Culture Jamming as Critical Public Pedagogy

JENNIFER A. SANDLIN AND JENNIFER L. MILAM

Culture jamming, the act of resisting and recreating commercial culture in an effort to transform society, is embraced by groups and individuals who seek to critique and (re)form how culture is created and enacted in our daily lives. The term was coined in 1984 by the San Francisco-based electronica band Negativeland in reference to the illegal interruption of the signals of ham radio (Carducci, 2006). Lasn (1999), founder of Adbusters Media Foundation, explains that culture jamming is a metaphor for stopping the flow of consumer-culture saturated media. And Atkinson (2003) posits that culture jamming is based on the idea of resisting the dominant ideology of consumerism and recreating commercial culture in order to transform society. Culture jamming includes such activities as billboard “liberation,” the creation and dissemination of anti-advertising “subvertisements,” and participation in DIY (do-it-yourself) political theater and “shopping interventions.” Many culture jammers view themselves as descendents of the “Situationists,” a European anarchist group from the 1950s led by Guy Debord (Harold, 2004). Members of this group created moments of what Bakhtin (1973) would later call the “carnivalesque,” enacted to fight against the “spectacle” of everyday life. According to the Situationists, the spectacle stifles free will and spontaneity, replacing them with media-sponsored lives and prepackaged experiences (Lasn, 1999). Like the Situationists, culture jammers reject the spectacle in favor of more authentic or less media-ted lives.

In this chapter we explore how two groups—Adbusters and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping—use culture jamming to resist hyperconsumption and commercialism. We theorize how culture jamming as practiced operates as critical public pedagogy. We propose that when viewed as such, culture jamming holds potential to connect learners with one another and to connect individual lives to social issues. However, we also posit that culture jamming may in fact hinder critical learning by imposing a rigid presence on the viewer-learner that limits creativity and transgression, and discuss how it risks becoming co-opted by the very market forces of capitalism it intends to oppose and interrupt.

Our view of culture is dynamic and critical. Grounded in a Gramscian cultural studies framework, we conceptualize popular culture as an active process, where cultural commodities and experiences are the raw materials people use to create popular culture, within various contexts of power relations (Storey, 2006). From this view popular culture becomes an arena for power struggles between dominant and subordinate social groups—a terrain on which hegemony, or consent, is fought for and resisted (Hartley, 2002; Storey, 2006). This Gramscian view of cultural studies is apparent in the work of critical curriculum scholars, especially those who
focus on popular culture as a site of public pedagogy. However, much of the public pedagogy literature emphasizes how popular culture perpetuates dominant values such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, machismo, and violence, rather than its counter-hegemonic possibilities (Mayo, 2002). Although we see the importance of exploring how people are raced, classed, and gendered through popular culture, we also believe it is imperative to investigate popular culture as a form of resistance (Duncombe, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). We thus seek to “criticalize” the notion of “public pedagogy” and thus expand the concept of “critical public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000, p. 355, emphasis ours). Like Mayo (2002), and Giroux (2004a, 2004b) we see the need to explore specific practices of critical public pedagogies, in order to understand how they operate and what opportunities they may offer for consumers, community members, and educators to actively engage in the (re)creation, (re)negotiation, and (re)conceptualization of culture.

We find Ellsworth’s (2005) explorations of public pedagogy helpful in our work; she urges critical educators to explore what she calls “anomalous places of learning”—museums, public art installations, films, and other forms of popular and public culture. We engage with her idea of the “pedagogical hinge” (p. 5) to examine culture jamming as critical public pedagogy, and to discover how culture jamming functions as a powerful site of learning. In addition, we borrow from Ellsworth a way of thinking about education within popular culture as a process rather than a product, and seek to understand how knowledge is created and experienced by the “learning self in the making” (p. 2). To Ellsworth, public pedagogy is most powerful when it creates “transitional spaces”—when it connects our inner selves to people, objects, and places outside of ourselves. We posit that Adbusters and Reverend Billy offer this connection.

