

# Pranking Rhetoric: “Culture Jamming” as Media Activism

Christine Harold

*This essay explores the practice of “culture jamming” as a strategy of rhetorical protest. Specifically, “pranksters” deploy the tools of the mass media and marketing in order to take advantage of the resources and venues they afford. Through the concept of “pranking,” this essay suggests that the most promising forms of media activism may resist less through negation and opposition than by playfully appropriating commercial rhetoric both by folding it over on itself and exaggerating its tropes.*

“Pranks aren’t reactive like acts of revenge. They don’t punish, they provoke.... Revenge is a science, pranking is an art.” (Reverend Al, of the Cacophony Society pranking group, quoted in Branwyn, 1997, p. 277)

“Illusion is a revolutionary weapon.” (Burrroughs, 1998, p. 284)

In late 2003, *Adbusters*, the activist magazine known for its parodic “subvertisements” and scathing critiques of consumer culture, launched its most ambitious anti-branding campaign yet. Its “Blackspot” sneaker, an unassuming black canvas shoe, with a large white spot where one would expect a corporate logo, is intended to “uncool” sportswear giant Nike by offering an ethically produced alternative to the Nike swoosh. The magazine’s first goal is to challenge Nike’s controversial CEO by way of a full-page ad in *The New York Times* declaring:

Phil Knight had a dream. He’d sell shoes. He’d sell dreams. He’d get rich. He’d use sweatshops if he had to. Then along came the new shoe. Plain. Simple. Cheap. Fair. Designed for only one thing. Kicking Phil’s ass. The Unswisher. (Blackspot website, 2004)

*Adbusters* is also encouraging its readers to help spread the “Blackspot virus” by

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Christine Harold is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia. Correspondence to: 110 Terrell Hall, Athens, GA 30602, U.S. Email: charold@uga.edu. This article was drawn from a dissertation completed at Pennsylvania State University under the direction of Stephen H. Browne. Portions of this essay were presented at the 2003 National Communication Association convention in Miami, Florida and the 2003 Argumentation Conference in Alta, Utah. The author is especially grateful to Marco Abel, Bonnie Dow, and Ken Rufo for their helpful feedback on the arguments presented in this essay.

graffiti-ing black spots on Niketown windows and displays across the U.S. and Canada. Although it remains to be seen whether the campaign will, as *Adbusters* hopes, “set a precedent that will revolutionize capitalism” (Blackspot, 2004), to date well over 200 independent shoe stores and 4000 individuals have placed orders for the shoes, and Blackspot was featured in *The New York Times Magazine*’s special “Year in Ideas” issue as one of the “best ideas of 2003.”

*Adbusters* is at the forefront of an insurgent political movement known loosely as “culture jamming.” This movement seeks to undermine the marketing rhetoric of multinational corporations, specifically through such practices as media hoaxing, corporate sabotage, billboard “liberation,” and trademark infringement. Ad parodies, popularized through magazines such as *Adbusters* and *Stay Free!* and countless websites, are by far the most prevalent of culture jamming strategies. Ad parodies attempting to serve as rhetorical x-rays, revealing the “true logic” of advertising, are a common way for so-called “subvertisers” to talk back to the multimedia spectacle of corporate marketing. An *Adbusters* parody of Calvin Klein’s “heroin chic” ads of the mid-1990s, for example, features a female model hunched over a toilet, vomiting, presumably to maintain her waifish figure. The ad tells viewers that women are dissatisfied with their own bodies because “the beauty industry is the beast.” In another, Joe Chemo, a cancer-ridden cartoon camel, derides the infamous Joe Camel campaign and a Tommy Hilfiger spoof depicts his customers as sheep, wanting only to “follow the flock.” The Gap’s infamous appropriation of the likenesses of counter-culture heroes Jack Kerouac and James Dean to sell khaki pants inspired a similar response from the adbusting community. To the Gap’s claim that “Kerouac wore khakis,” a group of Australian subvertisers responded with the likeness of another 20th century icon who wore khakis as well—Adolf Hitler. As such, Gap khakis were recoded as a means not to rugged individuality but genocidal totalitarianism—the conformist impulse writ large.

Ad parodies such as these might be categorized as a strategy of rhetorical sabotage, an attempt to impede the machinery of marketing. *Adbusters*’ own “culture jammer’s manifesto,” for example, declares: “We will jam the pop-culture marketers and bring their image factory to a sudden, shuddering halt” (Lasn, 1999, p. 128). The industrial imagery here is telling. It invokes the most traditional target of sabotage—the factory. Historically, sabotage, or monkey-wrenching, has been a dominant oppositional response to industrial power. The word “sabotage,” according to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary (1993), emerged in Europe around 1910, at the height of the industrial revolution. Indeed, it is a term that is inextricably linked to industrial capitalism. The first definition of sabotage offered in Webster’s is the “destruction of an employer’s property or the hindering of manufacturing by discontented workers.” Webster’s explains that the word comes from “sabot,” the name for the wooden shoes worn in many European countries in the 19th century. “Saboter,” then, meant “to clatter with sabots” or to “botch,” presumably by throwing one’s wooden shoes into the machinery. “Sabotage” means literally to “clog” with one’s clogs.

I suggest that while the advertising sabotage articulated by *Adbusters* is not without some rhetorical value, it does little to address the rhetoric of contemporary

marketing—a mode of power that is quite happy to oblige subversive rhetoric and shocking imagery. Indeed, parody and irony are the dominant motifs of many successful mass-marketing campaigns. Through a kind of nudge-and-wink knowingness, Madison Avenue culture jammers make every effort to subvert traditional advertising tropes—selling, as cultural critic Thomas Frank (1997) has put it, edgy brands as tickets to the rhetorical “lynching” of consumerism. As Fredric Jameson (1991) has famously argued, the cultural logic that accompanies this era of late capitalism is defined by a codification of the eccentric modernist styles of resistance. For example, contemporary advertising is teeming with the language of revolution. But, as Jameson points out, these flagrantly rebellious styles “ostentatiously deviate from a norm which then reasserts itself, in a not necessarily unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of their willful eccentricities” (1991, p. 16). In other words, parody becomes one of many social codes—codes that are as available to the capitalist as they are to the artist—and, as such “finds itself without vocation” (p. 16) as a rhetoric of protest in late capitalism.

Further, I want to suggest that despite its deconstructive sensibility, parody, an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) would describe as turning the world upside down, perpetuates a commitment to rhetorical binaries—the hierarchical form it supposedly wants to upset. The frustration expressed by *Adbusters*’ readers (if the magazine’s often scathing letters section is any indication) implies that being told what is best for them is no more welcome coming from *Adbusters* than it is coming from advertisers. This may be, in part, because the parodic form neglects what literary theorist Jeffrey Nealon (1993, p. 30) calls the “crucial operation” of deconstruction, *reinscribing* oppositions—for example, health/sickness or authenticity/conformity—back into a larger textual field. Hence parody, as negative critique, is not up to the task of undermining the parodist’s own purchase on the Truth as it maintains both a hierarchy of language and the protestor’s role as revealer. Parody derides the *content* of what it sees as oppressive rhetoric, but fails to attend to its *patterns*.

