

<nettime> notes on culture jamming

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* From: David A Cox <dcox **at** netSPACE.net.au>
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Notes on Culture Jamming

By David Cox

"Culture-jamming," a term I have popularized by articles in The New York Times and Adbusters, might best be defined as media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one. Billboard bandits, pirate TV and radio broadcasters, media hoaxers, and other vernacular media wrenchers who intrude on the intruders, investing ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings are all culture-jammers."

Mark Dery



Damn the Networks! Victory to the Imagination!

Yogi in Craig Baldwin's "Spectres of the Spectrum"

Spectres of the Spectrum: A Culture Jammer's Cinematic Call to Action

In his recently completed collage essay film "Spectres of the Spectrum" San Francisco's Craig Baldwin posits a time traveling telepathic media pirate called BooBoo who enters a wormhole and sees all the TV shows from when they first began to be broadcast. She travels through all of the last century's decades of broadcast media history. A psychic media archeologist and angry, intrepid chrononaut, BooBoo witnesses the gradual takeover of the electromagnetic spectrum from within by both the U.S. military-industrial complex and Big Business.

Pioneers and brilliant inventors like Nicola Tesla were robbed of their ideas by financially more powerful entities. Philo T Farnsworth's radical television ideas were appropriated by a team led by David Sarnoff, head of RCA, who then used them to

finance the development of national television. As BooBoo traverses the airwaves, she is guided by her father, Yogi, who keeps her updated with dispatches from his illegally broadcast pirate TV station code called TV Tesla.

BooBoo eventually 'crashes the system' of the New Electromagnetic Order (NEO) by retrieving a hidden message from her mother in an old episode of "Science in Action", flying into the sun and redirecting its 'free' energy to destroy the infrastructure of the military/entertainment complex. The film itself is made from the materials the onscreen characters themselves examine for clues: corporate training and propaganda, educational materials and old TV programming. Haunting and strange, early television pictures were once recorded on 16mm film from a TV tube, via a process known as kinoscope. Never destined for use anytime beyond the days they were broadcast, 1950s black and white shows like "Science in Action" and "Korla Pandit" ended up on the trash heaps and landfills of post cold war era television.

Cutting Comments: Baldwin at Work

Building from the ground up out of film text and graphic materials at hand, Baldwin makes the collage/essay film as an assembly. His work comments on the circumstances of its own production. Baldwin urges the film viewers to take heed from Spectres of the Spectrum's conclusion: that electromagnetism is a free energy source, which should be available to anyone.

One Day Son, All This Will be Yours

Culture-jammer work looks ruefully around at the contemporary landscape and sees little other than visual and sonic evidence of a world made ugly, dull and boring by the all-pervasive influence of commerce. Ads and posters for products dominate the streets, company logos adorn every other piece of clothing, cars and buildings. Less and less can be done in a contemporary city without a healthy amount of money in your pocket, and of course, access to the facilities of electronic banking, point of sale purchasing, credit cards and so on.

We live in a highly electronically mediated urban environment. Almost every single activity we perform is made available only if we key in a PIN number, use a key or if we in some other way identify to some unseen authority who we are. Anonymity is becoming a scarce resource in urban areas bristling with security cameras equipped with face-recognition software. The need to identify with a culture outside the global spectacle is being felt by young people all around the world.

Boring Media

The mainstream media is characterised by a middlebrow liberal/reformist humanist worldview. It is essentially at its core middle class, middle aged in editorial orientation and on the whole politically conservative. In delivering audiences to advertisers, mainstream media profits reflect the interests of the global corporations. As Noam Chomsky points out mainstream papers always have a "business" lift-out section but hardly ever a "labour" section. Business interests are those reinforced by the media most strongly as these reflect the ethos of those who commission the ads.

Events such as the recent September 11th protests in Melbourne with few exceptions are as a rule framed as out of control, violent and hostile. On commercial television news, only clashes with police make up the content of records of popular protest. A climate of urban threat generally frames commercial reportage of public displays of opposition to global corporate control. People at demonstrations with a point of view are televised in contexts in which seldom fails to link the aspiration for social or economic change to the idea of imminent violence and incursion.

Culture vs Commerce

Academic institutions, whose once much larger cultural influence have been made to conform in the 1980s and 1990s to the economic rationalist agenda of conservative governments. The liberalism which prevails in the corridors of cash-strapped academe far outstrips that in the world of industry. To work for a company, particularly a media company is to be forced to agree to non-disclosure agreements which effectively curtail freedom of speech.

