

2-4-2018

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Recommended Citation

Welling, Bart H. (2018) "Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance by Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink," *The Goose*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 28.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss2/28>

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Review of *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance* by Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink

***Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance* by MARILYN DELAURE and MORITZ FINK**

New York University Press, 2017 \$30.00USD

Reviewed by **BART H. WELLING**

When was the last time you laughed—I mean laughed *hard*—when reading an academic book? Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink’s excellent collection, *Culture Jamming*, features many laugh-out-loud moments, ranging from Savitri D.’s account of how she was nearly arrested for simply saying “Starbucks” repeatedly in a Starbucks shop (436), to Christine Harold’s description of a prank pulled in 1989 by a group calling itself the Barbie Liberation Organization. That project involved switching voice chips in Teen Talk Barbie and Talking Duke GI Joe so that, in Harold’s words, when children unwrapped their presents on Christmas morning,

instead of Barbie chirping cheerful affirmations of American girlishness, she growled, in the butch voice of GI Joe: ‘Eat lead, Cobra!’ [...] Meanwhile, Joe exclaimed: ‘Let’s plan our dream wedding!’ (75)

(Far from being freaked out by his altered GI Joe toy, one seven-year-old boy said “No way” to the idea of exchanging the doll for a “normal” one, telling a reporter “I love him. I like everything about him” [qtd. in Harold 75]. When they heard this, the Barbie Liberation Organization undoubtedly replied, “Mission accomplished.”)

Anyone concerned that the collection might kill the carnivalesque spirit of the Yes Men and *Adbusters* magazine (among many other subversive figures, media outlets, and activities profiled in the book) can rest easy. Most of the contributors share the commitment to artfulness, playfulness, and transgression that defines the tricks and hacks and creative protests they analyze; the book only gets bogged down in jargon and conceptual hair-splitting in a handful of places. Part history, part theoretical survey, part “studio” (the final section consists of interviews with, and short autobiographical essays by, well-known culture jammers), *Culture Jamming* does not just offer a lively—sometimes hilarious—overview of culture jamming’s past, but points to a vibrant future for “creative resistance” (434) in the Age of Trump and beyond.

Despite its pervasive humor, *Culture Jamming* is anything but a simple “Greatest Hits” review of leftist activists’ efforts to expose the “fundamental inequities, hypocrisies, and absurdities” of capitalism and mainstream consumer culture (qtd. on 13). Many of the book’s contributors grapple with tough questions about the ethics and efficacy of culture jamming. And, thanks to open and latent frictions between chapters, the collection will probably turn out to be just as teachable as it is readable.

The collection begins with a foreword in which Mark Dery, the author of an important 1993 manifesto (which also appears in the book), asks—citing fellow contributor Henry Jenkins—whether culture jamming has “gone the way of all fads,” and whether culture jammers were misguided all along (xi). Dery concludes that culture jamming still has great potential to help people become “citizens in a culture that insists on reducing us to consumers” (xv).

But another contributor to the volume, Michael Serazio, argues strongly that “culture jamming, as a philosophy and practice, has been hijacked from its anticommercial roots” (237) by corporate entities such as the ultra-successful “cool hunting” advertising firm Crispin Porter + Bogusky (CP+B), which markets products via campaigns that generate buzz by mocking more conventional forms of advertising. However, Serazio seemingly undercuts his argument when he notes that CP+B is also responsible for the anti-tobacco INFKT Truth campaign, which has evidently succeeded in persuading large numbers of teenagers not to smoke by encouraging them to rebel against the tobacco industry.

Many of the other contributors would probably disagree strongly with Serazio’s point that culture jammers are “really just looking for a different set of status symbols” than other consumers (251), but Serazio’s observations on how easily capitalism co-opts anti-capitalist forces should prompt some healthy introspection on the part of culture jammers regarding whether, for instance, *Adbusters*-style fake advertisements can still get much traction in an era when advertisers themselves have begun to capitalize on the money-making potential of pranks and hoaxes.

