

AP EN 3140- Avant-garde Movements After 1945
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Culture Jamming is the Avant-Garde's Postmodernist Tool for Social Change

Culture jamming is the act of modifying a widely known product to transform it into a political message. The goal of culture jammers is to change the original meaning of this artifact and create awareness amongst audiences by bringing to public attention the discrepancies in corporate practices versus their public claims. I will demonstrate that culture jammers have become the avant-garde of consumer culture by demanding that corporations adapt to new consumer expectations to keep their customers, thus allowing companies to stay profitable in a modern socially conscious economy where cancel culture can mean the end of a brand that does not engage in equitable practices. Culture jamming found its roots in a mid-century avant-garde movement started by Guy Debord called Situationist International before it evolved into what it is today. Culture jamming rebalances the power structures between the seemingly powerful corporations and the silenced voices of the anti-consumerist movement to create a new level of consciousness and incite change in societal behaviours. Culture jamming is an act of political revolution and rebellion.

Culture jamming involves the act of altering or twisting a commodity to offer a commentary and critique on the original commodity's intended message. Mark Dery coined the term "culture jamming" in the 1990s in an article for the New York Times (Salih 9). Dery formulated the concept as a way to describe the action of subverting capitalist ideologies and messages to produce a counter-cultural rationale that aims to make people question consumer commodification. Dery was influenced by the band Negativland who first used the term

“cultural jamming” in their 1984 album “JamCon ’84” to describe acts of billboard sabotage that criticized capitalist goals (Salih 9). Negativeland was inspired by the radio community’s description of “jamming” which described the act of blocking or disrupting other radio user’s radio communication (Salih 9) to play your own message. Dery then borrowed from this concept but he changed the term to “culture jamming” to describe his theory of jamming cultural messages from corporate capitalism to make people think of the inherent and latent messages within the advertisements, as well as the overarching consequences of capitalism itself. A culture jammer’s motive is to subvert cultural messages used for capitalist purposes, such as advertisements, and to reclaim the public space by blocking, or “jamming” their propagation channels: “culture jammers attempt to reclaim public space from the big producers of mass media culture” (Salih 10). Critically, Dery notes that there is an element of play, fun, and creativity to culture jamming and that this element of fun is crucial and inherent to the practice: culture jamming is effective because it pulls in its viewers with an element of play and then delivers a heavy message about the consequences of a capitalist lifestyle. Without the element of play, this message would be too heavy for its audiences who would then be less engaged with the political message that the culture jammers are trying to communicate. This element of play, mixed with audience participation, and the desire to change consciousness, are all elements that culture jamming borrows from its artistic predecessor: the Situationist International art movement of the mid-20th century.

One of the major influences for the roots of culture jamming was the avant-garde efforts and achievements of the Situationist International who were active in France in the late 1950s until the early 1970s and led by Debord. The concept behind culture jamming’s criticism of capitalism lies in Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which Debord criticizes the

“lack of human experience” due to it being commandeered by commodification and capitalism, and then sold back to consumers “through advertising and mass media” (Salih 7). However, the concept of culture jamming as a political act takes its roots in the idea of *détournement*; an idea that also came out of the Situationist International movement. While Asger Jorn came up with the idea of *détournement*, it was Debord who fully defined it in his essay *Détournement as Negation and Prelude* (1959). *Détournement* is at its core a theory of “rerouting” or “turning around” (the literal English translation for *détournement*) which means that an artifact or element is stripped of its original meaning, and the loss of its original meaning allows it to then be “turned around” and given a new meaning that broadens the scope and effect of the artifact. At its core, *détournement* is about providing a critique of the status quo and of capitalism- which are seen as the same thing. This key concept of critiquing the status quo that capitalism has installed through its pervasive use of advertisements and corporate slogans, as well as the idea of expressing its core aims of social revolution through consciousness-raising, are the same core ideas associated with culture jamming. Culture jamming finds its roots within the *détournement* movement within the shared goal of inspiring societal change by using the distortion of these ads/slogans, and the shock that it inspires, to make people think differently towards capitalism and consumerism.

The aim of culture jamming is to playfully grab the viewer’s attention by using well-known commercial artifacts and/or slogans and then change the original messages to make a political statement about society to change people’s behaviours. Culture jamming is an attempt to re-balance the power inequity between consumers and corporations: “[c]ulture jamming is also known as “semiological (Dery, 1993) or ‘meme’ (Lasn, 1999) warfare, a contest over meanings and forms of representation, particularly as propagated in society through various media of

communication” (Carducci 119). Culture jammers are reclaiming corporate artifacts and reconfiguring them to advocate for anti-consumerism. Culture jamming is inherently political but while it is an attempt to resist the dominant culture, it is also an integrally playful act. It invites public participation because it blurs the question of authorship and invites imitation and participation from the viewers who interact with the work. The public gets inundated daily with endless corporate messages and images from film and television, magazines, billboards, the internet, ads on cellphones, and the list goes on. It seems like everywhere people look they are being advertised to; culture jamming is a way for activists to reclaim their silenced voices and speak out about hidden corporate agendas and practices that don’t get advertised to a wider audience. “Culture jamming forces a double effect in which viewers recognize a familiar sight but are then asked to interrogate its merits, rather than unquestionably consume its ideology [...]” (Hazman 21). Culture jamming is the idea of using corporation’s slogans and advertisements against themselves to engender new meanings and make people see them anew and consequently make people question their intrinsic value: “[r]ather, it may be more useful to consider jamming as an artful proliferation of messages, a rhetorical process of intervention and invention, which challenges the ability of corporate discourses to make meaning in predictable ways” (Salih 17). In order to effectively culture jam, jammers must have an understanding of the medium they are working with to efficiently subvert the intended message: “[j]amming involves appropriation of existing art and producing a new interpretation, one that will contain “familiar textual residues” but that does not need to correspond to the original” (Salih 16). The aim of culture jamming is to subvert mainstream culture and ultimately hinder the capitalist machine: “[c]ulture jamming is used as a rhetorical protest strategy” (Salih 15). Culture jamming is a

counter-cultural tactic and its main goal is to embolden anti-corporate communication, civil disobedience, political progressivism, and resistance to capitalism and consumerism.