Federally backed restrictions on who can publish what on the Internet via universities has effectively silenced most students from publishing formally through a university world wide web server. Students rightly argue that this state of affairs is an outrage in a time when the Internet has been identified as the key factor in the success of economies worldwide. An appalling John Howard led Australia-wide cut in University Humanities and student union funding reinforces the view that the powers-that-be would much prefer a culturally unaware thinking population.

The distinction between information technology (I.T.) and the broader socio-cultural domain of media education could not be broader. To focus on a life based on computers the IT industry has effectively limited the idea of a life with computers as part of the broader global e-commerce agenda. Media education on the other hand promotes creative self-expression over the technical and administrative conventions of the I.T. departments of major banks, insurance and securities firms. When IT students find access to the more creative side of media production, the experience can often be a pleasant shock.

Worker vs Hacker

The theme of work and the workplace are the dominant discourse in the computer mainstream. From the retail outlet sales pitch, to the ads on TV for software, using a computer is equated with the idea of the 'office in the home' rather than the plaything for the hobbyist. In its original use, the phrase "to hack" meant to open up and investigate, to be curious, to experiment, to play and to discover. This broad definition of hacking is the most useful in understanding what differentiates computers as media from computers as work implements. Hackers play with the technology of computers as an end in itself. As a creative form of experimentation, hacking opens up technology to innovation and revision. For many hackers 'work' if done on a computer means play.

This spirit of experimentation and play is at the very core of the culture-jammer aesthetic. The collage/essay style of film making for example, takes delight in the actual process of film assembly itself, and makes this explicit within the film's structure. A growing creative youth movement is emerging which identifies with open systems of all kinds. The rise of the Linux computer operating system is a good example. Unlike Microsoft Windows or Macintosh Operating System Linux is free and available to anyone. "Shareware" culture of this type reflects a broader sense in the community that ideas, like software and a good joke are there to be shared, circulated and made available.

The D.I.Y. or "do it yourself" movement had its correlates in the punk scene of the seventies and prior to that in the 'homegrown' media production culture of the anti-Vietnam war counter-culture. Here "low-tech" and "hands-on" techniques for music and self publishing became very popular and widespread. When I studied Media Studies at college in the early 1980s, many values of the counterculture were still in circulation: principles of 'take a camera and shoot' and 'go out and publish your own magazine'. As the eighties unfolded, gradually cuts to the liberal arts by the then treasurer John Howard hulled the media education sector of its former liberalism.

Outside centers of learning, arts funding has recently favoured youth led festivals and events, of which the Newcastle Electrofringe/Young Writers Festival is exemplary.

Culture-jamming for many is an entire way of living. Its advocates generally reject the notion of the citizen as merely consumer, and the idea of society as merely marketplace. The culture-jammer and media activist approach to life questions the underlying social relations which govern the place of media (and by extension, capital) in our culture. Culture-jammer methods are strategies for self-empowerment. They embrace self-publishing in all its forms. Self made magazines (or "fanzines" or just 'zines), techno music done by teenagers in bedrooms, personal web site production, graffiti, hacking, billboard alteration and other forms of popular media resistance to the mainstream can reside under the broad banner of media activism.

Reversing Racism

As the photo-montagist John Heartfield discovered while working under the shadow of Nazi rule, a racist's rants are so loaded and antagonistic that the only real way to 'jam' them is to rework them so that the same venomous words now reorganized, become burlesque nonsense.

Devaluing the currency of the authoritarian is to turn the tables not only on the words, but the speaker, and by inference, the broader authoritarianism system itself. The shocking rise of public racism in Australia as evidenced in the rise and fall of the "Pauline Hanson's One Nation" party was the target of Sydney sound collage artist 'Pauline Pantdown'. The resultant song "I Don't Like It" edited Hanson's words into hilarious gibberish.

The Australian gonzo journalist and media prankster John Saffran staged a series of larrikin stunts including one involving dressing as burger clown Ronald McDonald. This was to deliberately pre-emp and hence overshadow the arrival of the official Ronald McDonald at a "New McDonald's Restaurant Opening" in suburban Australia. The event was videotaped by a nearby crew. Fearing a holdup, the staff at the restaurant apparently then called the police. Armed police surrounded Saffran immediately. Stories and images like these disrupt the normally squeaky clean image of the McDonald's global restaurant giant, processed as it usually is by slick production values of the commercial channels.