The Cases of Adbusters and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

We draw from multiple sources of data for this project. Following Ellsworth (2005), we used secondary data from scholars in other disciplines who have researched and written about culture jamming, and from culture jamming activists who participate in, record, and write about their activism—“the words and concepts of others”—as “raw material” (p. 13). We also analyzed data from/of/created by Adbusters and Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, including textual, visual, and audio material gathered from their websites, blogs, articles, Reverend Billy’s autobiography (Talen, 2003), “subvertisements” recently published in Adbusters magazines, Reverend Billy’s sermons, photographs, and public performance “scripts.” We also examined two documentaries, one that focused on culture jamming in general (Sharpe, 2001), and one that was specifically about Reverend Billy (Post & Palacios, 2006). We attempt in our analysis to make sense of how culture jamming operates as curriculum. We viewed the various forms of data gathered—including visual, written, and performative—as “cultural texts,” and, drawing upon McKee’s (2003) approach to interpretive cultural textual analysis, we sought to understand how culture jammers viewed and critiqued the world around them, how they (re)created alternative visions of the world, and how they (re)articulated these visions to/with/about others.

Adbusters is a magazine produced by the Adbusters Media Foundation. Based in Vancouver, Canada, Adbusters describes itself as “a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age” (Adbusters Media Foundation, n.d.). Adbusters focuses on two main themes—how marketing and mass media colonize space, and how global capitalism and rampant consumption are destroying natural environments (Rumbo, 2002). Adbusters magazine is a reader-supported, not-for profit magazine with an international circulation of 85,000 and contains reader-generated materials, commentaries by activists from across the globe, and
photographs and stories depicting readers’ social activism. Adbusters also hosts a
website (http://www.Adbusters.org/) where activists can read about anti-consumption
campaigns, download posters, stickers, and flyers for distribution, and share information
about their own activism.

Reverend Billy is an anti-consumption
activist based in New York City, and the
leader of the “Church of Stop Shopping.” Bill Talen, whose stage character is “Reverend
Billy,” adopts the persona of a conservative,
evangelical preacher—à la Jimmy Swaggart
(see Figure 28.1).

He stages “comic theatrical service[s]”
(Lane, 2002, p. 60)—structured as comic church services—with “readings from the saints (or
the devils), public confessions, collective exorcisms, the honoring of new saints, donations to
the cause, a lively choir, and a rousing sermon” (Lane, 2002, p. 61). During these services he per-
forms a call-and-response style of preaching as the audience responds with “Amens!” and “Hal-
lelujahs!” Reverend Billy also performs “retail interventions” in public spaces and retail stores
along with the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir; some of his popular targets of anti-consumption
activism include the Disney Company, Starbucks, Wal-Mart, and Victoria’s Secret. In addition,
Reverend Billy writes “intervention manuals” and scripts that other activists can use in their
own public theater jams.

Culture Jamming as Critical Public Pedagogy

Our analysis focused on how and why culture jamming activists enact what we position as critical
public pedagogy. Given the nature of our data we focus especially on the espoused and enacted
pedagogy of culture jamming. We posit that culture jamming operates as potentially powerful
public pedagogy through the ways in which it fosters participatory cultural production, engages
with the learner and the “teacher” corporeally, and fosters the creation of a community politic.
We further argue that culture jamming’s “pedagogical hinge” lies in how it produces a sense
of “détournement” in audience members, which can operate as a form of “transitional space.”
Finally, while we recognize culture jamming’s potential pedagogy of possibility (Giroux & Simon,
1988), our analysis also revealed moments of coercion and compliance—what we call culture
jamming’s “loose pedagogical hinge”—which can shut down rather than encourage the possibil-
ity of counter-hegemonic transgression (hooks, 1994). Not unlike culture itself, culture jamming
remains at once a location and process of (re)creation, negation, consumption, and resistance.