In this essay, I explore the rhetorical strategies of an alternative sort of culture jammer—the prankster—who resists less through negating and opposing dominant rhetorics than by playfully and provocatively folding existing cultural forms in on themselves. The prankster performs an art of rhetorical jujitsu, in an effort to redirect the resources of commercial media toward new ends. In what follows, I first detail the theoretical frame through which I engage the political art of culture jamming including why, specifically, the prankster’s ethic may offer a more compelling response than parody to contemporary cultural and economic forces. Second, in an effort to explore pranking in action I offer three contemporary case studies of radical and mainstream efforts to hijack popular media forms: the culture jamming collective ®<sup>TM</sup>ark (pronounced “artmark”); the San Francisco-based Biotic Baking Brigade; and the American Legacy Foundation’s INFKT Truth campaign. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that although pranking strategies do perform the Aristotelian notion of exploiting available means, for them to be fully imagined as rhetoric, rhetoric itself may have to be somewhat recalibrated in its role as a mass-mediated

political art. As I will discuss, although culture jamming should not be seen as a replacement for more traditional modes of civic engagement, the playful and disruptive strategies of the prankster have much to offer social justice movements in the so-called “post-industrial” era.

### **Intensifying Media Forms: A Theory of Culture Jamming**

The term “culture jamming” is based on the CB slang word “jamming” in which one disrupts existing transmissions. It usually implies an interruption, a sabotage, hoax, prank, banditry, or blockage of what are seen as the monolithic power structures governing cultural life. Like Umberto Eco’s “semiological guerrillas” (1986, p. 135), culture jammers seek to “introduce noise into the signal” that might otherwise obliterate alternatives to it (Dery, 1993). Culture jamming is usually described as a kind of “glutting” of the system; it is an amping up of contradictory rhetorical messages in an effort to engender a qualitative change. In this sense, jamming need not be seen only as a damming, or a stopping of corporate media, as *Adbusters*’ monkey-wrenching imagery implies. Rather, 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.

Many contemporary culture jammers describe themselves as political heirs to the Situationists, a group of avant-garde artists that flourished in 1950s and 1960s Europe. The Situationists were committed to detouring pre-existing political and commercial rhetorics in an effort to subvert and reclaim them. For the Situationists, led by *Society of the Spectacle* author Guy Debord, everyday life was being overrun by the Spectacle, a novel mode of social domination in which the industrial age’s coercive manual labor was replaced by capitalism’s deceitful promise of fulfillment through entertainment and consumption. Their main strategy, *détournement*, was an effort to “devalue the currency of the Spectacle” (Lasn, 1999, p. 108) that they claimed had kidnapped authentic life. Examples include everything from rewording conversations between popular comic strip characters, to reworking the sign on a storefront, to making subversive collages out of familiar commercial and government images. *Détournement* can be translated as “detour” or “diversion” but other, more subtle meanings in the French include “hijacking,” “embezzlement,” “corruption,” and “misappropriation” (Sadler, 1999). Although many ad parodists, such as those at *Adbusters*, see themselves as carrying the revolutionary mantle of the Situationists, Debord and his comrades were decidedly opposed to parody as an effective rhetorical strategy, because it maintained, rather than unsettled, audiences’ purchase on truth.

As I have mentioned, a major limitation of the adbuster’s reliance on parody as a revelatory device is that this device has been enthusiastically embraced by marketers as well. This insistence on revealing a hidden truth also becomes a problem for other reasons. Such an insistence disallows a forceful response to what it faces because it can only *react*. It is a rhetoric that resentfully tells its audience “Things are not as they should be” without affirming possible alternatives. Saying no is itself an

often satisfying alternative, but it is hardly one on which to build a lasting political movement.

The no-sayer is, in essence, yoked in a dialectic tug of war with the rhetoric it negates. *Adbusters'* Blackspot sneaker campaign, for example, may be more proactive than its subvertisements (*Adbusters* is, for example, proposing to build a “clean” factory in China should the campaign succeed), but the rhetorical message is similar. It is mobilized, first and foremost, by a desire to “kick Phil’s ass.” Second, then, because the no-sayer has not challenged the essential form of the binary, one can never negate adequately by its own, dialectical standards. A rhetoric that is defined by negation must always encounter more boundaries that must be overcome. More transgression is always required, which inevitably produces more cynicism and resentment. Certainly, saying no is sometimes a crucial political strategy. However, I suggest that asceticism may not be an effective intervention into the scintillating world of consumer culture; and ironically, by ardently pursuing the authentic realm “out there,” one plays one’s role as consumer in the fullest possible sense, endlessly chasing after something just beyond reach.

Finally—and most crucial for the discussion of pranking that follows—whereas parody may have significant impact in certain rhetorical situations, it should not be seen as a transhistorical category that is inherently subversive; primarily because capitalism itself is not a transhistorical system. It is constantly taking new shapes and producing different kinds of effects. A specific conversation between two theorists of contemporary capitalism, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, offers a productive model through which to conceptualize the political practices of culture jamming (Deleuze, 1990). Foucault and Deleuze conceived contemporary capitalism as undergoing a shift from *disciplinarity* to *control*. Under disciplinary societies, most famously theorized by Foucault, previously feudal modes of production were brought together, organized, and confined in order to maximize efficiency and profit. Disciplinary societies operate primarily through the confinement and atomization of individuals (for example, through the familiar models of the prison, the classroom, or the factory). This was the mode of power most appropriate to a Fordist world in which assembly-line style production was the most efficient way for capital to expand. Fordism required a certain level of *standardization* to function. Workers were more or less interchangeable and labor practices were repeated with as little variation as possible. Concurrently, the advertising industry emerged to standardize the consumers who would make up the markets for these newly mass produced products.

Deleuze pursues Foucault’s acknowledgement late in his career that the West is now undergoing a transformation from the disciplinarity necessary for an industrial economy to a service economy organized, in part, through the increased control of consumer desires. Control societies do not operate through the confinement and silencing of individuals but “through continuous control and communication” (1990, p. 174). That is, people are not denied access to information and knowledges but are granted ever greater access to them through the opening up of technologies and the hybridization of institutions. However, what might appear as new freedoms

also enable business to increasingly modulate every aspect of life. I suggest that the proliferation of the rhetoric of consumerism, in part, marks this shift from discipline to control. Because of this emerging shift from disciplinarity (which spotlights the political rhetoric of the nation-state) to control (which increasingly relies on the visual rhetoric of the market), the opportunities for political protest have shifted as well.