Pranks like this (as well as the well circulated video records of the events) offer up the at least the possibility of reversing the flow of media, if only for a brief moment in time. Media interventions represent potent symbolic challenges to the sanitized filtered mainstream advertising horizon which would otherwise dominate the airwaves, as well as the streets and magazine pages of our lives. Culture is thus truly 'jammed'; interrupted, and the process of doing so reveals much about the inner workings of society.

Another theme of the movement is the public display of overt contestation of sites of cultural and political power. In Australia, as writer Mark Davis, author of "Ganglands" points out, one could be forgiven for thinking that based on the daily press and broadcast evidence, the mainstream media favour the middle aged and affluent over the young.

Globalism, Politics and Bandwidth.

Bandwidth is political. Those countries who own the thickest network data pipes are usually also the most well-off in national economic terms. Germany and the United States between them hold the most bandwidth. Global media power is linked to global political power. Media magnates today can actually partly advise governments or at least negotiate at election time personally with heads of state in exchange for positive press coverage. At the World Economic Forum, attending an event

surrounded by protesters from around the world, Bill Gates was prompted to wonder if the rate and acceleration of change in the world brought about by telecommunications might be occurring too fast after all. Whose backing off now?
New Generation of Media Savvy Activists

The media activist movement incorporates aspects of the techno and electronica music underground as well as the punk/D.I.Y. 'zine subculture and the computer hacker subculture. Linux and freeware advocates are high in number as are the proponents of the culture-jammer movement itself as exemplified by film maker Craig Baldwin in San Francisco. Other jammers include the collage music band Negativland, and more locally John Saffran. It borrows heavily from the legacies of the beat movement, the punk scene and other bohemias which privileged self expression as a form of social and political empowerment.

Generational Cultural Battlezones

In his book "Ganglands", writer Mark Davis paints a portrait of a cultural climate in Australia where the same media 'pundits' who rose to prominence in the early and mid 1970s seem to dominate the contemporary opinion columns, editorial pages of mainstream media. Youth are routinely and casually framed in the media as hostile, lazy, ungrateful and marginal. Police in major cities will often automatically question and harass groups of young people gathered in malls and shopping centers. Young people, particularly those who choose to dress unconventionally are routinely stopped and questioned, and targeted for disproportionate levels of police attention.

Young people are charged at the turnstile for almost every daily urban experience. Fewer and fewer spaces in the contemporary city allow for the convergence and use by teenagers, let alone access to the means of communication. What were once public spaces are increasingly leased holdings, patrolled by private police and owned by private companies. Young people seldom appear in the news unless they are framed as 'grunge' or in some other way defined by how they do not fit into the broader media scheme of things. As humanities departments suffer cutbacks, closures and a gradual financial asphyxia, the cultural sphere is moving into the domain of the media activists.

At the recent S-11 protests (in what are very much public streets), people critical of globalism of all ages were being at first tolerated by police as a vocal but harmless group, then in a sudden change in police tactics, brutally attacked over the subsequent days. Police wore no identifying badges or markings, a move that was presumably designed to foil legal observation workers present. Culture Jammers had taken the popular song by John Farnham "You're the Voice" and posted it on the S11 website, claiming it as the 'official anthem' of S11. In response, Farnham's record company sent a 'cease and desist' letter insisting the song be removed from www.s11.org.au. The exchange between the web site authors and the record company became the hub of discussion on the web site, and in so doing the culture-jammer aesthetic accompanied the broader protest. Collage Essay Film Making.

Cut-up film making has a long tradition. It includes the work of the beat era film maker Bruce Connor and his onetime student Craig Baldwin. It includes the films of Phil Pateris, Jesse Drew and Greta Snider. Material is found in dumpsters, in donated film cans, from stuff thrown out from secondary schools and colleges, and mail order sources, to archives and libraries from around the country. The footage is painstakingly watched and material taken based on it's a) strength visually b) context narratively and c) potential as a part in a mosaic.

Few shots taken from an old film reel can find their way into the montage unless it in some way bolsters the argument of the film maker: if it is not visually directly relevant to what is being said on the soundtrack it might illustrate by way of analogy the idea.

For example a shot of a man closing a giant safe door could be used to illustrate someone talking about how the Internet is being closed down by corporate interests (Sonic Outlaws, 1995, by Craig Baldwin) . A giant company can be shown as a large clunky fake robot from a 1940s World Trade Fair sequence (Spectres of the Spectrum 1999). Stories are built up from the material available, and the material itself helps direct the script. The film makes itself from the availability and relevance of the material to the subject and the subject makes itself from the types of footage available.

