A Proposal for Grounded Cultural Activism: Communication Strategies, Adbusters and Social Change

Cultural activism constitutes one front in the battle over the people’s minds and hearts. In large part, it is a struggle to convey dissident viewpoints, truth claims, and alternative significations to the public by making use of the means to which activists are able to gain access. The established for-profit media outlets owned by corporations and influenced by governments are usually inaccessible. Activists, therefore, resort to alternative channels that are either created by or salvaged by activists themselves.

But where do “the activists” stand? Let’s look at the ancestral struggle. A century ago, before the ruin of the Great War, the international labor movement was shaking the world to its core. Governments were failing, wars were failing, humanity collectively felt itself to be on the edge of the new. The so-called conscious elements within the movement, the “vanguard,” was involved in a battle of ideas against ruling ideology. The means to this struggle was termed “agit-prop,” agitation and propaganda, long before the term came to be negatively associated with falsification and “the party line,” and simply meant inspiration and the dissemination of ideas. Whatever the failings of classical agit-prop, it was solidly grounded in the radical movement of political subjects seeking change. When a flag was burned, it meant, “desert the national army and boycott war bonds”; a poster depicting capitalist greed meant “support your fellow worker and union.”

The purpose of this essay is to cast a critical look at “detournement” (the meaning of which will be discussed below) as an activist tactic in the form of “adbusting” within the wider sphere of “culture jamming” practices. Culture jamming has appeared in recent years as a form of agit-prop in contemporary cultural activism. As it poses a significant influence within the movement, a critical look at adbusting...
in particular may shed light on the potentials and pitfalls of contemporary cultural activism.

Granted that this new means of cultural activism creates interesting possibilities of resistance and opposition without falling into the dogmatism from which many earlier strategies of ideological struggle in the twentieth century suffered, I nevertheless want to draw attention to the theoretical pitfalls and the self-crippling effects of the tendency to promote “culture jamming” not as a strategy but as the social struggle itself, and reaffirm the importance of a positively articulated, alternative political program for social change.

The discussion will frame culture jamming as an answer to the difficulties faced by alternative media, and include references to Kalle Lasn as a spokesperson of Adbusters, Situationism as a historical antecedent of Adbusting, and other culture jamming tactics. It will present a critique based on a Marxist conceptualization of money as an inherently alienated means, the cynical political subject of Slavoj Zizek and Michael Albert, and criticism of the notion of “consumer society” and the accompanying discourse of “needs.” Finally, two contemporary cases of cultural activism with which the author is familiar will be presented as hints to the way forward, inasmuch as they are examples of cultural activism which stand as integral parts of a concrete social movement of active, resisting subjects.

While cultural activism consists of complex and diverse practices and dynamics that cannot be reduced to a single overarching phenomenon, the tendency that I will criticize is crystallized in, and is represented by the “adbusters” practice, and I will infer from there. Let me first explain these terms and their claim to political subversion.

Culture jamming as a tactic of political subversion and cultural protest arrives with an admittedly attractive shot at a solution to the woes of activist access to channels of communication. Instead of trying to build an alternative from scratch, why not capitalize on the ubiquity of corporate messages, ads, and media by finding a way to use them against themselves? To this end, culture jammers focus on activities such as altering billboards, parodying advertisements, and spoofing websites. The technique of adbusting, for example, involves modifying a commercial advertisement or creating a fake one that mimics the look and feel of the original to proclaim a message that criticizes or mocks the targeted company. An example is the adbusted version of an “Absolute Vodka” ad, where the caption is replaced to read “Absolute Impotence,” and the image of the vodka bottle is modified to resemble a failing erection. The new “subadvertisement” aims to “uncool” the pricey and hip beverage by revealing an undesirable fact of alcohol consumption that was previously hidden. Another example is the infamous fake WTO website run by an activist collective called “The Yes Men” at gatt.org, which mimics the official WTO site and runs stories with titles such as “WTO Announces Formalized Slavery Market for Africa.” The Yes