At least two modes of intervention or resistance emerge out of and in response to the logics of disciplinarity and control—sabotage and appropriation. I loosely affiliate sabotage with disciplinarity and appropriation with control. However, I want to be careful, here, to complicate any neat distinction between the two. Although appropriation may be increasing in the face of greater control, both strategies continue to function in response to similar problems through deploying different tools. As Deleuze has suggested, disciplinarity does not disappear with the emergence of control. Control is an intensification, rather than a replacement, of discipline.

Media pranksters, an increasingly active type of consumer activist, prefer affirmation and appropriation to opposition and sabotage. Whereas the culture jammer as saboteur opposes commercialism through revelatory rhetoric such as parody, pranksters can be seen as comedians, as playful explorers of the commercial media landscape. In the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1989) argues that the ascetic ideal, that resentful no-saying of the first order, “has at present only *one* kind of real enemy capable of *harming* it: the comedians of this ideal—for they arouse mistrust of it” (p. 160). Unlike the ascetic, the comedian is not interested in revenge or “bringing the people to consciousness” as if she can use her comedy to expose the truth or push the limits of power until they reveal their true logic. These are the goals of the parodist, not the comedian. To reveal, one must stand in a familiar place and know just what is behind the spectacular curtain. In contrast, the comedian is something of a surfer with no firm, knowable ground on which to stand. Rather, she learns to navigate a force that is already in motion and will continue to be in motion long after she has passed. Whereas parodists attempt to change things in the name of a presupposed value, comedians diagnose a specific situation, and try something to see what responses they can provoke.

Legendary New York performance artist and media hoaxer Joey Skaggs has been provoking people for over three decades. Since 1966, Skaggs has been putting people on, using the news media’s own insatiable appetite for sensational images as his canvas. Skaggs says of his work:

I had concepts that I thought would make a statement. *I was using the media as a medium*. Rather than sticking with oil paint, the media became my medium; I got involved with the phenomenon of the media and communication as my art. (Vale & Juno, p. 36, emphasis mine)

Skaggs’s most famous and widely disseminated “image event” (DeLuca, 1999) was his 1976 “Cathouse for Dogs,” a phony doggie brothel in a makeshift storefront where one could supposedly have one’s dog sexually “serviced.” To begin, Skaggs simply issued press releases and ran the following advertisement in the *Village Voice*:

## CATHOUSE FOR DOGS

Featuring a savory selection of hot bitches. From pedigree (Fifi, the French Poodle) to mutts (Lady the Tramp). Handler and vet on duty. Stud and photo service available. No weirdos, please. Dogs only. By appointment. Call 254-7878.

On the face of it this silly prank hardly seems the kind of thing that would garner much reaction save from a few perverts or curious thrill-seekers. However, Skaggs's "Cathouse for Dogs" received more attention than even he imagined. Several New York television stations sent camera crews, the *Soho News* ran a piece, and the ASPCA, the Bureau of Animal Affairs and the NYPD vice squad, as well as the Mayor's office, all campaigned to put Skaggs out of business.

His greatest exposure, though, came by way of an *ABC News* interview. With little more than some footage of mating dogs and an interview with Skaggs, ABC produced a standard "wrap-around" news piece—interview-footage-interview—and aired it in a larger story about animal abuse. Skaggs's hoax quickly spread, earning him international media attention as well as a lawsuit from the ASPCA. Skaggs is careful to point out that his production was purely rhetorical:

I didn't want customers—it was never my intent to defraud or deceive people for money. Deceit—yes, fraud—no.... An artist is much different from a con-man. I am a con-man, but I'm a con-fidence, con-ceptual, con-artist. That's different. (Vale & Juno, 1987, p. 40)

Artistic intentions aside, that year, Skaggs was subpoenaed by the Attorney General's office for "illegally running a cathouse for dogs" (Vale & Juno, 1987, p. 40). Meanwhile, ABC's documentary piece featuring Skaggs's cathouse was nominated for an Emmy as "best news broadcast of the year" (pp. 40–41)! Facing criminal charges, Skaggs publicly revealed his cathouse as a hoax. Facing professional humiliation, the ABC journalists never retracted their story, despite Skaggs's revelation.

Skaggs's hoax illustrates an important characteristic of the media. It functions, in his words, as something of a "telephone game" in which meaning and content mutate with each repetition:

In this day and age, with electronic telecommunications instantaneously darting around the globe and people feeding off everyone else's network of nerve endings, a misspelled word or a misplaced explanation mark can totally change what is being said. And it's almost impossible to determine where the accidental change came from. And that's on a mild level. It's even *intentionally* done. Governments are doing it, corporations are doing it. Individuals within the media itself are doing it, and people like myself are doing it to make sociopolitical commentaries [about the irresponsibility of the news media]. (Vale & Juno, 1987, pp. 40-41)

As Skaggs suggests, his strategy is not uniquely his own, the domain only of the political subversive. Rather, he observes that unpredictable differentiation is an unavoidable effect as texts are disseminated across the mediascape. Messages and images mutate as they migrate through the vast variety of media outlets, until questions of source and original intent cease to matter. As he notes, governments and corporations often sponsor disinformation campaigns, using the media to start

rumors or deflect the public's attention from potential scandals. Indeed, thanks to ABC's professional constraints, Skaggs's cathouse for dogs remains on the record as historical "fact."

Skaggs's cathouse for dogs event—as well as his many others, which included a “celebrity sperm bank” and a Thanksgiving world hunger performance piece—is noteworthy because it exemplifies pranking as a strategic mode of engagement with commercial media and consumer culture in general. Skaggs's project clearly functions as a prank in its most familiar sense: a trick, a practical joke, or a mischievous act. This is a prank in the mundane sense of tying a classmate's shoelaces together under the desk, or short-sheeting a bed. A prank affords the prankster a certain “gotcha!” pleasure at having pulled one over on an unsuspecting party. But, more importantly for our purposes here, Joey Skaggs's prank—as well as the others I will discuss shortly—also illustrates two alternative senses of the word:

- (1) In Middle English, to prank was to add a stylistic flourish as to one's dress: to deck, or adorn as in “to dress, or deck in a gay, bright, or showy manner; to decorate; to deck oneself *out*, dress oneself *up*.”
- (2) Prank can also mean a fold, or a “pleat, as in the figurative sense of ‘wrinkle’” (Vale & Juno, 1987, preface, page not enumerated).