Fostering Participatory, Resistant Cultural Production

Powerful pedagogies engage learners as creators (Ellsworth, 2005). Critical pedagogy advocates
argue that learners should become cultural producers and build new, more democratic cultural
realities (Giroux, 2004b). One aspect of culture jamming’s potential power as critical pedagogy,
then, lies in how it fosters participatory cultural production. In our current condition of hyper-
capitalism (Graham, 2006) grounded in consumption, it is a defiant notion that individuals are
capable of and should be responsible for their own entertainment (Duncombe, 1997); yet it is
this very ideal that culture jammers promote. Culture jammers are cultural *producers* and *creators*, who actively resist, critique, appropriate, reuse, recreate, and alter cultural products and entertainment.

Culture jamming is enacted in many forms, all of which rely on creative cultural production and ultimately seek to challenge and change dominant discourses and practices of multinational corporations (Harold, 2004). Duncombe (2002) explains that cultural resisters shift from being consumers to being creators; indeed, this is what drove the genesis of *Adbusters*. Lasn (2006) explains:

> We had this nasty feeling that “we the people” were slowly but surely losing our power to sing the songs and tell the stories and generate our culture from the bottom up. More and more, the stories were being fed to us top-down by TV networks, ad agencies and corporations...[We wanted to take] the storytelling, culture-generating power back from commercial and corporate forces. (p. 85)

As a form of cultural resistance, then, culture jamming is a “free space” where artists and activists can “experiment with new ways of seeing and being” and where they can “develop tools and resources for resistance” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5).

Both *Adbusters* and Reverend Billy engage in cultural production as they seek to alter and give new, *resistant* meanings to popular cultural symbols. Culture jammers interrupt how public spaces are typically used and understood, “in ways that hold the potential for education to be contemporaneous with social change and identities in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 58). Culture jammers thus clearly demonstrate how popular culture is a field of contestation. *Adbusters*, through its “subvertisements” or “jams,” 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.

For example, one of *Adbusters’* most well-known “subvertisements” appropriates memes originally fashioned and circulated by Calvin Klein’s “Obsession” perfume advertising campaign in the early 1990s (see the *Adbusters* subvertisement at http://www.adbusters.org/node/678). This subvertisement shows what a reader might, at first glance, believe is a typical Obsession (perfume) advertisement with the obvious and central placement of a physically fit, scantily clad body in black and white image with the word “Obsession” looming overhead. This model, however, is glancing down into his underwear, “obsessed” with his phallus, instead of lustily gazing into the camera and the eyes of the consumer to sell perfume. Rather than lulling the viewer into an eager-to-buy perfume trance, this image urges the consumer to give pause and attempts to reveal a contradiction behind the Obsession advertising campaign. It appears to call into question the multi-media-reinforced tendency of men (and women) to be overly critical and self-conscious about their bodies in search of an unrealistic, market-driven standard of perfection. While this model appears physically fit and attractive, his facial expression and downward gaze into his underwear suggests that he may be less than pleased with the phallic entirety of his body. The subvertisement calls into question taken-for-granted notions of masculinity and the Calvin Klein brand (and the fashion industry, more generally) by clearly associating it with society’s insatiable preoccupation with physical beauty (or lack thereof) and hyper-sexualized images.

Reverend Billy, too, plays with memes created and distributed by corporations such as Disney, Starbucks, and Victoria’s Secret. For instance, during his “shopping interventions” at Disney
retail stores, Reverend Billy and members of his church often carry large wooden crosses with Mickey and Minnie Mouse stuffed animals “crucified” on them. Reverend Billy explains:

We’re taking two great organized religions [Christianity and what he calls the “Church of Consumerism”] and grinding them together and trying to confuse people so they can think in a new way...I want the symbols and meanings to fly away. (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2006)

Reverend Billy thus causes these memes to take on new meanings as they are incorporated into new, unexpected counter-hegemonic cultural scripts. Mickey Mouse morphs from the Disney-sanctioned symbol of everlasting childhood and nostalgia to the leader of the evil, child-labor-sweat-soaked empire of Disney.

