

7. "If we are to survive as a species we must recognize th
8. Michael Bierut, "A Manifesto with Ten Footnotes," *I.E. idonline.com/backissues.asp?2000*
9. "Find out what the ideal might be and talk engineers : tation is just the first step."
10. Editors' note: Owing to the events of September 11, the
11. See [voice.aiga.org](http://voice.aiga.org)

## THE PEOPLE V. THE CORPORATE COOL MACHINE

Kalle Lasn

*Has the Wild Human Spirit Been Tamed? Is an Oppositional Culture Still Possible?  
Can We Launch Another Revolution?*

The next revolution—World War III—will be waged inside your head. It will be, as Marshall McLuhan predicted, a guerrilla information war fought not in the sky or on the streets, not in the forests or around international fishing boundaries on the high seas, but in newspapers and magazines, on the radio, TV and in cyberspace. It will be a dirty, no-holds-barred propaganda war of competing world views and alternative visions of the future. We culture jammers can win this battle for ourselves and for planet Earth. Here's how. We build our own meme factory, put out a better product and beat the corporations at their own game. We identify the macromemes and the metamemes—the core ideas without which a sustainable future is unthinkable—and deploy them. Here are the five most potent metamemes in the culture jammers arsenal:

- *True Cost*: In the global marketplace of the future, the price of every product will tell the ecological truth.
- *Demarketing*: It's time to unsell the product and turn the incredible power of marketing against itself.
- *The Doomsday Meme*: The global economy is a doomsday machine that must be stopped and reprogrammed.
- *No Corporate "I"*: Corporations are not legal "persons" with constitutional rights and freedoms of their own, but legal fictions that we ourselves created and must control.

Originally published in *Emigre*, no. 49 (Winter 1999). Originally published in *Adbusters*, no. 23 (Autumn 1998). Excerpted from the author's book *Culture Jam* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

- *Media Carta*: Every human being has the "right to communicate"—to receive and impart information through any media.

Meme warfare—not race, gender or class warfare—will drive the next revolution.

Only the vigilant can maintain their liberties, and only those who are constantly and intelligently on the spot can hope to govern themselves effectively by democratic procedures. A society, most of whose members spend a great deal of their time not on the spot, not here and now in the calculable future, but somewhere else, in the irrelevant other worlds of sport and soap opera, of mythology and metaphysical fantasy, will find it hard to resist the encroachments of those who would manipulate and control it.

Aldous Huxley was on the spot in the foreword of his revised 1946 edition of *Brave New World*—which, perhaps more than any other work of twentieth-century fiction, predicted the psychological climate of our wired age. There's a clear parallel between "soma"—the pleasure drug issued to citizens of *BNW*—and the mass media as we know it today. Both keep the hordes tranquilized and pacified, and maintain the social order. Both chase out reason in favor of entertainment and disjointed thought. Both encourage uniformity of behavior. Both devalue the past in favor of sensory pleasures now. Residents of Huxley's realm willingly participate in their manipulation. They happily take soma. They're in the loop and, by God, they love it. The pursuit of happiness becomes its own end—there's endless consumption, free sex and perfect mood management. People believe they live in Utopia. Only you, the reader (and a couple of "imperfect" characters in the book who somehow ended up with real personalities), know it's Dystopia. It's a hell that can only be recognized by those outside the system. Our own dystopia, too, can only be detected from the outside—by "outsiders" who did not watch too much TV when they were young; who read a few good books and then, perhaps, had a Satori-like awakening while hiking through Mexico or India; who by some lucky twist of fate were not seduced by The Dream and recruited into the consumer cult of the insatiables. Although most of us are still stuck in the cult, our taste for soma is souring. Through the haze of manufactured happiness, we're realizing that our only escape is to stop the flow of soma, to break the global communication cartel's monopoly on the production of meaning.

Next time you're in a particularly soul-searching mood, ask yourself these simple questions: What would it take for me to make a spontaneous, radical gesture in support of something I believe in? Do I believe in *anything* strongly enough? What would it take for me to say, this may not be nice, it may not be considerate, it may not even be rational—but damn it, I'm going to do it anyway because it feels right? Direct action is a proclamation of personal independence. It happens, for the first time, at the intersection of your self-consciousness and your tolerance for being screwed over. You act. You thrust yourself forward and intervene. And then you hang loose and deal with whatever comes. Once you start relating to the world as an empowered human being instead of a hapless consumer drone, something remarkable happens. Your cynicism dissolves. Your interior world is suddenly vivid. You're like my cat on the prowl: alive, alert and

still a little wild. Guy Debord, the leader of the Situationist movement, said, "Revolution is not showing life to people, but making them live." This desire to be free and unfettered is hard-wired into each one of us. It's a drive almost as strong as sex or hunger, an irresistible force that, once harnessed, is almost impossible to stop. With that irresistible force on our side, we will strike. We will strike by smashing the postmodern hall of mirrors and redefining what it means to be alive. We will reframe the battle in the grandest terms. The old political battles that have consumed humankind during most of the twentieth century—black versus white, Left versus Right, male versus female—will fade into the background. The only battle still worth fighting and winning, the only one that can set us free, is *The People v. The Corporate Cool Machine*.