These alternative senses of prank are imperative for this discussion of culture jamming. In neither alternative is a prank an act of dialectical opposition. In the first alternative sense, as in to “deck in a showy manner,” a prank is a *stylistic exaggeration*. It is a kind of *layering up* of adornment in a conspicuous way that produces some sort of qualitative change. Prank, in this sense, is an augmentation of dominant modes of communication that interrupts their conventional patterns. In the second alternative sense, a prank is a wrinkle, or a fold. Like a fold, a prank can render a qualitative change by turning and doubling a material or text. This qualitative change is produced not through the addition of novelty, but through reconfiguration of the object itself. For analytical purposes, let us continue to stretch and layer the meaning of prank to include a folding over of mass-mediated rhetoric. Dominant texts are wrinkled, they are folded, they ravel and unravel as a result of these stylistic layerings. In the case studies that follow, I will play with these alternative senses of prank—adornment and folding—in an attempt to describe the rhetorical possibilities of media pranking.

While we are playing with definitions, however, let us consider another: I propose an alternative sense of jamming itself. Ultimately, if marketing is, as Deleuze suggests, “now the instrument of social control” (1990, p. 181), then perhaps activists must better learn to play and manipulate that instrument. Rather than approach jamming as simply a monkey-wrenching or opposition to marketing rhetoric, as the activists at *Adbusters* might have it, perhaps activists might approach it as well-trained musicians do music—as a familiar field on which to improvise, interpret, and experiment.

Earlier, I discussed the etymological roots of sabotage (literally, throwing one's clogs into the machinery) in the industrial revolution. This is a response to a



disciplinary model of power that ad parodists continue to practice, despite the waning of the factory as both the symbolic and material engine of the contemporary marketplace. However, in what is little more than a side note in its definition of sabotage, *Webster's* states that, in addition to referring to wooden shoes, "sabot" also denotes "a thrust transmitting carrier," or a kind of "launching tube." This second definition provides a compelling alternative sense of the concept of sabotage. As we have seen, in its monkey-wrenching version, sabotage implies destruction or the stopping and hindering of flows through the introduction of an outside element. Put simply, it is a clogging. However, in the word's second sense, as a launching tube, sabotage also implies a channeling, or a transmission of energy or resources through a conduit. This implies that resistance can also enable and direct energy flows rather than merely thwart them. With this in mind, one's rhetorical tools need not come from outside at all, as an oppositional model might insist. Further, as the invocation of tube and carrier implies, and as we have seen from the previous examples of culture jamming, sabotage is not a chaotic, shapeless, anarchic practice, but one that is restrained and shaped by the machinery from which it emerges; without the transmitting carrier, no thrust. In other words, constraints can be seen as immanent to those flows that seek to transform them.

Jamming, in this second, interpretive sense, requires both practice and knowledge of one's instrument as well as a dynamic exchange among a community of agents. Jamming, although it often implies a free-form chaos, requires knowledgeable and disciplined players to work. Recall, for example, Joey Skaggs's description of the work he put into his cathouse for dogs. He painstakingly set up an image event that would appeal to the needs of the televisual news media. He employed the strategies of a television producer in an effort to fold the medium over on itself. As Skaggs suggests, the broadcast media itself is his canvas. And Skaggs knows the contours of his canvas well:

First there's the hook, when I do the performance; next, I document the process of miscommunication, or how the media twists the content and meaning of the message; finally, I talk about the serious issues underlying the performance piece. The media often trivialize the third stage by saying "Oh, he's a hoaxter, he has an ego problem, he wants attention, etc." (quoted in Frauenfelder & Branwyn, 1995, pp. 40–41)

Skaggs's strategies do not oppose dominant modes of power; they utilize them. As he suggests, "You're already being pranked everyday. If you think *I'm* the prankster, you are sadly mistaken" (p. 41).

To jam as a musician does is to interpret an existing text. I do not mean here, interpret as in trying to make one word correspond directly to its equivalent as one does when translating a text from one language to another, where the interpreter is obliged to make the translation as correct as possible. Rather, I mean interpret in its sense as appropriation, as when a group of jazz musicians appropriate an existing piece of music, or a set of chord progressions and, in doing so, produce a new interpretation. This interpretation does not necessarily correspond to anything outside itself. It does not fail or succeed at representing an original. However, it does

contain familiar textual residues. Jamming as appropriation, in these ways, differs from jamming as sabotage.

### Pranking as Rhetorical Appropriation

This section focuses on three contemporary examples of media pranking. The first two, the Barbie Liberation Organization and the Biotic Baking Brigade, typify much pranking activism: both are protean collections of activists temporarily stealing the limelight of the mainstream organizations or leaders they target. Both can easily be categorized as engaging in guerrilla media strategies in the terms described above. The third example, the American Legacy Foundation's Truth campaign, an official organization's attempt to thwart teen smoking, maintains a guerrilla aesthetic and ethic but differs from the others in terms of its scope and resources. Unlike the other examples, which operate on shoestring budgets and the media savvy of activists, the Truth campaign is well funded by court-ordered tobacco industry dollars. It is the result of a successful hybrid of traditional legal advocacy and a deployment of the comedic sensibility of the prankster.

#### *Hacking Gender: ®<sup>TM</sup> ark and The Barbie Liberation Organization*

In 1989, a group of culture jammers known only as the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) pranked the infamously litigious Mattel Corporation through its most prized brand: Barbie. Barbie and Hasbro, Inc.'s military action figure G. I. Joe are notorious for reinforcing unrealistic, even dangerous, gender stereotypes. But, for the BLO, Mattel's Teen Talk Barbie proved to be the last straw. The doll, enhanced with a computer chip "voice box," was programmed to giggle random phrases when a button on her back was pressed. Mattel's chosen phrases included: "Math class is tough!"; "I love shopping!"; and "Will we ever have enough clothes?" (*Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia*). In response, the Manhattan-based BLO organized a prank that continues to generate discussion on feminist and culture jamming websites. Taking advantage of the mechanical similarities between Teen Talk Barbie and her male counterpart Talking Duke G. I. Joe, the BLO purchased hundreds of each doll from local stores, took them home and switched their voice chips. At the height of the Christmas shopping season, they returned the dolls to stores so they could be resold to unknowing shoppers. When children opened their toys on Christmas morning, instead of Barbie chirping cheerful affirmations of American girlishness she growled, in the butch voice of G. I. Joe: "Eat lead, Cobra!"; "Dead men tell no lies!"; and "Vengeance is mine!" Meanwhile, Joe exclaimed: "Let's plan our dream wedding!"