This two-way conversation between a culture-jammer's materials and his/her overall argument or worldview is at the core of the aesthetic. Junk, funk, trash, and cast off stuff becomes transformed and alchemically its meanings are re-arranged. Media become the ventriloquist's doll for the film-maker, saying what s/he wants it to say, doing what the film maker wants it to do.

'Zines

The rise of the photocopier in the 1970's and 1980's led to an explosion of printed matter by non professional publishers. Private desires and opinions become public expression. The circulation might only be the writer's peer group, or it may extend over a number of countries. 'Zine publication in Australia represents a badly undervalued and healthy channel of unofficial under-the-radar cultural production. 'Zines are made available to people by their peers, and offer up private commentary in a public sphere, by way of satire, parody, jokes, calls to action, confessions of often painful honesty.

Sticker Culture

Few artists who find a roll of blank stickers (especially skate punks) can resist the temptation to use them in creative ways for self-expression. Many gangs in the USA use stickers to mark out turf on buses and trains, quick 'tags' on 'Hello My Name Is' stickers liberated from retail outlets find their way into the public domain.

Stencils

Stencils came to prominence during the youth uprising of May 1968. Based often on photographic portraits and slogans, stencils are bits of cardboard, with the imagery cut out with sharp knives. The stencils are placed up against brick walls or on the footpath and a spray paint can is used to almost permanently emblazon the space with its message.

Audio Sampling

Audio collage by groups such as Negativland, John Oswald take materials from as many sources; scanned mobile phone conversations, old radio serials, and material off the internet. The Tape Beatles took out a patent on 'plagiarism' as a technique. By copying materials by the Beatles, the Tape Beatles intend to discredit the idea of the originality of the artist. The record companies interpret copying of any sort as bootlegging, despite the fact that most copies of music is not made for resale. The battle between companies and culture-jammers reached its zenith in the early 1990s when Island Records sued Negativland for using a sample of a song by the megagroup "U2" in a parody. The film "Sonic Outlaws" by Craig Baldwin chronicles these events in great detail.

Video Collage.

Video Collage by the Emergency Broadcast Network (EBN), and film maker Phil Pateris takes materials available over the airwaves, off videotape and off cable

television. It is then meticulously cut into rhythmic visual songs. In the case of the EBN, looped sound bites and other audio samples become complete works not only of video, but of music. The works are often hilarious takes on the relationship between the media and the military and end up as videotape compilations and music CDs.

Literary Cutups and Dimensional Travel

William Burroughs popularized the idea of the literary 'cutup' in the early 1960s. His novels utilize the technique of cutting up and reworking text to create whole "new" works. Burroughs believed that the many of the messages contained within his cutup texts foreshadowed actual events. As premonitions, cutup writings became for him at least a window into a supposed other dimension.

Dimensional travel of this sort is a recurring theme in science fiction D.I.Y. media. As materials present themselves for reworking, it is hard to read into early 60s 16mm educational films anything but evidence of a society very much into laying down the law, and asserting the centrality of the authority of government, school and home. In this regard a culture jam can open up a very real 'time corridor' into the otherzone of past. The process of understanding the relationship of early media to the time they occupied is itself a valuable discipline. It is the archivist as artist and vice versa.

Jamming has become a method of devaluing the cultural capital of the mainstream, of reversing the one-way flow of media. It is to many an almost evangelical trajectory, borne by Beat era notions of 'beatitude' a kind of heartfelt sense of pathos and epiphany through art or artistic gesture. This has won it critics from people Bruce Connor's work in the early 1960s on film shows a screen world of beatific menace and threat; cold war anxiety about nuclear weapons, and trashy cast off material about hot-rod races, nude dancers.

When cut together the combination of fact and fiction, rare archival and Z-grade schlock in Bruce Connor's films opens a window into the hidden underbelly of postwar US culture. The psyche of America is unveiled as a vast repository of pent-up desire. The cut-up method was an extension of the overall beat project; to symbolically defy the claims made upon everyday life by a post war command economy. The rigidly warlike hierarchical structure of the militarized government of America in the 1950s was met with an explosion of counter cultural resistance movements, beginning with the beatniks. As McKenzie Wark and Mark Davis point out in their books, it is the members of that same once vehemently anti-authoritarian counter-culture thirty five years ago who today still jealously clutch to cultural power within the contemporary Australian media.