**Engaging Corporeally**

Ellsworth (2005) argues that effective pedagogy engages the whole learner. We argue that part of the potential power of culture jamming’s pedagogy, then, lies in how it attempts to engage the whole person—including the body and emotions—in a process of “becoming.” First, the act of culture jamming often literally involves the body. For instance, one of Reverend Billy’s retail interventions literally engages jammers’ and audience members’ physical bodies. This intervention, targeted at Starbucks, is entitled “It’s a Party! Bump and Grind the Buckheads,” (Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, n.d.) and involves jammers filling a Starbucks store and proceeding to dance, strip, and handout pamphlets describing the questionable ethics of Starbucks’ business practices. Reverend Billy explains the physical sensations culture jamming ignites when he delivers his message to his audience. He says he tries to lead “by example” to persuade people that it can be fun not to consume. He further explains that participants have to:

Embody the fun. It all comes down to the decision, what sort of dance am I involved in here? Where are my arms, where are my hands? How far is my voice reaching, what am I saying? It’s all physical. It’s the physical-spiritual. It’s sacralizing the ordinary. (quoted in Ashlock, 2005, para. 31)

Culture jammers also attempt to engage emotions when enacting culture jamming, to initiate action and interest amongst members of society. For instance, we posit elsewhere (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009) that Adbusters engages viewers emotionally, by transforming recognizable consumer appeals into images that shock and disturb viewers. Drawing upon and extending our earlier work, we illustrate how Adbusters attempts to do this through subvertisements and manipulations of well-known ad campaigns. For example, in Adbusters’ attempt to jolt the reader/viewer out of their typical consumption practices, jammers transformed the stark white background, the green square, and the stark images of “diverse” young people from around the globe that were the hallmarks of the 1990s advertising campaign “The United Colors of Benetton” by the Benetton Corporation. This widely popular ad campaign showcased groups of variously hued young men and women wearing an array of trendy Benetton fashions in bright colors (see the Adbusters subvertisement at http://www.adbusters.org/gallery/spoofads/fashion/benetton). Through these and similar, more recent ads, Benetton positions itself as diverse, hip, multicultural, socially aware, and progressive. When viewing this subvertisement, however, the viewer is quickly jerked out of the familiar, as she is faced not with images of young, hip, lithe, multi-cultural and multi-hued youth, but with the striking image of a middle-aged man with a mouthful of money. In a kind of double take, the viewer sees what the ad really features—a
White man, presumably a corporate executive, literally consuming a wad of hundred dollar bills in a symbolic representation of greed. The viewer may also notice the original advertising slogan has been changed to read: “The True Colors of Benetton.” In this moment, the viewer experiences a moment of dissonance when the expectations for and the reality of the ad are at odds. This realization may produce a variety of emotions in the viewer—outrage at the corporate gluttony, or guilt over buying (perhaps, even at that moment wearing) Benetton products—and hopefully shocks the reader into viewing the Benetton company in a different light, and to changing her consumption practices. This subadvertisement calls our attention to the underlying intentions and exploitation of consumers by corporations that promote themselves as well-intentioned and socially aware.

Engaging corporeally does not mean simply engaging the physical body and internal emotions, however. Within culture jamming, we also see evidence of the kind of engagement of what Springgay and Freedman (2007) call the imaginary body. We argue that through engaging corporeally, culture jamming thus helps to establish a strong relationality—or consciousness of being “with” others. Springgay and Freedman (2007) suggest that a “bodied curriculum” questions, examines, and provokes particularities of different bodies rather than accepting a homogenized and normalized conception of the body. Thus, we posit that culture jamming—through its use of the physical as well as visual representations of the body in various forms—is an example of a critically bodied curriculum. Culture jamming as critical public pedagogy pushes participants to (re)consider their understandings of themselves, their relationships with others, and the interaction of their subjectivities within society for the purposes of questioning and challenging the current political and social milieu.