First we kill all the economists (figuratively speaking). We prove that despite the almost religious deference society extends to them, they are not untouchable. We launch a global media campaign to discredit them. We show how their economic models are fundamentally flawed, how their "scientifically" managed cycles of "growth" and "progress" are wiping out the natural world. We reveal their science as a dangerous pseudo-science. We ridicule them on TV. We pop up in unexpected places like the local business news, on commercial breaks during the midnight movie, and randomly on national prime-time. At the same time, we lay a trap for the G-8 leaders. Our campaign paints them as Lear-like figures, deluded kings unaware of the damage their deepening madness is doing. We demand to know why the issue of overconsumption in the First World is not even on their agenda. In the weeks leading up to their yearly summit meetings, we buy TV spots on stations around the world that ask, "Is Economic Progress Killing the Planet?" Bit by bit we maneuver the leaders into a position where suddenly, in a worldwide press conference, they are forced to respond to a question like this: "Mr. President, how do you measure economic progress? How do you tell if the economy is robust or sick?" Then we wait for them to give some pat answer about rising GDP. And that will be the decisive moment. We will have given our leaders a simple pop quiz and they will have flunked. This escalating war of nerves with the heads of state is the top jaw of our strategic pincer. The bottom jaw of the pincer is the work that goes on at a grassroots level, where neoclassical dogma is still being propagated every day. Within university economics departments worldwide, a wholesale mind shift is about to take place. The tenured professors who run those departments, the keepers of the neoclassical flame, are as proud and stubborn as high-alpine goats, and they don't take well to being challenged. But challenge them we must, fiercely and with the conviction that we are right and they are wrong. At critical times throughout history, university students have sparked massive protests, called their leaders on their lies and steered nations in brave new directions. It happened on campuses around the world in the 1960s, and more recently in Korea, China and Indonesia. Now we have reached another critical historical moment. Are the students up to it? Can they chase the old goats out of power? Will they be able to catalyze a paradigm shift in the science of economics and jam the doomsday machine?

A corporation has no soul, no morals. It cannot feel love or pain or remorse. You cannot argue with it. A corporation is nothing but a process—an efficient way of generating revenue. We demonize corporations for their unwavering pursuit of growth,

power and wealth. Yet let's face it: they are simply carrying out genetic orders. This is exactly what corporations were designed—by us—to do. Trying to rehabilitate a corporation, urging it to behave responsibly, is a fool's game. The only way to change the behavior of a corporation is to recode it; rewrite its charter; reprogram it. In 1886, the U.S. Supreme Court brought down a decision that changed the course of American history. In *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, a dispute over a railbed route, the judge ruled that a private corporation was a "natural person" under the U.S. Constitution and therefore entitled to protection under the Bill of Rights. The judgment was one of the great legal blunders of the century. Sixty years after it was inked, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas said of Santa Clara that it "could not be supported by history, logic, or reason." With Santa Clara, we granted corporations "personhood" and the same rights and privileges as private citizens. But given their vast financial resources, corporations now had far *more* rights and powers than any private citizen. In a single legal stroke, the whole intent of the Constitution—that all citizens have one vote and exercise an equal voice in public debates—had been undermined. In 1886, we, the people, lost control of our affairs and sowed the seeds of the Corporate State we now live in. There is only one way to regain control. We must challenge the corporate "I" in the courts and ultimately reverse Santa Clara. It will be a long and vicious battle for the soul of America. Will the people or the corporations prevail? In the next century, will we live and work on Planet Earth or Planet Inc.? The critical task will be for each of us to relearn how to think and act as a sovereign citizen. Let's start by doing something so bold it chills the spine of corporate America. Let's make an example of the biggest corporate criminal in the world. Let's take on Philip Morris Inc., getting the truth out, applying pressure and never letting up until the State of New York revokes the company's charter.

This is how the revolution begins: a few people start breaking their old patterns, embracing what they love (and in the process discovering what they hate), daydreaming, questioning, rebelling. What happens naturally then, according to the Situationists, is a groundswell of support for this new way of being, with more and more people empowered to perform new gestures "unencumbered by history." The new generation, Guy Debord believed, "would leave nothing to chance." These words still haunt us. The "society of spectacle" the Situationists railed against has triumphed. The American dream has devolved into exactly the kind of vacant obliviousness they talked about—a "have-a-nice-day" kind of happiness that close examination tends to disturb. If you keep up appearances, keep yourself diverted with new acquisitions and constant entertainments, keep yourself pharmacologized and recoil the moment you feel real life seeping in between the cracks, you'll be all right.

Some dream.

If the old America was about prosperity, maybe the new America will be about spontaneity. The Situationists maintained that ordinary people have all the tools they need for revolution. The only thing missing is a perceptual shift—a tantalizing glimpse of a new way of being—that suddenly brings everything into focus.