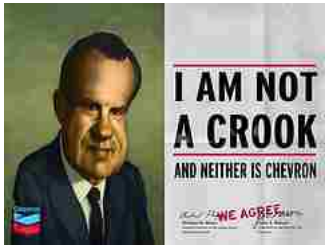

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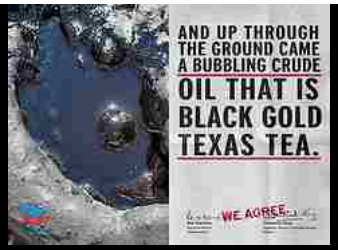

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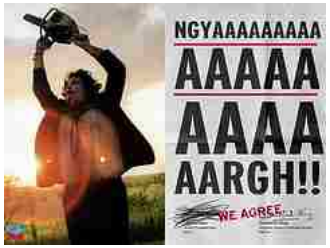

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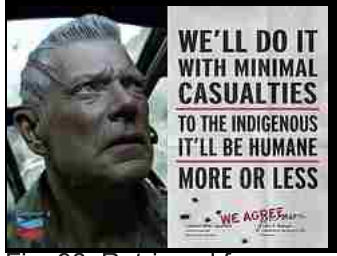

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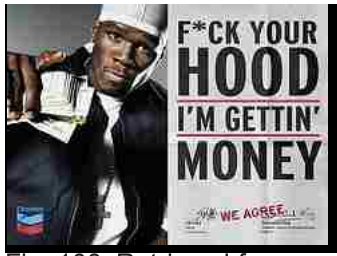

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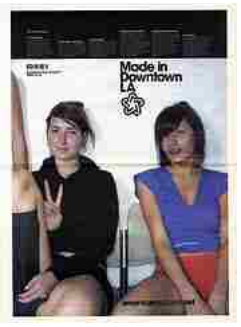

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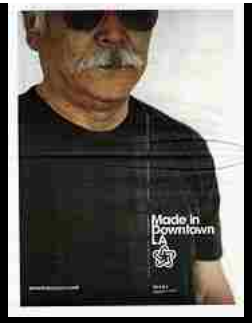

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