The rhetorical message of the Great Barbie Hack may be somewhat obvious. The sheer dissonance created by hearing gender inappropriate voices and sentiments may have made absurd otherwise normalized gender norms. As one BLO operative put it: "Our goal is to reveal and correct the problem of gender-based stereotyping in children's toys" (quoted in Greenberg, 1994, para. 5). Another told *The New York*

*Times*: “We are trying to make a statement about the way toys can encourage negative behavior in children, particularly given rising acts of violence and sexism” (Dery, 1994, para. 5). Political goals aside, the dolls have become something of a collector’s item. As another BLO member jokingly told National Public Radio’s Scott Simon, the BLO is good for business:

Nobody wants to return [the dolls] ... We think that our program of putting them back on the shelves [benefits] everyone: The storekeepers make money twice, we stimulate the economy, the consumer gets a better product and our message gets heard. (Dery, 1994, para. 9)

It also may have confused and upset children on Christmas morning. But not seven-year-old Zachariah Zelin who received one of the altered G. I. Joes. When asked “whether he wanted Santa to take back the feminine Joe, he responded sharply ‘No way. I love him. I like everything about him’” reports one Associated Press writer (Greenberg, 1994, para. 13).

What was truly inspired about the BLO was their media savvy. Each “hacked” doll had a sticker on its back urging recipients “Call your local TV news,” ensuring television journalists would have real disgruntled families to interview for their reports (*Culture Jammer’s Encyclopedia*). Further, the group later utilized the new medium of the Internet to disseminate detailed instructions on how to perform such hacks, complete with pictures and diagrams, enabling others to perpetuate the practice. The BLO claims to have inspired similar hacks in Canada, France, and England. Finally, using a strategy increasingly popular with media activists, the BLO produced its own pre-packaged news pieces to be distributed to content-hungry local television stations. The video documentaries showed doll hackers at work, “post-op” Barbies and Joes, and interviews with BLO members explaining their project. The videos were sent out to television stations complete with press releases explaining what BLO had done and why.

When reporters asked the toy manufacturers for their reaction, one Hasbro, Inc., spokesman simply called the attack “ridiculous.” Another was amused, but non-plussed: “This will move us to have a good laugh and go on making more G. I. Joes. Barbie dolls and G. I. Joes are part of American culture.” Mattel officials downplayed the attack, saying they had received no complaints from consumers (Greenberg, 1994, para. 10).

The BLO was the first and most prominent culture jamming project funded by ®™ark, something of a culture jamming clearing house that has modeled itself after a corporation. Although its actual numbers are somewhat ambiguous, according to the group’s website:

®™ark is a brokerage that benefits from “limited liability” just like any other corporation; using this principle, ®™ark supports the sabotage (informative alteration) of corporate products, from dolls and children’s learning tools to electronic action games, by channelling funds from investors to workers for specific projects grouped into “mutual funds.” (®™ark website, Frequently Asked Questions, para. 7)

®™ark exploits rather than condemns a corporate luxury that rankles many culture

jammers—a corporation’s ability to skirt certain legal restrictions that individuals are obliged to heed. As a private corporation, the group enables activists and investors to participate in illegal product tampering without much personal risk. As the group describes its mission: “®™ark is indeed just a corporation, and it benefits from corporate protections, but unlike other corporations, its ‘bottom line’ is to improve culture, rather than its own pocketbook; it seeks *cultural* profit, not financial” (®™ark website, Frequently Asked Questions, para. 8).

®™ark spokesperson Ray Thomas argues that many people still think of power in “the old terms”—that is, government power. His group seeks to make explicit the increasing power of corporations: “They are so adaptable, and they’re so organic that it’s hard to speak of any one corporation as the enemy. It’s more the system that allows tremendous abuse” (*How to make trouble*, December 7, 1998). Rather than attempting to dismantle the corporate power system, Thomas and the other activists at ®™ark exploit it; they observe the “adaptable” and “organic” nature of corporations and approach it as fertile soil for rhetorical and political appropriation. As one Australian journalist notes, ®™ark has “cleverly aped the structures and jargons of a financial institution, even down to a smarmingly corporate-sounding promotional video” (*How to make trouble*, December 7, 1998). Opening with warnings from Abraham Lincoln about unfettered corporate power, the aforementioned video—“Bringing it toYou!”—offers viewers a history of the corporation and rehearses ®™ark’s style of corporate sabotage. In the spirit of pranking as I want to conceive it here, ®™ark folds and augments the corporate model in a way that offers new dimensions for rhetorical invention.

### *Pie Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Biotic Baking Brigade*

In 1998, Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman (along with conservative California governor Pete Wilson, multi-millionaire Steve Forbes, and former Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan, George Schultz) was attending a conference on the benefits of privatizing public education. As Friedman was greeting well-wishers, a young man emerged from the crowd, exclaiming “Mr. Friedman, it’s a good day to pie!” and heaved a coconut crème pie into the face of the famous Chicago-school economist. With that, the Biotic Baking Brigade (BBB) executed the first of what would be many successful missions: publicly delivering pies to “pompous people.” Since its inception, BBB victims have included Microsoft founder Bill Gates, CEO of genetic engineering giant Monsanto Robert Shapiro, Chevron CEO Kenneth Derr, San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, and World Trade Organization Chief, Renato Ruggiero.

When reporting the public pieing of Mayor Willie Brown (who had just mandated a city-wide sweep of the homeless), a confused San Francisco anchorman asked: “Is it funny? Is it some kind of statement? A physical assault?” (*The Pie’s the Limit*, 1999). The BBB is consistently ready with pointed answers for journalists asking the inevitable question—“Why?” In the case of Milton Friedman, for example, BBB “special agent” Christian Parenti says:

Milton Friedman is the chief architect of neo-liberal economics. [His] particular brand of economics further allows multi-national corporations to rape the land, to plunder social systems ... to prevent any type of popular resistance to occur. So, even though Milton Friedman may seem like a strange target, like just some fuddy-duddy old geek, the man is like a purveyor of an ideological poison that is central to the kinds of policies and politics that are threatening the health of the planet and threatening the interests of common people all over the planet. (*The Pie's the Limit*, 1999)

A pie in the face of Milton Friedman becomes what rhetoricians would call a *synechdoche*; it is an easy visual short hand for a whole host of grievances against globalization's prevailing economic ideology.

The BBB's Rahula Janowski explains the logic behind the group's choice of "weapon": "Pie is an example that you don't have to revere someone just because they're more powerful than you ... Pie is the great equalizer. How wealthy and powerful are you with pie dripping off your face?" Janowski points out that many CEOs and other powerful people do not often put themselves in situations where they hear dissent. So the BBB seeks them out in public fora, often where the target is giving a speech in some controlled, formal environment:

It's a message of "we know who you are and we don't agree with what you're doing." And it also puts a face on that dissent. Here's this person and they're willing to come right up and put the pie in your face. Like, "we *really* don't like what you're doing." (*The Pie's the Limit*, 1999)

Importantly, the face that gets disseminated throughout the mediascape is not that of an angry protestor, as is often the case, but the often well-known face of a captain of industry. The face of Bill Gates is a familiar image for evening news audiences; however, after being pranked by the BBB, its ability to convey authority and influence is momentarily disabled.