Creating a (Poetic) Community Politics

An important part of Ellsworth’s (2005) “democratic civic pedagogy” is how it puts us in new relationships “with our selves and with our others” (p. 96). We argue, then, that another powerful aspect of culture jamming’s pedagogy is the ways in which it seeks to create community. Drawing upon St. Clair’s (1998) discussion, we view community as relationship; community relationships are sites of cultural production and reproduction, and help to develop and support shared value systems and social activism.

The community culture jammers seek to create is not just any kind of community, however—it is a community drawn together with a sense of political purpose and a community that engages in what Brookfield (2005) calls “political learning” (p. 31). The creation of community is, in fact, necessary for the enactment of culture jamming’s politics. Brookfield (2005), following Gramsci, argues that critical consciousness, or political learning, cannot form in an individual without that individual becoming part of a collective public. Critical consciousness thus forms in groups—communities—as people learn about their common situations and the need for collective political action. Culture jamming, however, hopes to create political community through a very different kind of political engagement than traditional party politics or traditional social movement activism. Both Adbusters founder Kalle Lasn (1999) and Reverend Billy argue that traditional social movement strategies cannot bring about the kinds of change culture jammers seek. Instead, individuals who want to build an effective social movement must use new tactics. These new tactics can include, but are never limited to, subvertisements, spoof ads, and community art exhibits like the “Waterboarding Thrill Ride” created and performed by Steve Powers at Coney Island (see Creative Time, 2008a).

The “thrill ride” was developed in response to the United States government’s assertion in 2007 that waterboarding was acceptable practice as an “enhanced interrogation technique.” In
a press release for the attraction, the performance and spectacle is described as “an animatronic diorama depicting a prisoner being waterboarded” (Creative Time, 2008b). A dollar “buys the curiosity-seeker a glimpse of a stark concrete room inhabited by two animatronic robots” engaged in a “simulation of the simulated drowning” to which several detainees at Guantanamo have been subjected and which the U.S. government condoned. As a striking example of how culture jammers seek to create and disrupt the community politics through satire and creativity, this type of amusement park “ride” engages the onlooker in a new politics of irony and tragedy—attempting to compel the viewer into a new consciousness and political learning. Far removed from the sterile conversations on the floor of the U.S. Senate, this exhibit lures viewers into a critical public pedagogy that urges them to (re)consider the real costs of community complacency and inhumane government policy. The artist and designer specifically intended for the “ride” to “broaden public awareness of and spark debate about a human rights issue that has received minimal weight in the public sphere.”

This new paradigm of political activism involves the creative appropriation, creation, and enactment of culture, along with large doses of humor, irony, and creativity—this approach works by creating a political poetics. We believe that part of culture jamming’s potential effectiveness as critical public pedagogy, then, is its ability to help participants to engage in communal politics. When politics becomes poetic, and is presented or enacted through culture—and especially through a new, exciting, collective experience of culture—it can seem more open and inviting, and less predictable, than other forms of political protest (Duncombe, 2002).

Culture Jamming’s Pedagogical Hinge: Opening Transitional Spaces through Détournement

Pedagogical “hinges” refer to those aspects of spaces of learning that make them pedagogically powerful. More specifically, the “hinge” refers to some aspect of pedagogy that puts “inside and outside, self and other, personal and social into relation” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 38). Pedagogy’s hinges create possibilities for both inside and outside—self and society—to be disrupted and refigured. We believe an important pedagogical moment—culture jamming’s pedagogical hinge—occurs when audience members as learners experience détournement (literally, a “turning around”). All of the pedagogical tactics used in culture jamming attempt to lead the learner to this moment, where she is no longer who she used to be, but rather is caught off guard by the possibility of becoming someone or something different. Lasn (1999) argues that culture jamming helps provide a new way of looking at the world, and describes this détournement as “a perspective-jarring turnabout in your everyday life” (p. xvii).