All of this is just to say that *Culture Jamming*, rather than presenting a monolithic view of the topic, carries on a vigorous debate with itself pretty much from beginning to end. Significantly, the editors devote the final chapter not to a triumphant praise-song, but to a funny but also very candid interview with “Stop Shopping” activists “Reverend Billy” Talen and Savitri D., in which Savitri D. laments that their efforts are “not working,” and editor Marilyn DeLaure asks whether

culture jamming is indeed “making a difference” (437-38).

This last kind of exchange is certainly familiar to ecocritics. While not many of the images and performances explored in *Culture Jamming* focus on ecological concerns, several of the contributors examine projects that will interest ecocritics because they clearly *are* making a difference, at least in terms of the challenges they pose to hegemonic ways of seeing. For example, Michael LeVan discusses the French artist JR’s giant portraits, which he attaches to walls and roofs around the world as a way of advertising the humanity of many different marginalized groups: African migrants in France, women in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and so on.

Wazmah Osman writes about a similar use of jumbo-scale photography in the *#NotABugSplat* campaign. (The name refers to U.S. drone pilots’ terrible euphemism for people they kill on the ground.) The campaign was mounted by an arts collective called the Foundation for Fundamental Rights, which tried to discourage drone operators from bombing civilians by covering a field along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border with a house-sized photograph of a child who had lost relatives in a U.S. strike (353-54).

Many environmentalists and Earth-oriented critics will be fascinated by these place-based forms of activism; furthermore, those of us who are trying to weave more humor and wild play into our work (as advocated by ecocritics like Mike Branch) will find the collection unusually helpful. For instance, perhaps instead of simply attacking fossil fuel corporations as monsters of greed, we could spend more time coming up with INFKT Truth-style campaigns that frame resistance to

hydrocarbon extraction as a cool form of rebellion rather than a somber chore. Maybe it would be a good idea, taking a cue from the Yes Men, to start impersonating officials of Trump's Environmental Protection Agency and Department of the Interior in TV interviews as a way of forcing the administration to own up to the world-wrecking crappiness of its environmental policies.

True, many culture jammers have already taken on fossil fuel corporations and the Trump administration with less than world-changing results, but longtime culture jamming proponent Naomi Klein makes an excellent argument about jamming Trump in her most recent book, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need*. Klein notes that in the age of "hollow brands"—i.e. corporations (such as Nike and Apple) that devote their efforts to "manufactur[ing] a sense of tribal identity" while leaving the actual making of their products up to obscenely underpaid workers in the developing world—Trump is "the personification of the merger of humans and corporations," a "one-man megabrand" whose wealth comes less from building his own hotels and golf resorts than from leasing his name out to other real estate developers (23, 10, 30-31). Klein is right: this strategy makes him vulnerable. If the perceived marketing value of his name/brand declines, so do the Trump Organization's profits, and the pressure mounts on Trump (who clearly values money and his TV image as a gold-plated Asshole-in-Chief over any other consideration) to radically change course (Klein 43-45). Klein surveys several activist efforts that are already having an impact on Trump and his kleptocratic family.

Environmental culture jammers have certainly been busy since Trump's inauguration, as noted in a follow-up blog post to *Culture Jamming* by editors DeLaure and Fink. The editors mention the rogue Twitter accounts used by National Parks Service and other federal employees to challenge the president, along with my favorite anti-Trump meme: an image of Smokey the Bear standing with a raised, burning fist that forms the *I* in the word *RESIST* ("All (Dis)Quiet"). This meme illustrates a point made by several contributors to *Culture Jamming*: that the roots of contemporary culture jamming go a lot deeper than the 1990s. *RESIST* Smokey echoes an example of culture jamming *avant la lettre*, Gary Snyder's 1969 poem, "Smokey the Bear Sutra" (which itself echoes ancient Buddhist texts); in the poem Snyder transforms the beloved Smokey from a government fire suppression mascot into a working-class foe of capitalism, totalitarianism, and extractive industries.

While Trump's name never appears in *Culture Jamming*, the book offers a wealth of ideas that ecocritics will want to study and debate as we strategize about the best ways in which to use the power of brand-jamming and satirical humor to resist a U.S. president, his Republican allies, and their corporate cronies who are hell-bent on promoting policies that, if they go unchecked, will finally destroy the Earth as we know it. And that, of course, is no laughing matter.

Works Cited

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