Although their message is clearly one that opposes the ideologies and practices of their targets—genetic engineering, neo-liberal economics, clear cutting of the redwoods, or corporate monopolies—their tactic of choice, pie-throwing, expresses that opposition in such a way that makes it difficult for targets to respond or audiences to understand in traditional ways. As one BBB agent, Rosie Rosebud explains: "A clown, a comedian, is someone who can laugh at themselves, they can laugh at society, and their rulers" (*The Pie's the Limit*, 1999). The BBB's rhetoric, when its agents speak to reporters, is clearly oppositional in nature, but it is their comedic posture and creation of spectacular images that get them the interviews in the first place.

The BBB understands well how to get its agenda into newspapers and television broadcasts. Unlike *Adbusters*, the BBB does not remain resentfully on the outside, denied access to what DeLuca and Peebles (2002) call the "public screen" by the commercial media. Instead, they hijack events that are already orchestrated for television—public speeches, rallies, meet-and-greets, and so on. They know that the image of a famous politician or captain of industry getting a pie in the face is so striking, the image-hungry media cannot help but cover it. Bill Gates with lemon meringue dripping from his nose *will* make the five-o'clock news. Unlike its more

ascetic counterparts, the BBB does not condemn the news; it makes it by cooking up tasty images for the Spectacle to consume. As San Francisco prankster Mark Pauline puts it in another context:

The media can never deny coverage to a good spectacle. No matter how ridiculous, absurd, insane or illogical something is, if it achieves a certain identity as a spectacle, the media has to deal with it. They have no choice. They're hamstrung by their own needs, to the extent that they're like a puppet in the face of such events. (Vale & Juno, 1987, p. 14)

Again, BBB agents are always on-hand to offer journalists a quick interpretive sound bite, such as "Monsanto CEO Robert Shapiro is the Pinochet of the food world [so] he's gotten his just desserts!" But the image of the powerful being pied says more than a spoken message ever could. As Janowski explains: "The American public understands the impact of the message that is put forth by a pie. I mean, I think of the Three Stooges. Think of the Marx Brothers. It's *very, very plain* what's happening when a pie is delivered" (*The Pie's the Limit*, 1999). A pie in the face becomes a powerful rhetorical symbol that requires little explanation. Agent "Salmonberry" puts it most succinctly: "I think the history of pie-throwing shows that it's a form of visual *Esperanto*. It's a universal language. Everyone understands the pie in the face. [It's about] taking their spectacle and just spinning it around. It allows people to have a laugh at the expense of the rich and powerful and otherwise unaccountable" (*The Pie's the Limit*, 1999). The BBB, then, mobilizes two familiar but dissonant visuals—a sober public speaker and a pie in the face—and by joining them, produces a kind of political jujitsu, using the power of the broadcast media toward its own ends.

To ensure its images make the news, the BBB sends its own camera operators on missions. In some cases, as with the pieing of Chevron CEO Kenneth Derr, the news media cannot be counted on to capture the moment on video. Like the Barbie Liberation Organization, the Biotic Baking Brigade happily provides budget-strapped local news stations with ready-made video packages, complete with interviews and images. This is a strategy often used by corporate advertisers hoping to create a "buzz" around a new product. Advertisers regularly offer pre-produced marketing stunts packaged as news features (known in the PR world as "video press releases"), which local news stations can easily queue up for broadcast. Result: free content for the station and free advertising for the corporation. Media pranksters like those in the BLO or the BBB just borrow that strategy, turning the media's love of images over on itself, creating a venue for issues that the commercial media often ignore. Further, BBB agents, despite their somewhat militant politics, are always clean cut, articulate, and wear a sly smile. Hence, they are not easily dismissed as militant hippie radicals creating anarchy. They realize that they, too, must look the part for broadcast television if they are to gain access to it. As BBB agents are always sure to tell reporters, civil disobedience is "as American as apple pie."<sup>1</sup>

*INFKT Truth: Pranking Big Tobacco*

One of the most successful models of media pranking comes in the form of an institutionally sanctioned public service campaign: the American Legacy Foundation's "INFKT Truth" campaign. Funded with more than \$100 million of tobacco money per annum (Arnold faces anti-smoking challenge, 2002) after the 1998 "master settlement" agreement between tobacco companies and 46 states, the impeccably produced television, print, radio, and web campaign distinguished by a bright orange background and the cyber-style font and graphics popular in rave and gaming culture, Truth seeks to mobilize young people against Big Tobacco. As its use of the phonetic device "INFKT" implies, the Truth campaign encourages young people to infect their peers with knowledge about how the tobacco industry markets to children.

Unlike Nancy Reagan's "Just say no" campaign that was, by most accounts, a dismal failure in the 1980s, Truth invites young people to assume a subversive posture that is far more active than just impotently saying no to tobacco. An underlying assumption of INFKT Truth is that Nike's provocation to "just do it" has proven far more compelling to young people than Reagan's message of abstinence could ever be. In an article about teen anti-smoking campaigns, one Scottish newspaper sarcastically asks: "Would you embrace a drug-free lifestyle on the advice of an emaciated former actress with concrete hair and a designer clothes habit many times more expensive than the average teenager's dope habit?" (Harris, 1996, p. 14). Whereas the "just say no" admonishment came from the First Lady, an unmistakable symbol of the establishment, the Truth campaign takes seriously young people's anti-authoritarian attitudes and positions itself with them. Rather than asking teenagers to correct their own individual behavior, Truth encourages a critical analysis of tobacco as an industry.

Before the American Legacy Foundation launched its Truth campaign in 2000, the most prominent voice against underage smoking was the tobacco industry itself, forced by a series of courtroom battles to sponsor anti-smoking public service announcements. At first blush, these tobacco-sponsored announcements seemed well-intentioned, but their rhetoric was so out of touch with the tropes of so-called "Generation Y" that they seem purposefully ineffective. Take, for example, tobacco giant Lorillard's "Tobacco is Wacko (if you're a teen)" campaign that supposedly sought to discourage kids from picking up the habit. First, let us assume that for most of today's teens and "tweens" as the market has so cleverly labeled pre-adolescents, "wacko" is probably not on the slang radar. More importantly, Lorillard neglects the fact that being "outside the box," "on the edge," "Xtreme" or, okay, even slightly "wacko" is exactly what is understood as cool for today's kids. Other advertisers pursuing the volatile teen market have known this for some time. Although even the most cursory analysis of market-produced rebellion shows that kids are encouraged to rebel symbolically in a mass produced way—by purchasing the latest "edgy" product—kids at least want to feel that they are choosing not to run with the herd when buying this or that brand of widget.