Through moments of détournement, culture jammers seek to move audience members away from scripted “spectacle-driven” experiences through igniting authenticity. As one culture jammer writing in *Adbusters* stated, “Is your life a project? Do you give a shit about anything? Can you still get angry? Be spontaneous?” (Unattributed artist, *Adbusters*, Sept./Oct., 2003, pp. 88–89). Détournement also involves stepping away from one’s self, and suspending that self in the “unknown.” In an interview conducted by Sharpe (2001) after a “shopping intervention” inside a Disney store, Reverend Billy explains this moment of détournement:

I love it if I see someone and their jaw’s down and their eyes are…. [demonstrates a confused look] …What is this?—What is this guy doing—What? Mickey’s the devil but he’s not a Christian?—What?—What?—Is he an actor or is this a stunt? —And you can see them looking at the cameras they’re trying to add it up—as soon as they can add it up it’s less important to them. If that suspension takes place for two or three or four minutes, they’re gonna take that home and they’re gonna still be thinking about it a week later. They might even hesitate to buy a Disney product. (as interviewed in Sharpe, 2001)
According to Ellsworth (2005), this suspension constitutes a powerful learning moment, as learning happens when the self is dissolving. Reverend Billy seeks out this dissolution and sees it as the moment of the possibility of change:

When I’m preaching there [inside retail spaces], people kinda go—[pauses, looks around with a confused expression on his face]...Their consciousness floats out away from their faces. They are no longer in possession of themselves and that’s good—that means something real might be changing in them or something. (as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2006)

Further, we believe that this moment of détournement has the potential to operate as a form of transitional space. “Transitional spaces” (Ellsworth, 2005) are spaces of play, creativity, and cultural production; they help us bridge the boundaries between the self and the other. When in those spaces, “we are entertaining strangeness and playing in difference. We are crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person we have been but no longer are and the person we will become” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 62). Our data highlighting audience reactions indicate that when experiencing culture jamming, audience members sometimes experience détournement and move into transitional spaces. Jason Grote, now a member of the Church of Stop Shopping, experienced a moment of détournement the first time he encountered Reverend Billy. We quote him at length to emphasize the significance of his response.

The moment I remember most about that show is a bit wherein he holds a conversation with a giant billboard of the model Kate Moss. “She’s looking at me,” he fumes. “She wants me.” He continues to flirt with the billboard and in so doing is transported back to an early adolescence romance. Suddenly, he realizes: this is my self. These are my memories. These ads are taking our memories, attaching them to products, and selling them back to us. He stops, horrified. We are completely with him. This world is fallen and so are we...We are given the following directive: ‘Remember your name.’ It occurred to me that day how branded I am. There is a huge chunk of my memory that is someone else’s property, property that someone is right now making money off of. I think about the tattoo of Bugs Bunny on my right shoulder blade. It is trademarked, licensed to the tattoo company by AOL Time Warner. (Grote, 2002, p. 363)

Reverend Billy describes these moments of détournement as moments where “a bright, unclaimed space opens up” (Talen, 2003, p. xii).

We contend that these moments of détournement may help audience-members-as-learners to envision and begin to enact what Giddens (1991) calls “life politics”—wherein people begin seeing their individual lives as intertwined with others’ lives and with social issues, and begin enacting “civil labor,” which involves individuals engaging politically with the commons in order to increase the social capital of everyone (Rojek, 2001). The work of both Reverend Billy and Adbusters is aimed at engaging détournement through helping expose the connections between individual actions and social, economic, and environmental issues. For instance, by injecting the idea that Benetton, a corporation that portrays itself as social-justice oriented and globally aware, is no better than any other free-market corporation in search of greater profits from the consumer, the Adbusters Benetton subadvertisement discussed above turns the original ad’s message upside down and exposes the raw motives of a for-profit multinational corporation like Benetton; this is done in an effort to push readers to rethink just how “globally conscious” it is to wear Benetton fashions and to support that multinational corporation. Perhaps when later recalled by the consumer in her day-to-day context, she might (re)consider how she is being
shaped as a consumer and how her understanding of what is just is also being influenced by advertising and corporations.