There are three decisive elements necessary to the practice of culture jamming: the first is an artifact, the second is distortion, and the last one is awareness (Harzman 21). Culture jamming is dependent on a pre-existing corporate artifact- this could be a symbol, an image, a sound, a slogan, or any other emblematic representation of a corporation that is well-known to the public: “[...] culture jamming entails an act of rhetorical criticism in which highly recognizable artifacts are distorted in an effort to raise awareness” (Harzman 20). The next necessary aspect of culture jamming is the element of distortion. The notoriety of an artifact attracts the audiences’ interest so that the jammers can then distort the original corporation’s message. The last imperative of culture jamming is the element of raising awareness. The end goal of culture jamming’s distortion is to make audiences rethink the original intended message of the corporation and induce a change in behaviour and society: “[c]ulture jamming targets recognizable artifacts, distorts their intended messages, and generates an alternative awareness among audiences” (Harzman 21). Consciousness-raising and inciting social change are core tenets of the avant-garde and culture jamming. It is through aesthetic innovation and shock that art can inspire people to change their daily habits and perhaps inspire a larger movement of social change. And culture jamming is a type of highly political art. While culture jamming, like most avant-garde art, might not be initially accepted, it continues to demand that corporations, and people, change their habits and behaviour.

Culture jamming provides a communication platform for activists and resisters whose voices are otherwise silenced by capitalism. Culture jamming is a way to increase public awareness and public discourse to inspire social or political change amongst the masses.

(Harzman 20). It is precisely the notoriety of an icon that already exists in the public's memory that gives power to its distorted state via culture jamming: "[...] with the end goal of activists seeking to challenge the salience of oppression that these artifacts represent" (Harzman 20). It is by making people think anew about corporate advertisements and slogans and making them question their validity and objectives that culture jamming has become the avant-garde's postmodernist tool for social change and revolution.

Culture jammers are activists who resist advertisement and capitalism because it overwhelms the public sphere in Western capitalist countries through a variety of tactics. These tactics include, but are not limited to: modifying corporate advertisements (as done by the Billboard Liberation Front); satirizing corporate and nongovernmental organization (NGO) websites (as done by The Yes Men); and the appropriation of consumption goods by means of shoplifting and rebranding (as done by Yomango) (Carducci 117). Some of the earliest culture jamming techniques involved using spray paint to alter billboard messages by changing the corporate slogans to a political slogan about the brand in question. By doing this the activist jammers intended to shock audiences into thinking differently about the ad's original message. Another key tactic in culture jamming is called "subvertising," also coined by Dery. Subvertising is the process involving the creation and distribution of "anti-ads" to oppose consumerist advertising (Salih 10). One famous example of subvertising is Banksy's anti Coca-Cola "ad" which used the brand's classic red and white colour scheme by featuring white writing in the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle on a red background. The white writing in Banksy's "ad" explained that corporations were taking advantage of consumers every day and how important it is to raise awareness of this fact. Banksy created this "ad" in an attempt to subvert these constant pro-consumerist messages that Coca-Cola hides within the subtext of all of their advertisements.

Banksy's Coca-Cola "ad" plays on the viewer's recognition of the famous soda brand's iconic colour scheme and instantly recognizable bottle shape to pull in the viewer. Then the "ad" subverts these expectations by delivering a very anti-consumerist message to raise consciousness amongst the public about the dangers of consumerism and the dizzying greed of corporations whose only goal is to be profitable.

Culture jamming advocates anti-consumerism as its central tenet. For example, Adbusters came up with the concept of an annual worldwide "Buy Nothing Day" and encouraged people to actively refrain from consumer culture for one day by not buying anything to protest the idea of consumerism by completely removing all of the consumers from the market for one full day (Carducci 124, 131). In this way, culture jamming was hoping to instigate social change by prompting viewers to think antagonistically about the flood of capitalist messages that the public is inundated with daily to be consumed at unprecedented rates in history.

Jamming exposes the oppressive nature of capitalism through the alteration of widely recognized and sometimes beloved corporate slogans and symbols. One of the goals of culture jamming is to excorticate the corporate brand's pretenses to expose the hidden aspects of the brand such as production practices, environmental impacts, and competitive schemes to hold corporations accountable to their public claims of authenticity by contrasting their actual actions against what they say they do (Carducci 122). This practice holds brands accountable for their public assertions of being environmentally friendly, providing fair wages to their workers, or practicing legal and equitable corporate processes. Culture jamming is a modern avant-garde movement that creates shocking content to make audiences think differently about corporate messages that people are inundated with on the public and private social and economic spheres. Culture jamming found its roots in the Situationist International movement as demanding total

participation and being an anonymous and collective production of consciousness-changing art with a desire to change society. Culture jamming grabs viewers' attention by distorting well-known corporate slogans and images to subvert those messages into highly political anti-consumerist directives. Culture jamming offers a counter-narrative to the barrage of capitalist messages from society that urges people to consume more and more every day. Culture jamming invokes people to imagine a new and better world.

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