On the face of it, then, it might seem that Lorillard misses what proves effective with the youth market when it states that it is wacko (read: edgy) to smoke cigarettes. Although it hopelessly fudges the vernacular of today's teens, it perpetuates the aura that makes smoking so sexy to kids in the first place. Smoking is what distinguishes you from the pack. It is what makes you a rebel. In this light, Lorillard's choice of the outdated "wacko" is clearly not misguided at all. In fact, it is most likely that the company's court-ordered anti-smoking campaign was ineffective by design. As one anti-tobacco website puts it:

The tobacco industry favors only measures that are known not to work well and may even be counter-productive—such as age-related restrictions, retailer schemes, exhortation from parents and teachers, and "finger wagging" messages that smoking is only for grown ups. These methods deflect attention away from the industry, are difficult to enforce, and present cigarettes as a "forbidden fruit" reserved for adults—exactly what most young people aspire to be! (*Exposing the truth*, para. 6)

Indeed, the outdated choice of "wacko" makes the "Don't Smoke" message all the more unhip, which leaves tobacco products untainted by any odor of unfashionability. In all, the tobacco industry spent a lot of money to tell kids that more than anything else its product makes you a rebel, which is precisely the message sent by every other successful youth marketer.

In contrast, the Truth campaign does not just tell kids not to smoke. In fact finger-waving messages never appear in its literature or imagery at all. Instead, Truth encourages young people to become culture jammers, or pranksters, themselves, and even provides them with the tools to do it. The Truth campaign is successful because it maximizes a truism in contemporary marketing: kids want to feel like they are "sticking it to the man" even if "the man" provides them the tools with which to do so. One of the group's slogans makes its non-conformist posture clear: "Join Truth now! But, don't think of it as 'joining' something." Whereas the tobacco industry's pseudo-attempt to curb teen smoking continues to afford the smoker the rebellious subject position, Truth flips that equation. In the Truth campaign, the non-smoking teen is the rebel, and tobacco executives, rather than parents and teachers, represent "the man." By rehearsing a series of pranks instigated by ordinary teenagers, Truth offers kids a new mode of agency in relation to tobacco advertising. It is an agency that is born of engaged mischief and hip rebellion rather than no-saying and abstention.

For example, one series of magazine ads provides kids with an incredibly simple way to become anti-tobacco activists. In several popular teen magazines, the group took out double-page spreads featuring Truth's trademark orange background and bold white letters. One spread read, "CIGARETTE SMOKE HAS ARSENIC," and the other, "AMMONIA IS ADDED TO CIGARETTES." On the following page is a picture of bookstores, magazine stands, and grocery store checkouts with magazines opened to these Truth "billboards" (see Figure 1). The demonstrative ads urge readers to "Spread the knowledge. Infect truth." Not only does Truth provide mini billboards inside teen magazines, it shows contexts in which those billboards might





**Figure 1.** INFKT Truth: a simple two-page spread provides the means for a quick and easy form of media activism

be displayed. In doing so, it provides young people with a quick and easy way to protest, to feel as if they are committing a subversive act, however small and temporary.

In another magazine campaign, Truth provides stickers in the shape of blank conversation bubbles as in a comic strip. Next to the free stickers is a picture of a Marlboro Man advertisement “augmented” by one of the stickers (see Figure 2). In this case, someone has written: “When I get tired of counting cow patties, I like to count the 4,000 chemicals in cigarette smoke.” The bubbles are outlined in the familiar Truth orange but are otherwise just blank slates, ready for kids to contribute their own messages to the vast sea of advertising. In short, it demonstrates an easy way for kids to hijack the advertisements that so saturate their landscape. As tobacco giant R. J. Reynolds itself is aware, the visual vocabulary of comic books appeals to kids. In a 1973 memo on how to better market its Camel cigarettes to young people, an R. J. Reynolds executive wrote “Comic strip type copy might get a much higher readership among younger people than any other type of copy” (*Tobacco Facts*). The company put this wisdom to use years later in its controversial Joe Camel campaign. In response, Truth launched its bubble campaign, folding Tobacco’s enthusiasm for the rhetorical power of comic book imagery over on itself and, in doing so, allowing kids to participate in the construction of a new narrative.

The Truth bubble campaign borrows a common mode of *détournement* employed by the Situationists who often revised the dialogue in popular comic strips as a venue for their own subversive messages. As Situationist René Viénet (1981, p. 214) argued,



**Figure 2.** The Marlboro Man is subjected to a *détournement*

“comic strips are the only truly popular literature of our century” and as such were a potentially powerful vehicle for rhetorical intervention. The Situationists hijacked existing comics, but they also borrowed the familiar dialogue bubbles that had become part of the popular vernacular as vehicles for revision in other venues. Viénet writes: “it is also possible to detourn *any* advertising billboards—particularly those in subway corridors, which form remarkable sequences—by pasting over pre-prepared placards” (p. 214). Anticipating terminology popular with contemporary culture jammers, he described the practice as “guerrilla media” warfare (p. 214). In this spirit, the Truth campaign, in effect, trains young people to practice their own brand of Situationism, by confiscating a small space from commercial advertising and using it as a site for rhetorical invention. The goal to reclaim public space from the increasing “contamination” of commercial messages is shared by many culture jammers—billboard liberators, graffiti artists, and hackers, for example—but these practices usually require a criminal act, defacing private property. The Truth bubble strategy is no different in that it is, in effect, encouraging young people to vandalize a corporation’s property. But, unlike other culture jammers who readily embrace their role as cultural guerrillas, Truth’s suggested hijack is noteworthy in that it comes from a government-regulated organization working with legally granted tobacco money.

The content of the Truth campaign’s rhetoric is not fundamentally different from the *Adbusters* strategy of negative critique. What differentiates the two is the form of their rhetorical strategy. Unlike the magazine’s Joe Camel parody, Joe Chemo, which critiques cigarette smoking and the ads that promote it, Truth unabashedly appro-

priates the rhetorical tropes of branding; it taps into the language of the market. Its signature color orange, its use of white asterisk pop-ups to connote a virus spreading, and its digital font are consistent in its magazine, television, and Internet campaigns. In effect, Truth is an excellent example of good brand management. The current INFKT Truth campaign experiments with a mode of rhetoric that is not grounded in the proclamations of any individual speaking subject. It promotes a kind of word-of-mouth dissemination of arguments against the tobacco industry. As such, it capitalizes on what may be two favorite pastimes of many teens: rebellion and gossip.

### **Conclusion: Pranking Rhetoric in the Commercial Mediascape**

The title of this essay, “pranking rhetoric,” was carefully chosen. On one hand, it names a category of rhetorical action: pranking. On the other, it articulates an underlying premise of this analysis. That is, in order to consider pranking as rhetoric, rhetoric itself must be, well, pranked. And, here, I mean prank in all its forms: to trick, but also to fold, and to adorn. The practices discussed in this essay—pranks, hoaxes, *détournements*—are not explicitly persuasive, if we understand persuasion as a targeted change in meaning structures. As I have suggested, they do not necessarily rely on that “aha!” moment when an audience becomes conscious of some new insight. Also, their effectiveness does not depend on the ethos or charisma of a specific rhetor. Hence, they fall outside the expectations of what conventionally qualifies as effective rhetoric. Clear arguments do often follow pranks—as in the Biotic Baking Brigade’s critique of neo-liberal economics—but those arguments are translations of pranks. They do not account for the power of the pranks themselves. One might even argue that such translations dilute the rhetorical power pranks have to confuse and provoke. In other words, attaching an explicit argument, making a prank make sense, may undermine what is unique about pranking’s signifying rhetoric in the first place.