We believe these various examples show how détournement can operate as a form of transitional space. That is, as détournement can help make clear and trouble our habitual responses to experiences (Ellsworth, 2005). Transitional spaces suspend time and space and thus allow us room to think of other ways of enacting particular moments. Transitional spaces introduce “a stutter, a hesitation” and interrupt “the binary logics that keep self/other, inner/outer, individual/social locked in face-to-face opposition,” thus allowing us to relate to ourselves and others in new ways (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 64). The learning moment within transitional spaces is similar to the Deleuzian “in-between” (Reynolds, 2004) and what Pinar (2004) calls currere, where the self is always positioned in relation to others. We argue that it is in these spaces that the viewer-learner begins to [re]consider her role in society, both as an individual and in relation to others. Whether or not the learner actually experiences a turning around is ultimately left to their desires and will—however, critical public pedagogy potentially provides this opportunity.

**Culture Jamming’s Loose Pedagogical Hinge?**

Ellsworth (2005) argues that the “space” in transitional spaces refers to the kinds of educational environments that facilitate new, creative, spontaneous ways of learning and of seeing the self in relation to others. While culture jamming often facilitates the opening of such spaces, our data analysis led us to believe that it also sometimes creates environments that hinder rather than support learning-as-transgression (hooks, 1994). Some audience members, upon experiencing a culture jam, react with anger not at consumerism but at the culture jammers themselves. For instance, in one culture jamming action captured on film by Sharpe (2001), Reverend Billy preaches against sweatshops and corporate power in a Disney store. Immediately following the performance, Sharpe’s videographer captures two women in the audience engaging in a conversation. One of the women says to the other:

> I’m just offended by what just happened in the store. Where I spend my money and where I go to shop is my business and not anyone else’s. Especially an idiot like whoever he was.
>  
> (Audience member, as interviewed in Sharpe, 2001)

Audience members also react negatively against Adbusters. A participant in an online discussion about culture jamming stated, for instance: “I HATE Adbusters. Why? Because they have this preachy holier-than-thou attitude” (Sulli, 2002). In these examples, it is evident that rather than [re]considering their own subject position or participation in what culture jammers would deem the social and political hegemony of popular culture, the viewer-learner experiences the jammers (and their actions) as offensive, judgmental, and oppressive.

We believe that these examples demonstrate that despite culture jamming’s potential for fostering critical pedagogy, it can also at times become a space where critical learning is paralyzed. Ellsworth (2005) explains a similar distinction when she describes the differences between learning-in-the-making as experience and learning-as-compliance. Culture jammers must try to avoid becoming “saboteur[s] of personal development,” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 75). Culture jammers must, instead, strive to revel more in possible, playful spaces, where the “learning self of the experience of the learning self is invented in and through its engagement with pedagogy’s force” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 7, emphasis in the original). These transitional spaces operate as engaging learning sites because the learning self is invited to play, to explore, to investigate partial knowledges in the making, and is not dictated by the “final correct answer” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 76).
In what follows, we explore how culture jammers can work to keep learning spaces open and transitional, and discuss some of the challenges they face in doing so.

Towards Opening Transitional Spaces

We view culture jamming as a form of resistance that is potentially aligned with resistance theories within critical curriculum studies. Within the notion of resistance lies a celebration of the power of human agency, and recognition that individuals are not merely passive receptacles or victims of powerful social structures (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, while we see the potential of culture jamming to foster critical learning, as a form of cultural resistance and critical public pedagogy it is not a panacea; it is not without contradictions and potential problems. As we explored, when culture jamming insists on the “right answer,” culture jamming can also work against critical learning and close down rather than open transitional spaces. Similar to Ellsworth’s (1988) experience in developing a critical curriculum in her classroom, culture jamming may in fact reinforce repressive myths by attempting to dictate who people should be and what they should think, rather than allowing for the open “talking back”—the “defiant speech that is constructed within communities of resistance” (p. 310). Therefore, critical educators interested in the counterhegemonic possibilities of public pedagogy must learn how to foster spaces of transition, and to learn to avoid closing those spaces by imposing predetermined moral positions already constructed. We believe an important part of this learning involves avoiding preaching a moral and ethical certainty and encouraging exploration—what Ellsworth (1988) calls a “pedagogy of the unknowable,” where, narratives, subjectivities, and ideas are always partial.