Arials vs Roots

McKenzie Wark in a 1998 documentary on Australian intellectual life; *Bohemian Rhapsody* invites a group he is with to recite the first lines of the theme to "The Brady Bunch". He does this in order to find out who knows the whole song as this tells us much about the time we live in. Many of us share a vivid history of such themes, ads, and shows from the last thirty years. Dead media become a kind of common cultural currency, shared, exchanged and valued. They resonate within the public imagination. *Adbusters* is a US based magazine that attacks the culture of consumerism by turning its own slick advertising tools and tactics against it. *Adbusters* expertly employs the glossy tactics of advertising to encourage people to take part in events such as "Buy Nothing Day" and "TV Turnoff Week." This diversionary tactic takes the revolution to another level, as the magazine's publisher, Kalle Lasn, issues a call to arms to "the advance shock troops of the most significant social movement" of the early 21st century. Kalle Lasn, author of the influential book "Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America" has highlighted the role of culture jamming

as a way for the population to reclaim its collective creative life. In being denied the cultural space to voice an alternative view, the populations of the big western economies are flocking to the Internet and its youth are busy making their own publications, hip-hop records, techno music and so on. MP Free The Newcastle Electrofringe events showcase the techno music talents from all over Australia. As recording artists converge this year, the role of the MP3 format in altering the stakes in the record industry is a hot topic. MP3 files have enabled people globally to share music without the intervening filter of the music publishing industry. This free exchange of music on the internet has been met with litigious hostility by the recording firms who have through legal action shut down web organizations who have made MP3s available via search and play web sites such as Napster and MP3.com. Media (H)activism

In Australia at present, cracks in the surface of what Guy Debord called 'the Society of the Spectacle' are appearing. The recent 'cash for comments' events in which two major radio announcers were found guilty of accepting money to promote goods and services in the guise of editorial comment have opened up debates about what type of media-space really surrounds us.

At the Young Writer's /Electrofringe festival held in October in Newcastle, NSW both in 1999 and this year, debates revolve mainly around the ways cultural power took form in Australia. Issues such as the level to which mainstream commercial media buttress global and local commercial interests were addressed, with forums on media access, self publishing and notions of technological empowerment.

A decision was made recently by the Howard federal government to attempt the censoring of the Internet. Recent legislation which restricts various types of material which can be made available via Internet Service Providers (ISPs) demonstrates how out of touch the Government actually is with the totally global workings of the Internet. That restricting the flow of data from within Australia can be thwarted by the operator simply setting up offshore was either a) a fact which the government could live with and tolerate or b) indicative of a fundamental lack of willingness to understand the technically uncensorable Internet. The reality is most likely a strange combination of both.

Internet History 101

To understand its significance as a mode for public discourse, it is important to understand something of the actual history, origins and current functioning of the Internet. Politicians and embarrassingly high numbers of today's 'media pundits' clearly do not. Those born in the early 1980s in contrast, have virtually grown up with the Internet and understand its role as an extension to everyday life, as a tool for use in a world where ideas need to be in a process of flow and dynamism to play a role. The Internet was largely reclaimed from military use by users who found it a useful extension to everyday life. As a site for chat, informal conversation and ideas exchange, the Internet, designed for imperviousness to nuclear war became an open global forum for the Vox Populi.

Artists as Pixel Pushing Cyberserfs

Art school graduates and freelance artists are enticed to become graphics software specialists in a climate with an insatiable appetite for PR gloss and advertising glitz. Creative people who need work are finding themselves expected to serve the demands of the almost endless appetite by PR firms for corporate desktop published brochures and web sites. In using the Internet these companies are sharing bandwidth with the public, who in the USA at least, actually paid for the Internet via cold war era taxes. But private and public life alike on the Internet are being squeezed from all sides today by the corporate imagination. The Internet as a public

space is being ruthlessly zoned for redevelopment to deliver maximum returns to its increasingly commercial backers and controllers. An activist might well feel the need to label 'return to sender' Bill Gate's alleged 'advice' to the Melbourne S11 protesters: Back Off!

Wings of Desire

Culture-jamming takes that latent desire within a loosed media fragment, reprograms it, and sends it back into circulation. Forensically analyzed and judged, a reworked image often transmits more than it intends. Culture Jamming releases meanings from pieces of the media puzzle and re-transmits them into new contexts where they can run free. It removes from the scene of the crime a film, literary, video or sound work. Lifted from its once fixed intended socio-cultural place and time the culture jammed media particle is made to throw its voice from the past into the present. Secrets can be explicitly revealed, hidden stories uncovered.

David Cox is a film maker, writer and lecturer in Digital Screen Production at Griffith University's School of Film Media and Cultural Studies. His films include Puppenhead (1990), BIT (1992), and Otherzone (1998)

Website: <http://www.netspace.net.au/~dcox/dcox.html>

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