The mass-mediated pranks and hoaxes discussed here do not oppose traditional notions of rhetoric, but they do repattern them in interesting ways. Media pranksters undermine the proprietary authority of rhetoric by hijacking its sanctioned venues, as does the Biotic Baking Brigade. Hoaxes challenge rhetoric’s relationship to truth (either the art’s “misuse” as a tool for propaganda, or its “correct use” in revealing facts to audiences), because they produce rhetorical effects that have little to do with facts or evidence, as in Joey Skaggs’s cathouse for dogs. In general, pranking has the potential to unravel rhetoric’s continued reliance on individual auteurs (be they presidents or protestors) because a prank’s source is often impossible to locate and, ultimately, irrelevant to its political impacts.

Traditionally, communication has largely been conceived in industrial, Fordist terms. Arguments are systematically and rationally assembled. Messages move teleologically toward an end product—persuasion. Perhaps the strategies of pranking and branding (its commercial counterpart) may have something to teach communication scholars. As North America moves into an economy driven as much by

information and marketing as the production of tangible goods, it becomes all the more crucial that communication scholars attend to the battles being waged over commercialization. A basic tenet of both the marketing and prankster world is that ideas and innovations spread less like widgets coming off an assembly line than like viruses in an ecosystem (see, for the most prominent example, Rushkoff, 1996). Indeed, viruses *communicate* diseases, yet they cannot be said to possess intentions nor progress teleologically, as a factory model might imply.

Vale and Juno (1987), in *Pranks!*, their edited collection of interviews with political pranksters, acknowledge that pranking can often be funny, even trivial. However, they remind us that pranks can also pose a “direct challenge to all verbal and behavioral *routines*, and [undermine] the sovereign authority of words, language, visual images, and social conventions in general” (Vale & Juno, 1987, preface, page not enumerated). Contemporary commercial culture depends upon consumers having somewhat routinized responses to words and images; however, these responses need not be completely homogenous. Indeed, it is the protean, polysemic nature of brands that allows them to be disseminated globally, across individuals and cultures. For example, Nike’s swoosh may signify “self-discipline” to one person, and “liberty” to another; and it is likely that the Nike corporation does not much care how people interpret it as long as they keep buying Nike products. This is the viral power of the brand—its ability to provoke through sheer replication of form.

Pranking—as intensification, augmentation, folding—is conceptually and practically quite different from how we often consider rhetorics of protest. Pranking is often comedic, but not in a satirical, derisive sense that prescribes a “correct” political position. It takes the logic of branding seriously. As the famous rallying cry of Nike CEO Phil Knight—“Brands! Not products!”—illustrates, successful brands are not limited to a closed system of representation. The swoosh has the capacity to signify much more than sneakers, or even products, and that is just the way Nike wants it. Nike understands that in an age where the factory has largely been moved overseas, it is now in the business of producing something much more profitable than sportswear: its product is seductive imagery and the loyal consumers it attracts.

As I have argued throughout, pranking repatterns commercial rhetoric less by protesting a disciplinary mode of power (clogging the machinery of the image factory) than by strategically augmenting and utilizing the precious resources the contemporary media ecology affords. In doing so, pranksters, those comedians of the commercial media landscape, make manifest Michel Foucault’s (1983) observation that one need not be sad to be militant. Rather than using political action to discredit a line of thought (as the parodist might have it), Foucault urges us to “use political practice as an *intensifier* of thought, and analysis as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action” (1983, p. xii).<sup>2</sup> Culture jamming multiplies the tools of intervention for contemporary media and consumer activists. It does so by embracing the viral character of communication, a quality long understood by marketers. So-called “cool hunters,” for example, employ the tools of anthropologists who engage in “diffusion research” to determine how ideas spread through cultures. These marketers, like their anthropologist counterparts,

have learned that people tend to adopt messages less in response to rational arguments than through exposure and example (Gladwell, 1997). Activists with a prankster ethic, such as those promoting the INFKT Truth campaign, capitalize on this capacity of ideas to multiply and disseminate like viruses. Further, although *Adbusters'* campaign to spread the Blackspot virus may still promote oppositional content, its embrace of the viral form indicates the group's advertising savvy. Tellingly, the magazine's focus on advertising parodies has waned in recent years.

It is important to note that the opportunities offered by culture jamming should not be seen as supplanting other, more traditional modes of engagement that continue to produce powerful rhetorical and political effects. Culture jamming—largely a response to consumerism and corporate power—may not be as productive in rhetorical situations that call for legal or policy interventions, for example. Further, culture jamming may be an effective strategy for engaging corporations who rely heavily on positive public relations, but may do little in the face of those which benefit from working beneath the public's radar. For these reasons, it may be most helpful to take seriously culture jamming, and pranking in particular, as important components of rhetorical hybrids, collections of tools that activists and scholars can utilize when intervening in the complex world of commercial discourse.

Finally, whereas ad parodies and satire offer up alternative interpretations of marketing rhetoric, pranks potentially upset the obligation of rhetoric to *represent* at all. Pranks intensify the polysemic quality of the signs on which marketing campaigns rely. They exacerbate the slippage in the signification process in such a way that polysemy may no longer serve the corporate author's effort to spread its ultimate message: buy! As Vale and Juno write, pranks

attack the fundamental mechanisms of a society in which all social/verbal intercourse functions as a means toward a future *consumer exchange*, either of goods or experience. It is possible to view *every* "entertainment" experience marketed today either as an act of consumption, a prelude to an act of consumption, or both. (1987, preface, page not enumerated)

In response to the increasing rhetorical prominence of marketers, who Deleuze (1990) describes as "the arrogant breed who are our masters," pranks enact his insistence that "We've got to hijack speech. Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non-communication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control" (p. 175). In this sense, pranks—precisely because they border on the non-sensical—reconfigure the very structures of meaning and production on which corporate media and advertising depend. Pranking—by layering and folding the rhetorical field—addresses the *patterns* of power rather than its *contents*. It does so by taking its cue, in part, from the incredible success of commercial rhetoric to infect contemporary culture.

## Notes

- [1] The phrase is reminiscent of Black Panther leader Huey Newton's famous phrase: "Violence is as American as cherry pie."

- [2] In his preface, Foucault is interpreting the themes of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2000).

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