Another issue that could potentially interrupt culture jamming’s potential as critical public pedagogy is the seemingly infinite capacity of capitalism to commodify dissent. Culture jamming has been critiqued because of how it “hijacks” dominant culture, and essentially makes the medium of mainstream commercial culture voice counter-hegemonic messages. In effect, because culture jammers “turn the power of commercial culture against itself” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 328), they must wrestle with this question: “When you/hijack a vehicle do you carry along a bit of its meaning?” (Duncombe, 2002, pp. 327–328). Capitalism and the free-market thus tend to remove the possibility of resistance from artistic creations or performances, by turning them into commodities and effectively co-opting them (Reynolds, 2004). Both Haiven (2007) and Scatamburlo-D’Annibale (2009) speak to this issue by further calling into question the purpose and efficacy of culture jamming, specifically Adbusters. They note that while Adbusters (and other culture jamming groups) might offer some apt critiques, through operating almost solely in the realm of the cultural and symbolic, through not engaging in the real material, structural aspects of oppression, and through championing individualized rather than collective dissent, Adbusters simply reifies neoliberal ideals of romanticized individualism and relies too much on an idealized personal emancipation that disregards the structures, powers, and systematic confines of society and social class structures. While we began our work several years ago acknowledging the broad critical potential in all forms of culture jamming, over time we have come to recognize that not all culture jamming activities and activists are created equal. We find the work of Adbusters and Reverend Billy different in significant ways that speak to their potential for creating lasting and significant social change. We tend to agree with Haiven (2007) and Scatamburlo-D’Annibale (2009) that Adbusters fails to address the larger, sociopolitical nature of class and culture by only addressing or manipulating symbols and material products of culture. We are less inclined to level these same critiques at Reverend Billy, however, as we see his work moving beyond simply playing with the symbolic, toward connecting
temporally, physically, and actively in solidarity with low-wage and other exploited workers in New York City and across the globe, and building community coalitions against multinational corporations and the commodification of everyday life.

Haiven (2007) urges critical educators to move away from asking “how can we forge a revolutionary strategy out of culture jamming”? (p. 106). Instead of simply assuming culture jamming’s inherent revolutionary potential, we have asked, “how does culture jamming operate as curriculum, both opening up and shutting down spaces where critical learning can occur?”

We found that culture jamming can help facilitate critical learning when it engages learners in participatory cultural production, enacts an embodied curriculum, and fosters a community politic. We agree with Haiven (2007) that providing opportunities for learners to engage in “manipulating and transforming the icons, logos, symbols, and spectacles that are our environment and shape and inform our subjectivities” can “go a long way to problematizing for ourselves our own internalized complicities with the Society of the Spectacle” (p. 106). Our findings also resonate with Giroux’s calls for learners to understand and become skilled in creating their own culture—to become cultural producers building new, more democratic cultural realities and spheres. We contend that critical researchers need to continue to move past simply critiquing and deconstructing current hegemonic and oppressive cultural narratives, and look to social movements as activism-as-curriculum that are seeking to actively produce new, resistant pedagogy using popular culture. Following Giroux’s (2003) plea, we urge academics to connect with and learn from activists and others involved in efforts toward social change. As a site of critical public pedagogy, culture jamming highlights ordinary people working individually and collectively for social change. We encourage other critical researchers and educators to continue to explore the potentials (and pitfalls) of culture jamming and to locate and excavate other sites of resistance within civic spaces.

References


Lasn, K. (2006). We were a bunch of burnt-out activists. Adbusters #65, 14(3), 85.


